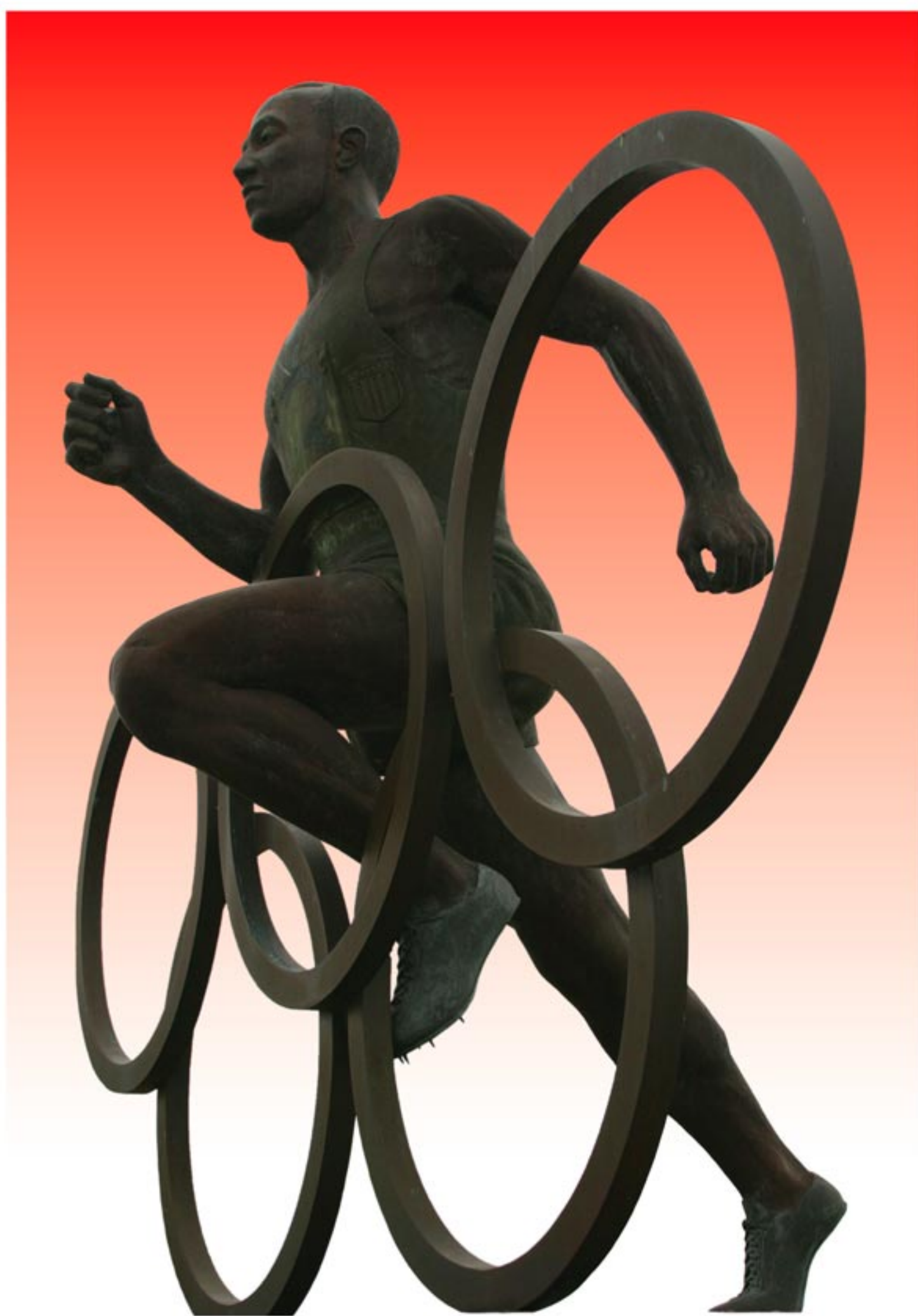


Ben Carrington



# Race, Sport and Politics

The Sporting Black Diaspora



# Race, Sport and Politics

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Race, Sport and Politics

The Sporting Black Diaspora

Ben Carrington



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



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

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

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

## The Invention of the Black Athlete and the Remaking of Race

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

More generally, *Race, Sport and Politics* addresses sport’s historical and contemporary role in the shaping of racial discourse. It considers sport’s place within black diasporic struggles for freedom and equality as well as the contested location of sport in relation to the politics of recognition within contemporary European multicultural societies. I argue that even within a putatively post-racial era, the institutional forms of commodified and hyper-commercialized sports<sup>1</sup> remain profoundly and deeply racialized. In part, this is a story of the continuing effects of ideas about race and racial difference within sport itself. But it is also, and perhaps more importantly, an argument that suggests that *sport reproduces race*. That is, sport has become an important if somewhat overlooked arena for the *making and remaking of race beyond its own boundaries*.

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

sport are used as a way to construct a historical narrative that can account for both change and stasis. An account, in other words, of the *intra*-relationship between discourses of race, the nature of embodied sporting performance, and the role of politics itself in the (re)making of 'the black athlete'.

### **Improbable Articulated Objects: The Sociologist of Sport ... Interested in Race**

It has been more than two decades since the English translation of Pierre Bourdieu's essay 'Program for a Sociology of Sport' (Bourdieu 1988). In that short piece, Bourdieu warns of the dilemma – the double domination as he puts it – that the sociologist faces in trying to take sport seriously as an object of academic study. On the one hand, sports specialists – journalists, fans and players themselves – are often disinclined to think