
Return to the Melting Pot: An Old American Olympic Story

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A fortnight before the recent winter carnival in Salt Lake City began, *USA Today* ran a cover story which predicted that in the looming shadow of September 11, 2001, "we'll have a sort of flag-wrapped, star-spangled Winter Olympics now."¹ The national newspaper could have added that the United States would have turned the Winter Olympics into a star-spangled spectacle even if terrorists had never struck New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania. Predicting that Americans will use the Olympic Games for nationalistic purposes is as facile as predicting that a tornado will touch down in Oklahoma sometime in the spring. Historical patterns make this sort of Olympic prognostication easy. Astute observers also could have guessed that certain segments of the international media would denounce American Olympic jingoism at the 2002 Winter Games, as when Chris Maume of London's *The Independent* opined that the Salt Lake Games were "drowned in Uncle Sam's tsunami of mindless knee-jerk sentimentality."² Such sentiments are hardly new. In 1908 the English magazine *Academy* was so disgusted with American behaviour at the London Olympics that it announced "we sincerely hope that this is the last time we shall see American . . . athletes in this country, and we can get on very well without a great many other Americans who are not athletes."³

The history of the Olympic Games demonstrates that national rancor and patriotic display are sure to crop up in these sporting spectacles. The question is inevitably where and not when. Had *USA Today* reporters asked the scholars they interviewed for the Olympic preview to speculate as to where nationalism and scandal might have broken out in Salt Lake City, perhaps one of them would have been clever enough to point the finger at figure skating, a sport which as long ago as the 1936 Winter Games in Nazi Germany a prescient American sportswriter described as "for

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the most part as completely and joyously crooked and bought and sold as any prize-fight or wrestling championship."⁴ The Olympic Games prove that sport and politics are fundamentally connected. No one nation has a corner on Olympic jingoism—although Americans have a strong historical claim to doing it earlier and better than many other nations. From the controversies over the "ground-zero" flag's entrance at the opening ceremonies to Russian and South Korean threats to pull out of the Salt Lake Games over alleged plots to favour North Americans and their wealthy television audiences, the 2002 Olympic Winter Games confirmed that the core of the Olympic movement is about conflict and competition between nations and not some transcendent form of globalism.⁵ The scholar Benedict Anderson warns against the recently fashionable fantasy that the nation-state is about to melt away into a borderless new age of global culture.⁶ The Salt Lake Olympics confirm his assertion.

More difficult to predict about American versions of national self-identification through the Olympics before the 2002 installment of the Winter Games was that an old and venerable theme would reemerge at the "white" winter carnival in homogeneous Utah. One of the central storylines in the American media's interpretations of the 2002 Winter Games in Salt Lake City flows from the nation's deep fascination with how ethnic and racial identities are defined through sporting performance. From beneath the snow-capped ramparts of the Wasatch Front, the nation witnessed the first Mexican-American, Cuban-American, and African-American athletes to win medals in a Winter Olympics. Asian Americans, stars of American teams at earlier Winter Games, continued to shine in Salt Lake. Vahe Gregorian of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, jabbing that the Salt Lake Winter Games were too often about the hue and cry of aggrieved nation states, proclaimed that "for the United States it has been about hue." Gregorian predicted that for the United States the 2002 Olympics "will be memorable for its diversity."⁷ Other American commentators, comfortably ensconced in the journalistic pack, concurred with Gregorian. The *Boston Globe's* John Powers hailed "a snow-and-ice team that looks like America."⁸ The *Washington Post's* Liz Clarke highlighted diversity as an "undeniable strength" of the American team.⁹ In the *Philadelphia Inquirer* Annette John-Hall observed that the American public would remember the Salt Lake winter sports carnival as "the coming out party for U.S. minority athletes in winter sports."¹⁰ In the *Atlanta Constitution* Steve Hummer joked that "it is only a matter of time now before they change the name of the Nordic combined to multicultural combined."¹¹ The gold medal for multicultural hyperbole should have gone to a sportswriter from Salt Lake's rival city in the Rocky Mountain West. "The United States is pouring pure gold from a melting pot," gushed the *Denver Post's* Mark Kizla. "For America to be No. 1, it takes a rainbow coalition," the Colorado columnist concluded.¹²

The athletes themselves echoed the reporters' sentiments. "We have the biggest melting pot in the world," proclaimed Jennifer Rodriguez, the Cuban-American skater who sped to two bronze medals in Salt Lake. "The one special quality about the United States is we are so diverse," she proudly maintained.¹³ "I think it really shows anything is possible no matter where you come from in this country," added Rodriguez's speed skating teammate, Derek Parra, who won a gold and a silver to become the first Mexican-American to medal in the Winter Games. "We are all Americans," Parra averred, linking Olympic performance to inclusion into the American polity.¹⁴ "There is no snow in Alabama," admitted African-American bob sled-

der Vonetta Flowers of one of the many obstacles she overcame to win her historic gold medal. "I hope my win opens some doors for younger African-Americans," Flowers declared, invoking the traditional American connection between equal opportunity and racial inclusion in sporting ventures.¹⁵

