

**'Race', Representation and the Sporting Body\***

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## **‘Race’, representation and the sporting body**

“There is one expression that through time has become singularly eroticized:  
the black athlete”

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*.

### **Introduction**

At the start of the twenty-first century the salience of ‘race’ appears at once both opaque and ubiquitous. The facts of blackness, or the lived experiences of being black in the new century, are no longer marked by an invisibility within the public sphere that once so clearly expressed black peoples’ lack of social power. Official discourse within the West readily promotes and even minimally endorses the mantras of ‘equal opportunities’, ‘diversity’ and ‘multiculturalism’ as unmistakable public goods. Mainstream media culture too is dominated by black faces and bodies, from the sports fields and fashion catwalks, to our cinematic screens and music video channels, and even (occasionally) within the high cultural spaces of award ceremonies for novelistic and avant-garde artistic production. Consumers can now enjoy the spectacle of blackness 24-7, in a way which is no longer threatening by its mere presence, for those who now actively desire a taste for ‘a bit of the other’. Yet alongside the rush to embrace this putative post-race utopia, the material and ideological effects of racial inequality, discrimination and violence continue to brutally manifest themselves within the public and private spheres of Western liberal democracies. The spectacle of ‘hyperblackness’ itself unwittingly reveals the psychic investments that such racialised identifications produce in projecting colonial discourses about the racial other forwards into the post/colonial present.

This paper maps some of these ambivalent tendencies within racial discourse by tracing the continuities of racial ideologies as they manifest themselves within aspects of contemporary media culture. It is suggested that historical colonial fantasies about the excesses of black sexuality continue to exercise a hegemonic role in the representation of blackness. It is also argued that the black (male) body has come to occupy a central metonymic site through which notions of 'athleticism' and 'animalism' operate, and that the athletic black body in particular remains deeply inscribed into the psychic imaginary of the West. These tropes of blackness provide the discursive boundaries within which the black subject is still framed. The argument proceeds via a reading of cultural texts within present-day media culture. It examines their effects in reinforcing racial hierarchies, and the distinctive corporeal patterns of identification they generate. The paper ends by tracing the implications of the contemporary commodification of the black body for transformative subaltern politics and the extent to which black vernacular cultures can still offer modes of resistance.

### **The politics of representation**

The body now occupies a central position within both social theory and contemporary media culture.<sup>1</sup> Attention to representation allows us to map dominant ideologies as they circulate through culture and reproduce themselves as sites for the interpellation of individuals into specific gendered, classed, and racialised subjectivities. By examining

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<sup>1</sup> For a review of the place of the body within social theory and the problematic role of 'embodiment', see Chris Shilling, 'The Embodied Foundations of Social Theory', in Ritzer, G. and Smart, B. (eds.) *Handbook of Social Theory*, Sage, London, 2001. Cheryl Cole provides a useful summary of sport sociology approaches to the body in, 'Body Studies in the Sociology of Sport: A review of the field', in Coakley, J. and Dunning, E. (eds.) *Handbook of Sport Studies*, Sage, London, 2000.

‘the symbolic significance of the body as a metaphor of social relationships’<sup>2</sup> we can trace the meanings embedded within cultural representations of particular bodies, and how these operate to sustain specific power relationships between groups and therefore influence lived cultures. As Stuart Hall notes, ‘cultural meanings are not only “in the head”. They organize and regulate social practices, influence our conduct and consequently have real, practical effects’.<sup>3</sup> Exposing and exploring the representation of certain types of bodies enables us to understand the inherently political process of representation itself. This is particularly the case with social groups that battle over the way they are perceived by others – in trying to break free from, or challenge, stereotypes - and how they are then able to perceive themselves. As Richard Dyer points out, how particular social groupings are portrayed within cultural representation ‘is part and parcel of how they are treated in life, that poverty, harassment, self-hate and discrimination (in housing, jobs, educational opportunity and so on) are shored up and instituted by representation’.<sup>4</sup> Dyer continues by suggesting that how we are seen as subjects ‘determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation’.<sup>5</sup> We should understand the process of stereotyping as an effect of power - as a discursive strategy that attempts to establish particular subject positions as fixed, often degenerate types, as a way of legitimating social hierarchies and inequalities. It is important then to view the process of representation as a primary site for the construction and constitution of identities, collective and individual, rather than merely being a secondary reflection of already formed social identities. It is therefore also a point at which the attempt to secure dominant relations may be resisted and challenged.

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<sup>2</sup> Bryan Turner, ‘Preface’, in Falk, P., *The Consuming Body*, Sage, London, 1994, p. viii.

<sup>3</sup> Stuart Hall, ‘Introduction’, in Hall, S. (ed.) *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*, Sage, London, 1997, p.3.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on representations*, Routledge, London, 1993, p.1

## Colonial discourse, sexuality and black masculinity

Stereotyped images of blacks have circulated in European culture (both popular and elite) throughout the eras of Western imperialism, slavery and colonialism.<sup>6</sup> The negative representation of the Other was vital in helping to legitimate the continuance of European slavery of Africans, and the violent acts carried out under the auspices of ‘Western civilisation’. Blackness itself was pathologised as a deviant identity, and the black male was stereotyped (and subsequently mythologised) as a hyper-sexed, almost animal-like, entity. Nederveen Pieterse suggests that the gendered socio-legal framework within which colonial relations took place meant that black male/white female sexual relations were, potentially, the most destabilising. This was due to the fact that a black child born to a white woman would more likely challenge the parameters of white society, in a way in which white male/black female relations would not, as a white woman ‘would be able to give her children an upbringing and education that would afford them access to social opportunities, and would thus disrupt and undermine the colour-based social hierarchy’.<sup>7</sup> This is not to imply that representations of black female sexuality remained unproblematised. Clearly black femininity has been devalued, within a system of

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> I am aware that there is a totalizing tendency within the use of such phrases as ‘western imperialism, slavery and colonialism’ that risks reducing the historical and cultural specificity of particular forms of racialised subordination and control to a universalised logic of white European racism. Clearly greater historical sensitivity is needed to trace the precise nature of imperialist ideologies as they materialised in the actual settings of, say, French as opposed to British colonial contexts. And of course how these changed even within particular locales at different historical periods – a critical moment being the abolition of slavery during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the changes – legal, political, social – that developed between European and non-European constructions of selfhood. This important caveat aside, what I am attempting to do is to offer a reading of the underlying, and consistent, *tendencies* which I believe can be mapped during these different periods which are still replayed, albeit inflected differently, within the post/colonial present and how these are variously inscribed onto the bodies of those ‘overdetermined from without’ as ‘Negro’, ‘African’ and ‘black’.

<sup>7</sup> Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and blacks in western popular culture*, Yale University Press, London, 1992, p. 174.

racialised heterosexuality that privileged white femininity, and subordinated via the patriarchal parameters within both wider society and black masculinist cultures.<sup>8</sup> The iconic figure of ‘Saartje Baartman’ provides clear evidence that the European colonialist gaze was just as fixated with pathologising black female ‘hyper-sexuality’ as it was with black male sexuality, with its fascination in studying black female genitalia as the supposed ‘external signs of a deviant excessive sexuality’.<sup>9</sup> The point, rather, is that it is the fear of black rams ‘tupping’ with white yews, as Iago played to such tragic effect, that has figured so prominently within the white male psyche, giving additional emphasis to constructions of black male/white female relations, and thereby helping to police and control white femininity too.

The social conditions and representations that structured colonial relationships between blacks and whites led to the perception of black people as effectively sub-human. Thus the Enlightenment project was simply thought to not apply to the ‘savage’ blacks who, as thinkers as diverse as Kant and Hume argued, were deemed incapable of attaining European standards of moral and intellectual development. As Hegel postulated, ‘The Negro is an example of animal man in all his savagery and lawlessness, and if we wish to understand him at all, we must put aside all our European attitudes...nothing consonant

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<sup>8</sup> On the extent to which colonial norms based on white European aesthetics structure contemporary responses to black female sexuality/attractiveness, see Amina Mama, *Beyond the Masks: Race, gender and subjectivity*, Routledge, London, 1995; Debbie Weekes, ‘Shades of Blackness: Young black female constructions of beauty’, in Mirza, H. (ed.) *Black British Feminism: A reader*, Routledge, London, 1997; and Lola Young, ‘How Do We Look? Unfixing the singular black (female) subject’, in Gilroy, P., Grossberg, L. and McRobbie, A. (eds.) *Without Guarantees: In honour of Stuart Hall*, Verso, London, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Lola Young, *Fear of the Dark: ‘Race’, gender and sexuality in the cinema*, Routledge, London, 1996, p. 49. See also Sander Gilman’s essay ‘The Hottentot and the Prostitute’ in *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of sexuality, race, and madness*, Cornell University Press, London, 1985; and also Anne Fausto-Sterling, ‘Gender, Race, and Nation: The comparative anatomy of ‘Hottentot’ women in Europe, 1815-1817’, in Schiebinger, L. (ed.) *Feminism and the Body*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000.