deeply about sport in anything other than an endogenous way, concerning themselves with discussions focused on results and great plays, and insular accounts of sporting history. On the other, many academics refrain from taking such a purportedly mundane, everyday pastime too seriously because the object itself is not considered fundamental to the inner-workings of society. Sport both hyper-accentuates and finds itself on the wrong side of a supposedly insurmountable (and deeply 'classed') dualism between useless physicality and purposeful intellectualism. 'Thus', Bourdieu suggests, 'there are, on the one hand, those who know sport very well on a practical level but do not know how to talk about it and, on the other hand, those who know sport very poorly on a practical level and who could talk about it, but disdain doing so, or do so without rhyme or reason' (1988: 153).

It would be comforting to report that in the intervening years such a denouncement of intellectual snobbery on the one hand and of willful intellectual refusal on the other has been overcome. Alas, it is not possible to do so. Sport remains a problematic intellectual object in a way that few other cultural forms are. Even when major social theorists do engage sport, it is often done in such a way as to reduce sport to a mere passing illustration of some other more fundamental point. The sociologist who takes sport as a *starting point* for sociological enquiry risks a certain professional disparagement.

Who, for instance, outside of the circles of the sport sociology community, knows that Anthony Giddens, arguably the most important and certainly most cited British sociologist of the past thirty years, studied the socio-historical formations of sport for his London School of Economics Masters thesis? Or that he is a huge fan of Tottenham Hotspur Football Club? Giddens's sporting intellectual antecedents are barely knowable from his extensive writings over the years that have explored in sophisticated theoretical detail just about every facet of society and culture, from macro socio-economic analyses of late modernity, globalization and the restructuring of the welfare state, to tracing the changing intimacies of everyday life, identity and emotion (Horne and Jary 2004). But not sport. A Giddens analysis of sport remains as rare as a major trophy in the White Hart Lane cabinet.

