`White Men Can't Jump': Race, Gender and Natural Athleticism

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'WHITE MEN CAN'T JUMP'

Race, Gender and Natural Athleticism

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Abstract This study examined the ways young people negotiate, take up and/or resist dominant discourses of race, athleticism and sport in school physical education contexts in the southeastern United States. The participants in this performance ethnography study were 28 high school students and one physical education teacher/coach. Data from multiple sources were collected, including field notes, and formal and informal interviews with each participant. The results of this study show that white boys complied with the notion of blacks' 'natural' physical superiority, and black boys occupied an ambiguous position within dominant discourses of race and natural athleticism; while girls, in general, rejected racialized discourses of the body, instead adopting a liberal humanistic position. Considering these findings, we advocate for sport educators' and physical education teachers' adoption of critical media pedagogy to promote a democratic consciousness among young people in sport and physical education settings.

Key words • critical pedagogy • discourse • gender • race • sport

Introduction

In the past decade, notwithstanding sport sociologists' increased interest in addressing race/ethnicity and gender issues in sport, a proliferation of discourses of racial differences in sport performance, formulated as blacks' innate physical 'edge', has reinvigorated cultural racism (Banet-Weiser, 1999). Narratives of the racialized performance of sporting bodies circulating through globalized sport media are leveraged as striking pseudo-scientific evidence of blacks' natural athletic prowess (Entine, 2000). The 'fact' that blacks dominate professional basketball in the United States, for example, is then articulated into the differing genetic propensities of black and white players.

Indeed, in contemporary sport media culture, American radio personality Don Imus's 4 April 2007 on-air description of the Rutgers University women's basketball team as 'nappy headed ho's' is another example of widespread re-invigorated cultural racism, and in this case, its intersection with sexism. The black edge discourse, moreover, implies blacks' intellectual inferiority to other

racial groups. Epitomizing contemporary arguments for biological racialized difference, Murray and Hernstein (1996) argue in their work, *The Bell Curve* that blacks demonstrate intellectual inferiority compared to Whites and Asians. While Lawrence (2005) argues that sport contexts sustain a deeply rooted 'culture of racism', Carrington and McDonald (2001) extend this analysis to state that whether cultural or biological, racisms share the belief in the biological separation of the human population into racial discrete groups.

Racialized Sporting Bodies: Media, Pedagogy and Schooling

Sport media discourses play a crucial role in pedagogizing young people's cultural sporting imagination, and mediate their embodiment of racialized and gendered sporting bodies. While the popular media provide cultural material for young people's making sense of social identities, young people, in multiple ways, take up, perform, reject and reconstruct the proliferation of sporting bodies, images, and symbols panopticized through the media. Like schools, media as sites of the socialization and institutionalization of dominant discourses of race and gender, operate to produce and re-inscribe meanings of physical performance by perpetuating the gender (Messner and Sabo, 1990) as well as the racial order of sport. By constructing an explicit and implicit link between race, athletic performance, and specific sport representations, sport media, as popular sporting artefacts, operate pedagogically 'in the cultural landscaping of national identity and the "schooling" of the minds of young children and adults alike' (Giardina, 2005: 7). For instance, in his discussion of race, film and images, Dyer (2002) explains that the creation of the racial category occurs in films when the social boundary of black/white is naturalized. He argues that in the film *White Men Can't Jump* (1992), for example, the discourse of black physical superiority is performed on the basketball playground in a black ghetto, functioning to fix the racial stereotype.

In this text, natural athletic superiority is constructed around black players in contrast to the white basketball player, who cannot overcome his innate inability to 'dunk' the basketball. In the film, the black players' ability to jump higher than the white player distinguishes blacks from whites, and naturalizes a socially constructed binary opposition between whiteness and blackness. According to Dyer, 'It is the way that black people are marked as black (are not just "people") in representation that has made it relatively easy to analyze their representation . . .' (2002: 128). The false assumption of the stereotype portrayed by the media, according to Bhabha, relies on fixating and stabilizing a particular colonial discourse to a specific context, denying the acknowledgement of subjective identities. Adopting Bhabha's notion of ambivalence to characterize the discourse of stereotype, opens up possibilities for the rupture of the fragile the colonial discourse, and thus reveals potential sites of resistance and transformation (Huddart, 2006). For instance, sites of subversion of the natural black athlete stereotype can be created by recalling the performance and success of white athletes in sports 'dominated' by blacks, such as Jerry West, John Stockton, or Jonathan Edwards, the world record holder for the men's triple jump and former World and Olympic Champion.

