More Myth than History: American Culture and Representations of the Black Female's Athletic Ability

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The aim of this paper is to provide a springboard for stimulating more research involving a cross-disciplinary collaboration between African American, feminist, and sport history scholars. Our intention is to explore a complex series of discourses that have developed around the black sporting female and her athletic abilities in the context of American culture, and trace the complex construction and perpetuation of damaging myths of racial and sexual "difference." To this end, we examine recent feminist claims that what has been repeated over time in a vast body of historical and social science literature about African American women and their bodies has shaped, reshaped, and endorsed a distinctive and profoundly disempowering composite image of black womanhood. This in turn, we suggest, has affected images of African American women's participation in sport.[1] It is an image of black womanhood that has been described as "mythical" in the sense that it is constituted of images that have become deeply interwoven into the shape of a story—"a pre-fabricated and backward looking story of a damaged and damaging womanhood that began with slavery and seems to have no end."[2]

Although scientific theories about racial difference have come and gone over the last two centuries or more, they have nevertheless succeeded in reifying fantasies about "civilized" behavior while perpetuating demeaning myths and stereotypes about the black body. As well, racial theories have been deeply imbricated with sexuality. Sander Gilman, for example, has shown how fantasies have been derived from cultural stereotypes in which blackness has evoked an

attractive, if dangerous sexuality and limitless fertility though threatening desire.[3] Add words such as "woman" to "black," and the result has been a set of racist and sexualized discourses that have clothed, defined, and determined the African American woman while delimiting the modes and spaces of action available to her and coloring her athletic achievements with fantasy and stereotype." It is painfully evident, says Michelle Wallace in *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman,* that African American women have been assigned "a hell of a history to live down."[5]

Part of this history of black womanhood involves the extension of racist and sexualized myths and stereotypes to African American female athletes, in spite of the claim of John Hoberman that African American men have been racially charged figures in a way that African American women have not, and that "absorption in sport is much more characteristic of men than it is of women."[6] Building upon Susan Cahn's pioneering work in *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth Century Women's Sport,*[7] which looks at the track-and-field successes of black female athletes during the inter-war years, we examine the current work of sport historians concerning African American sporting experiences and reevaluate the historical record, which has led to the distortion of the image and meaning of the sporting experiences of African American females. Finally, we offer some examples from this same period to show how easily racist and sexist beliefs and stereotypes about female African American physical activity were reinforced through other "everyday" professional discourses of physical educators and teachers.

These decades were significant years during which African American women came to dominate track and field at the national level and adhere, as Cindy Himes Gissendanner puts it, "to a more active level of femininity than did their white counterparts."[8] Their dominance in track-and-field sports was due to a number of factors, including the fact that these years were an important time for community building, identity development, and racial uplift for African American women. But it was also the result of a set of opportunities, as well as desires and abilities to occupy a competitive field of endeavor from which white female athletes had largely withdrawn. This withdrawal was apparently propelled by the vehement arguments of white female physical education leaders and amateur athletic associations who had come to believe that track and field competitions "subjected women to debilitating physical, emotional and sexual strains."[9] Hence, on the one hand, the successes of African American female athletes at this time could be seen as affirming the dignity and capabilities of African American womanhood. Certainly, many of them held this view, seeing themselves as stars, heroines, and role models in their own right. Yet, on the other hand, they also confirmed, for the racist and sexist elements in the dominant culture, "derogatory images of both black and athletic women."[10]

It is the cultural construction of these images that we must explore further in order to throw light upon their easy incorporation into twentieth-century physical education discourse. A closer examination of the construction and perpetuation of racist assumptions through the connected lenses of gender, sexuality, and class

might enable us to explain how damaging myths and stereotypes about the African American woman's physicality and sporting ability have been constructed, re-formed, and perpetuated over time.

In our examination of "everyday" racist discourses of white physical educators in their professional journals during these years, we underscore the concept of "everydayness" in the sense used by Thomas Holt.[11] Holt insists that the marking of "race" pervades not only the dramatic and global phenomena of our world, but is part of the "ordinary" events of everyday life and is perpetrated by "ordinary" people. It is at this level, he argues, "that race is reproduced long after its original historical stimulus . . .has faded, via the marking of the racial "Other," and that racist ideas and practices are naturalized, made self-evident and thus seemingly beyond audible challenge."[12] John Hoberman makes a similar point in regard to sport and racism in schools. The racialized universe of everyday encounters in the school, he suggests, has received far less attention than the highly public theater of professional and collegiate sport, yet it is here where "far greater numbers of people engage in race relations, absorb ideas about racially specific traits and abilities, and grapple with their own racial dramas in athletic terms."[13]

THEORIZING/INVENTING THE HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

> Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. 'Peaches' and 'Brown Sugar', 'Sapphire' and 'Earth Mother', 'Aunty', 'Granny', 'God's Holy Fool', a 'Miss Ebony First' or 'Black Woman at the Podium': I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented.[14]

A major difficulty in a study such as this lies in the fact that the unique experiences of African American women lack the neat category of theoretical feminist paradigms developed to capture white women's experiences, whether in their work or in sport and leisure.[15] Ann Hall notes that we constantly generalize from a western, usually white view of women.[16] Theories and analyses of white feminist scholars often make little sense in terms of the everyday racial experiences of women of color. Even the most revisionist feminist studies of women of color in the social sciences have tended to be conducted within the context of Eurocentric as well as malecentric reasoning.[17] bell hooks, Deborah King, Elsa Brown and others note that they simply cannot find themselves or their experiences in such theories.[18] Hence, race cannot simply be added to existing theoretical frameworks, for the oppression of black sportswomen is qualitatively different in kind than that of their white counterparts.[19]

Nor did all women enter the United States under the same conditions, explains Norma Burgess, suggesting that the incorporation of an Afrocentric perspective on gender role development in regard to the experiences of African American women might be illuminating.[20] Afrocentrism, says Gerald Early, is that ideological epoxy meant to bind black people more as a matter of culture and spirit than of race.[21] It could be one approach to promoting an assertive pro-black historiography

that moves away from deficit-level theory generation in the assumptions often made about African American women and their families.[22]

> Afrocentricity is African genius and African values created, decreated, reconstructed, and derived from our history and our experiences in our best interests. It is the clarity and focus through which black people must see the world in order to escalate.[23]

Yet, even historians who are steeped in matters of race, class, sex and gender, *and* who are sensitive to an Afrocentric point of view many times find it hard, in their renderings of history, to move beyond the sense that women *have more gender* than other groups, *blacks have more race,* and *men have more class.*[24] African American female athletes are racial *and* gendered *and* classed, with each and/or all of these categories taking on a different importance in certain moments and particular contexts.[25] The neglect of race issues at the intersection of race, gender, and class is thus a serious criticism that has been leveled at scholars in all fields, including scholars of sport history.

> Critical questions have been asked concerning why the fugitive slave, fiery orator, political activist, or person of color in sport is always represented as a black man, or the woman in sport-and-gender studies as a white woman. These omissions and biases continue to reinforce historical patterns of silence and contribute to the invisibility of women of color.[26]

Misinformation and/or silence, therefore, have led to numerous distortions about the sport and activity choices of African American women as well as prototypes of sporting and exercise behavior perceived to be appropriate for or unavailable to them.[27] For all these reasons, says Evelyn Higginbotham, "theoretical discussion in African American women's history begs for greater voice," including a closer examination of the mythologies surrounding the historical image of the black female and her athletic abilities.[28]

THE BLACK FEMALE ATHLETE: WHO CAN SPEAK FOR WHOM?

bell hooks feels that women scholars of color, from their dual position at the margin and the center, are best positioned to offer critiques about the theorizing of their oppressions and experiences.

> Living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as the margin. We understood both. This sense of wholeness impressed upon our consciousness by the structure of our daily lives provided us an oppositional world view—a mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors, that sustained us.[29]

It is certainly true that the portrayal of myths and stereotypes and the analyses of black oppression and experience by white feminists hold a real danger of incorporating black experience within a Eurocentric framework and of promoting a false uniformity to African American female's lives. Telling other people how

to read their own experience can be seen as an act of intellectual or textual colonization.[30] Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, for example, was prompted to say of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* "Find your own river...and please don't appropriate *our* geography for *your* psychic journeys."[31] In the same view, Caucasian researchers of black experience have been accused by black scholars of exploiting African Americans to benefit their academic careers.[32]

Certainly sport historians and sociologists writing from a position of "privileged whiteness" can claim neither the authority, the experience, nor an insider's understanding and perspective of the experience of racial discrimination in sport. Yet, the argument that we can only speak for ourselves can be seen as a "retreat response" that can ultimately paralyze meaningful discussion or advocacy.[33] As well, to rely only on personal experience would be to assume that one's own experience always or necessarily forms an accurate picture of reality. Experience is not pure and it is not owned—it is always mediated.[34] Indeed, pressing women of color to continually read their own experience could provoke them to engage in deconstructive work and focus on identity politics, which in turn leads to essentialist arguments and fixed notions of oppression.