with humanity is to be found in his character'.<sup>10</sup> Western anthropologists sought to prove that blacks were closer to animals in their biological make-up through craniological comparisons with various primates which was then used to explain the supposed uneven distribution in intelligence amongst particular 'races'. Georges Cuvier, who according to Stephen Jay Gould was considered in 19<sup>th</sup> century France as 'the Aristotle of his age', as well as 'a founder of geology, palaeontology, and modern comparative anatomy',<sup>11</sup> argued that Africans were 'the most degraded of human races, whose form approaches that of the beast and whose intelligence is nowhere great enough to arrive at regular government'.<sup>12</sup> Thus the disciplinary power of Western science was central in producing alterity and in constructing 'the black body' as a legitimate area for study upon which its normalising gaze could be inscribed - measuring, photographing and categorising, in minute detail, the various components of the black body.<sup>13</sup> This legitimised further racialised enquiry, which would later, during the Eugenics movement in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, include the onanistic search for the supposed innate capacities for sporting prowess, as modern science tried to uncover the secret truth(s) encased within the black skin of African bodies.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> From Hegel's 'Lectures on the Philosophy of World History', quoted in Emmanuel Eze's *Race and the Enlightenment: A reader*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1997, p. 128. David Goldberg makes an important analytical distinction between those forms of Enlightenment racial thought that were 'naturalist' and those that might be described as 'historicist'. In the former, exemplified in the writings of Hobbes, blacks were deemed to be inherently incapable of social, moral and cultural development. The latter tradition, found in the writings of Locke amongst others, believed blacks to be at a lower stage of maturation, thus holding out the possibility at least that black subjects might one day achieve white European levels of humanistic development, given appropriate colonial administration and education. See David Goldberg, *The Racial State*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Penguin, London, 1997, p. 66.

<sup>12</sup> Cuvier, G., *Recherches sur les ossements fossiles*, Vol. 1, Paris, Deterville, 1812, cited in Gould, *ibid.*, p.69.

<sup>13</sup> On construction of the 'African body' as an object of socio-medical discourse see Alexander Butchart, *The Anatomy of Power: European constructions of the African body*, Zed Books, London, 1998. See also John Bale, *Imagined Olympians: Body culture and colonial imagination in Rwanda*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2002.

<sup>14</sup> The stereotype of the naturally athletic black body is of course an 'impossible object'. Hence, despite being unable to find the non-existent 'running/jumping gene(s)' that are believed (hoped?) to be lurking within the skins of Kenyan long distance runners, or 'West

The attempt to essentialise and place that Other in a binary opposition grew from an ontological perspective that also allowed the idea of Europe itself to emerge. Ideologies of 'race' and white supremacy were not then minor appendages or epiphenomenal exceptions to the emergence of Enlightenment thought and European humanism, but were *from their inception* pivotal and internal to the project of modernity. It is impossible to talk about the modern construction of the subject and the 'civilising process' of the nation-state without an account of how European racism saturated these discourses. As Sartre acknowledged, 'there is nothing more consistent than a racist humanism since the European has only been able to become a man through creating slaves and monsters'.<sup>15</sup> The 'dehumanisation' of blacks, however, was a contradictory process. For as blacks were vilified for their supposed sub-human impulses they also, simultaneously, became the subject of a romanticised Occidental idealism, being seen as reflecting a pure state of abandonment, against the unnatural technocratic developments of a newly emerging industrial modernity. Africans became idealised/eroticised *and* despised/condemned at the same time; the colonial construction of the abject black body was ambivalent from the start. The notion of *ambivalence* thus allows constructions of the Other to remain both

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African descendant' sprinters, sport scientists still yearn for the magic piece of genetic machinery, always just around the corner, that will one day 'prove' their fantasises of biological racial difference.

<sup>15</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Preface', in Fanon, F., *The Wretched of the Earth*, Penguin, London, 1967[1961], p. 22. See also Hardt and Negri, when they note, 'Only through opposition to the colonized does the metropolitan subject really become itself. What first appeared as a simple logic of exclusion, then, turns out to be a negative dialectic of recognition. The colonizer does produce the colonized as negation, but, through a dialectical twist, that negative colonized identity is negated in turn to found the positive colonizer Self...The gilded monuments not only of European cities but also of modern European thought itself are founded on the intimate dialectal struggle with its Others', in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, London, 2000, p. 128.

‘fixed’ and to adapt (and sometimes to even reverse its connotations) in different historical contexts in order for it to make sense to its particular location and to ‘work’.<sup>16</sup>

Questions of ‘race’ and racism were then inherently connected with wider issues concerning the social organisation and display of gender and sexuality. As Anne McClintock has so powerfully demonstrated, ‘gender dynamics were, from the outset, fundamental to the securing and maintenance of the imperial enterprise’.<sup>17</sup> The close connection between colonial sexuality and domination of black peoples helps explain the significance, and degree, of lynching that took place within Western colonies, and, in particular, within the United States of America. Between 1884 and 1900 over 2,500 blacks were lynched in the American south, and in the decade between 1889 and 1899 a person was lynched every other day with the majority of cases being a black man accused of rape.<sup>18</sup> More than the actual acts themselves it was the public expression of what we might term a form of ‘white governmentality’ that served to reinforce and secure white power by the attempt to regulate, shape and affect the conduct of black people and communities through particular techniques of surveillance.<sup>19</sup> The use of black bodies ‘performing’ for the white gaze was not, then, a private affair of the American penal

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<sup>16</sup> Homi Bhabha, in locating the process of ambivalence as central to the processes of stereotyping within colonial discourse, suggests ‘in a very preliminary way...the stereotype is a complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation, as anxious as it is assertive’, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, 1994, p. 70.

<sup>17</sup> Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, gender and sexuality in the colonial contest*, Routledge, London, 1995, p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> Nederveen Pieterse, op. cit., p. 177. As Frantz Fanon made clear, there is a strong connection between racial lynching and the discursive field of gender performance and sexuality: ‘when a white man hates black men, is he not yielding to a feeling of impotence or of sexual inferiority? Since his ideal is an infinite virility, is there not a phenomenon of diminution in relation to the Negro, who is viewed as a penis symbol? Is the lynching of the Negro not a sexual revenge?’, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Pluto Press, London, 1986[1952], p. 159.

<sup>19</sup> Barnor Hesse, ‘White Governmentality: Urbanism, nationalism, racism’, in Westwood, S. and Williams, J. (eds.), *Imaging Cities: Scripts, signs, memories*, Routledge, London, 1997.

system but a public spectacle that sought to oversee the behaviour of black communities.<sup>20</sup>

For the maintenance of white patriarchal hegemony it was not the literal and violent lynching/castration of black men that was the most significant process, important though that was, but rather the *symbolic* castration of black men. This was achieved, primarily, by denying black men access to the central components of masculinity, i.e. patriarchal power and authority, and by reducing black men, politically, legally, socially, and often verbally, to the status of infants. Symbolic castration was also achieved via representational codes – what we might term a ‘racialized regime of representation’.<sup>21</sup> The sexualisation and objectification of the (panoptically controlled) black male body was an attempt to render it ‘feminine’. Such representations have had *constitutive* effects in delimiting racialised subjects – white and black - such that the fear of the power of black sexuality continued long after the period of direct colonial rule and formal segregation ended.<sup>22</sup>

This provided a set of contradictory social conditions for the emergence of black masculinity: it was at once acknowledged as a threat to systems of white supremacist patriarchy due to its (perceived) strength, power and virility, yet actual black men were denied the political and cultural authority that went along with this. This is what Kobena Mercer has called a subordinated masculinity:

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<sup>20</sup> For example see Vron Ware’s account of the ‘mass spectacle’ of black lynchings, in *Beyond the Pale: White women, racism and history*, Verso, London, 1992p. 171. For an overview of the historical conditions within which lynching took place during this period, and the forms of black resistance and struggle that emerged see Barbara Bair’s ‘Though Justice Sleeps: 1880-1900’, in Kelley, R. and Lewis, E. (eds.) *To Make Our World Anew: A history of African Americans*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2000.

<sup>21</sup> Stuart Hall, ‘The spectacle of the ‘other’’ in Hall, *Representation*, p. 249.