Racial Discourses about Athletes: A Review of Literature

Notwithstanding Bhaba's writing on the fragility of racial stereotypes, a number of recent studies have evidenced the way the myth of the 'natural black athlete' circulating in the media is yet pervasive in society, and difficult to destabilize (Azzarito and Solmon, 2006; Carrington and McDonald, 2001; Harrison and Lawrence, 2004; Harrison et al., 2004; Hayes and Sudgen, 1999; Stone et al., 1999). For instance, findings from Harrison and Lawrence's (2004) research show that college students in a predominantly white midwestern university in the United States embodied the notion, among a number of racialized perceptions, that black athletes are superior in certain sports to whites. The racial stereotype of black natural sporting abilities, however, is pervasive not only in American society, but also widespread in the UK (Carrington and McDonald, 2001; Hayes and Sudgen, 1999). In the UK, Hayes and Sudgen's (1999) research demonstrating that physical education teachers of different ethnicities in England believed in blacks' natural physical superiority raises urgent questions about the role of schooling in challenging the social inequalities that inform young people's physicality.

Further, the work of Stone et al. (1999) evidenced how black and white individuals' embodiment of negative stereotypes about the body can adversely affect their performance in sport. Their experiments showed that when college students were exposed to a negative stereotype about their identity, they experienced distress, which in turn adversely affected their performance in sport. In this vein, another study evidenced that white male high school students' embodiment of the natural black athleticism discourse can discourage their aspirations to play collegiate sports (Harrison et al., 2004). Likewise, Stone et al. (1997) found that college students (predominantly white participants) internalized the 'white men can't jump' stereotype, and this racialized belief informed their evaluations of basketball players' abilities and performance during a radio broadcast of a collegiate basketball game.

In sum, as results from a number of studies show, the racialized discourse of natural black superiority and/or 'white men can't jump' promoted by the media, coaches, physical education teachers, parents, and young people themselves, is institutionalized in schools, sport contexts, and embedded in society, shaping youth's identities, racial perceptions, and athletic performances. Young people's internalization of discourses centring on blacks being physically more skilled than whites, and on the other hand, whites being more intelligent than blacks, shapes their participation (or lack of participation) in certain sports, and affects their performance in sport and academics. Indeed, this problem is exacerbated when physical education teachers and coaches embody these beliefs, adopting pedagogically discriminatory practices. Therefore, to create pedagogies of resistance to racial myths of the body, it is crucial to further research young people's embodiments of race and athleticism, and to continue anti-racist socio-educational dialogues. While significant research in the sociology of sport has expanded conversation about the media, the body, and race, a dearth of research remains on the ways young people use discourses of race and athleticism in school physical education (Harrison et al., 2004). Considering this significant

void in the research, the purpose of this study was to investigate the ways young people negotiated, took up and/or resisted dominant discourses of race and athleticism in physical education settings.

Methodology

Setting and Participants

The settings of this research were two public (state-funded) schools located in the southeastern United States. The first high school, Molson High School, is located in a rural area near a state penitentiary, and had an approximately 50 percent white and 50 percent black student population. The second school, Walters High School is a suburban school with a predominantly white student population. While in the second school only three percent of students qualified for free or reduced lunch, at Molson High School, 37 percent of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch (Louisiana Department of Education, 2005). Before conducting the research, university Institutional Review Board approval, parents' permission and students' assent were obtained. Two co-educational physical education classes were observed at Walters High School, and two other classes – a single sex boys' class and a single-sex girls' class were observed at Molson High School.

To explore young people's negotiations of discourses of race and natural athleticism in physical education, researchers in this study employed performance ethnography (Giardina, 2005). Performance ethnography allows researchers to disclose the complexity of participants' multiple positionings within dominant discourses of race and gender in specific contexts. In writing this text, the researchers align with Scraton et al.'s (2005) approach to race/ethnicity, recognizing the widely criticized limits of using black/white dichotomous terminology in terms of identity politics conversations. This terminology is, therefore, adopted in this text as it was performed by the participants of this study and people in this specific US context.