A more useful approach might be to seek out similarities of experiences and increase our awareness of issues in the context of the lives of black female athletes, both as they have expressed them in the past and through critically examining a variety of historical discourses or cultural texts that have presented or distorted their experiences. The argument that one cannot appropriate the speech of the oppressed is an important one but, as Leslie Roman points out, to risk speaking *with* rather than *for* may be better than the risk of silence.[35] And there are aspects of the black experience that have been effectively silenced because "they point so painfully to the terrible damage that racism has done."[36] Black feminists have something special to say about their distinctive experiences and about issues related to their bodies, their physicality, and their sexuality, but this does not release white feminists from the responsibility to inform themselves about these issues, to provide affinity, and to dialogue with colleagues of color through the act of "hearing each other into speech."[37]

> An alternative to the intellectually truncated world of the racial separatist is understanding that the most delicate secrets must be studied to bring about the healing process made possible by knowledge, and that outsiders have a role to play in explaining the travails of people whose experience they have not shared.[38]

This paper, therefore, is a work of collaboration between two feminist sport historians-one African American, one white—in which we collectively theorize women's shared and different experiences of oppression and explore together historical constructions and myths about the physical and sporting abilities of the African American female. In this way, we attempt to write back to the center in the general project of dismantling the neo-colonial regime of truth about black female athletes.[39] We intend to highlight some of the ways in which cultural texts and everyday discourses have historically presented race as natural and fixed

rather than arbitrary and illusionary. The result, we suggest, has been a social construction contrived to produce and maintain relations of power and subordination, including a plethora of images of black womanhood and the black female athlete which can only be understood as the legacy, the multiple jeopardy of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism working in combination over a long period of time.

First, however, we feel an obligation to address the notion of race, underscore its historical social construction, and try to expose what Jeffrey Sammons calls "the dangers of race-thinking to scholarship." Serious discussion of race, he insists, is essential to any scholarship on African American sport if it is "to stimulate a rethinking of attitudes and approaches to people's experiences and lives"—and if we are to discover any emancipatory potential from understanding how racism is produced and reproduced in American society.[40]

RECOGNIZING THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF RACE

> By fully recognizing race as an unstable, shifting and strategic reconstruction, feminist scholars must take up new challenges to inform and confound many of the assumptions currently underlying Afro American history and women's history. We must problematize more of what we take for granted.[41]

Race, suggests Dominick LaCapra, is a concept that is at "the crux of one of the most powerful ideological formations in history—a false mystification with formidable effects."[42] It is a term that has dubious descriptive value since modern genetics has shown that there has always been so much interbreeding between human populations that it is quite meaningless to talk of fixed boundaries between races.[43] Furthermore, race can be clearly identified as a dynamic and changing construct because historically those groups identified as "people of color" have differed according to political circumstance. This realization, suggests David Wiggins, "not only negates any reliable physiological comparisons of athletes [and of all people] along racial lines, but makes the whole notion of racially distinctive physiological abilities a moot point."[44] If, in fact, human races do not exist, then we have to question to what end is it justifiable to use the category in our discussion?[45] Certainly, the fallacy of regarding race as a physical fact must not be embraced by historians, "for it is the ideological context that tells people which details to notice, which to ignore, and which to take for granted in translating the world around them into ideas about the world."[46]

Yet, concepts of race remain important to the extent that they inform people's actions, acting as a cultural construct regardless of whether there is any biological reality. Although there may be easily observable differences (such as skin color) that can be readily identifiable, no single trait is an adequate basis for characterizing human diversity. Nor can minor superficial differences readily become justifications for chauvinism, exclusion, exploitation, and abuse.[47] What matters is how these differences are interpreted and explained in daily life, how the marking of race

has become part of the ordinary events of everyday life and has been perpetrated by ordinary people.[48] To argue that race is myth and that it is ideological rather than a biological fact does not prevent it from having real, structural effects on society and individuals within it.

"By continually expressing overt and analogic relationships, race impregnates the simplest meanings we take for granted, and allows it to function as a metalanguage, an umbrella, which obscures class and gender differences."[49] It is real in the sense that it has real, though changing effects in the world and a real impact upon an individual's sense of self, experiences, and life chances. And, because the struggle for history is about much more than establishing what really happened, Diana Fuss argues that we must take "a closer look at the production of racial subjects, at what forces organize, administer, and produce racial identities."[50] Race matters, and by ascribing meaning to images of the past we in effect seek and sometimes find answers that are germane to our present.

SPORT HISTORIANS AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE ATHLETE

> In attempting to analyze the situation of the black woman in America, one crashes abruptly into a solid wall of grave misconceptions, outright distortions of fact, and defensive attitudes on the part of many.[51]

Until recently, sport historians have not looked closely at the production of racial and ethnic subjects in the world of sport. Currently, the topic has become a hotly debated one, especially in relation to male athletes, as the recent monographs of John Hoberman and John Bale with Joe Sang attest.[52] In *Kenyan Running,* John Bale and Joe Sang comment upon the continuing ambiguous views of the Caucasian in relation to the African athlete, which are residuals of more general thinking from the nineteenth century that explained black athletic speed and power as "jungle instincts" or "gifts of nature." Commenting upon the fact that "it is the penchant to generalize, based upon essences perceived as biological which defines 'racism,'" they note that hard work and sacrifice were rarely used to explain the success of African American stars such as Jesse Owens in the 1930s. This was in spite of the fact that "in athletics it is culture, not biology, attitude not altitude, nurture not nature, which are the crucial variables that explain individual athletic success in the rationalized and regulated world of achievement sport."[53] John Hoberman notes that he embarked upon *Darwin's Athletes* in reaction against "the taboo that has wrapped the issue of racial athletic aptitude in a shroud of fear."[54] He argues that the way we think about black athletic aptitude has been conditioned by a tradition of thinking about black human beings in a certain way, and that the mounting triumphs by black athletes serve up imagery and metaphors that reinforce racism. In this paper, we add sexism to racism in our account by focusing upon racism, sexuality and the physicalized identity of the African American female.

Not surprisingly, there has been a tendency to neglect serious study and analyses of the black female since sport history has traditionally been gendered

and until the last decade or so has focused upon masculinity and men's history to the exclusion of serious attention to women.[55] To date, most historical studies of African Americans in sport have been written by males and Caucasians, who have described, analyzed, or celebrated the male experience, substantially disregarding varieties of black female experience and the impact of gender relations within African American communities.[56] As well, while Jeffrey Sammons, in his recent critical examination of "race" and sport calls for much more attention by African American writers to the historical experiences of black people with sport, sport and physical activity are more or less absent from the writings of women of color. "In the realm of sport history," he notes, "African Americans [can] offer a critical perspective from which to examine and rewrite that larger history, because their inclusion challenges many of the questions posed, the methods and sources for responding to them and the conclusions reached."[57] On the other hand, says Susan Birrell, the absence of commentary on sports by women of color is itself significant, especially since we have so much to learn about the interaction of gendered, racial stereotypes and the construction of gendered ideologies in sport.[58] Indeed, it is upon this absence, within the spaces and silences, that we have had to construct our study.

In a special issue of the *Journal of Sport History* devoted entirely to the black athlete, David Wiggins (1988) presents some of the best-known scholarly works dealing with the history of the black athlete and racism in sport and highlights articles which have dealt with racial stereotypes and the construction and promotion of racial categories as natural.[59] Certainly, examinations of the myth of black athletic superiority have been prominent in "race-thinking" scholarship.[60] Yet, all of the articles in this special issue and almost all of Sammons' lengthy article in the *Journal of Sport History* focus upon the male black athlete and his story tellers. This again underlines the paucity of studies examining the sporting experiences of African American women and points to a need to explicate the nature of the particular barriers that have historically affected their sporting participation.

Yevonne Smith recently reviewed literature that discusses historical parallels between women of color in society and sport and underscored how little research has been completed on the unique social histories and experiences of female African Americans. In this largely unexplored facet of American history, she says, few published analyses specifically focus on women athletes of color. Rather, one is overwhelmed by the silence, inaccuracy, and misrepresentation in instances where African American female athletes and the enduring nature of negative and limiting images, which have historically ordered her reality in American society, have been made more "visible."[61]

> We are talking about myth here, those boundaries of discourse that determine belief, practice and desire.[62]

Gwendolyn Captain has examined the historical construction of these images of African American womanhood in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and has illustrated the efforts of the nation's black communities to provide

games and organized sports as ways to transcend racial marking as natural and permanent.[63] She notes that it is becoming increasingly clear that participation of African Americans in recreational, exercise, and sporting activities has been far more extensive than existing historical works have documented. Future studies thus demand that we address more fully the problem of the absence or silence of women of color from sport history research and scholarship, and the ways in which the black woman's womanhood, including myths about her body and physical aptitudes or disabilities, has been traditionally submerged in her racial identity.

