

The Veil We Run With: An Examination of the Veil in American Sports^{2*}

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An Examination of the Veil in American Sports and Culture

When W.E.B. Du Bois asserted that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line,” he created an ideological phenomenon that would characterize American racial consciousness (Du Bois, 1903, p. 3; Hylton, 2008, p. 2). Although a presentist lens of Du Bois’s philosophies exposes its elitist overtones, his conception of the color line as a social barrier that perpetuates racial animus by dividing Americans remains an unmovable barrier more than a century later. On one side of this color line, Black Americans reside behind a veil: a metaphorical object that shrouds White Americans’ perceptions of their experiences, identities, and humanities. Throughout *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois utilizes these racial barriers as foundations to navigate the racial dilemmas of the twentieth century. And, this work analyzes a significant–yet often overlooked–manifestation of the veil in America: sports.

Sports are an indispensable facet of American culture; from Little League soccer games to the annual March Madness, most Americans have a personal experience with sports—whether as spectators or athletes. However, there remains a false assumption that sports are wholly separate from the social context in which they occur, effectively erasing the interconnectedness of racism and American athletics. Black American sports began as an involuntary plantation pastime that created a spectacle of enslaved Black Americans (Rhoden & Farrell, 1996). As American racial dynamics continuously shifted, these dynamics in sports followed suit.

Although there is a growing body of literature dedicated to the intersections of race, sports, and

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American culture, few directly analyze the twice-told narrative of Black American athletes and sports through the differing accounts of White and Black Americans and the racial frameworks of the color line and veil, an inadequacy this essay seeks to remedy.

Sights from Outside the Veil

One must first conceptualize the view outside to sympathize with the contents inside the veil, effectively the lived experiences of Black American athletes. Scientific racism, or the practice of discrimination based on contrived biological differences between races, arose from European justifications for slavery and racial hierarchies (Miller, 2015, p. 330). Generally, these pseudo-scientific findings justified White Americans' predated engagement of "othering" and the intentional dehumanization of Black Americans to assert their inherent inferiority and justify the inhumanities perpetrated against them (Hylton, 2008, p. 5). However, scientific racism was also a necessary act of self-preservation for White Americans; if African Americans were intellectually inferior, then White superiority—amid ever-growing Black athletic dominance and accomplishments—could be preserved. In *The Anatomy of Scientific Racism*, Patrick Miller grappled with the pervasive nature of scientific racism within American sports through Carlton S. Coon. Despite his accolades as a Harvard anthropologist, Coon insisted on the biological differences between the "fast-twitch muscles" in Black versus White individuals (Miller, 2015, pp. 333-336). Although these pseudo-scientific findings, and scientific racism ideologies more broadly, were eventually disproved, the underlying misconceptions of Black athletes remained.

Instead of overt assertions of Black athletes' biological differences, terms like primitivity became a dog-whistle allusion to their intellectual and emotional inferiority, thus subtly replacing its precursor. Although the conception of Black primitivity stemmed from master narratives of slavery, the term gained momentum as a placeholder for scientific racism because it effectively evaded previous criticisms. Although this language shift is largely undocumented,

William C. Rhoden (2006) noted that by the twenty-first century, popular media already depicted Black athletes as “selfish individual players with an incessant ‘one-on-one’ mentality.” These depictions of “one-on-one” and “selfish” behaviors directly reference Black athletic primitivity as they associate Black athletes with survival instincts. When White Americans regard Black athletes like NFL player Marvin Upshaw as “*animals* [able to] get down and beat on each other like that,” they replace the language of scientific racism with that of primitivity, giving the illusion of progress while reinforcing racist practices (Messner, 2007, p. 95).

Outside the veil, Black athletic achievements were and continue to be accredited to Black Americans’ “natural” abilities and tendencies toward primitivity (Miller, 2015, pp. 327-341). As such, the veil in American sports became two-sided: White Americans failed to recognize the humanity of Black athletes and their anti-black racist practices as acts of self-preservation. By diminishing the ever-growing accomplishments of Black athletes to their biology, White Americans could maintain their sense of racial superiority. However, the simultaneous disproving of scientific racism and Black athletic dominance threatened to dismantle this social order. Therefore, Black athletes became an enduring and “uneasy symbol of African Americans’ deeply rooted presence in America” (Rhoden, 2006, p. 84). As this symbol of unwavering endurance prevailed, White Americans tightened their grasp on the sports veil—hoping to shield themselves from the undeniable success of Black American athletes.