The participants in this study were 28 high school students (13 boys and 15 girls) in four ninth grade physical education classes (13–14-year-olds), and one physical education teacher. The teacher-participant of the study was the white male physical education teacher of the boys' class at Molson High School, Coach Grenoue. During the observational period, when the researcher tried to explore the two other teachers' perspectives on this topic, both white female teachers were reluctant to talk about race issues. Therefore, only informal interviews with the two female teachers were conducted. Twenty-eight students were interviewed in order to represent the diversity of each class in terms of gender, race, diversity of skills, and participation level in physical education.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected from multiple sources, including 12 weeks of field notes, and formal and informal interviews with each student and the physical education

teacher. A second formal interview, a follow-up member check, was conducted with each participant, which provided participants the opportunity to add and clarify information (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Formal interviews questions centred on the following the three themes: a) students' lifestyle and their participation in physical activity inside and outside of physical education (i.e. on team sports, for recreation, with family, etc.); b) explaining the overrepresentation of black people in certain sports such as basketball and American football; and c) commenting on the film or common phrase 'white men can't jump' and 'natural black athlete'. All of the student and teacher interviews were transcribed verbatim.

The data analysis procedure was conducted in two steps: first, the two researchers separately conducted a content analysis of the students' and the physical education teacher's responses using the interview questions and theoretical framework (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Then, after reading the transcripts, both researchers looked for themes emerging from the data. To enhance the trustworthiness of the data, a cross-checking technique of different data sources, a member check with all the interviewees, and a multiple analyst technique were adopted. In the following section, we report the two themes that emerged in this study, 'Pedagogizing the Colours of Natural Athleticism', and '"It's Bull!" Deconstructing the Black Edge'.

Results

Pedagogizing the Colours of Natural Athleticism

Fixating the Black Edge

During one lesson the researcher observed, Coach Grenoue's boys' physical education class occupied a quarter of the gym for track and field training. At the starting point of the indoor triple jump site, some students surrounded Paul, who was concentrating, readying himself for a jump. They were loud and impatient to take their turn. Other students, stood like spectators on the side, next to the bleachers. The physical education teacher was positioned on the side of the take off line with his grade notebook. Slim and toned, Paul looked more like a long distance runner than a triple jumper. During his preparation, he rocked his body back and forth and focused on the take off line. With natural grace and light feet, Paul started running. As he quickly approached the line, his medium length golden blond hair flew out behind him. Paul took off with his right foot a few inches before the line, landed on his left and stumbled over his feet. Out of the small crowd standing around Paul's starting point, one of the black male students, Randy, ran toward Paul and teased him shouting, 'White men can't jump . . . White boys can't jump!!' Everybody, including the physical education teacher, chuckled. Paul grinned and walked defeated to where he'd remain for the rest of the lesson – near the rest of his mostly white classmates, next to the bleachers.

Paul was one of the very few white boys who sometimes played basketball for at least a half game with his classmates, mostly black students, before walking out of the gym to play soccer with the rest of his classmates, all white boys.

The researcher's following conversation with Paul, whose classmate Randy had teased him by shouting 'White men can't jump!', illustrates his position on race and natural athleticism:

> Int.: When you were doing the triple jump, and sometimes in basketball, I noticed that some of your classmates would tell you 'White men can't jump'. Could you please explain this comment?
>
> Paul: Hooyah, I think it's just the connotation that black guys usually jump higher, and of course they jump higher. I think it's just the connotation that they give to white guys that they can't jump higher or be faster, not that they [whites] can't be physically fit, but that they can't jump higher.
>
> Int.: What do you mean specifically?
>
> Paul: Maybe not that they are more skilled, but they are more fitful, they are more naturally able to play, they (blacks) are more skilled – they are more naturally able to play, but I wouldn't say that they are more skilled. You know it's just their history, where they come from and their genes . . . the white guys are not as good, and some of them are not as strong. You know they (blacks) are kind of rough, they can move you out and some of the white guys just don't like it. The black guys as a rule like basketball more than the whites and that is shown by the teams, there are more black guys than white guys. I think it's just their preferences and their abilities to play.