To date, much of what has been written about black women in sport has been designed to document the selective achievements of high-achieving African American sportswomen such as Alice Coachman, Wilma Rudolph and Althea Gibson, often explaining their use of sport as a means of social mobility or as an expression of their "natural" physicality or lack of femininity.[64] Edwin Henderson, an early historian of the black athletic experience explained in 1948 that "colored girl athletes are, as a rule, effeminate. They are normal girls. This is not true of the women champions who have made records that compare with marks set by men."[65] A decade later, Sam Lacy, a sportswriter for the *Baltimore Afro American* similarly explained away Althea Gibson's remarkable talent as "tomboyism," claiming that it had been socially problematic:

> As most of the youngsters in the neighborhood-those who seemed to be having fun, that is—were boys, Althea fell into their games. And being an apt, fearless person, she learned fast and with a marked thoroughness. Gibson became, not only the best girl athlete in her community, but as good as most of the boys as well. In one respect, this is good. All kids like to excel in sports. But in another, it isn't so good. When girls are able to play "boys" sports well and better than the boys, they acquire "tomboy" labels. In later life the "tomboy" finds herself victimized by complexes. Miss Gibson is no exception. She has a way of going into her hard shell and refusing to come out of it.[66]

Hence, during the inter-war years, black colleges and the black community worked apologetically, and often paternalistically, to inculcate African American female athletes with "feminine" behaviors and an attractive appearance in a desire to contain their sexuality and portray middle-class respectability.[67] Among elite black colleges during the inter-war years (with the exception of track and field at Tuskegee Institute), the tendency was to abandon an earlier commitment to women's basketball and track activities and place more emphasis on less competitive sports or play days and activities deemed more ladylike, such as badminton, archery, and table-tennis.[68] At the community level, girls' clubs organized by the National Association of Colored Women did include athletics, but sport was not a major focus.[69] The girl who is too athletic, said Ivora King; columnist for the *Baltimore Afro American,* "is on the wrong track to becoming a wife...Men want women all women...being too athletic, and consequently too mannish, prevents her from being."[70]

This effort to police working-class black women's bodies, says Cindy Gissendanner, represented efforts to control "immoral" and "uncivilized" behavior

that black middle-class communities believed stigmatized all African Americans, even if these ideas were not internalized by the athletes themselves.[71] When Althea Gibson was allowed to play at the Cosmopolitan Tennis Club, she was quick to point out the rigid ideas of social propriety required by race-separate American Tennis Association leaders such as Dr. Walter Johnson and Dr. Hubert Eaton, who had taken her under their wing:

> They were undoubtedly more strict than white people of similar position, for the obvious reason that they felt they had to be doubly careful in order to overcome the prejudiced attitude that all Negroes lived eight to a room in dirty houses and drank gin all day and settled all their arguments with knives.[72]

Certainly, African American women were particular targets of white criticism for poor personal hygiene habits and lifestyles which contributed to "unkempt" and "uncivilized" homes. At Wimbledon in 1951, commenting on "the first Negress ever to climb the height of amateur tennis," the white press felt obliged to print intimate details about this exotic new species of tennis player: Althea Gibson, it was noted, took a bath every afternoon.[73]

Though there is an expanding literature around the life stories of elite African American sportswomen, the most striking feature of the historical record on blackwomen athletes remains neglect. Susan Cahn suggests that the silence around black female athletes "reflects the power of [these] stereotypes to restrict African American women to the margin of cultural life, occupying a status as distant 'others'."[74] In an attempt to redress this neglect, she begins to document how longstanding racial and sexual stereotypes about the body have been promoted, shaping black women's sport and activity choices in the United States. She shows, for example, how African American female athletes (who, in the first half of this century, had stepped into a competitive arena of track and field largely abandoned by middle-class white women) were ridiculed by Olympic official Norman Cox, who proposed that "the International Olympic Committee should create a special category of competition for them-the unfairly advantaged 'hermaphrodites' who regularly defeated 'normal women,' those less skilled 'child bearing' types with 'largish breasts, wide hips [and] knocked knees.'"[75]

Such racist and sexist comments from the dominant male, white culture drew a direct correspondence between stereotyped depictions of black womanhood and "manly" athletic and physically gifted females. Their racialized notions of the virile or mannish black female athlete stemmed from a number of persistent historical myths: the linking of African American women's work history as slaves, their supposedly 'natural' brute strength and endurance inherited from their African origins, and the notion that vigorous or competitive sport masculinized women physically and sexually. All of these charges were related in one way or another to slave womanhood stereotypes involving the colonization of the black female body by the white master.

REEXAMINING THE HISTORICAL RECORD-THE CASTING AND RECASTING OF SLAVE WOMANHOOD STEREOTYPES

> The nicknames by which African American women have been imagined demonstrate the powers of distortion that the dominant community seizes as its unlawful prerogative.[76]

The commonly held myth that women of color have particular skills and abilities and are natural athletes in some sports and inept in others has perturbed the sporting and physical activity landscape of the African American female. "The education of any athlete begins in part with an education in the racial taxonomy of [her] chosen sport—in the subtle unwritten rules about what whites are supposed to be good at and what blacks are supposed to be good at."[77] For obvious economic as well as cultural reasons, most of the outstanding successes of black sportswomen have been in certain sports, notably track and field, basketball, and volleyball, and relatively few in tennis and swimming which are two of the most popular female sports. Indeed, black women continue to report in Black Women in Sport Workshops that they feel stereotyped as runners or baseball players and that the effects of such perceptions reduces the probability that coaches in other sports look to the black community for new recruits.[78]

Historical interpretations or distortions of the African American female's past have thus functioned to perpetuate a set of cultural images which together have shaped a composite picture of black women as both damaging and unwomanly. Mae King suggested that representations around the politics of racial and sexual stereotypes of African American women have revolved around the masculinized domineering matriarch, the inept and comical domestic servant, the erotic sex object, and the tragic mulatta (who failed to pass as white).[79] The cultural imagery of these central figures has, of course, been blurred over time, yet the contours remain faithful to their origins in slavery. Barbara Christian points out that the invidious black matriarch mythology, the shrewish "Sapphire" who emasculates men by usurping their role, can be seen as just another variation of the image of the faithful "Mammy."[80] More bluntly, suggests Edward Mapp, the thin line between the black Mammy and the black matriarch can be distinguished largely by whether she was presiding over a white family or a black one.[81] Though shrewd marketers and popular culture attempted to transform 'Mammy' into the more inept and comical Aunt Jemima figure, she retained the tough, defeminized, and menial image of the original 'Mammy'—the ideal slave dedicated to service and physical labor.[82] Similarly, the tragic mulatta, foiled in her attempt to "pass" in white society, was as often represented as Jezebel—an exotic sex object, a light-skinned concubine, and a 'yaller gal' who was lascivious and immoral in contrast to the sexual purity and morality of the white middle-class woman.

Such stereotypes grew out of the numerous inaccurate interpretations of the black woman's history that have been spawned by 'fictional' notions of the cumulative conditions and effects of slavery and have been sustained through

reports about African American athletic superiority. At the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles, while the *Los Angeles Times* proclaimed an Olympiad unsullied by racism, newspapers focused persistently upon slave images of African American athletes:

> Will Rogers noted in his national column that the slave traders must have sailed with the Olympics in mind, "for these 'senegambians' have just about run the white man ragged" ...One photograph in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch featured a picture of Eddie Tolan's 'mammy.'[83]

Greater ignominy was accorded to female African American sprinters Tidye Pickett and Louise Stokes. Both qualified for places on the Olympic four hundred yards relay but were "unceremoniously discarded and replaced by two white girls at the last minute."[84]

Certainly, the equation of black women's history with a prefabricated slave womanhood has played a central role in American historical research on race. Historical interpretations of race have until recently presented a uniform story of the black woman's past, showing her as a natural and permanent slave woman, complete with a distinctive set of stereotypes which have continued to endorse racist-sexist mythologies. As part of this process, distinctions among different categories of African Americans were muted or disappeared from view.[85] Furthermore, the "ceaseless arguments about the female slave's sexual promiscuity or her matriarchal proclivities have obscured rather than illuminated her condition during slavery, yet they remain enduring."[86] Slavery made clear the role of "race," not only in shaping the master/slave relationship but in coloring gender—in distinguishing blackwomen from their male counterparts through their association with motherhood and through attributions about their supposed unusual power or strength. Black women, testified Sojourner Truth, experienced the vicissitudes of slavery differently and even more harshly than men by bearing and nursing children, performing housekeeping tasks, and fending off rape, as well as sharing the field work.[87] Even though we now know that Sojourner Truth is known for words that she did not say, she embodied the ideal of the strong (black) woman (that history has so amply recorded) as she reflected upon her own experiences as an abused child, an oppressed worker, and a desperate litigant seeking custody of her son, illegally sold into slavery.[88] This pressure from all sides, this intimate knowledge of and experience of prejudice covering both sex and race, and the consequent perceived need to ensure survival through the absolute maximization of talent and effort became an important characteristic of the African American female athlete.

