The Anatomy of Scientific Racism: Racialist Responses to Black Athletic Achievement

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Writing in the late 1940s, a highly regarded critic for the New York Times exclaimed that the modern dance revolution had opened the way for black Americans to find themselves as “creative artists.” The widespread embrace of new choreographic styles had enabled them, John Martin asserted, to “release in communicative essence the uninhibited qualities of the racial heritage, no matter what the immediate subject of any specific dance might be.” Based on his many years as a reviewer, Martin’s survey text, which was republished in 1963, then again in 1970, ranged over a large number of themes. But what stood out, from first version to last, was his chapter on “The Negro Dance,” with its persistent references to the “intrinsic” and the “innate.” One feature of the Negro dancer, Martin insisted, “is his uniquely racial rhythm. . . . Far more than just a beat, it includes a characteristic phrase, manifested throughout the entire body and originating sometimes so far from its eventual point of outlet as to have won the description of ‘lazy’ . . . . Closely allied to this pervasive rhythm is the wide dynamic range of his movement itself, with, at one extreme, vigor and an apparently inexhaustible energy (though, be it noted, a minimum of tension), and at the other extreme, a rich command of relaxation."

Martin went on to declare that for all their contributions to jazz and modern dance, African Americans had been “wise” not to take up academic ballet, “. . . for its wholly European outlook, history and technical theory are alien to [them] culturally, temperamentally and anatomically.” Employing the same tone and terms, the critic then elaborated his conception of the attributes that distinguished one population group from another:

. . . In practice there is a racial constant, so to speak, in the proportions of the limbs and torso and the conformation of the feet, all of which affect body placement; in addition, the deliberately maintained erectness of the
European dancer’s spine is in marked contrast to the fluidity of the Negro dancer’s, and the latter’s natural concentration of movement in the pelvic region is similarly at odds with European usage.2

Instructive in many ways, Martin’s assertion adhered to a taxonomy that has long been exceedingly specific in marking the contrast between “fluidity” and “deliberately maintained erectness,” or in juxtaposing speed and stamina. Such typologies have matched one trait or another to particular individuals—what we have come to admire as the kinetic poise of Katherine Dunham, for instance, or the grace and power of Jesse Owens, the footwork of Muhammad Ali—and from those notes moved to broad generalizations about race and ethnicity: the attributes of the black dancer, the African American sprinter or boxer.3 At the same time, formulations such as Martin’s have been far less discriminating in their mingling of biological specifications and analytical constructs: cultural, temperamental, anatomical. Unself-consciously—but no less emphatically—these contentions have stacked judgments of value upon matters of “scientific” measurement without bothering to address the long legacy of segregation and racial prejudice that largely contributed to the development of distinctive social customs and expressive cultural practices. Likewise, such racialist pronouncements have discounted the hard work and discipline, as well as the creativity, that distinguishes artistic innovations irrespective of the color of the artist.

Indeed, by underscoring “a minimum of tension” or “a rich command of relaxation” among black performers, many white intellectuals like Martin surveyed an enormous distance between what has been studied, which those imagemakers exalted for a particular Katherine Dunham in “L’Ag’Ya,” her dramatic story of love and magic and the fighting dance of Martinique, from John Martini Book of the Dance. Though Martin praised Dunham’s innovative use of ethnological material, he also repeatedly juxtaposed the “innate equipment” of black dancers to the styles cultivated in traditional dance.

120

Volume 25, Number 1
conciseness, cleverness, and formality, and what they believed to inhere and thus could disparage as free or flowing or loose. At one level, references to the “pelvic region” derive from an expansive European and American literature, which has reduced racial and cultural difference to matters of sexuality. At another level, the insistent contrast between mind and body within the Western tradition renders black physicality as a kind of compensation for the absence of cerebral qualities and the traits of a purportedly advanced, or advancing, culture.

As both a text on culture and as a cultural text, John Martin’s Book of the Dance offers an especially graphic and forceful evocation of the racialized body—abstracted from artistic innovation and social interaction over time. Yet the considerations of a solitary reviewer, prominent as he once might have been, occupy but a small place in the long history of racialist thinking. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, the distinctions that eventually found their way into Martin’s appraisals were becoming central elements of what was considered pioneering scholarship in anthropology as well as the “scientific” study of history, helping to define Western notions of civilization. Critically, an observation concerning the “natural concentration of movement” of African Americans, when contrasted to the ideal of “European usage,” was meant to reinforce a longstanding hierarchy of values and standards, with the cultural achievements of the Continent at its head. Long before Martin measured the “uniquely racial rhythm” of jazz dancers against the accomplishments of ballerinas, to differentiate in the manner of mainstream commentary was to denigrate.

When African American artists and, more specifically to the point of this essay, black athletes pursued excellence within the boundaries of Western aesthetic and agonistic traditions—those creative impulses and that competitive spirit that have stood as the hallmarks of “civilization” and “progress,” conventionally represented—they encountered something more than the customary biases and myriad discriminatory acts. They also confronted a formidable impediment of another sort: a discourse of difference, which, when inscribed as a set of “racial constants,” effectively discounted the efforts of black Americans or denied the cultural significance of their achievements.

Ultimately, this particular dimension of the politics of culture has engaged a vast scholarship that ranges far beyond the history of race relations in the United States. Within one frame of analysis, the origins and development of the discourse of difference has been examined specifically with regard to the Nazi eugenic theories that marked Jews and gypsies, as well as homosexuals, for extermination. It has also been assessed with consideration of the linkages between gender and “race” in the construction of hierarchies of privilege and subordination over time. And as scholars of postcolonial ideology and experience have demonstrated, the ranking of “racial” traits—especially as it has elaborated the age-old dichotomy between mind and body—continues to serve as a means of suppressing the claims of people of color around the world. What remains is the crucial relationship between the pseudoscience of racial difference and the pernicious social policies it both inspires and informs.
The liberals still left in America remain attracted to a version of the idea of “progress” far different from the one implied by John Martin. Thus, from another vantage point, the years between the day when Martin’s comments were set in print and our own era may seem a long span, characterized by numerous uplifting chapters in the story of American race relations. Within the interval, we first witnessed the maturation of the Civil Rights movement and what was perceived at the time as its stunning effects on politics and policy. Since then, we have observed the coming of age of multiculturalism with its celebration of distinctive voices and visions along with a particular emphasis on the critical ties between representation and authority, the power of the image and the word. Various social surveys and opinion polls have suggested some success in the alteration of mainstream sensibilities regarding the meanings of “difference.” By some accounts, first-year college students, for instance, no longer appear to be as ignorant of ethnic relations or as bigoted as they once were. At the same time, scholars have issued challenges along many fronts to both the epistemology and the empirical claims of bio-determinism. These have emerged not just in the form of poststructuralist critiques of the essentialism that suffuses the observations of dance critics and intelligence testers alike or the recent interrogation of the notion of “whiteness” as a hitherto unmarked category within the huge grid of discriminations that has long characterized Western culture. Such revisionism also comes from a growing number of geneticists who have called into question the very concept of “race.”

Beyond notable examples of cultural syncretism—ranging from Creole cuisine, the preaching styles of evangelical Protestantism, and the “hybrid” music of Angelino garage bands and Tejano concert performers—one can point to an expanding literature on multiethnicity and the increasing incidence of racial/ethnic intermarriage. From there, both the circumstances and culture of pluralism can be discerned from recent census figures. These reveal that thousands upon thousands of Americans have become very uncomfortable with the traditional ethnic boxes conceived by government officials. A rapidly expanding number of associational initiatives—the creation of multiracial campus organizations, for example—further suggest that many people take pride in a mixed heritage, seeking new meanings for kinship and community and new reckonings with identity and ancestry. Taken together, such phenomena thoroughly challenge any assertions that a fixed racial identity can be matched to certain social accomplishments, whether intellectual, artistic, or athletic.