Paul was a long distance runner on the high school track and field team and played soccer on a recreational team occasionally. Although Paul experiments in this interview excerpt with a few different reasons to explain why 'white men can't jump', he reiterates and seems to settle squarely on the idea that the black edge is a 'natural' genetic phenomenon. Paul's naturalization of blacks' sporting success as related to muscular ability, contrasts discourses of skilfulness and technique that individuals develop through hard work. While working hard to develop skills and superior technique in sports are seen as a marker of whiteness, in opposition, roughness, power, and natural physical abilities are viewed as blackness, signifiers in racialized discourses (Stone et al., 1999). As Paul repeatedly asserts, blacks are not more skilled, they have the genes. The natural physicality discourse that Paul uses to explain the 'white men can't jump' remark functions to identify blacks as the 'other' by marking differences in black sport performance from the 'normal', the white. According to King, participating in white supremacy discourses 'involves making invidious distinctions of a socially crucial kind that are based primarily, if not exclusively, on physical characteristics and ancestry' (2005: 401). Blacks' success in sports, in discourses of race, is rarely attributed to hard work, technique, or intellectual strategy (Nayak, 2005).

During basketball and track and field activities in physical education class, Paul was not the only student who was often called 'white boy' by his black classmates. Black students in the boys' class used the same remark, for instance, during basketball practice when a white student missed a basket or made an error. When the interviewer asked Coach Grenoue, Paul and Randy's physical education teacher, about the triple jump episode, he explained:

> Right, the triple jump, right. Well, first of all, it's been my experience in teaching where I teach that on average black kids seem more athletic than white kids. Now, there are some

> white kids who are just as athletic as any of the black kids, but on the average black kids typically seem to be more athletic. I personally, I do believe, that some part of it is genetics, there's no doubt about it in terms of the muscle structure. There's just differences, and anybody who says anything else is not facing *the facts* . . .

Coach Grenoue concorded with Entine's argument, 'It's time to acknowledge and even celebrate the obvious: it's neither racist nor a myth to say that "White men can't jump'" (Entine, 2000: 341). The dominant discourse of blacks' natural athleticism circulating through media in society is embodied not only by young people, but performed also by educators and coaches in schools, as Harrison et al. (2004) found in another study.

Further explaining the relationship of race and athletic performance, Coach Grenoue commented:

> . . . black kids' emotions flow a lot easier, the conversation is a lot louder and a lot more dramatic, just dealing with something very simple. Black kids typically are going to compete at a higher level, you know. They don't like to lose, they don't like somebody to beat them. They are going to get out and play, and play the game hard, which typically makes you better at what you do. And then same thing if you don't want to make a B in a class, you study hard to make an A. Where, if somebody is happy with a B, they're not going to push themselves the extra. So, that holds true in all areas of life. But, the white kids typically just don't push themselves as hard . . . and it's just, typically you got movies that you see 'White Men Can't Jump', you know and it's funny, it's a comedy. Woody Harrelson plays in it, and Wesley Snipes. It's funny, but you know you have those types of things.
>
> Int.: What do you mean? Do kids believe in those types of things?
>
> Coach Grenoue: Yeah, yeah! Well, our society today I think has just created what I would call a false impression that white, you know, white kids can't compete with black kids. And I think a lot of white kids buy into that, that they can't compete with, you know, black kids athletically.

Coach Grenoue pathologizes blackness by characterizing the black students as lacking emotional control, positioning them as the 'other' (Azzarito and Solmon, 2005). From Coach Grenoue's white male racialized position, blacks' participation in sport is naturalized, 'they get out and play, and play hard'. According to him, white males demonstrate limited skills compared to black males, and moreover, white males don't work hard enough in sport. However, in his fantasy to restore white masculinity in the eyes of society, Coach Grenoue hopes for young white boys to push themselves to work hard and to compete with black males in basketball. In Pinar's (2002) terms, sports such as American football, basketball and baseball are masculinizing contexts, sites of the contested representation of racialized masculinities, symbolic representations of an 'affair between men'. While according to Pinar (2002), white men's obsession with black bodies and anxiety about their performance reflect an internalized, repressed desire for the black body, Mercer (1994) theorizes that fetishization of the black body might implicitly represent a white male colonial fantasy, an erotic objectification of the body, through which the black male body depends on a stereotypical fixation of 'Otherness'.