MASCULINIZING THE "STRONG" BLACK FEMALE BODY

> From the columns of my thighs
> I take the strength and hold the world aloft
> Standing, too often, with a cloud of loneliness
> Forming halos for my head.[89]

In response to particular stereotypes which have attempted to masculinize the black female body, black feminists argue that her experience under slavery, her participation in the work force, her political activism, and her sense of independence could be seen as making her *more* of a woman, not less of one.[90] Hortense Spillers has pointed out that it was the rule that the African female in indigenous African cultures performed the tasks of hard physical labor—so much so that the quintessential slave was female, not male.[91] With women already under men's ownership and control, the primary changes brought about by the slave system was in the status of enslaved men. They "joined the ranks of the dependent powerless populations, and to them were attributed the characteristics shared by women and children."[92] Yet, the forced labor of female slaves, followed by their continued subjection as sharecroppers and domestic workers, encouraged perceptions that they were masculinized by the vicious demands for their labor and were bred for physical qualities. It also underscored the class nature of the nineteenth-century culture of domesticity and 'true womanhood,' which meant that the prescribed ideal of femininity was only accessible to white middle- and upper-class women and that its code of behavior took no account of the problems and harsh necessities of poor women or slave women.[93]

In the demands placed upon them, black women clearly did not belong to the weaker sex. Historians have shown how many slavewomen spoke of their pride in their ability to excel at physical labor, picking cotton faster and hauling more than their male peers.[94] "They hauled logs by leather straps attached to their shoulders. They plowed using mule and ox teams, and hoed, sometimes with the heaviest equipment available."[95] Some believed, to use the words of Grandma Rose, that the heavy work had a kind of neutering effect, making "the kind of woman who could do any job a man could do...a regular man-woman."[96] Some cotton and sugar plantations were worked entirely with female labor, and slaveholders made efforts to wrench as much field labor as possible from female slaves without unduly injuring their capacity to bear children.[97] Thus, slave women, to a degree, shared roles with their male peers even though the distinctions between women's work and men's work remained clear and many slave women worked at domestic tasks long after their return from the fields.

White people's conceptions of black women's 'natural suitability' for slavery and 'masculine inclination' for powerful and heavy physical work continued to be perpetuated long after the demise of slavery by the subsequent terrible exploitation of black women as domestic workers. Though slavery in its purest forms ceased to exist, economic and oppressive conditions continued to persist, making it difficult for African American women to escape the myths of slave womanhood as a masculinizing endeavor, and the degradation of exploitative labor. Reported one desperate domestic worker in 1912:

> I frequently work from fourteen to sixteen hours a day. I am compelled...to sleep in the house. I am allowed to go home to my...children only every other Sunday afternoon...You might as well say that I'm on duty all the time—from sunrise to sunrise, every day of the week. I am the slave, body and soul of this family.[98]

Thus, for the African American woman there was the presumption that because she occupied an inferior status in society (often featured as a tough, hardworking domestic or working-class individual), the rough and tough nature of the sporting world would be a natural and ever acceptable activity at which she would be competent.[99] Attitudes toward the African American woman's amazonian work capacity, and lack of physical and emotional sensitivity, flowed easily into notions about the natural strength and "manly" athletic abilities of black women in running, jumping, and throwing activities—this despite the fact that sport and any other leisure activity was a luxury to the great majority of black women who needed to earn a living and raise a family in often very poor economic circumstances. In their coverage of the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics, the press made it clear that strenuous athletics destroyed a woman's physical beauty and social attractiveness and made it more difficult to attract a worthy father for her children. De-emphasizing her athletic abilities and discipline in training, the press parodied a female athlete whose abilities seemed to carry her beyond the limits of what women should be capable of—she was neither woman nor man, but "Amazon."[100]

In the face of such damaging stereotypes around gender, African American coaches, community organizers, and journalists worked assiduously to cultivate a feminine image of black women athletes. Tennessee State track-and-field coach Edward Temple was typical in demanding adherence to a dress code and personal hygiene regime. "None of my girls have any trouble getting boyfriends," he told a reporter in 1938. "They are young ladies first—track girls second."[101] Athletes themselves supported these efforts. Wilma Rudolph once commented, "I loved playing in games and I loved being a lady after the games."[102] After a while, said Althea Gibson, "I began to understand that you could walk out on the court like a lady, all dressed up in immaculate white, be polite to everybody and still play like a tiger and beat the liver and lights out of the ball."[103]

Wilma Rudolph. Courtesy of AP/ Wide World Photos.

Ironically, the neglect and distortion created around their bodies and physical capabilities may well have contributed to the lower-than-average levels of leisure-time physical activity frequently reported for African American females, which in turn contributes to their well-documented greater risks of chronic diseases such as heart disease and hypertension. A recent investigation into beliefs about leisure and healthful exercise among African American women found that, far from seeing themselves as 'naturally' suited to certain sports, many respondents considered vigorous leisure-time exercise as unnecessary and even stressful for a

group too often limited to jobs and family needs involving hard physical labor. We have, they noted, "other things to be concerned about."[104]

The popular acceptance of myths of matriarchal strength and dominant behavior which demeaned and emasculated black men and defeminized black women has neglected, of course, any realistic class analysis, for in many respects "race" can be seen as a metaphor for class. Reacting to the 1965 Moynihan Report[105] which revitalized Frazier's myth of the black matriarchy, Gerda Lerner pointed out that whereas 'matriarchy' by definition meant power by and for women, many African American women (because of their low socioeconomic status) had little power over their own lives or circumstances.[106] Thus, to attribute African American oppression primarily to the effects of a black matriarchy could only be seen as a cruel hoax, seducing black women into imagining they had power they did not possess and reducing their possibility of organizing collectively to fight against sexist-racism oppression.[107] (This is a point completely misunderstood by some male sports reporters who have trivialized the harassment of (the few) black female sports reporters by attributing to them a special strength and power in the black culture which enables them to counter offense with offense.)[108] Logically, a matriarchist value could not possibly be assigned to an enslaved person. It misnamed the power of the female regarding the enslaved community since she could not, in fact, claim her child, nor could motherhood be perceived as a legitimate procedure of cultural inheritance.[109] While rejecting the matriarchy thesis, however, Lerner nevertheless continued to perpetuate the matriarchal, nonfeminist, amazon image of African American womanhood that has so often been attributed to black female athletes (especially in track and field, where it can be seen unfairly as both cause and consequence of their success).[110]

Outstanding female African American athletes such as Willye White were quite aware of this contradiction. A sprinter and jumper from Greenwood, Mississippi, White competed in five successive Olympics from 1956 to 1972 but said that she always harbored a deep awareness of being an outcast from society, a supposed victim of her tomboyish ways.[111] As she explained, "...it's pretty difficult to be all woman out on the track."[112]

SEXUALIZING THE BLACK FEMALE BODY

> We would go so far as to entertain the very real possibility that 'sexuality' as a term of implied relationship and desire is dubiously appropriate, manageable or accurate to any of the familial arrangements under a system of enslavement...[113]

In addition to stereotypes that developed around the strength and masculinizing tendencies of the African American woman, discourses of racism developed and reified stereotypes of sexuality that demeaned her. Indeed, in no other area are there so many myths and stereotypes than that of the black female body and her sexuality. Racist sexual stereotypes of black womanhood propped up the white man's sexual control over all women, hence the racism that black

people have had to suffer has almost always been presented in peculiarly sexist terms. Moreover, says Joyce Ladner, the sexual image fed imperceptibly into the matriarchal one, resulting in an almost amazonic image.[114]

> From the intricate web of mythology which surrounds the black woman, a fundamental image emerges. It is of a woman of inordinate strength.... Less of a woman in that she is less feminine and helpless, she is really more of a woman in that she is the embodiment of Mother Earth, the quintessential mother with infinite sexual, life-giving and nurturing reserves.[115]