All that said, however, those who endeavor to expose and thus dispose of the cultural hierarchies predicated on the tired old versions of ethnicity and race have lately become involved in earnest and extensive debates over Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein’s *The Bell Curve*, an elaborate ranking of so-called racial and ethnic groups in terms of IQ—with African Americans at the bottom of the list. More recently still, an expanding portion of the political spectrum—including some of the most notable black conservatives in America—has felt compelled to address the assertions contained in Dinesh D’Souza’s *The End of
Pearl Primus with her New York company in a concert version of an African dance, from John Martini Book of the Dance. According to Martin, “the Negro artist, like the artist of any other race, works necessarily and rightly in terms of his own background, experience, and tradition. He makes no fetish of it, but on the other hand, like any other artist, he recognizes that there are some roles and categories that do not suit him. Race—exactly like sex, age, height, weight, vocal range, temperament—carries with it its own index of appropriateness.”

Racism. Far beyond its draconian policy proposals, such as the repeal of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, that book has not only reiterated long discredited notions of racial hierarchy. In unmistakable terms, it has also defended the institution of slavery—after the fashion of Southern polemicists of the antebellum era—for its so-called civilizing and Christianizing effects on the majority of blacks in America.14

As appalling as these texts are, they do not stand as the only emblems of reactionary racial commentary today, Progressive writers and educators must still regularly engage the persistent stereotypes concerning the “natural” physical abilities of blacks, which are said to explain the “dominance” of African Americans in sports such as basketball and football. Indeed, where Murray/Herrnstein and D’Souza have made great use of insinuation and indirection when discussing racial difference, other authors, such as J. Phillipe Rushton and Jon Entine, have been aggressive in their assertions about genetic determinism and racial ranking.15

To account for achievement in biologically essentialist terms effectively discounts the meaning of the game, the season, the career in terms of the traits identified with “character”: discipline, courage, sacrifice. And therein lies the significance of inquiries into racial science when they have been applied to athletics.16 Ultimately, the questions of who can run faster or jump higher are simplistic ones, but they are pernicious as well as foolish if conceived as measures of innate racial difference. In light of this ongoing cultural dynamic, John Martin’s
observations need to be read as something more than artifacts from a distant
time. Those assertions not only help us understand the anatomy of racialist
thinking in historical terms. Their similarity to far more recent comments offers
a telling reminder of the persistence of “academic” racism in contemporary
American society.

Since “race matters,” as the title of one of Cornel West’s recent books avows,
we need to discuss why it should. It matters in our scrutiny of the contexts and
remedies for present social conditions, in our concern that the long history of
racial oppression be reckoned with as we debate social policy. We must also
examine when it should not. It should not matter in judgments of individual
abilities and accomplishments. With regard to the historical construction of racial
categories, moreover, we ought to consider that even if many social commentators
argue that the most significant debate today concerns the ways test scores or the
reification of diverse cultural stances can be used to fold, bend, spindle, and
mutilate existing public policy, the body continues to loom large in many people’s
thinking about difference. Indeed, the highlights on TV sports reports often
provide the most obvious, vivid markers of distinctions associated with race and
ethnicity. In basketball, the trope of the white point guard, court-savvy and the
model of discipline and control, has stood in striking contrast to prevailing images
of black male athletes, able and all too willing to shatter backboards with their
slam dunks. And if that juxtaposition appears too stark and simple—in light of
the widespread recognition of Michael Jordan’s mastery, not just of the mechanics
of his game, but also of modern media relations17—that there are many other forums,
including the lecture hall, where racialized thinking remains fixed on the body. “I
don’t know whether or not most white men can jump,” the historian of science,
Stephen Jay Gould, has written recently. “And I don’t much care, although I
suppose that the subject bears some interest and marginal legitimacy in an alternate
framing that avoids such biologically meaningless categories as white and black.
Yet I can never give a speech on the subject of human diversity,” Gould continues,
“without attracting some variant of this inquiry in the subsequent question period.
I hear the ‘sports version,’ I suppose, as an acceptable surrogate for what really
troubles people of good will (and bad, although for other reasons).”18

The “sports version” of human diversity, still placing population groups up
and down a vertical axis of accomplishment, suggests another significant topic.
Often without discussion of the economic and educational practices that most
starkly mark “racial” distinctions in America, without examination of the concepts
of whiteness and blackness in cultural terms, and without recognition of mixed
heritage, most racialist formulations have clearly had as their objective the
demonstration of African American inferiority, for example, on intelligence tests.
But it has also been in response to black achievement that certain judgments about
“culture” or ideologies of success have been manipulated. And frequently it has
been in reaction to the triumphs by African Americans that explanations to qualify
excellence—no less innovative than cynical—have been fashioned out of the notion
of “natural ability.”19
Black accomplishments in the performing arts, for instance, provoked the construction of a model of development that privileged a European ideal or normative style, then attempted to account for the ways non-Europeans have merely approximated or somehow departed from the “classical” or “rational” cultural forms so long extolled in treatise and textbook. Martin’s analysis of black dancers exemplifies this pattern. With regard to black success—some would say superiority—in sport, when African Americans began to register an increasing number of victories on the playing fields during the first decades of the twentieth century, mainstream commentators effectively abandoned the athletic creed linking physical prowess, manly character, and the best features of American civilization. Though many African Americans had subscribed to the ideal that achievement in sport constituted a proof of equality, a mechanism of assimilation, and a platform for social mobility, they were betrayed in their beliefs and strivings. For in response to black athletic accomplishment, numerous influential educators and journalists employed a sharply contrasting set of terms stressing anatomical and physiological “advantages” or legacies from a primitive African past.

To a significant extent, many academicians from the mid-nineteenth century down to our own time thus turned away from the discourse of culture when interpreting the physical talents of blacks—and other “Others.” As they became engrossed in the “scientific” analysis of racial difference, various anthropologists and anthropometrists reached for the calipers and tape measure in search of a gastrocnemius muscle with a certain diameter or of an elongated heel bone in order to explain the success of certain sprinters or jumpers. Critically, within the dominant discourse, an individual’s performance was bound to attributes ascribed to the group of his or her origin. Such a racialized view of excellence defined the physical accomplishments of Europeans in terms of diligence and forethought, the application of the mind—in John Martin’s coinage, “history and technical theory”—to the movements of the body. In dramatic contrast, it framed the achievements of people of color with words such as “natural” and “innate.” Ultimately, then, racialized responses to the athletic as well as the artistic accomplishments of blacks have served both to shape and reinforce prevailing stereotypes. In so doing, they have also served to “rationalize” exclusionary social practices and discriminatory public policies.

The construction of racial typologies did not begin during the Enlightenment, when Johann Friedrich Blumenbach—among others—asserted that genotype and phenotype clearly distinguished the Caucasoid from Negroid and Mongoloid types. Neither did it originate in the Victorian anthropological categories: savagery, barbarism, civilization. It derived, rather, from a long tradition within Western thought that can be traced to Aristotle’s justification of slavery. Pictorial representations of Africans dating back to Greek antiquity, as well as the patterns of thought that shaped Shakespeare’s characterization of Caliban and Othello, for instance, stood as the foundations of modern European racism. Such images speak compellingly to a lengthy history of racial boundary-marking and the color-
coding of culture. Yet it is with the mid-nineteenth-century writings of Joseph-Arthur, Comte de Gobineau, that many scholars commence their explorations of the racist ideologies that alluded to measurable distinctions and pretended to scientific objectivity. In *The Inequality of Human Races* (1853-55), Gobineau asked: “Is there an inequality in physical strength?” His answer, according to the intellectual historian Elazar Barkan, “mixed aristocratic pessimism, romanticism, theology together with biology, all of which became part of a shared European value system based on racial differentiation.”

The American savages, like the Hindus, are certainly our inferiors in this respect, as are also the Australians. The Negroes, too, have less muscle power; and all these people are infinitely less able to bear fatigue. We must distinguish, however, between purely muscular strength, which needs to spend itself for a single instant victory, and the power of keeping up a prolonged resistance. The latter is far more typical than the former, of which we may find examples even in notoriously feeble races. If we take the blow of the fist as the sole criterion of strength, we shall find, among very backward negro races, among the New Zealanders (who are usually of weak constitution), among Lascars and Malays, certain individuals who can deliver such a blow as any Englishman. But if we take the people as a whole, and judge them by the amount of labor that they can go through without flinching, we shall give the palm to those belonging to the white race . . .