So powerful were these melting pot visions of the American Olympic team as a model of diversity that they crossed over from *Sports Illustrated*¹⁶ and other sports media to the mass market bible of American pop culture, *People* magazine. There, in the pages of the tabloid devoted to starlets' nuptials, Hollywood ballyhoo, television chatter, entertainment industry gossip, and all other manner of celebrity kitsch, appeared America's new Olympic diversity heroes, Derek Parra, Vonetta Flowers, and Anton Apolo Ohno.¹⁷ *People's* lead story on the "bond of gold" forged by the multi-ethnic trio illustrates the British cultural historian E.J. Hobsbawm's assertion that modern international sport has made athletes "primary expressions of their imagined communities."¹⁸ The inclusion of Flowers in the mix, along with other female stars such as Jennifer Rodriguez and Michelle Kwan, also updates Hobsbawm's antiquated belief that the celebration of nationalism in sport is solely a male preserve.¹⁹ The contemporary American Olympic melting pot is more gender inclusive than Hobsbawm imagined.

Using the Olympic Games to debate and illuminate American conceptions of the melting pot is not a new storyline. The old, if currently academically unfashionable, concept of the melting pot and the newer notion of diversity have been embedded in American Olympic tales for more than a century. Ever since the modern Olympics began in 1896, the American media, athletes, and fans have imagined their Olympic team as a collection of world-beating common folk whose gold, silver, and bronze medals testify to a multi-ethnic social fabric that resides at the core of the republic's power. The melting pot symbolizes the national belief that the United States has the world's most democratic and egalitarian society. Nationalism's deconstructor Benedict Anderson has asserted that nations are best understood as imagined communities—an idea E.J. Hobsbawm fastens directly to modern sport.²⁰ When Americans imagine their nation in Olympic arenas they regularly dream in multiracial tints.

The melting pot has always been a part of the national folklore that Americans spin around the Olympic Games, but it has never been a static symbol. The practice of using the melting pot as an explanatory device for American victories has waxed and waned over the course of the twentieth century as American policies governing immigration and racial identity have changed. At the beginning of the twentieth century melting pot allegories were abundant. In that era, melting pot analogies used American Olympic victories as proof that immigrants, particularly those from Europe, contributed mightily to their new nation. From World War I through World War II melting pot allegories appeared less frequently. The focus of the melting pot stories also shifted from emphasizing immigrants to depictions of American teams as model democratic units that bridged the huge racial divides between whites and blacks.²¹

After World War II, as the Cold War reshaped American life, the melting pot allegories continued to shift. As American notions of ethnicity in the second half of the twentieth century increasingly blurred older distinctions between European groups into a uniform category of whiteness, the elements smelting in the melting pot were increasingly perceived as white and black.²² As more African-American ath-

letes played prominent roles on U.S. Olympic teams from 1948 forward, that pattern intensified. In addition to symbolizing racial harmony between blacks and whites, the melting pot during the Cold War also served as a mechanism for promoting American claims of egalitarian superiority of competing claims from the Soviet Union.

As the Cold War lurched toward its abrupt climax and as new debates over immigration from Latin America and Asia smoldered in the United States, melting pot explanations of American Olympic prowess again shifted. The changes began in 1984 at Los Angeles, with the Cold War in one of its most intense phases and the Soviets leading a boycott of the American Games-payback for the U.S.-led boycott of the 1980 Moscow Games. Los Angeles enjoyed the double-edged title in the 1980s as the "capital of the Third World"—the most ethnically diverse city on the globe.²³ Some Americans feared the new patterns of immigration that many predicted would lead to the "browning of America."²⁴ Others seized on Los Angeles as the symbol of a new, more multi-cultural melting pot that would remake the United States for the twenty-first century. Similar stories characterized coverage of the Atlanta Games in 1996. American melting pot tales about the Olympic Games began to resemble the multiethnic fables of the early twentieth century, although the ethnic groups highlighted in the newer stories were Latin American and Asian rather than mainly European.²⁵