Even when such major figures do write on sport they often deny that they are in fact doing so. Hence Loïc Wacquant's stubborn refusal to concede that his widely praised study on the sport of boxing is a study of sport at all. Eric Dunning (2005: 171) – arguably the most prolific and distinguished sociologist to have come out of the sporting sociological closet – argues that Wacquant's (2004) *Body and Soul* is an important contribution to the sociologies of the body and sport, even though Wacquant fails to engage with the extensive sociology of sport literature on boxing, violence and embodiment (Dunning 2005: 175). Wacquant, responding to Dunning's review, flatly states that the focus of his study 'is not on the social organization and culture of athletic pursuits but on the twofold process of *incorporation of social structures*: the collective creation of proficient bodies and the ingenuous unfolding of the socially constituted powers they harbor' (2005: 454, emphasis in original). This sport is not a sport.

I have some sympathy with Wacquant's general position, which I understand to be an attempt to produce a radically reflexive contextualism on the one hand and a micro-sociological investigation of corporal reasoning on the other. The former position suggests that sociologists need to be wary of simply taking as the 'object of study' that which is presented to us within either popular discourse or public policy initiatives as a 'problem' in need of analysis. Or, as Bourdieu puts it, a large number of academic 'objects' that social science officially recognizes and related titles of study,

are nothing other than social problems that have been smuggled into sociology – poverty, delinquency, youth, high school drop-outs, leisure, drunken driving, and so on – and which vary with the fluctuations of the social or scholarly consciousness of the time, as an analysis of the evolution over time of the main realist divisions of sociology would testify ... For a sociologist more than any other thinker, to leave one's thought in a state of unthought (*impensé*) is to condemn oneself to be nothing more than the *instrument* of that which one claims to think. (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 236–238, emphasis in original)

Indeed, many would argue that there is no such thing as a 'sport sociologist', only sociologists interested in studying sport. This shift – from adjective to noun – is important in helping to problematize 'sport' itself. That is, to avoid giving to sport an ontological coherence across time and space that it may lack while also enabling sociologists to avoid extracting sport out of its wider social moorings. Tracing the *historical* development of the meanings given to the human activities that come to be labeled 'sport' and the wider socio-economic forces that are bound up with sport's very production helps to avoid the dangers of unreflexive accounts of sport and its varied meanings. That said, and beyond these specific analytical cautions, there is still a certain academic resistance to being associated with 'sport' itself. In part, this is a desire of some to be seen as 'generalists', that is sociologists able to speak on any topic at any time, as though to have a 'specialty' is to reduce oneself to a redundant particularism and hence to marginality. When that specialism is sport the effect is deemed to constitute a double marginality.

It is not surprising then that Wacquant studiously resists the attempt to 'reduce' his work to something as parochial as 'the sociology of sport', having previously warned of the dubious credibility of such an intellectual pursuit. Toby Miller (one of the very few senior figures within cultural studies who *has* taken sport seriously in his work) has noted that Wacquant once surmised that he probably would have never studied boxing at all but for the cachet obtained from his co-authored work with Bourdieu. Such an association, Wacquant stated, saved him from 'disappearing into the oblivion of the sociology of sport' (cited in Miller 1997: 116). Miller goes on to reflect that:

Wacquant ... demonstrates a cosmic personal ambivalence. At one point, he transcends social theory and careerism for a 'proper' understanding of sport based on allegedly pretheoretical experiential narration; at another, these very categories (themselves, of course, sociological and theoretical) are reinscribed as legitimate forms of argument. Here, sport does not necessarily refer to the fissures of the social, although it is assuredly informed by and informing of them. Rather sport is a mode of representation in which sportspeople are stars of the everyday, their performances conditioned by publicly available rules and dynamic intersubjective space (unlike in film) that can be imitated but never quite repeated. (1997: 117)