Gobineau’s observations ranged widely in subject and extended to three volumes in print. Although convoluted in their shifts from individual display to the characteristics defining a group (thus exposing powerful exceptions to exceedingly flimsy generalizations), his judgments are nevertheless significant for several reasons. Principally, this was an anthropology devoted to the ranking of peoples. It was, moreover, an enormously influential formulation of racial difference not despite but because of inconsistencies in the criteria it used to render innate and immutable distinctions between population groups. What Gobineau effectively promulgated was a bipartite notion of culture: the Western tradition involved social developments and creativity; the accomplishments of non-Western peoples were pinned to natural selection and genetics. If, for those who succeeded him as taxonimists of culture, Shakespeare and Beethoven illustrated European Civilization, Darwin and Galton explained all the rest. Ultimately, within such a framework, for the African, or the African American, there would be no way of winning, not even on the playing fields.

From a different vantage point, such assertions about European superiority, as strained as they were, also constituted arguments for white supremacy. Thus, in what amounts to much more than irony, the ideology of empire incorporated the so-called “feeble races” into elaborate systems of hard labor: the institution of slavery in the United States and colonial workforces elsewhere around the world. Stamina, therefore—as a kind of brutish endurance, the ability “to bear fatigue”—would ultimately be conceived as a trait characterizing subject peoples who would work on the plantations and in the mines that fed, clothed, and enriched
imperialism. Yet at the same time, persistence, the exaltation of hard work and steady accumulation, also stood as a key feature of nineteenth-century interpretations of the rise of modern civilization; bourgeois values and the doctrine of possessive individualism extolled toil over time above the heroic acts conventionally associated with generals and kings. To render this cruel paradox in somewhat different terms: the supposed hardihood characterizing people of color around the world was used to justify the exploitation of their labor. Simultaneously, the cultivation of hardihood, as suggested by exhortations to the strenuous life from Theodore Roosevelt in the United States and his counterparts across the North Atlantic, was intended to (re)invigorate various imperial elites. Neither the ideologues like Gobineau nor the imperialists they informed ever addressed the illogic of these patterns of thought, which only begins to suggest the contingency, the opportunism, indeed from their inception, the very soft-sidedness of such putatively “scientific” formulations.

At the turn of the century, standard reference books continued to reflect the passion among scientists to advance broad generalizations about racial difference on the basis of assorted observations and measurements. Under the subject heading “Negro,” the canonical *Encyclopaedia Britannica* of 1895 distinguished between cranial capacities (an average European 45 ounces; Negro 35; highest gorilla, 20) and underscored a differential development of the cranial sutures wherein the “premature ossification of the skull” was said to account for the intellectual limitations of blacks. Significantly, later versions of these notations would accentuate the so-called primitive features of the Negro physiognomy in order to explain the relative failure of African Americans—in the aggregate—on intelligence tests. Such references would also inform the doctrine of racial eugenics as it was elaborated on both sides of the Atlantic.

By 1900, however, another dimension of scientific racism could be discerned. Rather than simply reinforcing prevailing notions of Negro inferiority, experts felt compelled to account for the extraordinary achievements of some black athletes. In the face of an increasing number of victories by African Americans, the mainstream culture began to “qualify” the meanings of excellence in sport, either by changing the criteria or the “meanings” of the criteria that determined athletic excellence. In its discussion of “The Negro,” the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* had also described “the abnormal length of the arm, which in the erect position sometimes reaches the knee-pan, and which on an average exceeds that of the Caucasian by about two inches.” It also drew attention to “the low instep, divergent and somewhat prehensile great toe, and heel projection backwards (‘lark heel’).” Increasingly, these specifications would be advanced as reasons for black success in sports. Thus, in 1901 the champion sprint cyclist Marshall “Major” Taylor was X-rayed, as well as measured up and down, by a number of French medical anthropologists in an effort to reveal the source of his triumphs in the velodrome. In similar terms, comment on the speed of black Olympic runner John Taylor and on the prepossessing strength of heavyweight champion boxer Jack Johnson a few years later included “scientific” speculation. Throughout the twentieth century, it would often be the accomplishments of people of color, represented in
the realm of sport, that vexed and intimidated those who endeavored to defend a longstanding racial hierarchy. The response would not be subtle. Indeed, the Western discourse of racial difference carefully juxtaposed black athletic achievement—assessed in terms of compensation—with the supposed intellectual disabilities or cultural shortcomings of African Americans.

Critically, the initial forays into the anthropometry of athletic difference were expounded against the backdrop of increasing segregation in the United States, which involved—beyond the enforcement of Jim Crow in housing, transportation, and education—the exclusion of the vast majority of African American ballplayers, jockeys, and boxers from mainstream sporting competitions. The cyclist “Major” Taylor, for instance, competed in Europe and Australia because of the enormous hostility he encountered at home. Then, once again, hypocrisy was piled upon paradox when spokesmen for the dominant culture began to cast the “alarming” vitality of African Americans and immigrant newcomers to the United States in gripping contrast to the alleged degeneration of Anglo-America. Thus, such works as Madison Grant’s *The Passing of the Great Race* and Lothrop Stoddard’s *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy* reflected nearly hysterical feelings about the links between demography and democracy. Vaguely informed by statistical data, such discussions about the relative birthrates among the Mayflower descendants, the sons and daughters of the *shtetl*, and former slaves who were moving from southern farms to northern cities revealed a deep fear about the claims black Americans and “hyphenated” Americans might well make against hallowed ideals such as equality and opportunity.  

For their part, black leaders like W. E. B. Du Bois—alongside the guiding lights of the new immigrant groups—did indeed seek full participation in the social, economic, and political mainstream, although they demanded fairness not merely as a measure of their numbers but on the basis of their contributions to American culture. And according to the “muscular assimilationists” among them, there was no better argument for inclusion than success in the “national” pastimes. “Major” Taylor and Jack Johnson were not the first African Americans to make their mark in sports, and it was clear to racial reformers that they would not be the last to tread “the hard road to glory.” Well before the appearance of Joe Louis and Jesse Owens in the 1930s, and a decade later, of Jackie Robinson—among a large host of other competitors—black leaders saw in athletics a platform for social change.

Resistance to such assertions was formidable, however. There were those who would maintain Jim Crow guarded the portals of the stadium just as they stood at the schoolhouse door. Others reinforced racial hierarchy by constructing elaborate frameworks to distinguish between the laurels won by whites and blacks in sport. During the interwar period, anatomy and physiology were frequently invoked to explain the athletic success of African Americans and thus used to circumscribe any declarations that prowess in contests of speed, strength, and stamina bespoke fitness for other realms of endeavor. Simply stated in the idiom of sports, to deny the translation between athletics and other accomplishments
(more profound and longstanding), numerous mainstream commentators began
to “move the goal posts.”

By the 1930s generalizations from individual performances to group
characteristics had come to dominate numerous renderings of the
accomplishments of black prizefighters such as the heavyweight champion, Joe
Louis. Likewise, to account for the medals won by the sprinters Eddie Tolan
and Ralph Metcalfe during the 1932 Olympics and of Jesse Owens, Metcalfe
again, and numerous other African American champions at the Berlin Games of
1936, white commentators sought explanations from the realm of biology, insisting
that the sources of black success derived from innate advantages. Early in the
decade, E. Albert Kinley—whose claim to expertise was that he was an X-ray
specialist—repeated the canard about the elongated heel bone, then predicted
more world records for African Americans in those events that depended on a
certain kind of anatomical leverage. Working from a similar premise, Eleanor
Metheny, a well-known physical educator, conducted a number of studies on
body proportions. Though somewhat guarded in her conclusions, she asserted,
nevertheless, that kinesiological differences—in the movements generated by
individuals with longer legs and narrower hips, for instance—could account for
black dominance in sport. Significantly, and ultimately ironically, Metheny would
declare that a different, somehow deficient chest construction, as well as lower
breathing capacity among blacks, handicapped them in endurance events such as
distance running. As the historian David Wiggins has demonstrated in his critical
survey of the literature on the subject, “great speed but little stamina” became the
watchword for many white commentators on black athletics. In formulations
repeated both in scholarly journals and the popular press, the science of sport
further insinuated itself into the broader history of racism in America.