In racial terms, black men and women alike were subordinated to the power of the white master in hierarchical social relations of slavery, and for black men, as *objects* of oppression, this also cancelled out their access to positions of power and prestige which in gender terms are regarded as the essence of masculinity in patriarchy. Shaped by this history, black masculinity is a highly contradictory formation of identity, as it is a *subordinated* masculinity.<sup>23</sup>

The predicament of the black male struggling to obtain recognition within a racially stratified society that denies him that is of course key to Frantz Fanon's analysis in *Black Skin, White Masks*, whose very title encapsulates the 'split', or 'divided self', at the heart of the black male colonial subject; the fact, as Stuart Hall puts it, 'that the black man can only exist in relation to himself through the alienating presence of the white "Other"'.<sup>24</sup> Here questions of desire and envy, and the sexualised nature of the relationship between the 'white man' and the 'black man' ('homophilia') come to the fore.<sup>25</sup> Fanon somewhat controversially challenges the notion that 'woman' is the Other in relation to the white man; 'one can have no doubt that the real Other for the white man is and will continue to

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<sup>22</sup> As Jeffrey Weeks reminds us, the 'fear of black sexuality was integral to slave society in the American south, and has continued to shape public stereotypes to the present', in *Making Sexual History*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. 137.

<sup>23</sup> Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New positions in black cultural studies*, Routledge, London, 1994, p. 142-143 .

<sup>24</sup> Stuart Hall, 'The After-life of Frantz Fanon: Why Fanon? Why Now? Why *Black Skin, White Masks?*', in Read, A. (ed.) *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*, ICA, London, 1996, p. 18.

<sup>25</sup> The use of the 'white man' should not be read as referring in a literal sense to individual men who are marked as white, but rather to the totalizing discourses that produce such subject positions; or as Mercer notes, 'the political problem of power represented by straight white males is a problem not about persons but about ideological subject-positions that reproduce relations of oppression', in Kobena Mercer, 'Fear of a Black Penis', *Artforum*, Vol. 32, April, 1994, p.81. On the racialised nature of masculine contestation see also, Paul Hoch, *White Hero, Black Beast: Racism, sexism and the mask of masculinity*, Pluto Press, London, 1979; and Lynne Segal's essay 'Competing Masculinities (III): Black masculinity and the white man's black man', in her *Slow Motion: Changing masculinities, changing men*, Virago, London, 1990.

be the black man. And conversely'.<sup>26</sup> Fanon, describing the complex ontological contradiction at the heart of the black male subject, therefore sets out to demonstrate, as Françoise Vergès suggests, 'that colonialism had configured colonised masculinity as feminised and emasculated, and concluded that men in the colony had to reconstruct their manhood and their freedom through a rejection of colonial images'.<sup>27</sup>

### **The racial signification of sport**

bell hooks suggests that historically, 'competition between black and white males has been highlighted in the sports arena'.<sup>28</sup> This is not surprising given that sport is one of the few arenas for public displays of open competition, domination and control. Many accounts of the historical development and significance of sports during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries within the United States of America, Canada and Western Europe have suggested that sport acted as a key social institution whereby 'manly virtues and competencies' could be both learned and displayed as a way of avoiding wider social, political and economic processes of 'feminisation'.<sup>29</sup> The rapid growth of organised

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<sup>26</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 161. Fanon's appropriation of Lacan's 'mirror phase' is problematic as it tends to reinscribe 'the Other' as 'a fixed phenomenological point' Hall, 1996, op. cit., p. 26 - a criticism of course as much directed towards psychoanalysis in general as with Fanon's use of it - and the suggestion that Fanon's work denies black female subjectivity any agency within the colonial paradigm. The extent to which Fanon's 'masculinism' is compatible with black feminism is pursued by T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting in her critical but generally sympathetic reading of Fanon, in *Frantz Fanon: Conflicts and feminisms*, Rowman and Littlefield, Oxford, 1998.

<sup>27</sup> Françoise Vergès, 'Chains of Madness, Chains of Colonialism: Fanon and freedom', in Read, op. cit., p. 60-61.

<sup>28</sup> bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting representations*, Routledge, London, 1994, p. 31. Though of course this competition was structured on the premise that 'the white man' would win and where this did not happen blacks were formally excluded from competing against whites, such as the so-called 'colour-line' that was drawn in boxing after the success of Jack Johnson. Indeed most of the major American sports remained segregated until the 1960s. In Britain too, black boxers were prohibited from fighting for British titles until 1948.

<sup>29</sup> For sociological analyses on the historical development of sport see Eric Dunning, *Sport Matters: Sociological studies of sport, violence and civilisation*, Routledge, London, 1999; Rick Gruneau, *Class, Sports and Social Development*, Human Kinetics, Leeds, 1999, 2nd ed.; and John Hargreaves *Sport, Power and Culture*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1986. For an account that

sports during this period is seen 'as the creation of a homosocial institution which served to counter men's fears of feminization in the new industrial society'<sup>30</sup> and helped to 'naturalise', by its overt emphasis on the 'obvious' fact of biological difference, men's collective power in society.

Although it is a homosocial space, mainstream competitive sport is of course profoundly homophobic. This apparent contradiction is resolved by the formation of explicit and implicit rules governing the degree of intimate bodily contact within sports that disavows the inherently homoerotic possibilities of sports contests (with its codes of domination and penetration) even as the participants engage in activities that outside of the sports arena are prohibited by dominant heterosexual masculinity. As Brian Pronger notes, despite sport's 'inner libidinal logic', homoeroticism is controlled 'as an excess to the system by a comprehensive, unwritten but well-known and closely adhered-to set of rules'<sup>31</sup> that can be seen to govern and restrict 'the nature of caresses, hugs, and kisses on the playing field, not to mention the display of erections, erotic massage, masturbation, fellatio, and buggery in locker rooms, showers, washrooms, sleeping accommodation, or at team socials'.<sup>32</sup> Thus the potentially disruptive challenge to normative gender codes are resolved by the governance of intermale desire, meaning that 'sportsmen (and boys)

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remains more attuned to the specifically *gendered* nature of sports position as a 'male preserve' see Jenny Hargreaves *Sporting Females: Critical issues in the history and sociology of women's sports*, Routledge, London, 1994. As yet no sufficiently theorised account of sport's historical role in reproducing racialised forms of identification and racial inequality has been written.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Messner, *Power at Play: Sports and the problem of masculinity*, Boston, Beacon, 1992, p. 14.

<sup>31</sup> Brian Pronger, 'Homosexuality and Sport: Who's winning?', in McKay, J., Messner, M. and Sabo, D. (eds.) *Masculinities, Gender Relations, and Sport*, Sage, London, 2000, p. 236-237.

<sup>32</sup> Pronger, *ibid.*, p. 237. Allen Guttman provides a useful cultural history of the 'erotic' in sport. However, his understanding of contemporary feminist, psychoanalytical and neo-Marxist critiques of the sexualisation of the body displays a profound mis-reading of the complexity of the theoretical arguments put forward by such positions; see his *The Erotic in Sports*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1996. For a more sophisticated theoretical

can play with each other's bodies in highly erotic and intimate ways without that desire becoming other to the system of masculinist hetero-normativity that sport produces'.<sup>33</sup>

Thus the ideological values of sport constructed a homosocial space within which femininity was degraded, women excluded and heterosexist norms embedded. Given this, sport's symbolic space offered opportunities for those marginalised by hegemonic masculinity to challenge dominant projections of white, middle-class, male heterosexuality, even as male power was being consolidated in formal economic and political life, and became a highly charged regulatory social space.

Sports are also, of course, a context in which black bodies can be gazed upon, safe in the knowledge that the circumscribed arena of the sports field provides a legitimate space for such racialised homosocial encounters.<sup>34</sup> It is evident that colonial myths about black power have been most clearly expressed in the discourse of the 'tough' black athlete making the *athletic black body* a key repository for contemporary desires and fears about blackness.<sup>35</sup> Sport can be viewed, perhaps, as a mechanism for the production of temporally bounded space that is delimited by desire itself.<sup>36</sup>

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explication of these issues see Toby Miller's, *Sportsex*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2001.

<sup>33</sup> Pronger, *ibid.*, p. 237. Notions of phallogentric anxiety are also pursued in Toby Miller's suggestive essay 'A Short History of the Penis' which attempts to bring, analytically speaking, 'sport and the penis together: one as an arena of intense self-control, the other as an arena of profound risk', p. 103, in *Technologies of Truth: Cultural citizenship and the popular media*, University of Minnesota Press, London, 1998.

<sup>34</sup> See Elizabeth Alexander's analysis of the popular film *White Men Can't Jump* when she asks, 'What is the space of the basketball court, of black male theatrics in the white male imagination?...The basketball court is imagined as a classless, raceless, hypergendered space of transcendence. It is also, crucially, where white men can safely articulate and experience their desire for black men', in "'We're Gonna Deconstruct Your Life!": The making and un-making of the black bourgeois patriarch in *Ricochet*', in Blount, M. and Cunningham, G. (eds.) *Representing Black Men*, Routledge, London, 1996, p. 170.