Though Los Angeles and Atlanta began the return to older melting pot traditions, Salt Lake City dominated the comeback. Three surprises were embedded in the melting pot explosions at Salt Lake City. First, the stories occurred at a winter rather than a summer Games. Winter Games had long been criticized as the exclusionary province of northern Europeans and North Americans. Even an "industry" journal had admitted that problem as recently as the late 1990s when *Skiing* magazine lamented the lack of diversity at the Winter Games in an essay cleverly titled "The Unbearable Whiteness of Skiing."²⁶ Second, the number of melting pot stories from Los Angeles and Atlanta paled next to the tally of multi-cultural narratives that erupted from Salt Lake City. The frequency of melting pot themes took an unexpectedly large jump in 2002. Third, in some important ways, the melting pot parables from the 2002 Winter Games evoked the sentiments of American Olympic tales from the earliest era of modern Olympic history rather than the tales from much of the rest of the twentieth century. Americans had long used the Olympic Games as a way to measure the gap between national ideals and social realities.²⁷ In 2002 those measurements resembled appraisals from the first decade of the twentieth century when victories by members of new groups of immigrants and their native-born offspring were hailed as proof of American exceptionalism.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the American press depicted U.S. Olympic teams as athletic testimonials to Thomas Jefferson's hallowed, if unrealized, self-evident truth that all men (women were, until 1920, absent from American squads-as they were from American polls) were created equal. In an era when racial and ethnic bigotries were not only commonplace but enshrined in law as well as custom, the media still portrayed American athletes at Olympic Games in racially diverse colors. In 1908, the influential political journal *The Outlook* cheered that the American team for the London Olympics "comprised Anglo-Saxon, Teuton, Slav, Celt, Black Ethiopian and red Indian."²⁸ In 1912, the liberal Protestant weekly *The Independent* heralded an American team chosen for the Stockholm Olympics "without

regard to class, wealth, race, color or previous condition of servitude."²⁹ American Olympic official Robert M. Thompson concurred, announcing that American Olympic teams were "thoroughly democratic, representative of all sorts and conditions of men—except bad men."³⁰ While these claims did not reflect actual social practices of an early twentieth-century United States where most citizens of colour were excluded from voting and where even many of those of European descent, who did not fall into what that era's racialists dubbed the Anglo-Saxon races, faced a multitude of discriminatory practices, the rhetoric nevertheless symbolized what many hoped the nation would soon become.³¹



Members of minority groups used these melting pot visions for their own purposes. James B. Connolly, an Irish-American athlete and writer who won the first Olympic championship in American history when he hopped, stepped, and jumped to victory in Athens in 1896, later penned stories for popular magazines giving credit for American Olympic triumphs to ethnic and racial pluralism. Connolly also used the presence of large numbers of American Olympic heroes of Irish descent to attack popular ethnic stereotypes of Anglo-Saxon superiority.³² Connolly's contemporary, the Irish-American humorist Finley Peter Dunne, eagerly joined the melting pot fray. Through the thick brogue of his popular comic character Mr. Dooley, Dunne told his large national audience that at the 1908 London Olympics "'on'y me iv pure Anglo-Saxon blood were allowed to compete, an th' names iv th' American team alone were enough to thrill th' heart iv th' Saxon who knows th' proud histry iv his race—such names as Sheridan, Flannagan, O'Brien, Casey, O'Halloran, an' so on.'" ³³ Indeed, one of the most nationalistic customs that the United States regularly practices in Olympic arenas stems from both Irish and American patriotism. Ralph Rose, the Irish-American flag-bearer at the parade of nations in London in 1908 refused to dip the "Stars and Stripes" to the English king, allegedly snarling that "this flag dips for no earthly king," thereby inventing a tradition that American teams have more or less followed ever since and that inspired the "ground zero" flag controversy in Salt Lake City ninety-four years later. Rose was motivated both by what the American media at the time labeled the "Spirit of 1776" and by the refusal of the British to allow Irish athletes to compete under the Emerald Isle's banner even though other members of the Empire marched under their own standards.³⁴

For similar reasons, the European press in the early twentieth century frequently condemned both American jingoism and invocations of the melting pot as the smelter of American athletic dominion. They labeled American teams as athletic armies of immigrant mercenaries who dishonored the European conception of nationhood based on ethnic kinship. American commentators responded vociferously to attacks on the multiethnic American "race." An indignant editor at *The Independent* responded to European assaults after the 1912 Olympic Games at Stockholm by proclaiming that the "United States owes its supremacy over all other nations to the fact

that it is a union of all races." The editor proudly maintained, "we rightfully lay claim to all those sheltered under our flag, many of them despised and rejected of their native lands. When an Italian from Paterson, N.J., kills a king we get the blame. Shall we not get the praise when an Italian from Paterson, N.J., wins a race?"³⁵



No longer does the European press attack this particular strain of nationalism when the United States crows about its Olympian performances. Indeed, many other nations now use international sport to proclaim their own commitments to social diversity. From the Australian embrace of aboriginal track star Cathy Freeman, to the appearance of multiracial South African Olympic squads, to the French cry that their champions from the 1998 World Cup tournament truly represented a cross-section of French society, images of melting pots have cropped up in the imaginations of many countries that connect sporting performance to national identity.