If experiments like those conducted by Metheny were as flawed in their
conception as in their conclusions, other speculations on African American success
in sport were far more odious in their implications. Thus the prominent
sportswriter Grantland Rice reckoned with the triumphs of Joe Louis, not as a
measure of racial progress but in terms of “prehistoric” conflict:

For he is part of years long lost,
back on an age-old beat
Where strength and speed meant life and love
—and death ran with defeat.
For those who slugged the dinosaur,
or lived on mammoth’s meat,

There was a day when brawn and might were all they cared to know;

There was a day when fang and claw made up the ancient show—

And so today we slip our cash to Bomber Joe . . . .

Other writers appeared just as intent on defending myths of Anglo-Saxon
or Aryan superiority. “It was not long ago,” wrote the track-and-field coach Dean
Cromwell, in 1941, “that his [the black athlete’s] ability to sprint and jump was a
life-and-death matter to him in the jungle. His muscles are pliable, and his easy-
going disposition is a valuable aid to the mental and physical relaxation that a
“Comparison of White and Negro competitors in the same event [400 meters], with the photographs enlarged so both have the sitting height (actually head-to-buttock distance),” J. M. Tanner, The Physique of the Olympic Athlete. This study of 137 track and field athletes at the Rome Olympics did not formally assert a correlation between physique and performance, but it dwelled on racial differences in limb structure, proportion, and size.

runner and jumper must have.” The attempt thus to “historicize” racial difference in sport revealed a significant strand of popular thought. To invoke an African past, the primitive other, a state of being predicated solely on physical prowess, was literally to denigrate what flowed from it. By extension, it was also to exalt its presumed obverse, civilization, and the attributes of the dominant order.35

For its part, Cromwell’s interpretation was a curious notion of nature and culture at odds. It imagined that when blacks in Africa had been off running and hunting, the ancestors of white athletes were composing symphonies and building cathedrals, which placed their descendants at a substantial disadvantage at the modern-day Olympics, which was supposed to showcase the strenuous elements within the European cultural tradition. Similarly, if in the psychological terms invoked by Coach Cromwell, the black athlete’s “easy-going disposition” lay at or near the center of his success, then again by contrast, white competitors may have been thwarted from starting block to finish line by their particular worries about the fate of Western civilization. Such apprehensions, concerning the maintenance of traditional forms of racial privilege and subordination, were certainly on Cromwell’s mind when he sought, in this instance, to break the longstanding links between excellence in sport and the traits associated with it: strength of character, discipline, and hard work.

So when African American athletes outstripped white runners, it was presented in the roundest terms that they were merely reenacting some primordial escape from a lion or tiger. And to be sure, such luridly imagined observations as
Cromwell’s never stood alone or without amplification. In the ensuing years, black athleticism fell prey to the Harvard anthropologist Carleton S. Coon, who began his commentary on the inherited advantages of African Americans in sport with a depiction of their slender calves and loose jointedness. But what started with anatomy ended with a striking analogy, as was so often the case with racial scientists. The biological features that suited African Americans for certain sports, Coon declared, were characteristic of “living things (cheetahs, for instance) known for their speed and leaping ability.” Somewhat later still, two chroniclers of the history of college football continued to rely on gross stereotype, though they had relocated their analogies from the African “jungle” to the American palladium. “Because of their tap-dancer sense of rhythm and distinctive leg conformation, blacks excel as sprinters,” John McCallum and Charles Pearson averred. “It follows naturally that on the football field they stand out as broken field runners.” The links between these comments and the discriminations advanced by the dance critic, John Martin, are unmistakable.

After mid-century, as Wiggins has shown, racial science often focused on the triumph of black athletes in the track-and-field events of the Olympic Games. The stopwatch and the tape measure seemed to offer a certain validation to the claims of the hereditarians that significant and fixed anatomical and physiological differences accounted for the medals won by black Americans in the sprints and jumps. But then, rather suddenly, racial commentators were confronted by the stellar efforts and world records of African distance runners. On the heels of successive gold medal performances in the marathon, steeplechase, and 10,000-meter race by competitors from Ethiopia and Kenya during the 1960s, the notion of fast twitch and slow twitch muscle fibers—which had for a time been used to distinguish between the speed of blacks versus the stamina of whites—was displaced as a frame of analysis by various assertions that strove to mark differences between East African and West African physiques, supposedly long and lithe versus compact and muscular. From the vantage not so much of a later era but of a different ideological stance, such a shift in explanations suggests that the persistence of scientific racism lay not so much in the consistency of the science but in the constancy of its racism.

At odds with such racially essentialist notions, an increasing emphasis on cultural interpretations of African American success in sports characterized the social science of sport as well as mainstream journalism during the 1960s. This was a noteworthy development because its stress on black struggle and triumph within the boundaries marked by the athletic establishment reflected the growing influence of the Civil Rights movement and its integrationist appeal. Still, the (i)logic of athletic taxonomy remained largely in place. Indeed, it received its most thorough exposition in 1971 when Sports Illustrated published Martin Kane’s “An Assessment of ‘Black is Best’.” Kane’s survey of expert commentary on racial difference and athletic achievement was intended to be impressive in its range. But, in fact, the findings of assorted anatomists and the observations of a number of successful athletes overwhelmed other perspectives. The article ignored historical and sociological considerations of discrimination on the playing fields.
and beyond. Conversely, it failed to discuss the notion that athletics offered a platform for social mobility or a move from margins to mainstream for many of those who were acutely aware of their outsider or “minority” status. Despite a slight qualification here and there, Kane’s main point was ultimately that “physical differences in the races might well have enhanced the athletic potential of the Negro in certain events.”

This is not so much a matter of height and weight as of body proportions. Researchers have found that the black American, on the average, tends to have a shorter trunk, a more slender pelvis, longer arms (especially forearms) and longer legs (especially from the knees down) than his white counterpart. His bones are denser, and therefore heavier, than those of whites. He has more muscle in the upper arms and legs, less in the calves. There is reason to believe that his fat distribution is patterned differently from that of the white man—leaner extremities but not much difference in the trunk. And there is a trifle of evidence—this aspect has been studied so little that it is still in the highly speculative state—that the black man’s adrenal glands, a vital factor in many sports, are larger than the white man’s.

Kane’s piece appeared during the years when the Civil Rights appeal seemed to be gaining ascendancy in mainstream culture, drawing some racial moderates toward liberals and leftists. Those same years, however, also witnessed the increasing intensity of resistance to an ideology symbolized by the level playing field. Simply stated, the most prominent sports magazine in the United States had encapsulated a century of racialist thinking about human performance, then went on to speculate about what the next generation of biological research might disclose. The article further revealed the procrustean nature of racial science, hastily stretching old assumptions and assertions so as to explain recent phenomena, such as the considerable stamina as well as the great speed displayed by a new cohort of black athletes. Though it celebrated the anthropometry of athletics over and above observations of long and arduous practice sessions. There was more to the *Sports Illustrated* article than a laboratory view of the sporting scene. For implicit in the enterprise of assessing “Black is Best” was an attempt to isolate black achievements to the arena, where natural physical abilities supposedly accounted for their triumphs. Later formulations of the athleticized black body would similarly create a cultural ghetto of the gridiron, diamond, track oval, and boxing ring: social spaces tightly bounded and set apart from the world beyond athletic competition, where more numerous and more substantial opportunities for success could be found.

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Allusions to “life and death matters in the jungle” and analogies to cheetahs and tap-dancers rested comfortably within the prevailing rhetoric of racial denigration for many years. Though sometimes communicated in a more subtle manner or in more scientific language, as Martin Kane’s article attests, references to innate athletic differences between population groups persisted well beyond
the era of the desegregation of sport. But such ways of thinking have also provoked
a variety of reactions, often passionate and profound, from black Americans.
From Du Bois at the turn of the century to educators and athletes such as Harry
Edwards and Arthur Ashe in our own time, African American commentators
have objected to the use of stereotypes and the misuse of science to distinguish
the accomplishments of black and white athletes. Urgently and consistently, many
intellectuals and activists within the Civil Rights movement have asserted that
the claims made by excellent black athletes against the mainstream rhetoric of
equality and opportunity have stood for the larger aspirations of Afro-America.
They have also drawn upon the findings of numerous physical scientists and
social scientists, who have disproved the allegations of bio-determinism and
dismissed the idea of legacies from a primitive past.