Western conceptions of black women's sexuality, of course, were colored long before slavery, by centuries-long perceptions of Africans as primitive, simian and savage. There are stories of early slave buyers in Africa interpreting African cultural traditions in such a way that nudity was taken for lewdness, polygamy for sexual license and tribal dances for orgies.[116] Caricature rather than truth was the hallmark of lasting impressions of the black woman as particularly sensual and quite different from the purity and asexuality of the white woman. Evolutionary thought in the nineteenth century provided the main ballast for the caricatures that black women came to symbolize. The theory that humans evolved through distinct social stages—from savagery to barbarism to civilization—led to a self-congratulatory anthropology that actively promoted sexual stereotypes about the African.[117] Ingenious efforts were made to determine racial peculiarities and to distort anatomical differences and interpret them 'scientifically.' Anthropometic measurements derived from Negro soldiers in the Civil War cemented anatomical observations about greater arm length, long feet, and protruding heels (and other anthropoid-like features) while confirming the 'well-known' African American's imitative capacity, natural fondness for rhythmical movement and capacity for endurance and withstanding pain. Using Civil War era observations as a base-line, medical doctors initiated studies on emancipated slaves, especially women, to confirm these anatomical differences and further elaborate upon their meaning and effects.[118] Some of these medical experiments continued well into the twentieth century supported by the continuing notion that black women felt less pain and nervous sensitivity than their white peers and hence could endure more inconvenience and physical hardship. Dr. J. Marion Sims used African American women as experimental guinea pigs as he pioneered his famous treatment for vesico-vaginal fistula in Alabama in the 1840s and 1850s. Because they felt less pain than white women, he believed they were appropriate subjects for his traumatic surgery.[119] Thus, instead of assuming human similarities, medicine has often designed interventions or therapies (or withheld them) on sexualized and racialized presumptions.[120]

Such labeling of the black female as more primitive and, by analogy, more sexually intensive was underpinned by observations about her loose morals and degree of lascivity despite a system of oppression which had left her unprotected in the face of sexual harassment and rape from white men. "The view that black women were exceptionally libidinous was of course nourished by the conditions

under which slave women lived and worked," for public attention to their procreative capacity naturally dramatized at the same time their sexual activities.[121] During slavery, black women were ignominiously handled and their bodies exposed on the auction block, leading to a frequent equating of black women with promiscuity.

> Centuries have recorded my features, in cafes and
> Cathedrals, along the water's edge
> I awaited the arrival of the ships of freedom
> On the selling stage as men proved their power in a
> handful of my thigh.[122]

The association between the sexuality and fecundity of female slaves was casually made, though it was the drive for profit, not cultural practices, that influenced slave women's fertility. According to Kenneth Kiple, the adverse conditions of the slave plantation led to slave women losing over half of their pregnancies to still-births and infant and early childhood mortality. Since black women were highly productive in the fields, the rigors of their work created substantial stress on reproduction and the high value placed on their working time encouraged attenuated breastfeeding and early supplementation of infants. High fertility was achieved, therefore, not because of sexual desire, but in part because losses from still births and neonatal mortality were rapidly replaced by new pregnancies. As well, birth intervals were reduced because of the early cessation of breastfeeding demanded by slave owners. West African customs which prescribed both prolonged lactation and a taboo against sexual relations while a woman was lactating, which might have eased high infant mortality rates, were simply overridden by slave owners' desires to get women back to work.[123] Slave women thus suffered from the extreme malevolence that flowed from both racism and sexism as tainted images of their sexual desire and license were repeatedly reinvented in popular culture. Not only did black women continue to be severely sexually victimized, but combating sexual exploitation and resisting sexual slander became, for them, inseparable from their considerable future efforts at race uplift.[124]

In Lawrence Durrell's *Black Book* (first published in the 1950s), these stereotypes and deeply racist white fears of black sexuality are crudely and savagely displayed to a wide readership in his portrait of a Negress, Miss Smith:

> The focus which attracts us all so much is centred, like a cyclone over sex. You may think you are looking at her—but really you are looking at her fertility.... Look if you dare and see the plate-mouthed women of the Congo Basin more delectable than the pelican. Vaginas turning blue and exploding in dark flowers. The penis slit like a ripe banana. Seed spurting like a million comers. The menstrual catharsis swerving down from the loins, dyeing the black carpers of flesh in the sweet smell, the rich urao of blood.. The slit lips of the vagina opening like a whale for the Jonah's of civilization.[125]

Certainly the theme of sexual exploitation and 'breeding' persisted in the discourse of athleticism. Less than a decade ago, the *New York Times* published

an article in which black athletic superiority was said to have its origins in the Civil War period when "the slave owner would breed his big black with his big woman so that he could have a big black kid."[126] It is not hard to see how such discourses have influenced health educators seeking to prevent obesity in females, claiming that African American women are more socially tolerant toward obesity because of the relatively high prevalence seen among them. Minimizing socioeconomic status, the critical measure of obesity and poor nutritional status, they draw attention instead to the influence of the milieu of African American culture and suggest that size and strength may be more important than physical appearance. They therefore recommend focusing interventions on a supposed cultural tolerance and physiological imperative of size, rather than the underlying socioeconomic causes of the health risk.[127]

PHYSICAL EDUCATION DISCOURSE DURING THE INTER-WAR YEARS: REPRODUCING THE STEREOTYPES, PROLONGING THE MYTHS

We can readily see how Mae King's central images of Black women were superimposed upon the professional physical education and sporting discourse of the inter-war years to sustain damaging and disempowering images of the black female and her athletic abilities at the same time that black athletes were achieving particular success in track and field. In 1930, for example, *The Journal of Health and Physical Education* published an article titled "The Romping Rompers—A Tumbling Demonstration for Girls."[128] The general theme is a script for a stage presentation for a school physical education class. It centers around a "happy group of playmates" who are joined in their play by "Topsy, a little darky girl from the neighborhood who furnishes the comedy." As the white girls perform their tumbling feats in a play space surrounded by a white picket fence, Topsy, her hair braided in many pigtails, tied with ribbons, and dressed in a pink romper suit, peeps over the garden gate. "The rompers see her and pretend to throw something at her...she dodges behind the fence and then peeps again-they confer and decide to let her join them...Topsy opens the garden gate, cakewalks in (to the tune of Plantation dance music) and does a cartwheel." In the orchestrated Dive and Forward Roll over Bodies stunt, Topsy is to be tricked into trying to dive over seven or eight bodies. "With shaking knees and do-or-die spirit," Topsy is finally pressed "with gleeful determination on the part of the white girls" to try the feat, only to have the girls "flatten out during the dive and laugh at her fear and confusion...."[129]

The images of mindlessness and comical timidity, combined with assumptions about Topsy's "natural" athleticism and rhythmic talents; the need to be overdressed and decorated in feminine colors and ribbons in order to mask masculine characteristics and the notion that she was not quite a 'lady'; her apartness and the sense of darkness in the wrong place—an enclosed space for white girls surrounded by a white picket fence; all provide dramatic binary images of difference and subservience. And they point up the frustrating ambiguities of the black

woman's role as it was informed by the demeaning myths and stereotypes of her slave-womanhood history.

Topsy, we are reminded, was the frolicking, scatterbrained, black comic relief character in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* who was treated kindly by the pure and saintly little Eva. This first American novel with blacks as central characters provided popular dramatic material for theatrical promoters of minstrelsy from the mid-nineteenth century on, mostly 'unmarred' by Stowe's anti-slavery images. When PT. Barnum opened his American museum show in New York in 1853, he insisted that his minstrel version was a "true picture of negro life in the South," which did not "foolishly and unjustly elevate the negro above the white man in intellect or morals."[130] Parodies of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* quickly found their way into the early minstrel shows where they usually became a grouping of plantation songs, dances, and tableaux that for the most part represented slaves as dim-witted, banjo-playing, dancing darkies. Indeed, for many nineteenth-century Americans, minstrelsy provided their only exposure to life on the plantation and reveals the evolution and functioning of American racial stereotypes better than almost any other source.[131] By furnishing a romantic image of contented, child-like, southern Negroes in an ordered, family-like environment, minstrelsy, with its blackface makeup and portrayals of Negro characters, provided a major vehicle through which northern whites could begin to understand the role of the black person in American culture, albeit a caricatured role of body peculiarities and customs.[132]

From the outset, minstrel shows unequivocally branded Black men and women as inferiors by portraying them with woolly hair, gaping mouths and gigantic feet. The 'ideal' black woman had huge feet and a dangling lower lip, representing both her sexual voluptuousness and her "masculine" physical capacity for work. Exaggerating racial peculiarities and minimizing their commonplace features, minstrels molded distinct racial caricatures and embedded these stereotypes into audiences' minds throughout America.[133] For more than a century, the athletic success of African American males was attributed in part to their feet with "larger heel bone and thicker fat pads—a marvellous organ for mobility, leaping, jumping and landing" (characteristic of cheetahs, for example).[134] Though no studies can be found focusing on the feet or heel bone of female African Americans, comparisons to animals' swiftness of foot certainly continued to evoke old stereotypes that blacks were little removed from the apes in their evolutionary development.[135] Wilma Rudolph, nicknamed "the blackgazelle," was represented as a wild beast, albeit a gentle creature who, once internationally successful as an athlete, could be adopted as a "pet" of the American public.[136]