<sup>35</sup> As Bob Connell has noted, 'in a white-supremacist context, black masculinities play symbolic roles for white gender construction...black sporting stars become exemplars of masculine toughness', in *Maculinites*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 80. On the construction of Mike Tyson as emblematic of hard (black) masculinity see Tony Jefferson's essay, 'Muscle, 'Hard Men' and 'Iron' Mike Tyson: Reflections on desire, anxiety and the embodiment of masculinity', in *Body and Society*, 4 (1) March, 1998, pp. 77-98, although

What we might term the ‘racial signification of sport’ means that sports contests are more than just significant events. Rather, they act as a key signifier for wider questions about identity within racially demarcated societies in which narratives about the self and society are read both *into* and *from* sporting contests involving racial competition. Though this is rarely publicly acknowledged, the racial signification of sport means that success by black athletes has profound effects on the white male imaginary. Black achievement in two of the most hegemonically prized sports, the men’s Olympic 100 meters in athletics and the World Heavyweight Championship in boxing, clearly poses a threat to white hegemonic masculinity. The perennial search for the ‘Great White Hope’ first emerged as a term after Jack Johnson’s successes at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. That this phrase is still part of common sports lore reveals the almost desperate longing for *any* white man to reclaim the mantle of masculinity that the Heavyweight Champion of the World is meant to bestow, and also the pain caused to the white male psyche of black success in sport.<sup>37</sup>

Occasionally however the hidden racialised meanings of competitive sport are revealed. American basketball player, Dennis Rodman, for example, has said ‘when you talk about race in basketball, the whole thing is simple: **a black player knows he can** go out on the court and **kick a white player’s ass**. He can beat him, and he knows it. It’s that simple,

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Jefferson fails to engage in a sufficiently critical and self-reflexive manner about his own ‘fascination’ with Tyson’s black ‘hyper-masculinity’ as a white male academic.

<sup>36</sup> Drawing on the work of Deleuze and Guattari, Pronger has pursued this argument further by arguing that ‘sport is a disciplinary practice that organizes the body and desire in time and space’, in Pronger, *op. cit.*, p. 235. This racialised context of homosocial desire and envy is of course central to understanding the popularity of the Rocky films. Indeed the relationship between Rocky Balboa (played by Sylvester Stallone) and Apollo Creed (Carl Weathers) is surely one of modern cinemas most enduring but unconsummated homoerotic relationships.

<sup>37</sup> In 1997 the front cover of *Sports Illustrated* juxtaposed a picture of an all-white college basketball team from the (presumably) golden age of segregated US sports, under the title, ‘What Ever Happened to the White Athlete?’ That such a question can be asked – even as it is factually incorrect if we take sport to mean more than male basketball, boxing and track

and it shouldn't surprise anyone. The black player feels it every time. He knows it from the inside'.<sup>38</sup> And witness also the earlier, unguarded, remarks by the white British boxer Alan Minter before his comprehensive defeat at the hands of Marvin Hagler, when he remarked, 'I have spent many years reaching the world title. I have no intention of letting a black man take it from me'.<sup>39</sup> When challenged about his comments, Minter made the somewhat spurious defence that he had, of course, been misquoted and what he had actually said was that he would never allow *this particular* black man to beat him.<sup>40</sup>

The sports media in particular have played a central role in biologising black performance via their constant use of animalistic similes to describe black athletes. Black athletes – female and male – are invariably described as being strong, powerful and quick but with unpredictable and 'wild' moments when they supposedly lack the cognitive capabilities – unlike their white peers – to have 'composure' at critical moments. Previous sports journalists were less circumspect than their modern equivalents in their use of language in which heroic qualities which would otherwise enhance the *human* capacities of the athlete are instead read as intrinsic reflexes of the unthinking black body. Paul Gallico, the *New York Times* sports editor, described Joe Louis, before one fight, as, 'the magnificent animal...He eats. He sleeps. He fights...Is he all instinct, all animal? Or have a hundred million years left a fold upon his brain? I see in this colored man something so cold, so hard, so cruel that I wonder as to his bravery. Courage in the animal is desperation. Courage in the human is something incalculable and divine'.<sup>41</sup>

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athletics – reflects the deeply embedded nature of racial discourse to mainstream sports cultures.

<sup>38</sup> Dennis Rodman, *Bad As I Wanna Be*, Delacorte Press, New York, 1996, p. 129.

<sup>39</sup> London Evening News, 21 August 1980, quoted in Ellis Cashmore, *Black Sportsmen*, Routledge, London, 1982, p. 182.

<sup>40</sup> Cited in Funmilayo Kolaru, *Real Men Wear Black: The socio-legal significance of black male athletes in the West*, unpublished Masters Thesis, University of Kent at Canterbury, 1995.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Jay Coakley, *Sport in Society: Issues and controversies*, McGraw-Hill, London, 1998, p. 258.

This colonial discourse still has a contemporary resonance in framing ‘deviant’ aspects of black masculinity. When, in June 1997, Mike Tyson engaged in the wrong sort of violence in biting his opponent Evander Holyfield’s ear during their Heavyweight Championship clash, the British print media went into a frenzy in projecting discourses of bestial animalism onto Tyson. The incident was deemed of such international and political importance that it dominated not only the sports leaders but the front pages of nearly all the British broadsheet and tabloid papers, most with colour photographs of a missing lobe of Holyfield’s ear, complete with blood, and a snarling Tyson. The *Mirror* headline proclaimed ‘Ban Beast Tyson’, whilst the *Independent’s* Sport section counterpoised a jubilant ‘all-white’ Tim Henman against the black robed Tyson, under the caption ‘Beauty and the beast: Britain’s Tim Henman brings a smile to Centre Court while Mike Tyson descends to new levels of savagery’. The *Express* avoided any ambiguity and simply called Tyson a ‘Monster’ in its Sports Special. Whilst the paper actually lead with the headline ‘Savage’ on its main front page. Lest we be unsure of how Tyson should be viewed the opening paragraph to the lead story read, ‘When Mike Tyson’s career started it carried the mark of greatness. Effectively, it has ended with that of the beast’.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> To be clear, I do not wish to deny that Tyson’s actions were illegitimate. What is significant is the ease, readiness and extent to which Tyson’s actions allowed for the tropes of savagery, cannibalism and bestiality to be replayed and out of all proportion to the actual incident, thereby framing Tyson within a highly racialised discourse. This was made clearer when, a few months later during a rugby union game, the London Scottish flanker Simon Fenn had part of his ear bitten off by Bath’s Kevin Yates. Yates was heavily criticised, though largely only within the sporting media, but mainly for having ‘gone too far’ and for breaking the ethical codes, as well as the formal rules, of rugby union. His violent excess was thus seen as a regrettable, but ultimately insignificant, exception. Tyson, however, standing in for black masculinity within the white imagination, was reverting to ‘type’ and thus had to be morally and publicly punished for his sins against white civility.

It is interesting, given the arguments presented here concerning the intersection of 'race', gender and sexuality in the maintenance of racial typologies, that Fanon himself demonstrates the centrality of sport, and the black athlete in particular, as a discursive field where these fantasies are most clearly projected. When Fanon gives his white patients a word association test, it is significant to note how often his respondents mention either sports, or prominent black athletes of the period. Fanon informs us that the word, '*Negro* brought forth biology, penis, strong, athletic, potent, boxer, Joe Louis, Jesse Owens, Senegalese troops, savage, animal, devil, sin'.<sup>43</sup> For Fanon, the black male was the repository of white fears, fantasies and desires, and of all of these constructions, there was one figure above all others that held a central place within the colonial imaginary: 'There is one expression that through time has become singularly eroticized: the black athlete'.<sup>44</sup>

### **Black men with big balls**

Feminist scholars have shown how female athletes are often subject to a systematic process of sexualisation that devalues their sporting achievements, and once again renders female bodies controllable to a heterosexual male gaze. As Jenny Hargreaves has argued, in the case of well-known female athletes, 'the sexualisation of the body is a favoured image in magazine and press photographs...Glamour poses which ignore the skills of performance and highlight sexuality transform athletes into objects of desire and envy, providing an unambiguous message that sportswomen are sexual women'.<sup>45</sup> Thus the entry of female athletes into sport and the potential threat this poses to hegemonic

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<sup>43</sup> Fanon, op. cit., p. 166.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, p. 158.

masculinity is resolved by the reduction of female physicality to highly heterosexist representational techniques, regardless, as the forlorn career of Anna Kournikova illustrates, of the actual technical ability of the female athlete.<sup>46</sup> Similarly Jim McKay et al note that ‘corporate interests and media framing of female athletes often serve to neutralize any challenge inherent in female athleticism and to facilitate and profit from the creation of new, but still subordinate, definitions of emphasised femininity’.<sup>47</sup> Without wishing to deny the validity of these insights, I want to suggest that the *black male* sporting body has now attained equal prominence in the degree to which it has become sexualised and transformed into an object of desire and envy.<sup>48</sup> Currently, the muscled black male torso as a commodity-sign has achieved almost iconic status within

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<sup>45</sup> Jennifer Hargreaves, ‘Bodies Matter! Images of sport and female sexualisation’, in Brackenridge, C. (ed.) *Body Matters: Leisure Images and Lifestyle*, Leisure Studies Association, No. 47, Eastbourne, 1993, p. 61.