However, Erickson (2005) offers a differing interpretation of race discourses in sport. From his view, the internalization of whiteness as a racial identity

creates anxiety because of the possibility that the privileged and colonizing space represented by white masculinity might be taken away by a black hypermasculine body. This is evidenced in Coach Grenoue's interview; his participation in the discourse of the black genetic edge and performance of whiteness might represent anxiety around the privileged position he occupies as a white male.

Like Coach Grenoue and all of the white male student-participants at Molson High School, Coach Grenoue's student Kevin, took up the dominant discourses of race and athletic performance, explaining the relationships and the teasing among boys in the gym in general as follows:

> Oh, we, like, usually, a black person in America can jump higher than a white person. Like Michael Jordan, he jumps, I don't know how, but he jumps. I tell you what, we are just messing with them [black students] like they mess with us [white students] and we mess with them, but we don't mean on being bad, we are just playing around.
>
> Int.: But, do you think black boys really jump higher than whites?
>
> Kevin: I think it's proven that black men jump higher than white men because they got extra muscles or something like that in their legs, like I heard they got extra muscles in their legs and that causes them to run faster usually or jump higher. I mean, like take Randy; he is my height, he is a little shorter than me and he can jump higher than me. He can jump and do a 360 and not worry about it. I can barely grab the net. I mean, it's just different.

Kevin contrasts Randy's performance in jumping and running to his own, thus constructing a racialized justification for Randy's better jumping performance. Kevin was an American football player for one year at Molson High School, and said he still loved American football, but had stopped playing because he wanted to finish school, 'get a job and make money'. As Nayak (2005) theorizes, cultural imaginings produced by the media, like *White Men Can't Jump*, become real to individuals who attribute racialized significance to specific social practices, embody and perform them. Perhaps, the function of racialized discourse in society produces and reinforces the naturalized boundary between black/white. The production of normative white masculinity created in opposition to black hypermasculinity, displayed through 'natural' physical ability, represents a white male backlash (Denison and Markula, 2005). Discourse constructing the black body as the 'other', the 'abnormal', the one with 'extra muscles', to some extent, protects and maintains the fantasy of the 'normal' white body. Similar to Coach Grenoue, Kevin, Paul and other white male students aim to stabilize normative white masculinity in opposition to black masculinity.

Black Boys' Ambivalence: 'White Men Can Jump . . . But Not as High as Blacks' – Randy, who teased Paul about his performance of the triple jump, was one of the students who frequently used the 'white boy' label. Randy, as he explained to the researcher, considered himself a superior athlete, played on the American football, basketball and track and field school teams, and with the support of his family dreamed of becoming a professional American football or basketball player. During the formal interview, when Randy was asked to explain the triple jump episode, he commented:

> It's mainly from a movie that we have seen and the name of the movie is called *White Men Can't Jump*, that is the name of the movie. Well, it's just because the movie stereotypes that white boys can't jump so it's like we have white boys in our class that can't jump, but they laugh [when we tease them].
>
> Int.: But, do you believe that white boys can't jump as high as blacks?
>
> Randy: Well, I think that it's mainly from the genes. If you have them, if you come from a family that has them, like the family has athletic people, you actually should be able to jump. If you are from a family with non-athletic people, you won't be able to jump. I think it's just something you are born with it, it's a gift. If you have the skills you can do it.

Randy's response is ambiguous and ambivalent to some extent, as he participates in contradictory discourses of race. Randy positioned himself simultaneously as a superior athlete by accepting the genetic edge discourse (his self-perception and his comment that athletic performance is 'mainly from the genes . . .'), and as a black boy rejecting racial stereotypes, including movie fictions of whiteness. As the racialization processes of identity are fluid and contradictory, blackness, like whiteness, is an expression of multiple and conflictual signifiers with malleable boundaries (Nayak, 2005). Randy therefore negotiates these boundaries by positioning himself regarding discourses of race and athleticism in contradictory ways: he simultaneously accepts the discourse of the black edge (Harrison, 2001) because his performance as an athlete centres him in the discourse, a source of black power and pride, and discards 'white men can't jump'. Indeed, his rejection of the discourse of 'white men can't jump' might have reflected his awareness of white mass media stereotypes, considering that the sport media industry is a white male-dominated institution. Whiteness is visible to the ones who are excluded, as Frankenberg (1993) theorizes. Differently from Randy, the other two black boys interviewed resisted the notion of natural black athleticism, but they all, like Randy, embodied the 'hoop dream' discourse. All of the black boys interviewed hoped to become professional basketball players, and they all expressed a desire to achieve economic success through sport. In their expression of blackness, black boys often accept positive and empowering socially constructed notions attributed to their ethnicity, being unaware of the academic implications (Harrison, 2001).

