

Ben Carrington, *Race, Sport and Politics: The Sporting Black Diaspora*, London: SAGE, 2010; 201 pp. (with index), £25.99 (paperback), £79.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9781412901031 (paperback), ISBN: 9781412901024 (hardback).

Reviewed by Dr Thomas Fletcher, Leeds Metropolitan University, Carnegie Faculty, Bronte Hall, Headingley Campus, Leeds, LS6 3QW.

In *Race, Sport and Politics: The Sporting Black Diaspora*, Ben Carrington argues that sport is a place where historical representations of racialised bodies are articulated, re-defined and resisted and thus, may act as an important redemptive space for the production of black politics. Carrington introduces the reader to a new racial trope, *the black athlete*, which, he explains, is a construction made from the repertoire of pre-existing white colonial fantasies about blackness, which are the result of growing imperialistic vulnerabilities and white impotency.

Carrington opens *Race, Sport and Politics* by boldly claiming that ‘The black athlete was created on 26 December 1908 in a boxing ring in Sydney, Australia’ (p.1). On that day, the black American boxer Jack Johnson defeated the white Canadian Tommy Burns to become the first black World Heavyweight Champion. Carrington declares Johnson’s victory as pivotal in the history and development of black sporting diasporic consciousness. The author states, ‘The black athlete was created at a moment of impending imperial crisis’ (p.3) in that, Johnson’s victory took place at the peak of imperialism, social Darwinism, eugenics and Muscular Christianity. Carrington symbolizes Johnson’s victory as a potential trigger for a ‘black revolution’; explaining how, in the following years and decades, ‘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’ (p.3).

In Chapter 1, *Sporting Resistance: Thinking Race and Sport Diasporically*, Carrington conceptualizes black diasporic experiences in sport in relation to wider questions of freedom, constraint, resistance and hegemonic struggle, and calls for a ‘fundamental rethinking’ (p.25) of how these relationships are operationalized. He argues that a Eurocentric model of sport’s global diffusion continues to dominate accounts of modern sports development. In particular he critiques the contribution of hegemony theorists and argues how their analyses have closed down the possibility of sport offering alternative modes of political struggle, resistance or change. He advocates for scholars of sport to engage more regularly with theories of postcolonialism and diaspora (despite the fact that sport rarely features within those areas) as, rather than reinforcing ‘tropes of alterity’ and problematical racial binaries, these theories are able to articulate the possibility of sport as a legitimate space for political struggle, resistance and change, and as a modality for ‘self-actualization and the reaffirmation of previously abject identities’ (p.36). For Carrington, Johnson’s victory

represented successful resistance and a powerful black response to western racist imperialism and western racial logic. Following Franz Fanon's (2008[1952]) analyses of the colonial subjects' desire to break free from white subjugation, the author examines the relationship between 'freedom and space', 'escape and movement', 'violence' both real and symbolic and 'embodied emancipation' (p.50), and argues that sports 'enabled such men to momentarily transgress some of the racial constraints imposed on their lives and in so doing they began to redefine black political claims to freedom' (p.54). For Carrington, these public displays of black sporting prowess were highly influential in challenging western racial logic, including that of black degeneracy, in what the author terms 'the Myth of Modern Sport' (p.25); a Eurocentric model of sport's global diffusion, which presupposes the physical, mental and emotional superiority of the white race over other races.

In Chapter 2, *Sporting Redemption: Violence, Desire and the Politics of Freedom*, Carrington presents a loosely diachronic conceptualization of racial discourse and how, throughout the twentieth century, black sporting achievements significantly challenged the 'white colonial frame' (p.18). As black physical inferiority had become one of the key foundational pillars of imperial white supremacy, victories of black athletes over their white counterparts posed serious problems for the continuation of a white supremacist ideology. Carrington asserts that the impact of Johnson's victory would be felt across the whole black diaspora. However, while challenging the previously unquestioned superiority of white masculinity, Carrington warns that this fight would also inadvertently create a new racial trope: '*the black athlete*' (p.76).

The black athlete is positioned in problematical terms with Carrington suggesting that the proliferation of black sporting success throughout the 1930s paved the way for modern sports science, eugenics and the essentialization of the black body. Under these terms, black sporting success would be attributed atavistically (and with little evidence) to the 'natural' and 'primordial' abilities of the unthinking black body and, in so doing, 'attempted to supply white supremacist logic with a much needed rationale that would disallow any suggestion that such sporting achievements be reflective of any deeper, cognitive and above all intellectual disposition' (p.79). Carrington asserts authoritatively however, that *the black athlete* is a social construction – it does not exist in any meaningful ontological sense beyond the 'discourse of white sports science and popular imaginings' (p.81) which serve primarily in the construction of whiteness. For Carrington, the creation of *the black athlete* represented an ideological shift towards not only recognizing the burgeoning influence of the black race, but also the fragility and declining dominance of the white race. He advocates that, at this point, the racial significance of sports was never more apparent: 'If that central aspect of racial ideology proved to be false, then where did that leave the theory of white supremacy itself, founded as it was, in part upon the 'facts' of physical pre-eminence?' (p.75).