Minstrels also created the alluring "yaller gals" (who had the light skin and facial features of white women combined with the perceived exoticism and "availability" of black women). They located these yaller gals on plantations which were usually portrayed as ideal domestic settings where blacks could work all day, and sing and dance all night, while entertaining their benevolent masters. Initially, white female impersonators played the roles of yaller girls with lavish costumes and coquettish acts.[137] Eric Lott, in a provocative analysis of the minstrel shows,

has shown how tightly leashed minstrelsy was to working-class representations by equating Zip Coon and Jim Crow, stock figures in most shows, with the southern country lad and the northern city boy. The workplace discipline increasingly demanded of the antebellum city boy, he suggests, pushed worried workers to imagine that the pleasures they had repressed had somehow been stolen by black men. This, he suggests, then accounted for the popularity of yaller gals as well as minstrel transvestitism and extravagant displays of male potency.[138] When black minstrels took over minstrelsy (from white actors who impersonated black men), and when all-female minstrels were established in the 1870s, they simply added credibility to earlier portrayals by making it seem like they too behaved like minstrelsy's black caricatures. Black minstrel shows ultimately became almost exclusively plantation shows, delineating a benign plantation experience and continuing to be performed in schools and community pageants long after the minstrel shows had disappeared.[139]

In addition to a continuation of black minstrel caricatures through the Harlem Globetrotters, first established in 1927 as the Savoy Big Five,[140] romantic representations of plantation life echoing earlier minstrel shows often appeared in physical education discourse during the inter-war years. In "America Marches In," Hilda Southall, a physical education teacher from New Jersey, provided detailed instructions for teachers to organize historical pageants in their physical education classes.[141] Among the more popular tableaux, she pointed out, were those demonstrating life on the plantation accompanied by banjo players, black-faced clog dancers, and the ubiquitous Mammy. Life on the plantation, explained Southall:

> was on the whole very pleasant. The master of the house spent his time in overseeing the labor in the fields, in hunting, or in entertaining at his home. The women sewed, supervised the housekeeping and often gave great balls. The slaves too usually led a happy life. They were deeply religious and delighted in singing chants about bible events. When their daily work was done, they went to their own cabins which were built in a group not far from the big house. There they could sing, dance and enjoy themselves in other ways.[142]

Clog dances were seen as a useful way of teaching a sense of rhythm to schoolchildren. "Any simple clog dance danced by a couple dressed as negro children is always popular" explained Janie Kent in the *Journal of Health and Physical Education,* echoing the sustained belief that a superior sense of rhythm was one of the marked characteristics of the negro race.[143] Indeed, "observations of colored people in the cotton fields of the South," said Dorothy Muzzy in the *Research Quarterly,* particularly "impress one with the place of rhythm in the daily life of the negro," so we might expect colored children to learn rhythmical patterns more quickly than whites.[144] For her research experiment, Muzzy selected tom-toms for testing rhythm (because of their place in the rhythmic history of the race and the elimination of the need to memorize a tune). Her results, unsurprisingly reflected the same presuppositions that led to the selection of her

instrument. "Colored" girls and boys (despite the lack of rhythm training in the curriculum of their segregated schools) were markedly superior to whites in motor rhythm, but over the course of a six-day experiment, the colored group, after their quick start, plateaued at two to three days while the white group continued to progress steadily throughout the trial. In other words, true to stereotype, colored boys and girls had greater 'natural' rhythmic ability and lesser learning capacity or simply tired more quickly.[145]

Leila Perry, who attended Tuskegee Institute in the late 1930s and early 1940s on a college track scholarship, was familiar with this notion when she told of a ceremony in Atlantic City to honor the Tuskegee team. Before being presented with the key to the city, the team was asked to sing to the crowd because "as always they think that black folks are supposed to be able to sing."[146]

CONCLUSION

> We might interpret the whole career of African Americans, a decisive factor in national political life since the mid-seventeenth century ... as a metaphor of social and cultural management[147]

In many ways, the reconstruction of African American women's history has been and continues to be a feminist endeavor. Until recently, however, the failure of our scholarship and politics to teach us about the construction of 'race' has been connected to our failure to understand 'race' as a significant factor in women's experience. Indeed, the shaping of the African American woman's story in sport, as in other areas of her life, reveals much more about the pictures in the minds of its shapers than about the diversity and complexity of her realities.

We are reminded that historical writing has much in common with fictional literature in presenting verbal fictions and myths. We know that myths may provide justifications of our desires and that they may also serve to justify our fears or alleviate anxieties by projecting what is feared onto others. Both stereotypes and myths are fundamentally pictures in the mind created out of the imagination, and both have deeply and perniciously pervaded the representations of black women's history and therefore the story of the black female's physicality and athleticism.

At the threshold of the twenty-first century, black women scholars continue to emphasize the inseparable unity of race and gender in their work and dismiss efforts to bifurcate the identity of black women into discrete categories. Yet, old images of the black female's place in American culture remain strikingly impervious to logic because they are underpinned by images of gender and race as natural and permanent. If she is rescued from the myth of the Negro, the myth of the woman traps her. If she escapes the myth of the woman, the myth of the Negro still ensnares her.[148] Indeed, few other groups in America have had their identity so socialized out of existence as have black women.[149] Until such time as African American women themselves (especially athletes) are empowered to challenge these myths from the dual position referred to by bell hooks and others,

the absence of this vital and necessary perspective could prevent a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of what it means—both past and present—to be a black female athlete in America.

The struggle against stereotype, the basis of all racism, is in the end a profoundly personal one, says Neil Bissoondath—and some African American female athletes are indeed seeking ways to reclaim and deal with negative stereotypes.[150] Florence Griffith-Joyner's flaunting of hyper-sexuality and fashion could be viewed as one attempt to dismantle and disrupt the dominant society's deployment of race. Dressed in flamboyant, 'sexy' fashions, she uses the sports media to profile her power, beauty, and superb athletic skills and to demonstrate forms of resistance to old charges of masculinity.

> With her shoulder length hair, meticulous make-up, one legged running tights, lace-trimmed bikini briefs and long multi-colored fingernails she has run into the record books a rainbow blur of blazing color—"looking good is almost as important as running well," she said [though in fact] "I lift and I reach out when I run. I run more like a guy than a girl."[151]

It's just a slip, however, from one dominant stereotype to another, erasing notions of masculinity by recasting another traditional image of powerful sexuality. *Paris Match* returned this sexuality to its animal origins, calling Griffith-Joyner "la tigresse noire." Thus, conceptualizations of the black female's physicality can fall into the creative trap or paradox of finding one way out of traditional stereotypes by simply reinvigorating another stereotype.

As Trudier Harris pointed out recently, "the superficial attractions of strength have dominated portraits of Black women to the detriment of other possibilities and potentially stymied future directions for their representation. This tradition of portrayal has created, as well as become its own form of illness." Strength, she points out, has been the one unassailable characteristic applied to black women historically—a stereotype creating a black woman more suprahuman than human, but also one with an implied ideology of domination, tyranny, and masculinity. "We have really praised these women for being suprahuman, certainly more than female which means that often we have praised them for exhibiting traits that western culture has traditionally designated more masculine than feminine." Perhaps, suggests Harris, African Americans are willing to continue to embrace strength and perpetuate the modern-day image of warrior-goddesses 'because anything else would be more destructive than strength could ever be."[152] Yet paradoxically, a wholesale acceptance of this image of strength and power requires the acceptance of historically negative images such as the emasculating matriarch and "mammyism" deterring black women from seeking support by living up to cultural myths of their near invisibility.

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10. Cahn, *Coming on Strong,* 121.
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38. Hoberman, *Darwin's Athletes,* xiii.
39. Ali Behdad, "Traveling to Teach: Postcolonial Critics in the American Academy," in Cameron McCarthy and Warren Critchlow (eds.), *Race, Identity and Representation in Education,* 40-49 (New York: Routledge, 1993), 48.
40. Jeffrey T. Sammons, "'Race' and Sport: A Critical Historical Examination," *Journal of Sport History* 21, 3 (1994), 204.
41. Higginbotham, *African-American Women's History,* 274.
42. Dominick LaCapra, *The Bounds of Race: Perspectives on Hegemony and Resistance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 1.
43. Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives* (London: Pluto Press, 1993).
44. David Wiggins, "Great Speed But Little Stamina: The Historical Debate Over Black Athletic Superiority," *Journal of Sport History* 16, 2 (1989), 184.
45. Richard Cooper, "The Biological Concept of Race and Its Application to Public Health and Epidemiology," *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law,* 11, 1 (1986), 97-116.
46. Barbara J. Fields, "Ideology and Race in American History," in J.M. Kousser and J.M. McPherson (eds.), *Region, Race and Reconstruction,* 146 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).
47. Jaques Barzun, *A Study in Superstition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965).
48. Holt, "Marking: Race," 3.
49. Higginbotham, *African-American Women,* 254.
50. Diana Fuss, Essentially *Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 91-2.