Similarly, the culture sections of newspapers, magazines and literary review journals, and the equivalent culture review programs of radio and television, remain enamored of a model of culture that has changed little since the days when Lord Reith's British Broadcasting Corporation decided to bring higher learning and Culture to the masses, or what might be termed the democratization of high culture (Henry 2001: 16–18). Despite the protestations of conservative (and occasionally liberal) commentators over the supposed postmodern collapse of cultural boundaries that drove the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, the canonical gatekeepers have managed to keep 'sport' safely locked inside its own bantustan and outside of the borders of 'culture'. Weekend broadsheets on both sides of the Atlantic, for example, rarely confuse their culture sections with the rapidly growing special supplements dedicated to the non-cultural: 'sport'. And the sports literati, found on the back pages, web pages, radio phone-ins and, increasingly, the dedicated cable and satellite televisual channels, have been happy with this cultural détente. Thus while it is true, for example, that discerning commentaries can occasionally be found in newspaper supplements such as the *Observer's Sports Monthly* in Britain and magazines such as *Sports Illustrated* in the United States, as well as in the perceptive writings of journalists such as Mike Marqusee and Dave Zirin, the gap between critical, sociologically informed work and the broader forms of mass media sports chatter,<sup>2</sup> itself often removed from 'serious' cultural analysis, remains significant. The promise that the arrival of extended sports television talk shows – such as ESPN's *SportsCenter* – would offer a mass-media space for critical, informed, if irreverent and idiosyncratic, commentary remains unfulfilled.<sup>3</sup>

In many ways the academic field reproduces such cultural distinctions. While a sociologist such as Richard Sennett can be admired for his cello-playing dexterity (Glenn 2003; Tonkin 2008), no such validation exists for the 'sporting sociologist'. Sennett's intellectual credentials are, if anything, *enhanced* by such bourgeois cultural associations, yet little if any cultural capital can be gained within academia by announcing that one is or was, say, an Olympic-level sprint hurdler or indeed a semi-professional footballer. The technical aspects of musical production and performance can be used as a way to rethink the physicality and creativity of 'craftsmanship' as a complex social practice and 'music worlds' can help inform a theory of the social mechanisms and collective activities that produce and redefine the very notion of the aesthetic (Becker 2008; Miller 2008; Sennett 2008), but 'sport' in and of itself is rarely accorded such elevated analytical status.<sup>4</sup>

Edwin Amenta's (2007a) *Professor Baseball*, an ethnographic memoir on his experiences playing for and captaining a New York softball team, is instructive here. Even the title of Amenta's book connotes a less-than-serious, somewhat jovial, association between the two operative words: 'professor' and 'baseball'. The title's 'hook' lies in the very, supposedly improbable, conjuncture of the avowedly academic with the irredeemably sporting. Indeed, Amenta reveals that the title stemmed from his fear that his softball teammates would ultimately reject his attempts at using his (academic) analytical skills to produce better sporting results for the team: 'The last thing I need is for one of my teammates to ask, "Who do you think you are, 'Professor Baseball?'" The ridicule would be ruthless' (2007a: 59; see also 2007b: 41). Likewise, Amenta notes the spatial dislocation and unease that would result when he and his teammates would occasionally traipse across the New York University campus after a game, his baseball clothing signifying not just a sartorial breach of academic space but a deeper sense that no serious academic should be spending so much time on such an unserious activity as softball. Amenta confesses, 'My sporting and academic circles never overlap like this, and I worry about being seen' (2007a: 110; see also 2007c).<sup>5</sup>

Given this situation, it is important not simply to berate the cultural gatekeepers or the major sociological figures for not taking sport seriously. Such a response begins to sound like, and is invariably read as, sub-disciplinary griping that serves only to further reinforce the perception that the subject under discussion really is (and should remain) marginal to life's 'big questions'. In his prefatory note to Bourdieu's aforementioned essay, John MacAloon warns against 'the usual sterile lament' (1988: 150) of the sociologist or social scientist of sport, upset that, yet again, their subject matter has been overlooked, ignored or disparaged. Laments, sterile or otherwise, will not get us very far.

There is, of course, a danger in over-stating this 'marginalization' and further reifying a distinction between 'the academic mainstream' and 'the sporting rest' (stuck on the sidelines?) that may not be fully accurate nor helpful. For example, the sociology of sport is a vibrant area of study that