In Chapter 3, *Sporting Negritude: Commodity Blackness and the Liberation of Failure*, Carrington examines how, throughout the twentieth century, *the black athlete* has undergone a series of redefinitions. He critiques the manner in which blackness, particularly black physicality, has been commodified, and how popular cultural engagement with blackness has tended to be contradictory. The author argues how the black athletic body has been exploited in the 'sign economy' via its repeated use by advertisers to signify power and strength, whilst in the 'real economy', actual black bodies struggle for representation (p.103). The effect, he suggests, is the 'fetishization' of the black body, which, reading bell hooks (1994), renders the black masculine 'menace' feminine through a process of 'patriarchal objectification' (p.105). Thus, Carrington argues, 'the black male was the imago of white fantasies' (p.87) which, following Fanon, reduce the black man/athlete to a phallus: 'no longer do we see the black man; we see a penis ... he is a penis' (pp.87-88).

Next Carrington examines two black former heavyweight boxing champions, the Briton Frank Bruno and the American Mike Tyson. He positions them in terms of the colonial binary 'good black-bad black'. Bruno, the good black, 'came to be seen as the embodiment of black success, a visible sign of Britain's post/colonial meritocracy' (p.115). In contrast, Tyson, the bad black, became 'the living embodiment of hypermasculine excess' (p.120). Bruno is distinguished from Tyson, in that, despite his incredible physicality (and blackness), Bruno was never depicted as being threatening. Carrington explains this in terms of there being a difference between athletes who are phenotypically black and *the black athlete*. Their success in the ring aside, Carrington warns that the image of both athletes amongst the British public and media was complex. He explains how the white British public's adoption of Bruno was largely due to their fondness of the underdog, his reluctance to talk about racism, and a tendency to play down his black identity. By contrast, he argues that black Britons were wary of the extent to which Bruno's politics seemed to give in to the 'dominant white norms of British nationalism' (p.116). The author similarly describes how the British media reveled in Tyson's deviant behavior, for example, the infamous biting of Evander Holyfield's ear during a boxing encounter, and his subsequent decline into a mediocre fighter. Carrington cites Ellis Cashmore's (2005) biography of Tyson to illuminate this: 'Tyson's unexpected descent to the ranks of mere mortals were greeted with surprise spiced with some satisfaction, the satisfaction that comes from watching the world's most intimidating man's public humiliation' (p.126). While Carrington is cautious in not agreeing with Cashmore's interpretation of the general public's desire to see Tyson's humiliation, he does concede that there was evidence of some satisfaction within much of the British press towards the end of Tyson's career. For Carrington, since his retirement, Tyson has, for some at least, reconciled his public persona from one of disgust and outrage, to (or at least exist alongside), pity and understanding. In a complex passage the author quotes Neal (2005) in suggesting that such conflicting accounts of black

athletes offer a potentially important way to 'create new tropes of black masculinity that challenge the most negative stereotypes associated with black masculinity' (pp.129-130).

In chapter 4, *Sporting Multiculturalism: Nationalism, Belonging and Identity*, Carrington examines the politics of race and sport in Britain in the post September 11 and July 7 eras. The chapter opens with a provocative telling of how, on the day before the July 7 bombings in London, the city was confirmed as host for the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. The author depicts the contradiction between London's bid, which celebrated the city's ethnic and cultural diversity, and the attacks, which were carried out by three British men from minority ethnic backgrounds. Carrington suggests that these actions, coupled with the aggressive anti-liberal political response throughout Britain, signalled the end of British multiculturalism. The author then discusses the much criticized Parekh Report (2000). Carrington supports the Report's attempt to 'link discussions of race with those of nation, and to provide an alternative narrative of what Britishness both was and could be' (p.153). He argues that the willingness amongst political commentators to conflate the Report's references to Britain having 'racial connotations' with Britain being 'racist' is emblematic and symptomatic of 'just how powerful the white colonial frame remains in shaping the terms of the debate, what can be debated and how that debate takes place when it comes to the politics of race and nation' (p.154).

Finally the chapter addresses the fortunes of British black and Asian sportsmen, and the role of sport as a catalyst for, and an indicator of, popular attitudes towards diversity. Carrington does this through an analysis of the cricketer, Monty Panesar and Formula One driver, Lewis Hamilton. According to the author, unlike other successful minority ethnic athletes, both Hamilton and Panesar are British-born and therefore, their Englishness is an 'unremarkable, uncontestable given' (p.158). However, Carrington warns that both athletes continue to be framed in problematic ways. He cites frequent discussions about Panesar's physicality – particularly his large, uncoordinated hands - and the tendency amongst white supporters to mimic his visual otherness by wearing fake beards and imitation head scarves as confirmation that he is contemporaneously depicted, not as an exemplar of equal opportunities, but as a symbol of mockery. He argues how such mimicry has an 'uneasy resonance that plays on (and sometimes ignores) the line between on the one hand jovial hero worship and sporting admiration and on the other the darker side of white mimicry of the racialised Other in which markers of religious and cultural differences are reduced to crude caricatures in the service of white laughter' (p.159). Carrington argues how media discourse surrounding Hamilton is also ambivalent: "Race' is both ever present and absent in the media framing of Hamilton' (p.159). Whilst on the one hand he remarks how Hamilton was intentionally shielded from questions about his 'colour' by his racing team McLaren, on the other he warns that, at the same time, the media would often talk about Hamilton in metonymic terms, such as referring to him as 'irresistibly different' and

'new and exciting' (p.159). Subsequently, both athletes' motion towards the type of 'convivial multiculturalism' described by Gilroy (2005), as representing the process of cohabitation and interaction; ordinary features of social life, opposed to the 'formal, political and policy debates over official, state multiculturalism' (p.159).