If other nations have their own melting pot stories, the United States still has the oldest tradition of Olympic melting pot folklore. This tradition reflects the history of the United States. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the United States received more immigrants than the combined totals of all other nations in the world.³⁶ The proclamation that the United States was a "union of all races" has shaped American Olympic folklore since the early twentieth century. This belief, resurrected so powerfully in Salt Lake City, fits into a broad American ideology which asserts, as the historian Arthur Mann posits, that "nationalities are changeable rather than irrevocable."³⁷ For ethnic groups of European descent this ideology has worked better than it has for people of colour. Skin colour in American history has created categories that have generally been resistant to change rather than open to easy mutation. Still, at the beginning of the twentieth century, African Americans, Native Americans, and other non-European peoples were cobbled into the "union of all races" when they won glory for American teams in Olympic stadiums.



The melting pot motif in American Olympic interpretations appeared with the

greatest frequency during the first era of the modern Games, the period before World War I. Indeed the concept of the melting pot, a term popularized by dramatist Israel Zangwill's 1908 play of the same name, originated in that period. The years between 1896, when the modern Olympics began, and World War I represented the culmination of the great age of immigration in the United States. In the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth century more than 23 million people immigrated to the United States as the nation's population leapt from 50 million to 100 million. Questions about both if and how the United States could assimilate such an enormous influx shaped the era's political and social debates.

Given the history of American immigration it is easy to understand why narratives that heralded national successes as the products of teams fueled by athletes from many ethnic groups captured public fancy. In imagining a national community before 1914, Americans had to confront immigration. After World War I ended, immigration patterns into the United States changed dramatically. Federal laws initially enacted in the 1920s, changes in the national and global economies, and new political realities in the postwar world combined to substantially diminish the flow of immigrants into the United States. Government policies attempted to create a situation in which the considerably smaller batches of immigrants allowed on American soil still came from Europe, but for the rest of the twentieth century Latin Americans, especially, and Asians clamoured for access to new opportunities.

These new social realities tempered the frequency of melting pot tales in domestic commentaries on American performances in Olympic arenas. During the 1920s, when anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States grew significantly, American Olympic interpreters rarely returned to the melting pot for metaphors.³⁸ Olympic stories such as the *Boston Herald's* account of a 1924 American team with "a liberal sprinkling of every race which excels in sports" contributing to U.S. domination in Paris were far rarer than they had been in the previous decade.³⁹

Melting pot stories about American Olympic teams became rarer after the beginning of the twentieth century but they certainly did not disappear from the national lexicon. In spite of the significant changes in the patterns of immigration, many Americans continued to perceive their homeland as a nation of immigrants. The media carried on the tradition of looking to Olympic arenas for confirmation that they were truly a "union of all races." Jesse Owens' feats in Berlin in 1936 roused another round of self-congratulatory rhetoric about racial democracy in the United States in spite of the realities of Jim Crow.⁴⁰ During the Berlin Games *New York Times* sports columnist John Kieran employed the melting pot motif in his claim that the U.S. team would change Nazi leader Adolf Hitler's conception of the world. If Hitler and the Nazis had not received Owens and the American team with open arms, "at least the United States contingent, with its representative mixture of Protestants, Catholics and Jews and its amazing collection of great Negro athletes, should open his eyes a little," maintained an overly optimistic Kieran.⁴¹

The focus on the feats of Owens and his fellow "black auxiliaries," as some of the press labeled African-American Olympians, illustrated the shift toward a melting pot tradition centered on forging unity between black and white. As World War II approached, American Olympic writers increasingly globalized their notions of the melting pot, suggesting American ideals as the solution not only to American problems but to every other cultural and social conflict afflicting humankind. If Kieran,

writing in 1936, was overly optimistic about the power of American Olympic teams to change Hitler's mind and alter the course of world history, then novelist Dorothy Frooms, recounting in 1946 a scene from the "Nazi" Olympics a decade earlier, was clearly drunk with the melting pot spirit. She imagined that on a sultry August night in Berlin the athletes of the world had gathered to celebrate the closing of the Games of the Eleventh Olympiad. The Olympians mingled and cavorted in a grand auditorium. Even Jesse Owens attended the party, accompanied by his black teammates. "Heroes all, black though they were, and just as welcome on the great, democratic floor as the diminutive Jap, the dark Italian, the swarthy Hungarian, the taciturn Dutch and Swede, the clean-limbed Briton, the blond German, and the plain American," marveled Frooms in hackneyed prose. "It was sports that set the rules, and sports that made them equals," she insisted.⁴²



In that free and egalitarian setting, while most of the athletes danced the night away, a small group of friends from a variety of nations discussed more serious topics. A perky young American diver held her audience spellbound with an impromptu speech on the blessings of democracy. Her enthusiasm inspired an admirer, an English pole vaulter, to jump onto the bandstand as the festivities neared an end. "Friends, this is our last dance, the last moment in the events which have brought us together the past two weeks, and have made us one family," shouted the pole vaulter. He asked his fellow athletes to join him in an oath to "fair-play, team-work, tolerance, loyalty, justice," and the hope that the Olympic torch might be kept burning. "Let us each in his or her own country strive to bring home to those who govern, that the rules of the games in sports are the rules they should live by, and any violation of the rules should be treated as an oppression," the vaulter commanded. When he asked the assembly to raise their right hands and shout "Olympia!," he received a tumultuous response.⁴³