<sup>46</sup> Female body builders have been the subject of much attention from feminist theorists – even though ‘mainstream’ feminism has surprisingly tended to neglect sport as an area of inquiry – as they disrupt the binary of female body/muscled body and offer subversive images that challenge the gender order. As Honi Ferb Haber notes, ‘In a culture, and within a power network that has insisted on, and benefited from, keeping the domains of the masculine and the feminine separate, the unexpected and shocking body of the muscled woman does indeed present a subversive image ripe with the possibilities of empowerment and revaluation’, in ‘Foucault Pumped: Body politics and the muscled woman’, in Hekman, S. (ed.) *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania, 1996, p.153. On the marginalisation of sport within feminist thought Elspeth Probyn has noted that ‘it is true that for me as for many other feminists, sport is a sociological area of which we rarely speak’, p. 14, in ‘Sporting Bodies: Dynamics of shame and pride’, in *Body and Society*, 6 (1), March, 2000, pp. 13-28.

<sup>47</sup> Jim McKay, Michael Messner, and Don Sabo, ‘Studying Sport, Men, and Masculinities From Feminist Standpoints’, p. 7, in McKay et al, op. cit. This can clearly be seen in the way that Denise Lewis, the 2000 Olympic Heptathlete Champion, has been represented. She is arguably the most successful black British female athlete ever and as such has had a media profile as high as any male athlete – black or white. Yet she more often appears in the print media in ways that emphasises her femininity, though often combined with a focus on her athletic physical frame, such as when she appeared in 1997 on the front cover of *Total Sport* magazine ‘naked’ except for red, white and blue paint that covered her body. In an interview for the *Radio Times* (December 2000) after her Sydney Olympic success – which again had a front cover image of her in a pose more suited to a soft-core pornography magazine, with her gold medal suggestively hanging down the front of her chest – she remarked ‘I was body-painted with my 1996 Olympic kit for the benefit of my sponsors. I was only being a good little athlete, doing as I was told’, p. 8.

<sup>48</sup> The fact that it is the black male and not black female body that has become iconic demonstrates the contradictory ways in which black masculinity can be afforded a ‘privileged’ status further illustrating how racialised regimes of representation can simultaneously marginalise black femininity whilst valorising black masculinity.

the Western media, within both popular cultural and high art spaces, in replaying, at the connotative level, colonial fantasies about the perceived sexual excesses of black masculinity. From the continuing interest in the photographs of Robert Maplethorpe, to advertisements for Nike and other sports companies, to the cinematic constructions of Steven Spielberg's *Amistad*,<sup>49</sup> to the covers of black athlete's autobiographies, the black male torso as object of visual desire is *everywhere*. We might suggest then that the 'passive sexualization'<sup>50</sup> of male (largely white) bodies during the 1980s, when advertising and marketing discourses produced the ephemeral 'New Man', is now displaced by an *active* sexualisation of black male bodies.

Even a cursory glance through contemporary media forms shows how often, and to what extent, the black male torso (always heavily defined, never 'soft') is used to connote notions of athleticism, that is strength, aggression and power. Often underlying such representations are also coded plays on notions of animalism. When the clothing manufacturer Ralph Lauren launched their sportswear range 'Polo Sport' during the 1990s the model chosen to front the campaign was the African-American Tyson Beckford.<sup>51</sup> The black model automatically connotes 'athleticism' to a white audience

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<sup>49</sup> The opening scenes to Spielberg's 1998 epic *Amistad* arguably provide some of the most voyeuristic images of chiselled, sweating and vulnerable 'black flesh' seen outside of hard core pornography. The film is less about the North Atlantic slave trade than a myopic justification and homage for the democratic ideals of the American legal system. As Paul Gilroy sardonically notes, 'The slaves in Steven Spielberg's courtroom drama *Amistad* arrive at their Cuban auction block fresh from the horrors of the Middle Passage. They are buffed: apparently fit and gleaming with robust good health. They enjoy the worked-out and pumped-up musculature that can only be acquired through the happy rigors of a postmodern gym routine...It may be that those coveted abdominal muscles are now deemed to be an essential precondition for identifying with the superhuman figures of heroes like Spielberg's Joseph Cinqué', in *Between Camps: Nations, cultures and the allure of race*, Allen Lane, London, 2000, p. 25-26.

<sup>50</sup> Sean Nixon, 'Exhibiting Masculinity', p. 304, in Hall, *Representation*.

<sup>51</sup> Tyson Beckford was introduced to Ralph Lauren by the photographer Bruce Weber. Beckford's profile from the campaigns was such that he achieved a status as high as many female models. As Deborah McDowell noted: 'we might propose model Tyson Beckford as a more recent example of the feminized/eroticized black body. For its profile on Beckford, the *New York Times* [November 20, 1994] chose the headline: "To Claudia, Naomi, and Cindy,

thus is seen to be the obvious choice for such a campaign. Significantly, Tyson Beckford (whose signifier plays off against the other 'dark side' of black masculinity encapsulated by the figure of Mike Tyson) was also chosen as the lead model to promote their underwear range (Linford Christie too has modelled Kangol underwear).<sup>52</sup> Throughout most the 1990s magazines were full of pictures of Beckford, wearing either a tight fitting sporting vest, normally with a basketball under his arm emphasising his 'ripped' torso and fore arms, or naked, except for skin-tight underwear.

In contrast to the frequent photography of white models in 'air-brushed', soft focused light, black models are usually shot with a high intensity film so that the black skin is exposed to a microscopic gaze, showing veins, pores, and sweat gleaning from the dark skin, reproducing a 'pornographic' effect in rendering the black male body vulnerable, 'open' and exposed to inspection.<sup>53</sup> Indeed camera and film companies often use close-focus shots of parts of black bodies in order to illustrate the degree of 'resolution' their products are capable of. As Mercer notes in his analysis of the Maplethorpe photographs, the 'glossy, shining, fetishized surface of black skin thus serves and services a white male

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you can add the name Tyson". Tyson becomes la femme, one of "the girls", symbolically a kind of "boy-girl", in 'Pecs and Peps: Muscling in on race and the subject of masculinities', in Stecopoulos, H. and Uebel, M. (eds.) *Race and the Subject of Masculinities*, Duke University Press, London, 1997, p. 367.

<sup>52</sup> The discourse surrounding Linford Christie's 'lunch-box' is perhaps the most explicit form of sexualisation of a black athlete in the public sphere in recent times; the term itself becoming a coded word play for talking about the (imagined) over-sized black penis. For an analysis of the sexualisation of Christie, see Ben Carrington, 'Double Consciousness and the Black British Athlete', in Owusu, K. (ed.) *Black British Culture and Society*, Routledge, London, 2000.

<sup>53</sup> 'Skin, as the key signifier of cultural and racial difference in the stereotype, is the most visible of fetishes, recognized as 'common knowledge' in a range of cultural, political and historical discourses, and plays a public part in the racial drama that is enacted every day in colonial societies', Bhabha, op. cit., p. 78. On the role of skin colour as an inherently unstable signifier of racial difference, see Sara Ahmed, 'Tanning the Body: Skin, colour and gender', in *New Formations*, 34, Summer, 1998, pp. 27-42.

desire to look and to enjoy the fantasy of mastery precisely through the scopic intensity that the pictures solicit'.<sup>54</sup>

These representational techniques are now no longer the preserve of gay photography within high cultural spaces, but can be found within mainstream media depictions of black men too. More recent advertisements for Polo Sport Cologne, which have been used on huge billboards throughout much of Western Europe and North America, have shown Beckford, bare chested, holding up a large ball from his outstretched hand, again emphasising his muscular, tattooed and statuesque frame. In another series of advertisements, Beckford is seen from behind (Beckford is rarely allowed to return our gaze), with the camera's lights exposing in minute detail the subtle shades of black on his muscular body, as he holds, on one arm, a huge black leather ball. Male sexuality and the power of the phallus, often represented via the raised arm and fist, is here used to represent black sexual power, the over-sized ball now taking on metaphoric significance.<sup>55</sup> The use of black men holding 'big balls' has become a constant theme within mediated images of black men: from the American artist Jeff Koon's Nike advertisements in the 1980s, showing a black basketball player surrounded by and holding aloft basketballs, to the American basketball player Dennis Rodman's cover for his 1996 autobiography *Bad As I Wanna Be*, showing him naked except for basketballs

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<sup>54</sup> Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, p. 176. Anoop Nayak decodes the use of black skin to produce fetishised representations of black sexual excess within the advertising media in his essay, 'Frozen Bodies: Disclosing whiteness in Haagen-Dazs advertising', in *Body and Society*, 3 (3), September, 1997, pp. 51-71. See also Peter Jackson, 'Black Male: Advertising and the cultural politics of masculinity', in *Gender, Place and Culture*, 1 (1), 1994, pp. 49-59.