51. Frances Beale, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," in Toni Cade (ed.), *The Black Woman: An Anthology,* 90-100 (New York: Signet Books, 1970), 90.
52. John Bale and Joe Sang's work is a cultural geography of Kenyan runners and John Hoberman's focus is upon African American sportsmen,
53. John Bale and Joe Sang, *Kenyan Running: Movement, Culture, Geography and Global Change* (London: Frank Cass, 1996), 143, 156, 158. See also Marek Kohn, *Race Gallery: The Return of Racial Science* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), 77-83.
54. Hoberman, *Darwin's Athletes,* xiii.
55. Patricia Vertinsky, "Gender Relations, Women's History and Sport History: A Decade of Changing Enquiry, 1983-1993," *Journal of Sport History* 21, 1 (1994), 1-24.
56. For example, Steven A. Riess and Gerald R. Gems have given passing attention to the sporting and recreating pursuits of blacks in their larger studies of organized sport in Chicago. Steven A. Riess, *City Games,* 113-121. Gerald R. Gems, *Sport and Cultural Formation in Chicago, 1890-1940.* Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Maryland, 1989, 376. See also Rob Ruck, *Sandlot Seasons: Black Sport in Pittsburgh* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1987).
57. Sammons, "Race and Sport," 204.
58. Susan Birrell, "Women of Color: Critical Autobiography and Sport," in Michael Messner and Donald Sabo (eds.), *Sport, Men and the Gender Order: Critical Feminist Perspectives,* 185-199 (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1990), 198.
59. David Wiggins (ed.), Special Edition, "The Black Athlete in American Sport," *Journal of Sport History* 15, 3 (1988), 239-355. See also, M. Omni and H. Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960's to the 1980's* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986).
60. For example, Gary A. Sailes, "The Myth of Black Sports Supremacy," *Journal of Black Studies* 21, 1 (1991), 480-487; Gary A. Sailes, "An Investigation of Campus Stereotypes: The Myth of Black Athletic Superiority and the Dumb Jock Stereotype," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 10, 1 (1993), 88-97; David Wiggins, "Great Speed but Little Stamina"; Laurel R. Davis, "The Articulation of Difference: White Pre-occupation with the Question of Racially Linked Genetic Differences Among Athletes," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 7, 2 (1990), 179-187.
61. Yevonne R. Smith, "Women of Color in Society and Sport," *Quest* 44, 2 (1992), 231.
62. Spillers, *Mama's Baby,* 184.
63. Gwendolyn Captain, "Enter Ladies and Gentlemen of Color: Gender, Sport and the Ideal of African American Manhood and Womanhood During the Late Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," *Journal of Sport History* 18, 1(1991), 81-102; See also Gwendolyn Captain "Social, Religious and Leisure Pursuits of Northern California's African American Population. The Discovery of Gold through World War II," unpublished master's thesis, University of California at Berkeley, 1995.
64. Wilma Rudolph's autobiography, for example, details the range of her experiences with racism and rapid upward mobility accompanying her rise to an Olympian athlete. Martin Ralbovsky (ed.) and Wilma Rudolph, *Wilma: The Story of Wilma Rudolph* (New York: New American Library Signet, 1977).
65. Edwin B. Henderson, "Tan Lads May Bring U.S. First Title Since '04," *The Baltimore Afro-American,* August 1948, p. 8, national edition.
66. Wilma Rudolph was aware of similar critiques concerning her ability to play sport and remain feminine. "I also learned some lessons about what it was like being a girl who loved sport and about what people thought about such things-you couldn't be a lady and a good athlete at the same time." Rudolph, *Wilma,* 2. See for example, Sam Lacy, "Has Althea Gibson Conquered Herself?" *The Baltimore Afro-American* (Magazine Section; June 29, 1957), 1.

67. See for example, Ann Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (New York Dell Publishing, 1968).
68. Rita Liberti, "We Were Ladies, We Just Played Like Boys: African-American Women and Competitive Basketball at Bennett College, 1928-1942," paper presented at the North American Society for Sport History, Springfield, MA, 1997. See also, Cindy Himes Gissendanner, "African-American Women and Competitive Sport, 1920-1960," in Susan Birrell and Cheryl Cole (eds.), *Women, Sport and Culture,* 81-92 (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1994).
69. Marilyn Dell Brady, "Organizing Afro-American Girls' Clubs in Kansas in the 1920's," *Frontiers* 9, 2 (1987), 69-72.
70. Ivora King, "Feminine Yet Athletic," *Baltimore Afro-American,* September 19, 1931, 13.
71. Cindy Himes Gissendanner, "African-American Women Olympians: The Impact of Race, Gender, and Class Ideologies, 1932-1968," *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 87, 2 (1996), 176; See also Hazel Carby, "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context," *Critical Inquiry* 4, 2 (1992), 739.
72. Adrianne Blue, *Grace Under Pressure: The Emergence of Women in Sport* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1987), 23.
73. Blue, *Grace Under Pressure,* 28.
74. Cahn, *Coming on Strong,* 127.
75. Cahn, *Coming On Strong,* 111.
76. Spillers, *Mama's Baby,* 69.
77. Malcolm Gladwell, "The Sport's Taboo. Why Blacks are Like Boys and Whites are Like Girls," *The New Yorker* 73, 12 (May 19, 1997), 50-55.
78. Tina Sloan Green, Carole A. Oglesby, Alpha Alexander, Nikki Franke, *Black Women in Sport* (Reston, VA: AAPHERD Publications, 1981). In Lumpkin and Williams' analysis of 151 covers of *Women's Sport and Fitness Magazine* since the 1950s, only twelve Black sportswomen were portrayed-four in track and field and five in basketball. Angela Lumpkin and Linda D. Williams, "An Analysis of Sports Illustrated Feature Articles, 1954-1987," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 8, 1 (1991), 16-32. It must be underscored that economic factors have traditionally restricted the access of African-American girls and women to such sports as tennis, golf, yachting, organized swimming and diving, as well as winter sports.
79. Mae King, "The Politics of Sexual Stereotypes," *The Black Scholar* 4, 6 (1973), 12-23.
80. Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Cultural Critique* 6, 1 (1987), 51-63.
81. Edward Mapp, "Black Women in Films," *The Black Scholar* 4, 6 (1973), 42.
82. Phil Patton, "Mammy. Her Life and Times," *American Heritage* 44, 5 (1993), 78-87.
83. David B. Welky, "Viking Girls, Mermaids, and Little Brown Men: U.S. Journalism and the 1932 Olympics," *Journal of Sport History* 24, 1 (1997), 37.
84. "Girls Get Great Trip, Though Barred from the Olympics," *The Baltimore Afro-American* 13 (15), (August 1932), national edition.
85. Lois E. Horton, "Ambiguous Roles: The Racial Factor in American Womanhood," paper presented at the conference on Xenophobia, Racism, Nativism and National Identity in Germany and the United States, German Historical Institute, Washington, D.C., June 1994, 4.
86. Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 9.
87. Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985).
88. Nell Irvin Painter, "Representing Truth: Sojourner Truth's Knowing and Becoming Known," *The Journal of Ameriran History* 81, 2 (1994), 461-492.
89. Maya Angelou, *Now Sheba Sings the Song* (with art by Tom Feelings; New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 34.

90. Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter* (New York: William Morrow&Co. Inc., 1984), 7.
91. Spillers, *Mama's Baby,* 73.
92. Horton, *Ambiguous Roles,* 4.
93. Andolsen, *Daughters of Jefferson,* 16.
94. Wallace, *Black Macho,* 20.
95. White, *Ar'n' I a Woman,* 120.
96. George Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography,* 19 vols., (Vol. 4, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972), 139.
97. Horton, *Ambiguous Rob,* 8.
98. Anonymous domestic's complaint in 1912. "I Live a Treadmill Life." In Gerda Lerner (ed.), *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History,* 227-228 (New York: Vintage Books, 1973).
99. Doris Corbett and William Johnson, "The African American Female in Collegiate Sport: Sexism and Racism." In Dana Brooks and Ronald Althouse (eds.), *Racism in Collegiate* Sport 177-204 (Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology Inc., 1993).
100. Welky, "Viking Girls, Mermaids and Little Brown Men," 30.
101. Cahn, *Coming On Strong,* 133.
102. Rudolph, *The Story of Wilma Rudolph,* 143-144.
103. Blue, *Grace Under Pressure,* 23-4; Being a lady of course stressed the real fear of lesbianism in female athletes who showed strength and power. Heterosexual relationships were invariably underscored as desirable. Gina Daddario, "Gendered Sport Programming: 1992 Summer Olympic Coverage and Feminine Narrative Form," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 14, 2 (1997), 113. Television sports reporters today continue to identify the other roles of female track and field athletes as women and mothers to a far greater degree than in other sports. Amid all the controversy surrounding Gwen Torrence at the 1992 Olympics, commentators seldom failed to point out that the African-American sprinter was a wife and the mother of a three-year-old son.
104. Collins O. Airhihenbauwa, Shriki Kumanyika, Tanya Agurs, and Agatha Lowe, "Perceptions and Beliefs about Exercise, Rest and Health among African-Americans," *American Journal of Health Promotion* 9, 6 (1995), 428.
105. Daniel Patrick Moynihan's analysis of the black family resonated with the social hygiene discourse of prominent African-American reformers during the inter-war years. The perceived need to counter racial stigmatization had given many middle-class African Americans, especially women, a powerful rationale to subscribe to Victorian values to "uplift" their race. Forced to a marginal position in society on the grounds of race, they fought against the dominant white position, that allowed color to obscure class and defined all blacks as primitive and lacking sexual control, by associating their cause with Victorian sexual responsibility. Strong African-American women would exemplify middle-class respectability most thoroughly by reforming home life (damaged by slavery and the handicaps of racial prejudice) and demanding high standards of sexual morality Class was thus substituted for race as the cause of social and family problems. Christina Simmons, "African-Americans and Sexual Victorianism in the Social Hygiene Movement, 1910-1940," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 4, 1 (1993), 61, 65. See also, "Strong Women and Strutting Men," in Giddings, *When and Where I Enter,* 325-335.
106. Gerda Lerner (ed.) *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Vintage Press, 1973).
107. Eugene Genovese, "The Slave Family, Women: A Reassessment of Matriarchy, Emasculation, Weakness," *Southern Voices* 1 (Aug.-Sept. 1974), 9-16.
108. Thomas Kochman, *Black and White Styles in Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