In Frooms' novel the young athletes met again in Berlin the next day to plan an international movement which would make fair play and sportsmanship the standards of world politics. But the Nazi Gestapo, alerted by the seditious talk of democracy at the party the night before, had been lurking in the shadows and moved to destroy the campaign. Hitler's minions understood nothing of the principles and ethics of fair play. The Gestapo shipped the English pole vaulter off to a concentration camp, blackmailed the father of the American diver, and brutally punished a German sports star who sympathized with the movement's goals of peace through sport. Thus begins an obscure novel by Dorothy Frooms, entitled *The Olympic Torch*.⁴⁴

In the rest of *The Olympic Torch* Fooks detailed the creation, mainly through the efforts of the American diver, of a worldwide crusade to build a Utopia based on athletic ideals. "The universal elements that make for international friendships without the necessity of knowledge of language, are sports, music, love," believed Helen Madison, the American diver.⁴⁵ If the youth of the world devoted their lives to those institutions, then they could "unite against any form of aggression, force, [or] hypocritical diplomacy," Madison asserted. The American diver believed that globalizing an American-inspired egalitarian democracy would usher in a pacific age of "legal tribunals, mutual regard for respective national rights and needs, the respect for traditional national cultures, customs, racial and religious claims." Madison insisted that through her plan "the heads of nations will then be induced to accept the formula of international sports' regulations for conducting world affairs."⁴⁶

Dorothy Fooks' fictional American diver voiced the same sentiments that animated American ideas about the Olympic Games during the Cold War. As World War II ended and a new epoch began, the image-makers who controlled the American team realized that they should find a way to symbolize the multiracial fable of the U.S. Olympic squad in some official action. In 1948, when Jim Crow segregation was still in place, United States Olympic Committee (USOC) official Gustavus T. Kirby, who had served with the organization for more than forty years, suggested that in every future parade of nations the U.S. flag-bearer should be flanked by two symbolic athletic figures, "one of whom should be a woman and the other a Negro." Kirby insisted that such an arrangement would celebrate the popular belief "that the United States team has been and will be always made up of men and women, those of the white race, and those of other races." The doyen of the American Olympic movement celebrated that at the 1948 Games in London, the American team had been a multicultural melange of European, African, and even Korean and Filipino heritages.⁴⁷



Kirby acknowledged an older melting pot custom of a multiracial American Olympic team while recognizing that American struggles over ethnicity after World War II would increasingly be viewed through black and white lenses. During the Cold War the American press connected the melting pot character of American Olympic teams to the crusades for integration. Thus in Rome in 1960, Olympic correspondent Arthur Daley of the *New York Times*, who had covered the Games since the 1930s, claimed that American boxer Cassius Marcellus Clay (later Muhammad

Ali) had turned the Olympic village into an American-style melting pot through his effervescent personality and his Olympic pin trading skill. Clay, Daley reported, turned even the "suspicious Russians" into American friends.⁴⁸

After Rome, African-American athletes and activists began to use this new melting pot narrative to offer different measurements of racial progress in the United States. Sparked by the Civil Rights movement, persistent racism in American sports, and Muhammad Ali's punishment for defying the Vietnam draft board and mainstream sensibilities, black athletes used victories in Mexico City to declare that for many African Americans the melting pot's promise of equality was more rhetoric than reality.⁴⁹ The genius of the black power salutes by African-American athletes on the medal podiums at Mexico City was that they so fiercely and directly expressed an alternative discourse to the "union of all races" folklore created by the American media and perpetuated by Olympic folklore.⁵⁰

African-American athletes remained at the centre of American racial dialogues sparked by the Olympic Games for the next several decades. But other melting permutations began to crop up. As the Cold War spawned Olympic boycotts during the 1980s, the American press returned to melting pot themes to highlight American exceptionalism and draw contrasts to the Soviets. Determined not to permit the Soviet-led boycott of the 1984 Los Angeles Games spoil the American party, the press hyped Los Angeles as the world's most diverse city, a place where the people could order kosher burritos in a cafe owned by a Korean.⁵¹