<sup>55</sup> Richard Dyer argues that sexuality in general and male sexuality in particular is rarely shown directly but symbolised via certain representational techniques usually using fetishised parts of the male body: 'The first thing to say about the symbolism of male sexuality is that it is overwhelmingly centred on the genitals, especially the penis. Penises are not shown, but the evocation of male sexuality is almost always an evocation of the penis...Even when other parts of the male body are used to represent sexuality it is only because they can symbolize the penis, as in the commonest of them all, the fist raised from the elbow', Dyer, op. cit., p. 112.

strategically placed covering his genitalia, sitting astride a huge black Harley Davidson motor bike.<sup>56</sup>

Notions of black athleticism are often carefully coded through plays on black animalism too; the two tropes playing off each other so as to produce a metonymic space for phantasmatic constructions of black animality. In 1996 the Italian clothing company Armani produced a catalogue magazine, based on a photo shoot in Cuba. Inside are pictures of various dark (athletic) male bodies that provide the exotic and dangerous backdrop for the clothes worn by the visiting pale European models. This is meant to emphasise the ‘cultured’ difference of Italian high fashion - the civilised and clothed European body contrasted against the ‘natural’ and naked dark bodies of Cuba. The cover picture shows the black English football player David James, who (again) also models Armani’s underwear collection, prowling, ‘panther-like’, and naked on the ground on all fours.

The use of images of black males in ‘animal-like’ positions is also used on the cover of Rodman’s (1997) second autobiography, *Walk on the Wild Side*, when he is shown, like James on the Armani catalogue, crouching naked, except for ‘animal-paint’ on his body. The sleeve to Rodman’s book informs us: ‘I have this fantasy that I can live my life like a tiger in the jungle – eating whatever I want, having sex whenever I want, and roaming around butt naked, wild and free...’ What is most interesting about Rodman – whatever else we may think of him – is that by openly playing with the myths concerning black

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<sup>56</sup> Michelle Dunbar, talking about the book’s cover, notes that the ‘back cover shows Rodman’s full naked body from the rear view, legs standing shoulder width apart and arms extended upward in a “Y” shape holding two basketballs. This image can be interpreted as phallic, with the upheld balls representing testicles and Rodman’s lean, tall body suggesting the phallus’, p. 281, in ‘Dennis Rodman – do you feel feminine yet? Black masculinity, gender transgression and reproductive rebellion on MTV’, in McKay et al, op. cit..

sexuality, he forces readers to directly confront that which is often hidden and coded in other contexts. Whilst Rodman reinforces certain gendered norms, his deliberate and provocative use of racialised stereotypes is also a *potentially* transgressive move. His refusal to fully endorse the heterosexist parameters of mainstream sports cultures – the ambiguity over his sexuality being the clearest example of this - exposes the degree to which sports culture has to constantly work at disavowing its more homoerotic and racialised subtexts. Rather than simply trying to negate the stereotypes that do exist, or offering ‘good’ images, Rodman, in many ways attempts to deconstruct those boundaries from within. Hall has argued to ‘reverse the stereotype is not necessarily to overturn or subvert it’<sup>57</sup> as it fails to escape the contradictions of the binary structure of the stereotype. Thus Hall suggests that a strategy that operates explicitly within and against the liminal boundaries of the stereotype is often more productive:

...instead of avoiding the black body, because it has been so caught up in the complexities of power and subordination within representation, this strategy positively takes the body as the principal site of its representational strategies, attempting to make the stereotypes work against themselves. Instead of avoiding dangerous terrain opened up by the interweaving of ‘race’, gender and sexuality, it deliberately contests the dominant gendered and sexual definitions of racial difference by *working on* black sexuality. Since black people have so often been fixed, stereotypically, by the racialized gaze, it may have been tempting to refuse the complex emotions associated with ‘looking’. However, this strategy makes elaborate play with ‘looking’, hoping by its very attention, to ‘make it strange’ – that is, to de-familiarize it, and so make explicit what is often hidden – its erotic dimensions...It is not afraid to deploy humour...Finally, instead of refusing the

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<sup>57</sup> Hall, S., *The spectacle of the ‘other’*, p. 272.

displaced power and danger of 'fetishism', this strategy attempts to use the desires and ambivalence which tropes of fetishism inevitably awaken.<sup>58</sup>

Within the British print-advertising media, the figure of a black athlete in the crouched position of a sprinter has been used to sell everything from electricity shares to financial services. The idea is that you can get an 'explosive' result through buying these goods since the black male body, as suggested earlier, automatically connotes power, speed and strength. Thus the code of *performance* dominates, emphasising the linked ideology of sporting and sexual prowess - are these black men in the sprinting starting position, a sexual position or mimicking animals? These connotations were also used during the 1990s in Pirelli's campaign, using the African-American sprinter Carl Lewis. This campaign produced striking images of the athlete in a black, skin-tight lycra outfit, again in the crouched sprinting position, his backside protruding, his body ready to 'explode', under the caption, 'Power Is Nothing Without Control'. The objectified black male body was literally feminised in this instance as Lewis was depicted wearing women's red stiletto shoes, furthering the ambivalent projection of the black male body as at once hyper-masculine and 'feminine'.

### **Commodification and body politics**

The growth in the visual spectacularisation of the black (male) form within Western media culture raises a number of issues relating to the diminution of politics and the reconfiguration of the subaltern public sphere. These undoubtedly contradictory processes are played out within the sign economy where 'blackness', and the black body, have become highly valued commodities whilst at the very same time within the formal

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<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, p. 274-275.

economy, actual black people (alienated from the surplus sign-value of their own bodies) struggle to survive against the material conditions of global capitalism. Black people, once literal commodities during the Atlantic slave trade, have been transformed into commodity-signs to be bought and sold throughout the globalised media market. Again, it is the black athlete, above all, who occupies pride of place in the fetishised desire for blackness. As Hazel Carby notes:

In these days of what is referred to as ‘global culture’, the Nike corporation produces racialized images for the world by elevating the bodies of Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods to the status of international icons. Hollywood too now takes for granted that black bodies can be used to promote both products and style worldwide...But despite the multimillion-dollar international trade in black male bodies, and encouragement to ‘just do it’, there is no equivalent international outrage, no marches or large-scale public protest, at the hundreds of thousands of black male bodies languishing out of sight of the media in the North American [and indeed British] penal system.<sup>59</sup>

Carby suggests that despite the hyper-visibility of blacks within media culture, we have seen no concomitant developments within the public sphere of black political mobilisation. Indeed some have argued that the allure of the spectacle of the black body has not only served to obscure the real conditions that many black people face, but has simultaneously diminished the space for progressive politics itself. This can be seen in Gilroy’s adaptation of the term ‘bio-politics’ ‘in which the person is defined as the body and in which certain exemplary bodies, for example those of Mike Tyson and Michael

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<sup>59</sup> Hazel Carby, *Race Men: The WEB Du Bois Lectures*, Harvard University Press, London, 1998, p. 1.

Jordan, Naomi Campbell and Veronica Webb, become instantiations of community'.<sup>60</sup>

The effect of such politics means that whereas previous attempts to transform the condition of black communities articulated around the 'liberation of the mind', today's bio-politics is only expressed via modalities of the body. Racialised bio-politics, therefore, establishes the boundaries of the authentic racial community through 'the visual representation of racial bodies – engaged in characteristic activities – usually sexual or sporting – that ground and solicit identification if not solidarity'.<sup>61</sup>

This (anti-)political expression is not to be confused with what we might call a politics of the everyday, or what Robin Kelley has referred to in a different context as 'infrapolitics'.<sup>62</sup> The notion of a politics of 'the everyday' can be read as a critique of politics as traditionally defined by political science and as instituted in liberal democracies, and can be seen as the site through which power is simultaneously both exercised and resisted.<sup>63</sup> Further the 'hidden transcripts' of everyday resistance offer a way of understanding the informal modes of struggle that remain excluded from formal

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<sup>60</sup> Paul Gilroy, "'After the love has gone": Bio-politics and etho-poetics in the black public sphere', *Third Text*, Autumn/Winter, 1994, p. 29. Gilroy is using the term somewhat differently from the standard Foucauldian notion of bio-politics, usually understood as 'the regulation of the individuated bodies of the social body through disciplinary techniques', p. 63, in Robert Young, 'Foucault on Race and Colonialism', *New Formations*, 25, Summer, 1995, pp. 57-65, revised in 'Foucault in Tunisia', in Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: An historical introduction*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2001. See also the section 'Right of Death and Power over Life' in, Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge - The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, Penguin, London, 1998 [1976]. For a critical account of Foucault's work in relation to 'race', sexuality and colonialism, see Ann Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's 'History of Sexuality' and the colonial order of things*, Duke University Press, London, 1995.