In the Depths of the Veil

Within the recesses of the sports veil, one will witness Black American athletes’ humanity and resistance (Du Bois, 1903, p. 3). Black athleticism began on plantations to pacify potential resistance efforts. However, sports quickly became a tangible way for Black Americans to gain upward economic mobility, rally around Black success publicly, and navigate racially oppressive conditions. William C. Rhoden (2006) contended that “physical competition [within

sports] became another means of salvaging a portion of lost self-esteem.” Moreover, sports became a potential means for Black Americans to regain social power by leveraging their platforms as successful athletes. Although Black intellectuals like Frederick Douglass acknowledged the dangerously repressive nature of sports—in terms of Black resistance efforts—he also recognized their potential as a tool for mobility and racial progress (Rhoden, 2006, pp. 48-49). One of the most prominent Black jockeys in American history, Isaac Murphy, exemplified the social and economic mobility afforded by sports. At the peak of his career in the late nineteenth century, Murphy earned between \$15,000 and \$20,000 per year—equating to about \$500,00 per year today—distinguishing himself as one of the highest-paid athletes of his time (Rhoden, 2006, pp. 64-65). Even after the infamous Jockey Syndrome, racially discriminatory sports practices where Black athletes are incrementally excluded from participation, his athletic success attested to American sports as a potential vehicle of unparalleled progress.

For Black athletes, existence has always been resistance: resistance to scientific racism, American racial discrimination, and White Americans’ view from outside the veil. As Hylton (2008) illustrated, race is a “self-reinforcing process” that pervades American culture and sports; however, Black athletes have always sought to disprove racialized notions of sports. When Jesse Owens amassed numerous gold medals at the 1936 Olympic Games, many Americans falsely attributed his success to the biological differences of Black Americans (Rhoden & Farrell, 1996). In response, W. Montague Cobb, a Black Howard University professor, conducted muscular biopsies on Owens. Unfortunately, for the aforementioned Carlton S. Coon and other proponents of race biology, Cobb concluded that “determination and proper training” determined athletic success, not race biology (Miller, 2015, p. 336). Even when the notion of primitivity as a continuation of scientific racism dominated American depictions of Black sports culture, athletes

like boxer Joe Louis took ample precautions to dispel the stereotype of Black athletes as barbaric, flamboyant, and selfish (Rhoden & Farrell, 1996). Prominent Black athletes used their positionality to reject racially obtuse views of Black Americans publicly, thus attempting to lift the sports veil for White Americans. Whether it is the quintessential images of Black athletic resistance, such as the 1968 Olympic protest of Tommie Smith and John Carlos or the distorted images of Black athletes that exist outside the veil, Black athletes' mere existence is resistance to this veil and a testament to Black American humanity.

“The Veil is a Distance Run?”

The journey of Black American athletes is a distance run with a veil. As Black athletes run toward what they perceive as racial progress, they carry the actual inhibition—the sports veil—with them. Although this essay seeks to lift the veil of American sports and allow White Americans to conceptualize its deeper recesses, this exercise may prove negligible (Du Bois, 1903). As Americans, we consume sports media that perpetuates a veiled representation of Black American athletes, one that continues to harm us all; to diminish the influence of this veil, we must analyze, critique, and question how dog-whistle terms like ‘aggressive,’ ‘selfish,’ or ‘flamboyant’ further reinforce the American sports veil. Unfortunately, deliberate actions may prove futile in the face of the immovable forces of institutionalized racism, the necessity for racism to maintain capitalism, and purposeful inaction. As Black activist Audre Lorde (1984) beautifully contended, “A master’s tools can never dismantle the master’s house.” As such, only an incredibly radical force will lift the American sports veil *and* implement lasting change for Black American athletes. And only then will Black athletes be able to relinquish the veil with which they currently run.

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