A Momentary Rupture of the Black Edge – As mentioned above, the racial teasing between the boys did not occur only between Paul and Randy. During the course of the observational period, the dominant discourse of black athletic superiority was subverted when Steve beat John during a 100 meter race. When Steve finished before John, Rick teased John by shouting, 'You let a white boy beat you! A white boy beat you!' Coach Grenoue, while he usually chuckled at students' 'teasing', firmly intervened in this instance, asking Rick to stop screaming, and commented later to the researcher that Steve had very good athletic skills. Steve explained to the researcher during his informal interview that he had never been on any school or recreational teams. A few times during the observational period, Steve sat by himself on the benches and did not participate in physical education class. 'I don't feel like it', Steve would respond when the researcher inquired about his lack of participation. However, 'a white boy beat

you' was a unique episode during the physical education classes, a rupture of the much more frequent comment 'white boys can't jump'.

This episode made visible the hidden curriculum on race supported by Coach Grenoue, revealing the fragility of 'white men can't jump' discourse (Huddart, 2006). While on one hand, Coach Grenoue's conscious and/or unconscious assertive intervention functioned to dismiss the rupture and to re-establish the racial order, on the other hand, the follow up silence among students marked a moment of anxiety in the class. The silence symbolized a momentary loss of the regime of truth of the black edge circulating in this physical education class; it signified the vulnerability and instability of the discourse (Huddart, 2006), opening possibilities for the creation a contradictory one, 'white boys can jump'. During this episode, Steve negotiated his position within the dominant discourse of race in multiple, conflictual ways. While his performance provided a momentary but serious challenge to the black edge, at the same time, Steve negotiated this event by maintaining and accepting a peripheral position within discourses of athletic performance and superiority. To some extent, Steve's lack of participation in sport practices, the marginal position he occupied in the gym by sitting out of activities, re-established and upheld the racialized notion of the athletic performance in sport, obscuring the 'white men can jump' discourse again. 'A white boy beat you!' was a unique episode in Coach Grenoue's physical education class.

'It's Bull!' Deconstructing the Black Edge

In the girls' single sex class at the same high school, episodes similar to the 'white men can't jump' teasing were never observed by the researcher. A preliminary explanation, thus, would suggest that the 'white men can't jump' episode was isolated and/or was allowed by the physical education teacher, Coach Grenoue. However, in the physical education classes at Walters High School, most of the white boys interviewed (all but two, both non-athletes) firmly took up the black genetic edge discourse. Notably, all of the girls in the girls' single sex class, most of the girls in co-educational classes (except for two white girls) and only two white boys resisted the natural black athleticism discourse. Strikingly, all of the black girls interviewed dismissed the black physical superiority discourse.

(En)gendering 'White Men Can't Jump' . . . It's about Upbringing, Money and Working Hard! – For instance, Ashley, a black girl in a predominantly white physical education class, who loved sports, such as cheerleading, but never had access to formal training, negotiated the discourse of race and athleticism by commenting:

> I just think that African American students, maybe because their lives are harder and they have to like work harder than like white people, you know, like kids, and, I think, go to sports to help them go through school, you know. 'Cause you know, like at this school, the majority of whites have wealthy parents, and a majority of African Americans don't have wealthy parents. So I guess it's more of a scholarship, so they can have, like, more money for college, you know.

In explaining how black students perceive sport as an avenue for college and achieving social success in society, Ashley uses an economic discourse that describes social class as a structural barrier that black students must overcome. Although she rejects the black athletic superiority discourse, her narrative imagines whites and blacks as belonging to different social classes. Ashley views and experiences whiteness as a system of privilege and wealth in and through which white people have access to social avenues such that they do not need to excel in sports to go to college or become successful in society. Low socio-economic status and working-class students often do not perceive success in society as available to them through common means such as schooling; for these students, sport might be viewed as a prestigious but alternative pathway (Goldsmith, 2003). School sport offers not only prestige among peers, but also a 'non-white' avenue to obtaining college scholarships.