During the early years of the century, Du Bois enlisted a new generation of
anthropologists led by Franz Boas to refute the tenets of scientific racism. The
environmentalism embraced by an increasing number of social scientists in the
ensuing years seemed to remove black athletic accomplishment from the shaky
anthropometrical foundations first advanced by ideologues like Gobineau and to
place excellence in sport, for instance, within the sturdier frames of analysis,
which address social circumstance and cultural innovation. At the same time,
biological scientists also challenged the generalizations based on anthropometry.
Few, if any, offered findings more emphatic or timely than the African American
scholar W. Montague Cobb. Drawing on his experiments in physiology and
anatomy, particularly his biopsies of the muscle tissue of Jesse Owens during the
mid 1930s, Cobb assailed the proposition that specific biological determinants
could account for black athletic success. With reference to the prevailing
classification systems, the Howard University professor declared without
equivocation that the “Negroid type of calf, foot, and heel bone” could not be
found in the Olympic champion; if anything, Cobb asserted, the diameter of
Owens’s gastrocnemius conformed more to “the caucasoid type rather than the
negroid.”

In professional as well as popular journals, Cobb extended his analysis in
important ways. He was neither the first scientist nor the last to underscore the
salience of physical variations within population groups as well as between them.
Yet critically, his discussion of that notion occurred within the context of sporting
accomplishment and thus engaged, at an early date, the athletic typologies then
in place. What is more, Cobb indicated his clear sense that racial mixing subverted
any assertion concerning fixed and isolated genetic determinants of muscular or
mental prowess. Howard Drew had been a co-record holder in the 100 yard dash
and the first black sprinter to be acclaimed “the world’s fastest human,” Cobb
noted in 1936. But Drew was also light skinned and “usually taken for a white
man by those not in the know.” Edward Gourdin, the Harvard sprinter and former
world-record holder in the broad jump, was similarly light skinned. “There is
not one single physical feature, including skin color, which all our Negro
champions have in common which would identify them as Negroes,” Cobb
asserted. A mixed heritage, he concluded, obviously removed such stellar athletes
from consideration when rigid racial dichotomies were being cast, thus exposing as arbitrary and contrived the very principles of racial taxonomy.  

Cobb’s scientific investigations stood among a host of scholarly articles and books that debunked bio-determinist assertions regarding athletic performance. As compelling as those conclusions were and remain, they have ultimately not been sufficient to counter prevailing speculation on black success in sport. Neither, for the most part, have been the arguments of the sociologist Harry Edwards, whose stinging responses to the Kane article, in addition to his other writings and position statements, have both inspired and informed numerous critics of racism in sport and society. Nor have the appeals of such popular figures as Arthur Ashe, Jr., whose three-volume text, *The Hard Road to Glory*, documented a history of white hostility to black effort and accomplishment in the realm of athletics. These commentaries might well have sent the innatists to the sidelines for good. Sadly, however, the muscular assimilationists have been largely unsuccessful in altering the terms of discourse from the natural to the cultural and social.  

That the tide of resistance to the efforts of the integrationists was so massive might begin to explain why other African American commentators have come to subscribe to essentialist considerations of physical hardihood and athletic prowess. The attempt to strategically appropriate the notion of racial difference-to turn

![Image](Image.png)

According to the historian David Wiggins, “W. Montague Cobb, the well-known professor of anatomy at Howard University, was so intrigued by the debate over black athletic success in track and field that he took anthropometric measurements of Jesse Owens to determine if racially linked physical characteristics accounted for differences in sport performance. Cobb, shown here taking measurements of Owens, ultimately concluded that proper training and motivations to succeed were the most important factors in determining athletic success.” Courtesy of the Chicago Defender.
it on its head, as it were—may have been born of frustration with the inefficacy of egalitarian initiatives. It was clearly sustained by considerations of cultural nationalism and Black Power during the late 1960s and 1970s. But today such racialism is not only manifest in African-centered assertions regarding distinctive patterns of cultural development; it also makes its appeal through the notions of melanin theory, no less weird or pernicious than the pronouncements of coach Cromwell or the journalist Kane. It is significant, however, that many of its principal adherents are social psychologists, for the “strange career” of black biological essentialism begs scrutiny mainly as a response to a long history of oppression. The various tenets of Afrocentrism certainly speak to racial pride, yet they also stand as an evocation of anger and alienation in the face of the qualified successes and many failures of meliorist reform. Nevertheless, it is important not to confuse such a sociological phenomenon with a solidly grounded school of critical analysis; while Afrocentrism may be good therapy, as one prominent scholar has noted, it is not good history.  

Like cultural nationalism, black racial essentialism serves many purposes, though its separatist assertions and implications do much more than reinforce the notion of a fixed social identity and a consolidated political stance. They also divide persistent racial reformers from those who have attenuated their commitment to the Civil Rights crusade. The distinctions between integrationist appeals and essentialist formulations have not always been sharply drawn, however, just as the hazards of perpetuating athletic taxonomies have not always been apparent to some black athletes and African American commentators. The case of Edwin Bancroft Henderson may be instructive in this regard. For more than fifty years, one of the leading chroniclers of black sport, and perhaps the foremost promoter of the ideal of “muscular assimilationism,” Henderson devoted his career to Civil Rights activism. Yet in what seems a striking departure from his campaign to establish a level playing field of athletic competition, he embraced, at least in some measure, the prevailing discourse of difference. Specifically, in a 1936 article appearing in *Opportunity*, the journal of the National Urban League, he alleged that it might have been the rigors of the Middle Passage that had winnowed the slave population, allowing only the fittest to survive. It was from this group, Henderson suggested, that the great athletes descended.

When one recalls that it is estimated that only one Negro slave in five was able to live through the rigors of the “Middle Passage,” and that the horrible conditions of slavery took a toll of many slaves who could not make biological adjustments in a hostile environment, one finds the Darwinian theory of survival of the fit operating among Negroes as rigorously as any selective process ever operated among human beings. There is just a likelihood that some very vital elements persist in the histological tissues of the glands or muscles of Negro athletes.

Thirty-five years later, the Yale graduate and NFL star Calvin Hill echoed Henderson’s peculiar notion. Black athletes were “the offspring of those who [were] physically and mentally tough enough to survive,” Hill asserted. “We were simply bred for physical qualities.” This explanation resonated for a number of
African American commentators and athletes who had embraced certain elements of the Black Power movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Recast in a more positive way, such thinking drew attention to an African past and pride in physical accomplishment, which would eventually be manifest in many achievements by black athletes in the modern ordeal of sport. The most solid reaction to notions of white supremacy at the time, the construction of an idealized black superhero in sports nevertheless has played into a cultural taxonomy that still ranks athletes as performers (with the line between the symbolic and substantive importance of their accomplishments still firmly drawn). Paradoxically, such assertions of a “strategic essentialism” have served to tighten the boundaries around the athletic ghetto. In an article titled “Delusions of Grandeur,” published in *Sports Illustrated* in 1991, the cultural commentator, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., pointed out that when the foremost black cultural heroes are the celebrities of the football field and basketball arena, and when they are held in esteem mainly for their innate abilities, the effect is to diminish the significance of other African American leaders and the years of dedication that lie behind their accomplishments. More passionately—also more polemically—John Hoberman has said the same thing in *Darwin’s Athletes: How Sport Has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race*. For a relatively small but vociferous sect of African Americans, the tenets of innatism have extended far beyond arguments about social Darwinism or cultural nationalism. Upon occasion, race pride now takes the form of celebrating the inherently superior qualities of African “sun people” and mocking the maladies suffered by European “ice people.” In the melanin theories advanced by black social scientists such as Frances Cress-Welsing, what accounts for variations in the pigmentation of the skin also explains a large number of attributes conducive to physical prowess, intellectual acumen, and artistic innovation. Arguing an essential linkage between skin melanin and neuromelanin—which is supposedly endowed with extraordinary properties—one theorist alleged that “melanin centers in the brain are responsible for coordinating and controlling body movements and controlling brain power,” while several others assert, simply, that “Blacks have more melanin in their muscle cells as compared to whites. This coupled to its biophysical characteristics as a semi-conductor and its ability to trap free radical energy is the explanation for ‘why Blacks run faster’ and ‘Black athletic superiority.’” Many of those who have endorsed melanin theories situate themselves within the African-centered movement of historical interpretation, which strives to trace the accomplishments of the diverse peoples of the black diaspora back to an ancestral homeland and to a set of fixed racial characteristics. Yet, at the same time, much of what is advanced as afrocentrism serves a hegemonic function by perpetuating the noxious simplisms of the old typologies. That the majority of African Americans continue to insist on egalitarian principles and practices should not be discounted. Endeavoring to subvert both the structure and the substance of racialist responses to black accomplishment while striving to enter the
mainstream of American society by virtue of their attainments, most blacks still subscribe to the tenets of the Civil Rights crusade. But for many reasons the Afrocentrist stance and the assertions of the melanists are also noteworthy. The most troubling of those reasons, perhaps, is that their positions lean heavily on racial taxonomy and ultimately amount to an inversion of the traditional hierarchies.