The author concludes by arguing that, despite popular belief that sports are one of the most meritocratic and colour blind institutions in modern societies, overt forms of racism have not disappeared from sports cultures. He suggests that, 'We need to avoid adopting theoretically naïve and empirically suspect positions, however widely held they may be, that suggest that the significance of race has diminished merely because formal segregation no longer exists' (p.174). Carrington finishes by looking ahead to the 'Age of Obama', whilst advocating the need for scholars of race to acknowledge how sport remains a critical site for the reproduction (and rearticulation) of racial knowledge, and in the contestation and continued struggle over ideology, politics and identity (p.175).

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book, but I do offer a short critique. The book's focus is conspicuously male-centric and therefore, discussion of female, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered athletes, and athletes with disabilities is largely absent. This is not to say that Carrington is unaware of these issues. He is much too astute a scholar not to acknowledge how race intersects with other identity markers at various stages throughout the book. Instead, the author has clearly been selective over the book's theoretical focus. In general, the author is too pessimistic over the state of academic studies on race and sport. Not enough credit is given to some of the excellent work currently being undertaken (especially in the UK) in the areas of race, sport and leisure. Kevin Hylton's (2009) *Race and Sport: Critical Race Theory* does not make the reference list, whilst Dan Burdsey's (2007) seminal *British Asians and Football* and Colin King's (2004) *Offside Racism*, a study of black male coaches in professional football are barely mentioned. Similarly, contrary to Carrington's analyses, there are scholars of sport who are utilizing theories of diaspora, hybridity and postcolonialism, and they are going some way towards bridging the gap between studies of sport and mainstream social theory by publishing their work in non-sport-specific journals, including, though not limited to 'Sociology', 'Sociological Research Online', 'Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies', 'Ethnic and Racial Studies', 'The Sociological Review', and 'Leisure Studies' – all of which have impact factors confirmed by Thomson Reuters. Moreover, although the analyses presented in *Race, Sport and Politics* are both theoretically rich and practically applied to relevant case studies, the author does tend to favour some sports (principally boxing, cricket and baseball) over others. Whilst appreciating the relevance of these case studies for positioning 'race', sport and politics within the wider socio-cultural-political context, the author could have utilised examples from a greater variety of sports in order to increase its currency amongst a wider audience.

Finally, Carrington's reliance on case studies and secondary analysis as the foci methodology will, for some at least, be problematic. Carrington defends the methodological rigour of the research by positioning the study within the realms of 'cultural studies' which, he argues, is less positivistic, and places less emphasis on primary empirical evidence, than sociology does for instance. Rather than using a particular empirical project to guide the content, Carrington reflects on the book's methodological position: 'my goal is to provide a *deliberately generalized account* and theoretical map within which we can begin to make better sense of the critical conjunctures between race and sport within the wider black diaspora and the political effects of those moments of (dis)articulation within the west' (p.14 *emphasis added*). Harsh critics could accuse Carrington of, in his own words, descending into 'meta-theoreticism' (p.14), but they would be met with opposition from the author. Carrington's approach to creating a 'theoretically directed narrative that emphasizes broad patterns, tendencies and critical moments in the struggle over meaning' (p.14) is effective and will, over time, act as both a stimulant to academic debate, and a catalyst for scholars of race, sport and politics to apply his narrative to their own empirical analyses. Thus, Carrington's book may address one of his own criticisms of the sociology (cultural studies?) of sport by generating, and not merely applying, social theory.

Overall, *Race, Sport and Politics* is an accessible book, which will appeal to scholars, students and practitioners alike. Ben Carrington successfully makes the case for the significance of sport within wider debates on race, politics, multiculturalism and identity, whilst adding a critical dimension to the existing body of knowledge.

References

Cashmore, E. (2005) *Tyson: Nurture of the Beast*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Fanon, F. (2008[1952]) *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press.

Gilroy, P. (2005) 'Melancholia or Conviviality: The Politics of Belonging in Britain'. *Soundings*, 29 (Spring): 35-46.

hooks, b. (1994) '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.

Hylton, K. (2009) *Race and Sport: Critical Race Theory*. London: Routledge.

King, C. (2004) *Offside Racism: Playing the White Man*. Oxford: Berg.

Parekh, B. (2000) *The Parekh Report: The Future of Multi-ethnic Britain*. London: Profile Books.