109. Spillers, *Mama's Baby,* 80.

110. Negative images of black women affect all Americans, but they may have also promoted a special divisiveness between black men and black women. While a strong woman might be celebrated, her assertive demeanor identified her as masculinized and domineering, and as a threat, therefore, to black manhood. Forced by economic necessity to take on traditional male tasks outside the home, black women often felt compelled to continue their traditional female tasks at home in order to 'protect' their men from gender threatening demands. Through this matriarchal mythology, says bell hooks "white racist oppressors have been able to forge bonds of solidarity with black men based on mutual sexism" *(Feminist Theory,* 80) and drive a wedge between black men and black women. Wallace suggests that this growing distrust between black men and black women has been nursed along, not only by racism on the part of whites but also by an almost deliberate ignorance on the part of blacks about the sexual politics of their experience. Far too little attention has been devoted, she continues, to an examination of the historical male/female relationship except for those aspects in it that reinforced the notion of the black man as the sexual victim of matriarchal tyranny. Wallace, *Black Macho,* 13.

111. Cahn, *Coming on Strong,* 122.

112. Michael D. Davis, *Black American Women in Track and Field. A Complete Illustrated Reference* (North Carolina: McFarland & Co. Inc., 1992):156.

113. Spillers, *Mama's Baby,* 76.

114. Joyce Ladner, *Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Woman* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 154.

115. Wallace, *Black Macho,* 107.

116. James Walvin, "Black Caricature: The Roots of Racism," in Charles Husband (ed.), *Race in Britain: Continuity and Change* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), 59-82; Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black, American Attitudes Toward the Negro 1550-1812,* 1-43 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968).

117. Patrick Brantlinger, "Victorians and Africans: The Geneaology of the Myth of the Dark Continent" in Henry Louis Gates Jr. (ed.), *"Race," Writing and Difference,* 185-223 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 203.

118. John S. Haller, Jr., *Outcasts from Evolution: Scientific Attitudes of Racial Inferiority, 1859-1900* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 51.

119. Durrenda Ojanuga, "The Medical Ethics of the 'Father of Gynaecology' Dr. J. Marion Sims," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 19, 1 (1993), 28-31; Todd L. Savitt, "The Use of Blacks for Medical Experimentation and Demonstration in the Old South," *Journal of Southern History* 48, 1 (August 1982), 331-348.

120. Sammons, "Race and Sport," 271. In light of such stereotypes, it would be interesting to speculate how far African-American female athletes were later convinced to become (or accused of becoming) victims of experimental performance-enhancing drugs to a greater extent than their white peers. There were less than subtle hints at the Seoul Olympics that Florence Griffith-Joyner and Jackie Joyner-Kersee had used anabolic steroids. Underlining these hints about the drug taking habits of African-American athletes have been frequent allusions to "masculine" bulk, thick muscular necks, and looking mannish. Davis, *Black American Women in Track and Field, 71-2.*

121. White, *Ar'n't I a Woman,* 31.

122. Angelou, *Now Sheba Sings,* 22.

123. Kenneth F. Kiple (ed.), *The African Exchange: Toward a Biological History of Black People* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987).

124. Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled. Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890-1935* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 130.

125. Lawrence Durrell, *The Black Book* (New York: Carroll and Gray Publishers, Inc. 1990, first published 1959), 128-129.

126. *New York Times,* Jan. 16, 17, 1988 quoted in Wiggins, "Great Speed but Little Stamina," 179.
127. Sue Y.S. Kimm, et al., "Self-Esteem and Adiposity in Black and White Girls: The NHLBI Growth and Health Study," *Annals of Epidemiology,* 7, 8 (November 1997), 550-560.
128. Bonnie and Donnie Cotteral, "The Romping Rompers," *Journal of Health and Physical Education* 1, 5 (1930), 6-17, 53.
129. Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 91.
130. Harry Birdoff Toll, *America's Greatest Hit: Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: S.F. Vanni, 1947), 91.
131. Toll, *America's Greatest Hit,* 66.
132. By addressing themselves to race, blackfaced performers quickly established the minstrel show as a national institution and molded folkloric images of the "peculiarities" of black men and black women through dance and song. "In the process of creating their stage images of Negroes, northern white professional entertainers selectively adopted elements of Afro-American folk culture into caricatures and stereotypes of negroes. These negative images of blacks did have some elements of black culture in them, however twisted and distorted the overall effect was...Minstrelsy was the first example of the way American popular culture would exploit and manipulate Afro-Americans and their culture to please and benefit white Americans," Toll, *Blacking Up,* 170.
133. Toll, *Blacking Up,* 170.
134. Carleton S. Coon, quoted in Marshall Smith, "Giving the Olympics an Anthropological Once-Over," *Life Magazine* (1964), 81-84; See Wiggins, "Great Speed but Little Stamina," 167.
135. Harry Edwards, "The Sources of the Black Athlete's Superiority," *The Black Scholar* 3 (November 1971), 38-39.
136. Cahn, *Coming on Strong,* 132.
137. Toll, *Blacking Up,* 138-43.
138. Eric Lott, *The Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
139. Typically, they featured "Old Darky, nostalgically recalling the happy days of his youth, the frolicking children, the tasty possum, the bright cotton fields, the perfume of magnolia blossoms, the lively banjo music"; Toll, *Blacking Up,* 245.
140. Abe Saperstein, who founded the team, had a benevolent "plantation owner's" affection for his players. "Running about the court emitting savage jungle yells...they came across as frivolous, mildly dishonest children, the white man's encapsulated view of the whole Negro race set to the rhythm of Sweet Georgia Brown." Ben Lombardo, "The Harlem Globetrotters and the Perpetuation of the Black Stereotype," *The Physical Educator* 35, 2 (1978), 61.
141. Hilda Southall, "America Marches On: A Historical Pageant," *Journal of Health and Physical Education* 5, 9 (1934), 19-25.
142. Southall, "America Marches On," 23; Referring to the American institution of slavery, English naturalist Robert Dunn popularized the notion that Negroes had lived in slavery in a constant state of enjoyment, a state which reflected their lack of mental complexity. When their toils were over they sang, danced and displayed mild and gentle affection (because they were small-brained savages). Robert Dunn. *Some Observations on the Psychological Differences Whicb Exist Among the Typical Races of Man.* Ethnological Society of Canada. Transactions, III, 1863, p. 20.
143. Janie Kent, "Dancing Has Its Place in the Physical Education Program," *Journal of Health and Physical Education* 2, 6 (1931), 21.
144. Dorothy Muzzy, "Rhythm and Colored Children," *Research Quarterly* 2, 6 (1931), 20-21.

145. See also Yale S. Nathanson, "The Musical Ability of the Negro," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science,* 229 (November 1928), 140, and Helen Elizabeth Sanderson, "Differences in Music Ability of Children of Different National and Racial Origin," *Journal of Genetic Psychology* 42, 1 (1933), 100-119.
146. Cahn, *Coming on Strong,* 125.
147. Spillers, *Mama's Baby,* 79.
148. White, *Ar'n't I A Woman.*
149. bell hooks, *Ai'nt I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), 7.
150. Neil Bissoondath, *Selling Illusions. The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1994), 212.
151. Davis, *Black American Women in Olympic Track and Field,* 65. See also, Mariah Burton Nelson, *The Stronger Women Get, the More Men Love Football: Sexism and the American Culture of Sports* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1994), 214; and Allen Guttman, *Women's Sports: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 249-250.
152. Trudier Harris, "This Disease Called Strength: Some Observations on the Compensating Construction of Black Female Character," *Literature and Medicine* 13, 1(1995), 110, 115, 123.