<sup>61</sup> Gilroy, *ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>62</sup> Robin Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, politics, and the black working class*, The Free Press, New York, 1996.

<sup>63</sup> To adapt Henri Lefebvre to our argument here, political activity 'can be founded on already established authority, or on constituted law, on mystification and violence, or on knowledge. In so far as it is founded on knowledge, it requires the most scrupulous attention to everyday life...The simplest matters concerning housing, roads, children's playgrounds, public transport etc., have their place in a hierarchy of requirements which may lead to the transformation of the State...And yet if true politics involves a knowledge of everyday life and a critique of its requirements, conversely everyday life involves a critique of all politics', *Critique of Everyday Life: Volume One*, Verso, London, 1991, p. 88-89

narratives of political resistance. As Kelley argues, infrapolitics is necessary for recognising the importance of ‘daily confrontations, evasive actions, and stifled thoughts that often inform organized political movements’.<sup>64</sup> This is not an argument against the material effectivity of formal political activity, but rather an argument for acknowledging that:

...the political history of oppressed people cannot be understood *without* reference to infrapolitics, for these daily acts have a cumulative effect on power relations. While the meaning and effectiveness of various acts differ according to the particular circumstances, they do make a difference, whether intended or not...Politics is not separate from lived experience or the imaginary world of what is possible; to the contrary, politics is about these things. Politics comprises the many battles to roll back constraints and exercise some power over, or create some space within, the institutions and social relationships that dominate our lives<sup>65</sup>

For Gilroy, however, the urban vernacular cultures of the black diaspora that historically provided alternative narratives to the overdeveloped West have lost their oppositional power as they have become subservient to the visually-driven image-world of media culture with its obsession with the body. Contemporary bio-politics is therefore problematic as ‘it marks the racial community exclusively as a space of heterosexual activity and confirms the abandonment of any politics aside from the ongoing oppositional creativity of gendered self-cultivation...If it survives, politics becomes an exclusively aesthetic concern with all the perils that implies’.<sup>66</sup> While Gilroy’s pessimistic reading of these shifts as signalling the end of political dialogue and desires

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<sup>64</sup> Kelley, op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*, p. 8-10.

for freedom may be a little premature, the inability to conceive of political possibilities beyond the body has certainly resulted in a substantial reconfiguration of that dialogue. The culturalisation of politics means that increasingly forms of representation that may previously have been expressed within a separate, delimited, social field, are collapsed back into the cultural domain. The effect of this is that political questions concerning social inequality become displaced as sites of contestation, such that *social* conflicts become understood instead as expressions of (often innate) *cultural* difference.

The changing significance and signification of black athletes over the past two hundred years has not only mirrored, but in some cases actually constituted, the form and formation of black politics more generally.<sup>67</sup> It appears that we have moved from a position of black athletes embodying a politics of social transformation to politics itself being reduced to the bodies of individual athletes. The agency encapsulated within the vocal Muhammad Ali speaking out during the 1960s and 1970s is now counterpoised to the static and voiceless icon of a Michael Jordan figure stuck in mid-air clutching a ball. bell hooks suggests it is important to differentiate between previous black athletes such as Jack Johnson, who symbolised a mode of resistance to the racial oppression of the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and those of today who allow their bodies to be commodified for capitalist and racist exploitation:

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<sup>66</sup> Gilroy, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

<sup>67</sup> I have explored this argument elsewhere via the concept of the sporting black Atlantic which can be seen as a complex cultural and political space, unhindered by the constraints of national boundaries, whereby the migrations and/or achievements of black athletes have come to assume a political significance for the dispersed peoples and cultures of the black diaspora - the sports arena thus operating as an important public sphere in the struggle of black peoples claims for citizenship. See Ben Carrington, Dave Andrews, Steve Jackson, and Zbiginiew Mazur, 'Global Jordanscapes', in Andrews, D. (ed.) *Michael Jordan Inc.: Corporate sport, media culture and late modern America*, SUNY Press, New York, 2001.

Appropriated by market forces, the subversive potential of the displayed black male body is countered. This has been especially the case for black male bodies whose radical political agency is often diffused by a process of commodification that strips those bodies of dignity. The bodies of Johnson and Louis were commodified, yet that process was one that exploited and sensationalized political issues like racial separatism and economic inequality. Rather than oppose those forms of commodification that reinvent the black male body in ways that subordinate and subjugate, today's black athlete 'submits' to any objectified use of his person that brings huge monetary reward. Black male capitulation to neo-colonial white supremacist patriarchal commodification signals the loss of political agency, the absence of radical politics.<sup>68</sup>

The forms of bio-political governance of the (black) population during the eras preceding de-colonisation, that sought to supervise, regulate and discipline black bodies through various repressive mechanisms, are now increasingly based in social projects that produce new knowledges about the 'natural' propensities of athletic black bodies. There is clearly a danger, however, with overly deterministic accounts that fail to acknowledge the complexity, and partially open-ended nature, of the meanings inscribed in particular texts. We need to be aware too of the importance of the social context of audiences' experiences in consuming and decoding particular images.<sup>69</sup> The signification of images is never fixed nor final, and clearly the meanings that particular texts produce do have a

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<sup>68</sup> bell hooks, 'Feminism Inside: Toward a black body politic.', in T. Golden (ed.) *Black Male: Representations of masculinity in contemporary American art*, New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994, p. 133.

<sup>69</sup> On the importance of contextual analysis to issues of spectatorship/audience, and the problematic positioning of homosexual and racialised identifications within psychoanalytical approaches to 'the gaze' see Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gamman, 'The Gaze Revisited, Or Reviewing Queer Viewing', in Burston, P. and Richardson, C. (eds.) *A Queer Romance: Lesbians, gay men and popular culture*, Routledge, London, 1995; see also, Sarah Walters, 'Sex,

degree of variance, even as ideology tries to fix and shape the ways in which these messages are received. Indeed it is more accurate to think of meaning as being produced in the very process of reading cultural texts, rather than it being an inherent element of texts themselves. It is necessary when attempting to assess the effects of dominant codes within media culture and especially within advertising to take into account 'both their resistant elements and their normalising messages'.<sup>70</sup>

In this context it is important to acknowledge the new forms of subjectivity and types of cultural capital this situation creates for black men who suddenly find themselves with a degree of public visibility and (symbolically at least) with a sense of empowerment and increased visual prestige in otherwise marginalised circumstances. However the inability to critique the patriarchal structures which give positive values to such identifications with hard black masculinity renders any progress limited. Black masculinist politics wins space only at the expense of reinscribing wider patriarchal dominance by its failure to challenge the binaries of white/black, male/female, strong/weak and so on, upon which the logic of racialised athleticism depends. It is vital therefore for black men to address the issue, as bell hooks notes, of how to 'construct a life-sustaining black masculinity that does not have its roots in patriarchal phallocentrism'.<sup>71</sup>

Important too, for those of us still interested in the sphere of popular culture as a site of political contestation, is the extent to which black expressive behaviour and its attendant cultures have been (un)able to halt the logic of late capitalist production in the near

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Text, and Context: (In) between feminism and cultural studies', in Ferree, M., Lorber, J., and Hess, B. (eds.) *Revisioning Gender*, London, Sage, 1999.

<sup>70</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, western culture, and the body*, University of California Press, London, 1993, p. 297. See also Bordo's *Twilight Zones: The hidden life of cultural images from Plato to O.J.*, University of California Press, London, 1997.

saturation of the commodification of vernacular culture. Sensitive ethnographies and authoritative readings still provide convincing accounts of continued forms of resistance found within the contradictory spaces of expressive subcultural styles of dance and fashion, within particular cultural practices of musical production and sporting activities, and in more formal modes of filmic and artistic production that continue a black Atlantic critique of the over-developed West.<sup>72</sup> If it remains the case, as Homi Bhabha suggests, that forms of popular protest and rebellion 'are often most subversive and transgressive when they are created through oppositional *cultural* practices'<sup>73</sup> then we need to enquire further into the extent to which such resistant cultures still offer *transformative* modes of politics that critique as well win space within existing social structures.

### **From subhuman to superhuman**

Given the myths generated by European colonialism that continue to inform contemporary (white) views about black men and the central iconic place of the black male torso, various Western media's use of black athleticism and animalism should not be surprising. The black male is seen to be the embodiment of hyper-masculinity - ultra

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<sup>71</sup> bell hooks, 'Reconstructing Black Masculinity', in Perchuk, A. and Posner, H. (eds.) *The Masculine Masquerade: Masculinity and representation*, MIT Press, London, 1995, p. 86.