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If racial essentialism had ever been in retreat during the era of civil rights and national liberation—as some scholars maintain—its resurgence has been dramatically illustrated in recent years. Indeed the emergence of melanism seems but a sidelight to other renderings of difference and dominance that reflect traditional patterns of thought within the mainstream culture. One of the most notorious episodes of “typing” occurred in the late 1980s when a major league baseball official, Al Campanis, stated that blacks performed well on the field but lacked “the necessities” to occupy managerial positions or places of responsibility and authority in the front offices of sports organizations. Another involved Jimmy “the Greek” Snyder, a football commentator on television, who linked the heritage of slavery to the modern playing field. “The slave owner would breed his big black with his big woman so that he could have a big black kid,” Snyder maintained. From one vantage, the consternation evinced by their respective interviewers and the summary firing of both men indicated a shift of values and standards toward such public declarations and their racist underpinnings. Yet another media forum from the late 1980s was an NBC telecast hosted by Tom Brokaw, which introduced a number of racial scientists whose experiments were grounded in the notion of biological differences between the races. Ultimately, too, the Brokaw report dwelled on the “over-representation” of African Americans in professional football and basketball as a rather troubling issue for the public to consider without raising questions about the percentage of peoples of color in other occupations, network television for instance. More recently, the marking of racial difference in the athletic arena received perhaps its most calculated and crude exposition. Commenting on a stellar play by one athlete toward the end of the 1996-97 basketball season, David Halberstam, who announces the games for the Miami Heat, remarked that “Thomas Jefferson would have been proud of that pass. When Thomas Jefferson was around basketball was not invented yet, but those slaves working at Thomas Jefferson’s farm, I’m sure they would have made good basketball players.”

Clearly, such instances draw attention to the continuing prevalence of racialist thinking concerning athletic accomplishment. The NBC report merely made its contribution to this tendency by way of the issues it evaded as much as by the questions it asked. Other commentary has been more forthright in addressing the meaning of the success of blacks in sport. In the aftermath of the firing of Jimmy “the Greek,” the syndicated columnist Richard Cohen vaguely suggested that civil rights activists would want to steer clear of any assessment of the racial dimension of physical attributes for fear of having to engage intellectual and psychological distinctions. Raising the issue of Political correctness,” Cohen then
shied away from further speculation about racial difference in sport or other endeavors. Nevertheless, his comments made their way into the much more purposive arguments of Dinesh D’Souza in *The End of Racism*, a book that deals with scientific racism principally by repeating its most atrocious pronouncements and ignoring its critics. Thus in a short section concerning athletics, intended to set up his selective digest of IQ statistics, D’Souza not only recapitulated the “categorical imperative,” which has long prevailed among racial scientists; he also reiterated the notion of compensation. “It stands to reason that groups that are unlike each other in some respects may also differ in other respects,” D’Souza contends offhandedly. “Why should groups with different skin color, head shape, and other visible characteristics prove identical in reasoning ability or the ability to construct an advanced civilization? If blacks have certain inherited abilities, such as improvisational decision making, that could explain why they predominate in certain fields such as jazz, rap, and basketball, and not in other fields, such as classical music, chess, and astronomy.” The end of racism indeed.

Ultimately, to discuss the racial essentialism that continues to shadow much of the commentary on sport in the United States—just as it haunts most discussions of intelligence testing—is not to say that a taxonomic frame of mind is confined to American culture or to considerations of the achievements of African Americans alone. A relatively recent article from a popular New Zealand magazine, for example, illustrates that such is not the case. Titled “White Men Can’t Jump,”—how ironically it is hard to tell—the 1993 piece in *Metro: Essentially Auckland* documented the increasing prominence of native peoples in rugby, a sport that for more than a century had been identified with British colonialism: a means of toughening those who administered the Empire. Amid a wide-ranging discussion of changing demographics in New Zealand as well as an analysis otherwise sensitive to Maori and Samoan cultural patterns, several white sports figures were asked to state their views. They speculate, first, on the innate abilities vis à vis the acquired skills of Polynesian squads. “Polynesian players were naturally superior to us in talent,” one former player declared, “but a lot of them aren’t there now because they didn’t have the discipline for physical conditioning. They lacked the right kind of mental attitude. They’d just turn up and play.” Along the same lines, another New Zealander of European ancestry described a similar pattern, though he was careful to place his assessment in the past tense: once it was, that “your typical Polynesian rugby team would have just lost their head in a pressure situation,” he remarked. “It was almost as if it was the Polynesian way to do something really stupid that gave the game away.”

To indicate the malleability of such typologies, however, a passage from a few pages later suggests why Polynesians have come to excel at the sport. They are bigger now and play a “more physical and confrontational” brand of the game. It is strategy and size that accounts for the changes. But inevitably size will win out in such appraisals: “The Polynesian is basically mesomorphic, tending to be big-boned, muscular, of average height, wide shoulders, thin waist,” one white trainer asserts. “They have a higher proportion of fast twitch muscle fibre which is the source of their explosive style and the reason they are fast over short
Contrasting feats of character to mere physicality, the article offers yet another instance where innatist constructs can be placed in comparative perspective, encouraging us to generalize somewhat about the phenomenon of racial essentialism. As with the United States, in New Zealand population changes and new claims to cultural power—by way of participation in “national pastimes”—have created the context where longstanding notions of essential difference make their way into the everyday language of sports. Those ideas can be communicated in genteel or popular scientific terms, but their purpose has ultimately been to circumscribe the efforts of those who would use athletics as a means to enter the social and cultural mainstream. In New Zealand as in the United States, athletic competition has offered a way for people of color to fashion significant emblems of identity and pride as well as to challenge the discriminatory practices of old. It is a critical commentary on both social systems that those initiatives are still contested, that racist thinking continues to quality such hallowed notions as sportsmanship and fair play, equality and opportunity

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The original title for this article was “Excellence, the Essentials of . . . .” It was cast in the form of an index entry in order to emphasize the linkages among the many European-American responses to the accomplishments of people of color in such diverse realms as the arts and the sporting arena. And it was meant to underscore the “paradox” within Western thought that addresses achievement

The 40-yard dash, timed as a part of the NFL draft process each spring. The image depicts the black athlete as performer, while an array of coaches determines the standard of measurement and judges the skill and fitness of the athlete. Although in this photograph, taken in 1995, two of the coaches are African Americans, the percentage of black players in the NFL greatly exceeds the percentage of black coaches and officials. Courtesy of the Arizona Daily Star.
in the language of culture and civilization only until the time when “others” make their marks as dancers, runners, boxers—or as rugby players. Historically, the dominant discourse has then switched to a different set of terms, and “natural ability” becomes the touchstone—an enormous burden in the instance of athletic accomplishments—for those who have sought to make their claims for full participation in the social, economic, and political life of their nations.

This assessment thus emphasizes the “contingency,” the reactive dimension of racial essentialism, just as it suggests the problematic elements of defining a cultural nationalism out of references to innate differences in physical prowess. Significantly, taxonomic conventions in the representation of population groups have long stood as the predicate of social authority. That the dominant culture can employ them—and modify them when necessary—to maintain hierarchies of privilege and subordination means that “minority” cultures cannot use such typologies in the same ways. If the strategy of “muscular assimilationism”—a prominent element of the Civil Rights campaigns of the twentieth century—has not been entirely successful in creating a level playing field, it is more certain still that the separatism manifest in Afrocentrism and melanin theory is patently self-defeating in the long run. Moreover, to the extent that many African American youth exalt athletic heroes over other role models—spending their formative years in “hoop dreams”—the emphasis on athletic striving has been overplayed. What remains is yet another troubling fact. Even as sociological surveys and a new generation of biographies and memoirs tell us about the increasingly multiracial character of American society, the discourse of innate and immutable racial difference still looms large in the popular consciousness.