In the wake of American domination of those nations that did show up in Los Angeles, the president of the United States led the nation in a prolonged cheer for the renewed power of the melting pot. As the closing ceremonies played on international television, Ronald Reagan hailed the American squad as "the great melting pot team of 1984."⁵² A few weeks later, on the platform at the Republican National Convention after being nominated to run for a second term as president, Reagan culminated his acceptance speech with a long series of anecdotes about the power of the American "melting pot" drawn directly from the Los Angeles Games. Reminiscing about the opening ceremonies, Reagan observed that "there were athletes representing 140 countries here to compete in the one country in all the world whose people carry the bloodlines of all those 140 countries and more." Reagan marveled that "only in the United States is there such a rich mixture of races, creeds, and nationalities, only in our melting pot." Carrying his commentary on the connections between Olympic sport, American exceptionalism, and ethnic diversity to a jingoistic climax, Reagan finished his valedictory by transforming the Olympic torch into "Miss Liberty's torch" atop the great statue in New York harbor, "the lamp beside the golden door."⁵³

The renewed focus on American Olympic teams as melting pot symbols reflected an intense debate over large influxes of immigrants from Latin America and Asia into the United States. Reagan's rekindling of the Olympic melting pot echoed through the rest of the 1980s and the 1990s. Celebrating Japanese-American Kristi Yamaguchi's triumph over Japan's Midori Ito at the 1992 Winter Games at Albertville, a *New York Times* editorial hoped that it would end hyphenated Americanism. "As the contents of the melting pot change, so do its colors," opined the nation's most influential newspaper. "In this case, the color is pure, unhyphenated gold," the editors concluded.⁵⁴ In 1996 Ross Atkin of the *Christian Science Monitor* reminded the nation at the Atlanta Games that the 667-member American team which included 36 foreign-

born athletes "serves as a reminder that the United States is a melting pot nation, a fact perhaps richly reflected in the makeup of its current Olympic team as any before."⁵⁵

Given this long history of making American Olympic teams into emblems of the multiethnic fabric of American society and the reinvigoration of melting pot stories during the 1980s and 1990s as the United States hosted two summer and one winter Games, the resurgence of melting pot themes in the coverage of the Salt Lake City Winter Games should not have been quite as surprising. The astonishment stems mainly from the fact that the melting pot appeared so forcefully at a Winter Games—Kristi Yamaguchi and other figure skaters notwithstanding. The Winter Olympics have long been labeled as the playground of the northern European bourgeoisie and elites, and their North American cousins—by both blood and class—as even *Skiing* magazine admitted. The fact that the symbol of the melting pot has also fallen into disfavour among American academics and media during the last four decades made its Salt Lake City renaissance all the more startling.

What makes popular interpretations of results from Salt Lake City even more interesting is how similar early twenty-first-century homages to the melting pot are to early twentieth-century American versions. Some of the congruities stem from parallels in immigration demographics. The end of the twentieth century witnessed a huge new influx of immigrants that resembled the migration patterns—in quantity but not in origin—of the beginning of the century. In 1900, 14% of the American population was foreign-born. After decades of restrictions on immigration beginning after World War I lowered that percentage substantially, the foreign-born population of the United States once again reached double figures at the end of the century, standing at 10% in 2000.⁵⁶

At both the beginning of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, the American media argued that Olympic victories proved that the U.S. was the world's most exceptional society, and that immigration, innovation, risk-taking, and superior organizational skills make "average" Americans into world-beating athletes. The focus on these themes in American tales of their world-beating Olympic egalitarians has not been so intense since before World War I. John Romano of the *St. Petersburg Times* laid out the 2002 edition of this argument under the rubric, "Richer, Larger, Fairer." Romano offered an American formula for Olympic success. Add a group of athletes that "truly reflected the country's many cultures" to the U.S. push to include new sports on the Olympic programs that reflect the innovative character of American society such as snowboarding and short-track speed skating, and then stir in huge sums of money along with liberal dollops of know-how, and you have an unbeatable Winter Games team, believed Romano.⁵⁷

Romano was one of several commentators to make the link between money and diversity in the American formula, noting that the blueprint for success in 2002 was shaped by, of all people, George Steinbrenner. Steinbrenner, disgusted by American floundering at Calgary in 1988, led a USOC commission that transformed the American Winter Games team into a Olympian version of the New York Yankees.⁵⁸ Purchasing the best athletes from all over the nation and world has become the Yankees' standard operating procedure. Before the Yankees adopted this method, another New York City establishment, the New York Athletic Club, during the early 1900s lured Irish shot-putters, discus-throwers, and hammer-heavers onto the American team by

finding them cushy jobs with the New York City Police Department.⁵⁹

The 2002 edition of this strategy is the policy of scouring Sunbelt in-line skating parks for Derek Parra, Apolo Ohnos, and Jennifer Rodriguezes. "To increase the talent pool in sports such as snowboarding, speedskating, and short-track speedskating, officials from those sports are combing the sunshine states," reported Randy Harvey of the *Los Angeles Times*.⁶⁰ Pronouncements by USOC officials confirm the strategy. "To see Derek Parra on the medal plaza hugging his wife and crying—there could be 100 Mexican kids in San Antonio at the YMCA saying, 'I want to do the same thing,'" exulted USOC spokesperson Bob Condron. "I think the door has opened to where a minority, a talented young child, can dream of being in the Winter Olympics and the dream can come true," asserted (now former) USOC President Sandy Baldwin.⁶¹ "Who's counting?" medals by multicultural Olympians, wondered a *Baltimore Sun* editorial. "Among others, Olympics management, well aware of the image of America that our teams present to the world," the editorial continued, highlighting a continuing sensibility that would have made Gustavus T. Kirby glow.⁶²

