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Reading Althea Gibson, Revealing the Workings of Whiteness

Althea Gibson's place in the annals of tennis history are indeed praiseworthy although more recently two strokes have limited both her mobility and memory, and media reports suggest that Gibson continues to struggle financially. Gibson's tennis accomplishments are noteworthy for her dominance in all-Black American Tennis Association events and for her achievements at both Wimbledon and Forest Hills, where she won both singles and doubles championships. She is often referred to as the Jackie Robinson of tennis, given her successes in what is commonly referred to as crossing the color barrier that is claiming success as an African American within an enclave of Whiteness, in this case within the racially segregated world of country club tennis. And yet, Gibson's presence, unlike that of Jackie Robinson and Major League Baseball, did not translate into widespread integration of elite tennis.

Narratives surrounding Althea Gibson's career as an elite tennis player offer a fruitful site for exploring broader historical and contemporary issues not only in regards to sport, to the lives of African Americans, but also in regards to the ways in which White Americans have and continue to imagine themselves. Part of a larger project, this paper draws upon critical race theory to document the varied ways in which Whiteness has been imagined

through accounts of Gibson's achievements during the 1950s and the 1960s. This analysis is indebted to critical race scholarship that has established Whiteness, not as a stable identity, but as a politically meaningful and fragmented construct in need of analysis, contestation and reformation. Collectively critical scholarship exposes Whiteness as a relational category, an effect of hierarchical discursive practices that both mark bodies and shape life chances. There is a long history of critiques of Whiteness and White dominated knowledge production, provided by people of color including the works of James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison and continuing through today in the work of such cultural critics as bell hooks, Cornell West and Stuart Hall. This work seeks to expose the political workings of the dominant culture and challenge ideas reproduced in popular circles that suggest only people of color are raced. In this paper I apply this sensibility to accounts regarding Gibson's life and achievements, especially those generated after she won the US and Wimbledon championships in 1957 and 1958, paying particular attention to the ways Whiteness is projected in a documentary produced by the United States Information Agency as part of their (1953-1961) series on Black celebrities.