Ultimately, for intellectual historians, cultural theorists, and social scientists, as well as journalists who hope to engage entrenched modes of racialist thought and to create a more expansive conception of culture, it may be well as a first step to adopt a new perspective regarding the texts that are devoted to innatist thinking. Central to this undertaking would be the compilation of a roster of phrases and pronouncements that clearly links academic racism, past and present. To be sure, as we strive to move beyond category, the idea of an index of racialist literature involves a troubling dimension. Yet it is nevertheless crucial that progressive, or expansive, thinkers on the subject—rather than institute- and foundation-based conservative ideologues—become the cartographers of the contemporary discussion of “race.” Better still, though from a different interpretive position, we might start erasing “racial” boundaries altogether.

With notions of history and collective memory in mind, perhaps it would be wise to evaluate such books as The Bell Curve and The End of Racism, deftly written as they might seem to some reviewers, through the same lens that we would use to assess the essentialist observations of the dance critic John Martin, as contrived as they were and remain. From there we could examine the arguments still insisting on a broad-based anatomy of racial difference with an eye toward the ideological stance they share with those who spoke before, with the sportswriter Martin Kane, for instance, with the anthropologist Carleton Coon, and with
Coach Cromwell. We could allude, then, to the polemics on white supremacy by Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard as well as to the pronouncements on European superiority by the Count de Gobineau. For, “essentially,” de Gobineau and D’Souza are of a kind. To read such works together, indeed to draw the significant connections between nineteenth-century social theories and the most recent versions, would ultimately reveal the shared racism of their premises as well as of their prescriptions.

I am grateful to Paul Spickard, Elliott Gorn, David Wiggins, Peter Hoffenberg, Scott Haine, Johanna Garvey, Steven Riess, June Sochen, Kirsten Fischer, and Ursula Bielski for their careful readings of earlier versions of this article.

1. Quotes are from John Martini Book of the Dance (New York: Tudor Publishing Co., 1963), 177-189. This was originally published as The Dance (New York: Tudor, 1947). Though Martin assessed the dancing of Pearl Primus and the choreography of Katherine Dunham as well as the work of Alvin Ailey and Talley Beatty, he used the generic male figure to characterize the main features of black dance. For a recent appraisal of the African American experience in modern dance, see Jennifer Dunning, Alvin Ailey: A Life in Dance (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996); idem, “Classic Dance, Race and Missed Possibilities: A Story Still Unfolding,” New York Times, February 24, 1996.

2. Martin’s Book of the Dance, 178-179. The way Martin cast his observations is all-important. Not only did he mark differences, he also ranked them. For alternative framings and judgments that generalized from the movements of the body, one might look to the Western historians and ethnographers who surveyed African culture with comparisons in mind. One English scholar noted that “African rhythm is so complicated that it is exceedingly difficult for a European to analyse it. . . . Broadly speaking, the difference between African and European rhythms is that whereas any piece of European music has at any one moment one rhythm in common, a piece of African music has always two or three, sometimes as many as four. . . . From this point of view European music is childishly simple. . . .” W. E. Ward, “Music in the Gold Coast,” Gold Coast Review II (July-December 1927), 214. “The twistings, turnings, contortions and springing movements executed in perfect time, are wonderful to behold,” another scholar noted. “For these set dances . . . the physical strength required is tremendous. The body movements are extremely difficult and would probably kill a European.” G. T. Basden, Among the Ibos in Nigeria (London: 1966 [1921]), 131-132. Both are quoted in John W. Blassingame, The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 22-23.


5. See, for example, the discussion of the “savage” and “civilized” body in John Hoberman, Mortal Engines: The Science of Performance and the Dehumanization of Sport (New York: Free Press, 1992), 33-61.


Finally, with regard to the comparative dimension to the study of essentialism, ethnicity, and culture, see Gary Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996). Chapter 2 is titled, “Is Yellow Black or White?”


Largely left out of the discussions of racial science have been the various works off Thomas Sowell, whose notions of “cultural” variation among “racial” and ethnic groups bear a striking resemblance to the biological distinctions that Herrnstein and Murray seek to draw. His approach to ethnicity and culture might also be compared to the “seed catalog” sociology of the early twentieth century. See Thomas Sowell, *Migrations and Cultures: A World View* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).


15. See J. Philippe Rushton, *Race, Evolution, and Behavior: A Life History Perspective* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1995). For his part, Rushton attempts to correlate IQ with experimental findings about such matters as brain size and sexual potency, arguing for differential rates of evolution among “Whites, Blacks, and Orientals.” By way of the Internet, Jon Entine announced his forthcoming book, *Taboo: How Blacks Have Come to Dominate Sports and Why We are Afraid to Talk About It*. With less sureness about its grammar than about what science has revealed, the message stated, that “after years of research, it is clear that the evidence is OVERWHELMING that there are significant phenotypical and genotypical differences between population groups and that race is a key ‘marker’ for these differences (even in African-Americans who have a significant admixture of DNA from outside of sub-Saharan Africa)” (emphasis in original, *Sport Sociology* listserve, December 12, 1997). For a critique of Rushton, see Richard Lewontin, “Of Genes and Genitals,” *Transition* 69 (Spring 1996), 178-193.

17. For an innovative assessment of the significance of Michael Jordan, see Michael Eric Dyson, ““Be Like Mike”: Michael Jordan and the Pedagogy of Desire,” in Reflecting Black: African-American Cultural Criticism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 64-75. From a different vantage point, it is important to consider the embrace of the “bad man” image by players such as Dennis Rodman. On Rodman, we have his autobiography, Bad as I Wanna Be (New York: Delacorte, 1996); John Edgar Wideman, “Playing Dennis Rodman,” The New Yorker (April 29 and May 6, 1996), 94-95. On notions of “badness,” “banditry,” and African American cultural resistance, from the legend of John Henry to the career of Jack Johnson and beyond, see Lawrence Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). For the multiple meanings of the black athletic experience, a fine collection of essays can be found in Elliott J. Gorn, ed., Muhammad Ali: The People’s Champ. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995).


19. Here it should be understood that the ways in which “difference” and “dominance” have been cast and recast clearly link gender and “race” as cognate hierarchies of privilege and subordination. It was to de-legitimatize the accomplishments of “New Women” as well as “New Negroes” at the turn of the century, as well as to reject their claims to full participation in the American social, economic, and political arena since then, that the rules of competition and the boundaries of culture have been largely redrawn by those who would defend, or in some instances, reestablish the old gender and racial regimes. See Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America (New York Knopf, 1985); J. A. Mangan and Roberta J. Park, eds., From “Fair Sex” to Feminism: Sport and the Socialization of Women in the Industrial and Post-Industrial Eras (London: Frank Cass, 1987); Cynthia Russell, Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989); Patricia Vertinsky, The Eternally Wounded Woman: Women, Doctors, and Exercise in the Late Nineteenth Century (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1990); idem, “The Social Construction of the Gendered Body: Exercise and the Exercise of Power,” The International Journal of the History of Sport 11 (August 1994), 147-171. See also Michael A. Messner and Donald F. Sabo, eds., Sport, Men, and the Gender Order: Critical Feminist Perspectives (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1990); Susan Birrell and Cheryl L. Cole, eds. Women, Sport, and Culture (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1994), esp. 1-92. An impressive cultural analysis that links “race” to issues of gender and sexuality is Susan Cahn’s Coming On Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women’s Sport (New York: Free Press, 1994), 110-139.


23. “In strength of fist, the English are superior to all the other European races; while the French and Spanish have a greater power of resisting fatigue and privation, as well as the inclemency of extreme climates . . . We may conclude that the French have certain physical qualities that are superior to those of the Germans, which allow them to brave with impunity the snows of Russia as well as the burning sands of Egypt.” Gobineau, *The Inequality of Human Races* (London: William Heinemann, 1915), 151-153. I am indebted to Scott Haine for bringing these passages to my attention.