<sup>72</sup> See for example the essays collected in Gina Dent, (ed.) *Black Popular Culture*, Bay Press, Seattle, 1992. The various writings of Robin Kelley and Grant Farred currently offer some of the most astute readings of the politics of black popular culture. In this context, Brett St. Louis presents an interesting argument for tracing the 'poetic imperative' that can be found within black (sporting) performance, as part of his wider argument against the Cartesian reduction of sports performance that disavows the inherently cognitive elements to physical praxis. In suggesting that 'sport presents a *potential* space for the fusion of mind and body and not its separation', p. 60., St. Louis is trying, via a reading of C.L.R. James' work, to develop an aesthetics of black performance that would challenge the dismissal of black athletic involvement as merely being complicit with the mind/body distinction, and as a way of theorising the 'symbolic power of Black performance', p. 65. See St Louis, B. 'Readings Within a Diasporic Boundary: Transatlantic black performance and the poetic imperative in sport', in Hesse, B. (ed.) *Un/settled Multiculturalisms: Diasporas, entanglements, transruptions*, Zed Press, London, 2000.

<sup>73</sup> Bhabha, op. cit., p. 20.

violent and the ultimate manifestation of phallic power, whose ‘hyperbolic virility’ signifies black masculinity as a *surplus* and therefore a threat to the ‘white male corporeal ego’.<sup>74</sup> As argued earlier, one of the central components to the emasculating discourses of white racism is an attempt to simultaneously dehumanise and sexualise the black male body, as an attempt to deny him his humanity. As Fanon argued, the black man is thus reduced to his biological essence: ‘The Negro symbolizes the biological’.<sup>75</sup> The logical conclusion to this sexualised discourse is that, via the processes of objectification, the black man is effectively reduced to the phallus: ‘one is no longer aware of the Negro but only of a penis; the Negro is eclipsed. He is turned into a penis. He *is* a penis’.<sup>76</sup>

The black athlete assumes the pre-eminent position as a ‘penis-symbol’ and becomes a phantasmatic site through which anxieties concerning the fragility of Western sexuality are played out. The black athlete is thus positioned as a site for voyeuristic admiration - the black male athlete is idolised for his sheer (super-human) physicality but also controlled by a complex process of objectification and sexualisation that once again renders the dangerous black male threat controllable to white patriarchy. The fear of the black athlete as a commodity-sign is thus appropriated and consumed by its use within contemporary consumer society and its attendant media culture. As bell hooks argues, ‘it has taken contemporary commodification of blackness to teach the world that this perceived threat, whether real or symbolic, can be diffused by a process of fetishization that renders the black masculine “menace” feminine through a process of patriarchal objectification’.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, Routledge, London, 1996, p. 31.

<sup>75</sup> Fanon, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>77</sup> hooks, *Feminism Inside*, p. 131.

Within the post/colonial present, the binary structure of contemporary stereotypes means that the black body becomes either *sub*-human or *super*-human – never just common, never ordinary, never defined by its unspectacular *humanity*. In the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, as Michael Johnson broke the world 200 meter record (and the last remaining track record held by a white male athlete), the BBC sports commentator David Coleman repeatedly screamed to viewers, ‘This man, surely, is not human!’ The ‘super-human’ achievements of white athletes, such as five times gold medal winning Olympian Steve Redgrave, are rarely labelled as such. White athletes humanity is already grounded in their whiteness, making their achievements all the more remarkable. Black sporting success thus becomes something that is praised, but in a way that divorces black athletes’ achievements from their (universal) humanity. Black people become, in effect, almost freaks of *nature* in their extra-ordinarily brilliant performances requiring implausible explanations of black physicality that ultimately serves to devalue their feats.<sup>78</sup> We are told that Michael Jordan can actually ‘hang in the air’ longer than real humans, or that the parameters of the sports themselves must be changed to prevent unfair advantages to these super-human athletes – such as the course designs that are now deemed ‘necessary’ to hold back Tiger Woods.<sup>79</sup> The colonial discourses that once denied black peoples’ humanity re-emerge now to mark the same shift in lifting the black body upwards and beyond the realm of the human once again. As Gilroy argues, the celebrated aspects of

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<sup>78</sup> As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam note, ‘The adulation of Black physical agility has as its tacit corollary a presumed mental incapacity. The lauding of “natural” talent in performance implies that Black achievements have nothing to do with hard work or discipline’, in *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the media*, Routledge, London, 1994, p. 21.

<sup>79</sup> In the early 1990s Pirelli showed a series of television adverts in which Carl Lewis bounded across the planet, across oceans, mountains, and canyons, semi-naked, except for the Pirelli tyre imprint that was moulded onto the bottom of his feet. Interestingly, the same ‘superhuman’ feats were replayed when Pirelli used the French 400m athlete Marie-José Percé in a similar advert later in the 1990s.

physicality that black athletes enjoy means that ‘in moving from the infrahuman to the superhuman’, they are carried ‘beyond the human altogether’.<sup>80</sup>

## Conclusion

The forms of commodity racism that once marked the period of high Imperialism – the soap advertisements that promised to wash the Negro clean and that provided a narrative of Imperial progress – have now been replaced by the commodification of blackness itself. Through it, black bodies function as racialised symbols of cultural difference, without of course challenging the unequal power relationships that structure this consumption.<sup>81</sup> That is, the centring of blackness as an object of desire, prestige and ‘cool’ sits alongside the increases in racial violence and the electoral gains of the Far Right throughout Western Europe.<sup>82</sup> Put another way, we might suggest that *the commodification of the black athletic body is in many ways the cultural logic of post/colonial racism.*

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<sup>80</sup> Gilroy, *Between Camps*, p. 348-349. There is a strange and contradictory shift within the racialised regime of representation that posits black bodies as super-human machines until we reach prison/police cells, where disproportionate numbers of black males have died at the hands of police and prison officers. Under these conditions of excessive white power, black bodies suddenly lose their invincibility and become, once again, weak bodies. The imagined narratives concerning black super-strength are often played out in police and prison officer ‘justifications’ for such killings, although the former director general of the Prison Service, Richard Tilt, offered a new twist to the explanation when he suggested that black people were physiologically more prone to asphyxia, thus the strangle holds which would be legitimate on ‘normal people’ (that is white prisoners) were perhaps unsuited to the weaker necks of black people. The Labour Government subsequently awarded Tilt a knighthood. See, ‘Blacks ‘Die in prison easier than whites’: Rage at jail chief’s claim’, in *The Mirror*, March 27, 1998, p. 1.

<sup>81</sup> c.f. Glenn Jordan and Chris Weedon, ‘The celebration of difference and the cultural politics of racism’, in Adam, B. and Allan, S. (eds.) *Theorizing Culture: An interdisciplinary critique after postmodernism*, UCL Press, London, 1995.

<sup>82</sup> On the rise and persistence of racial violence within Britain and much of Europe see the various issues of the journals *CARF* and *Statewatch*.

As the body politic of Europe increasingly constructs borders in order to keep out so-called ‘illegal immigrants’, as the increasingly xenophobic expressions about the ‘body of Europe’ being diluted from the ‘influx’ of immigrant cultures continues, at this very same moment, the bodies of blacks are increasingly valorised within the Western media. The fear of the black athlete, whether praised or vilified, is a powerful reminder of the continuance and efficacy of colonial racist discourses, of white mythologies, within the West. This can only be challenged once we begin to recognise and deconstruct the normalising power inscribed in the spectacle of the black body which increasingly serves to shift attention away from everyday forms of racial inequality. Paul Gilroy is surely right in this context when he notes:

The global selling of black bodies as a prestigious element in the economy of health, sports and fitness industries means that blackness is now largely uncoupled from the theme of immigration that overdetermined it for so long. But, orientated to the twin benefits of restriction and integration, the pattern set by bipartisan policies endures today in the brutal and unjust regime that keeps asylum seekers and refugees at bay...Even if the automatic links between blackness and poverty have been partially broken, most post-colonial settlers remain both socially excluded and economically marginal.<sup>83</sup>

Of course questions of representation cannot be divorced from the material disciplinary measures which operate through formal State apparatus. The question is whether the iconic place that the black athlete once held during the high-point of European colonialism during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as a metonymic site through which

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<sup>83</sup> Paul Gilroy, *Joined-up Politics and Post-Colonial Melancholia*, ICA Diversity Lecture, July, London, 1999, p.18-19.

'race' was made meaningful, can now be reconfigured to serve more radical positionings by calling into question the false promises of Western racial meritocracy. It may well be that current arguments that have looked to the body as a site of radical agency and resistance may have to be re-thought in light of the continuing over-determining power of certain ideologies in securing the reproduction of dominant relations through the racialisation of human difference and the subsequent forms of inequality this continues to produce. In this situation understanding the politics of representation whilst interrogating and deconstructing the discursive inscription of power onto particular bodies remains a necessary task. But we also need to more fully understand the precise links between *cultural representations* and the forms of *political representation* that are necessary for any effective oppositional politics. Only then will we be able to appreciate the physicality of black athleticism as emblematic of our common cosmopolitan humanity, rather than seeing it as an example of racialised exceptionalism.