The effort to market the 2002 Winter Games as the triumph of American diversity in a post-September 11 world won over the U.S. media—especially pundits from the Sunbelt areas where the nation supposedly found sun-kissed bob sledders, skaters, and half-pipers to challenge the world's polar sports powers. In the *Tulsa World*, editor Mike Jones declared that the U.S. had survived a terrorist attack and thrived in the Winter Games because America "is still the great Melting Pot." Jones concluded his editorial with a paean to multiculturalism that would have thrilled Mr. Dooley: "Diversity sometimes gets a bad rap. But diversity has been this country's lifeblood. And it was a wonderful and truly American sight on the podiums of the Winter Olympics."⁶³ Diane Pucin of the *Los Angeles Times* marveled that after Salt Lake "there are little boys in Milwaukee and Duluth, in Palm Springs, Fla., and Palm Springs, Calif, in the desert, in the swamps, little boys of different colors are asking their moms or dads or grandmoms or granddads if they can't please, please have speedskates and a trip to the ice rink." Pucin, seriously misrepresenting an Olympic history in which the U.S. was in fact an early opponent of women's inclusion in the Olympic family, grandiosely declared that "just as the U.S. was in the lead in making women's sports an appealing and popular part of the Olympic program, the U.S. will be in the lead in making the Winter Olympics truly multicultural." Pucin went so far as to label Parra, Ohno, Flowers, Rodriguez, and their teammates as the "Jesse Owens" of contemporary American culture.⁶⁴

The ultimate Olympic melting pot allegory of American nationalism came from San Diego, where columnist Peter Rowe connected the battle over illegal immigration across the border between Mexico and the U.S. and the backlash against immigrants in the wake of the September 11 terrorist assaults to the lesson that the Salt Lake Winter Games were teaching the nation. "Throughout our history," wrote Rowe, "reformers' have warned that our shores are being swamped by a foreign tide." Rowe pointed out that had the gates been completely closed against this tide then Apolo Ohno's father, Michelle Kwan's father and mother, Jennifer Rodriguez's father, and Derek Parra's grandparents would never have been allowed into the United States. Their athletic artistry would never have thrilled a nation still mourning the victims of terrorism. "When I hear that Mexicans are too clannish to join the greater American community, I think of Parra, skating a victory lap while wrapped in Old

Glory," Rowe counseled. "When I hear that African-Americans cannot emerge from the long, bitter, shadow of slavery and Jim Crow, I think about Flowers' tearful face as her victory was saluted by her national anthem," Rowe cheered. "When I hear that Asians don't respect democracy, I think of the dedication Ohno and Kwan needed to become their country's representatives," Rowe admonished. "When I hear that our nation's security depends on us erecting more barriers against the world, I have another thought," Rowe observed. "I think these people aren't watching enough TV," Rowe concluded.⁶⁵

Rowe's essay is strikingly similar to a 1924 *New York Times* editorial written during the anti-immigrant backlashes of the 1920s. Entitled "An Ethiopian Takes Notes," the editorial counters the nativism of its era and gives credit for American domination of the Paris Olympics to the nation's ethnic diversity and to widespread commitment to equality of opportunity.⁶⁶ The continuities between the construction of an American national identity at the beginning of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century are startling.

A search on internet databases of media interpretations of the Salt Lake Winter Games revealed few dissenting editorials to the widespread belief that the 2002 American team did in fact illuminate important things about American diversity.⁶⁷ Writing in the *Sacramento Bee*, Marcos Breton was one of the few commentators trying to knock the wheels off the melting pot bandwagon. "Like all things Olympian, the diversity story line is happy triumphant television with a definite flip side," Breton protested. He argued that the "Games really aren't diverse" and that the "athletes of color" who "thrilled" American audiences "reached the top step of the medals podium by chance." Breton contended that "athletes of color" made up only a small fragment of the American team—an unrepresentative slice that did not even match the nation's demographics. He also maintained that the winter sports Americans were glued to during Olympic telecasts were too expensive and too inaccessible for too many people. "This is a growing reality of sports today—kids of color and, yes, low-income white kids are too often priced out the market," Breton concluded.⁶⁸