24. Gobineau also addressed racial mixing, referring to “tertiary” and “quaternary” races. In the paintbox formulation he advanced, Polynesians had “sprung from the mixture of black and yellow.” *The Inequality of Human Races*, 148-149.


26. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, American Edition, XVII, (New York, 1895): 316-320. The longest portion of the entry relates the early closing of the cranial sutures to “the inherent mental inferiority of the blacks, an inferiority which is even more marked than their physical differences.”

ANATOMY OF SCIENTIFIC RACISM


34. Rice quoted in Mead, *Champion*, 62-63. Not all white sportswriters wrote in this mode. Westbrook Pegler, for instance, rejected “the freak theories and pseudo-scientific speculation that inevitably attend a Negro’s rise.” Pegler continued: “It is a doubtful compliment to a Negro athlete who is qualified to attend college to attempt to account for his proficiency on the field by suggesting that he is still so close to the primitive that whenever he runs a foot-race in a formal meet between schools his civilization vanishes and he becomes again for the moment an African savage in breechcloth and nose ring legging it through the jungle.” Quoted in Mead, *Champion*, 105. For a notably different rendering of this quotation, see Hoberman, *Darwin's Athletes*, 226.

35. Dean Cromwell and Al Wesson, *Championship Techniques in Track and Field* (New York, 1941), 6; Wiggins, “‘Great Speed But Little Stamina,’” 161. Compare these representations with the one that the Nazi architect and functionary, Albert Speer, attributed to Adolf Hitler: “People whose antecedents came from the jungle were primitive. . . . Their physiques were stronger than those of civilized whites. They represented unfair competition and hence must be excluded from future [Olympic] games.” Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich* (New York: Avon, 1971), 114, quoted in John Hoberman, “Toward a Theory of Olympic Internationalism,” *Journal of Sport History* 22 (Spring 1995), 26.

36. Carleton S. Coon quoted in Marshall Smith, “Giving the Olympics an Anthropological Once-Over,” *Life* 57 (October 23, 1964), 83. Describing the research of the anthropologist Robert Malina, another journalist later reported the “well-known findings which suggest that animals living in hot climates tend to have longer extremities and a lesser body mass in order to dissipate heat. With their long legs and arms, blacks have a greater surface area from which to dissipate heat through the skin.” See Martin Kane, “An Assessment of ‘Black is Best,’” *Sports Illustrated* (January 18, 1971), 76.


38. One of the most famous works concerning physiological difference was the expansive text by Tanner et al., *The Physique of the Olympic Athlete*. For a more recent work placing such thinking in context and pointing out its flaws, see John Bale and Joe Sang, *Kenyan Running: Movement, Culture, Geography and Global Change* (London: Frank Cass, 1996).


40. Kane did not spare his readers what he considered the relevant statistics: one study reported that black sprinters “averaged 86.2 centimeters in leg length while white sprinters averaged 83. . . . The blacks' hip width averaged 26.8 centimeters, and the whites’, 28.5. The ratio of leg length to sitting height for sprinters, 400-meter runners, and high jumpers averaged 0.88, 0.92 and 0.93 in whites, and 0.93, 0.97 and 1.01 in Negroes,” according to one of Kane’s experts, who also discovered “a distinct difference in the composition of the Negro calf compared with that of the white. . . .” Kane, “An Assessment of ‘Black is Best,’” 74.


42. In 1906, at the invitation of Du Bois, Boas had delivered a paper titled “The Health and Physique of the Negro-American” at the eleventh annual Atlanta University Conference. Emphasizing the significance of culture in perceived racial differences, he was instrumental in prompting young African American scholars, such as Zora Neale Hurston, to undertake research in black folklore and culture. Through the first half of the century Boasians were popular speakers on the campuses of historically black colleges. See David Levering Lewis,


47. Edwin B. Henderson, “The Negro Athlete and Race Prejudice,” Opportunity 14 (March 1936), 77-79. Significantly, to read the large body of Henderson’s works (as well as those W. Montague Cobb) would be to understand their primary concerns as assimilationist or integrationist; the stray passages that speak to essentialist notions of black excellence need to be read within this broader context. See Wiggins, “Edwin Bancroft Henderson, African American Athletes and the Writing of Sport History” in Glory Bound; Miller, The Playing Fields of American Culture, chaps. 7, 8.

48. Hill, quoted in Kane, “An Assessment of ‘Black is Best,’” 76, 79. See also David Zang, “Calvin Hill Interview,” Journal of Sport History 15 (Winter 1988), 334-355. In Henderson’s The Black Athlete, a number of African American athletes and coaches declared that physiological factors largely accounted for their success. In a 1977 Time article, titled “Black Dominance,” O. J. Simpson argued that blacks “were built a little differently. . . built for speed—skinny calves, long legs, high asses are all characteristics of blacks.”
See *Time* (May 9, 1977), 57-60; Wiggins, “‘Great Speed But Little Stamina,’” 172-174. In a telling counterpoint to the line of essentialist thought embraced by many black athletes (as well as the habits of the mainstream press), the basketball player Isaiah Thomas argued in 1987 against “the perpetuation of stereotypes about blacks.” “When [Larry] Bird makes a great play, it’s due to his thinking and his work habits,” Thomas remarked. “It’s all planned out by him. It’s not the case for blacks. All we do is run and jump. We never practice or give a thought to how we play. It’s like I came dribbling out of my mother’s womb.” *New York Times*, June 2, 1987; see also ibid., June 5, 9, 1987. Quoted in David K. Wiggins, “The Notion of Double-Consciousness and the Involvement of Black Athletes in American Sport,” in George Eisen and David K. Wiggins, eds., *Ethnicity and Sport in North American History and Culture* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 151.

49. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Delusions of Grandeur,” *Sports Illustrated* (August 19, 1991), 78. For a critique of Hoberman—and rebuttal, see Jeffrey T. Sammons, “A Proportionate and Measured Response to the Provocation that is *Darwin’s Athletes* and John Hoberman, ‘How Not to Misread *Darwin’s Athletes*: A Response to Jeffrey T. Sammons,” *Journal of Sport History* 24 (Fall 1997), 378-396. Lamentably, neither Hoberman’s text nor Sammons’ review suggests that the authors are familiar with such critical concepts as “hegemony,” (in any of the ways that term has been cast) or the cultural studies that seek to place the “myth of race” in historical context. See also, John Bale et al., “Review Symposium on *Darwin’s Athletes*,” *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 33 (March 1998).


One might also note in this context such statements as those by the track legend Roger Bannister on the physical endowments of Britain’s black sprinters: “As a scientist rather than a sociologist, I am prepared to risk political incorrectness by drawing attention to the seemingly obvious fact that black sprinters and black athletes in general all seem to have certain natural anatomical advantages.” Bannister qualified this assertion somewhat in contrasting the musculature of the black sprint champions Linford Christie and Carl Lewis. “The Brain, not the heart or lungs, is the critical organ,” he concluded. See “Bannister Speculates on Sprinters,” Chicago Tribune, September 14, 1995. In broader terms, Marek Kohn discusses the “race science system” directed at the control of the Romani (Gypsy) population recently established in Southern and Eastern Europe, See Kohn, The Race Gallery, 178-252; On issues of classification and discrimination, see also Saul Dubow, Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

For a recent discussion of this notion, see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

Even some of the scholars who have labored most to expose the pernicious implications of racial essentialism remain bound to racial category. Though it should be a matter of fact that mixed racial heritage subverts any notion of a sprinting gene, or a jumping gene—in the athletic sense, of course—commentators such as John Hoberman neglect or refuse to deal with multiplicity or mixed racial heritage. Hoberman, for example, does not quote W. Montague Cobb’s comments about the light-skinned and obviously mixed heritage of black athletic champions, Howard Drew and Ned Gourdin. Neither does he mention Dan O’Brien, the Olympic champion and world record holder in the decathlon, whose birth parents were Finnish and African American, and who was adopted at an early age and raised in a multi-racial family. For his part, Tiger Woods, a legend-in-the-making among golfers, declines to acknowledge one, and only one, ancestry and identity in the attempt to avoid the racialization of his athletic accomplishment.