The confounding fact about Breton's attack on Olympic melting pot folklore is that it represents one lonely dissent. The great American dailies such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *San Francisco Chronicle*, well-known for the self-defined roles as the gatekeepers who filter such patriotic folklore out of American culture, all joined in on the celebration of the American team as proof that multiculturalism is really the American social reality. Even Marcos Breton reversed himself at the end of his story. In his conclusion Breton unexpectedly embraced the ethnically diverse American Olympic heroes and argued that they signified "opportunity." Breton quoted a local Sacramento social worker, Frank Victorio of the Moral Values Program, "who affirmed that "I know there are gold medalists in this barrio." Breton had abruptly transformed Derek Parra and the others from tokens who were lucky to medal into characters in a melting-pot morality tale. If the USOC kept expanding its outreach programs to include more diverse groups, Breton imagined, "maybe they'll play a small part in helping a kid Victorio knows stand on the top step of the podium."⁶⁹

Breton's ironic conclusion echoed sentiments expressed a century earlier by James Connolly and Finley Peter Dunne in mixing ironic satire with ethnic pride in their accounts of Irish contributions to melting pot victories. Minority groups con-

tinue to use melting pot visions to tell their own versions of American stories. At the beginning of the twenty-first century those tales originate from Latin American and Asian communities more frequently than from Irish and Italian neighborhoods. In 2002, the United States returned to its traditional folklore about American medal winners representing the multiracial strength of the republic. Even Marcos Breton did not, in the final analysis, swim against the tide. An editorial in *USA Today* argued that American performances at the Salt Lake Olympics were "a radiant-and-refreshing reminder that while the USA is indeed a nation of 'different people,' there is strength, inspiration and even unity in that diversity."⁷⁰

Unity in diversity has been a longstanding, if paradoxical, American belief about the fundamental nature of the republican experiment. Historian Robert Weibe, in his final book, designated it as the only hope for the future of democracy.⁷¹ The maps of red and blue America from the 2000 presidential election, daily reminders in the news that ethnic and racial bigotry is far from extinct, and a host of other evidence make it easy to dismiss the unity in diversity sentiment as foolish rhetoric. Indeed, it is hard to trace direct historical connections between the century-long expression of the idea that in Olympic stadiums the United States is a "union of all races" and specific policies or legislation that have attacked discrimination. It is easy to use historical evidence to poke holes through these notions and to reveal how far from such ideals the lived experiences of many generations stand. From other angles, however, changes in the treatment of ethnic and racial minorities in the United States over the course of the twentieth century have been substantial. The restrictions on voting rights, the legal sanctions for segregation, and the general toleration of discrimination in place at the beginning of the century gave way to much more egalitarian attitudes and policies by the end of the century. Seen from that vantage, the nation made a great deal of progress toward narrowing the gap between ideals and social practices over the course of the century.

Ideals such as the melting pot—in its myriad manifestations—are essential measuring sticks in the unfinished experiment that animates the republic. How will Mexican-American or Cuban-American comics use the melting pot Olympians to challenge boundaries? One can cheer Vonetta Flowers's thrilling ride down the bobsled run as the breaking of another of the many color lines that bind the nation without forgetting that other racial barriers still remain. Indeed, one can hope that someday additional stereotypes might fall when African Americans move from the back of the sled to the front—from "pushers" recruited for their athletic brawn to "pilots" leading by their mental acumen. One should not forget the pernicious and all too popular racial stereotypes that lurk just beneath the surface of American sports regarding specious claims about athletic genes and strange logics that imply that some groups must lack mental dexterity if they manifest physical prowess. But that does not mean that interpreters have to be entirely cynical about these contemporary salutes to the old American tradition of reading cherished ideals into Olympian feats. Like unity and diversity, skepticism and hope should be among the paradoxes that animate twenty-first-century American imaginations.

Endnotes

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12. Mark Kizla, "America Give Games Their Hue," *Denver Post*, February 21, 2002, sec. C, p. 1.
13. Kizla, "America Give Games Their Hue," p.1; Gregorian, "U.S. Team Glides Along on Medal Spree," p. 1.
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 16. S.L. Price, "Gold Rush," *Sports Illustrated*, March 4, 2002, p. 32.
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 29. "Race Questions at the Olympics," *Independent* 73 (July 25, 1912), p. 214.
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"As I watched those clean-cut American youths acknowledging victory or defeat with the same modest smile, I knew that they came from a quiet, sportsmanlike people.

When I saw the silent and magnificent efforts of their runners and their jumpers, I knew that they came from a people that loved action and abhorred palaver.

When I saw the young Americans soar like birds over the bars and the hurdles, I said to myself that this is the way every American surmounts the obstacles in his path.

When I saw on the list of contenders names like SCHOLZ and LE GENDRE, I understood that I was dealing with a people utterly ignorant of the debasing sentiment of racialism and sectionalism.

When I saw the swiftness and certainty with which the young Americans met every emergency as it arose, I said to myself that this is a people of magnificent individual initiative, a people who would take orders from no one.

When I saw the splendid devotion of each athlete to the single cause of his country's victory, I knew that this was a people which sacrificed self to common good."

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