While Ashley generalizes the class experiences of her fellow students based upon their race (black *or* white), race is not a unitary category; it is fluid and intersecting with other categories, like social class, and it is performed through young people's sport participation and academic success in school (Azzarito and Solmon, 2005). These young people's differing cultural contexts and gendered experiences in sport inform their negotiations of the dominant discourse of race present in their narratives. While Ashley adopted an economic discourse to explain the 'fact' of black overrepresentation in certain sports, Yasmin, a black student at Walters High School who had never participated in athletics outside of physical education, concisely argued:

> I don't think you are better than someone at birth just because you're African American or white, it just depends on you, how you want to be. If you practice to be good, then you'll be good, no matter what race you are.

Yasmin resisted the racialized body by stepping outside of the white androcentric discourse of black natural physical superiority. She apparently rejects the social ascriptions of blackness or whiteness which, through institutionalized practices produce the racialized body, by asserting that such race narratives classify human beings 'from birth'. Yasmin's willingness to distance herself from biological discourses of race is evident in her response. She resists a history of human classification, from Social Darwinism (Carrington and McDonald, 2001) to *The Bell Curve* and *Taboo*, which has functioned as racial discrimination by certain groups against others. Yasmin's concise statement 'no matter what race you are' in particular disavows dominant hegemonic discourses of race, resisting any conceivable biological explanation. While most of the girls agreed with Yasmin and Ashley on this point, only two white girls took up racial stereotypes fixating the 'natural' black athlete notion. For example, Kathy, a white tennis player, confidently states:

> I mean African Americans, I mean they have the genes and they are usually tall, and they have the muscle mass that genetically helps them play sports. They are more, I mean, they already have that jump to help them, they get into it because, because of that and then they get better with practice.

It's a Guy's Thing . . . We Are All the 'Same'! – Yasmin was not an athlete, but Brittney, another black student interviewed for this study, played basketball, softball, and volleyball and was on the school cheerleading team. In an informal interview, Brittney's physical education teacher, Ms Breck, commented that because Brittney was one of the very few girls who played on a variety of teams at Molson High School, and especially because she was a cheerleader, she was sometimes called 'white girl' by her classmates. Brittney explained during the interview that sport was very important to her family – all her siblings played sports, and her father and grandfather were involved in sports too. When the researcher asked Brittney about the notion of 'natural' black athleticism, she responded:

> I totally disagree with that because . . . I think guys are like, I don't know they're weird, it's hard to explain I guess . . . The black guys want to look like [they're on the] basketball team, and then you have your soccer guys who want to look like what's his name, um Beckham, and they are mostly white. You know people want to look like this and the other people want to look like that and guys just split up. But I mean girls, it's just like one big thing. I think that our [boys'] basketball team is mostly black, except for one guy, like they [whites] think that [blacks are naturally skilled], but it's not true, because I mean, I know, I have white friends who play basketball and just don't go out for it because they are like 'Oh, they're better than me, I'm not going to make the team.' And I'm just like you know, they are pretty good, but they don't think so. That is what they think . . . I think like they're equally good, and so I mean like, they just don't play because they don't think they're good enough to play . . .

Referring to her experience in sport, Brittney continued:

> . . . I totally disagree with that . . . [blacks' natural athleticism] I mean, for girls it's different, I mean girls do everything. I mean, I do softball which is a predominantly white sport, but like myself, and another girl and another girl we are like the three blacks on the softball team. Like we have white girls on our team that are 30 times better than some of the black girls on our team. I have to disagree with that because there's this one [white] girl on our team who scored 15 points the other night, and she scored the highest out of all the girls who played . . .

Like all the other black girls interviewed, Brittney emphatically rejects the genetic edge attributed to blackness. As Brittney navigates white and black spaces in school through sport, she resists the dominant narratives of race by pointing out cultural differences in boys' performances in sport: white boys want to *look like* Beckham, black boys want to *look like* basketball players. Therefore, whereas Brittney adopts an 'oppositional reading' to the black edge discourse (Van Sterkenburg and Knoppers, 2004), she subverts the racialized narrative of the body by sharing her experience as a black female athlete on predominantly white teams. As a black girl, she rejects blackness as a signifier of natural physical superiority by explaining that on her softball team, some white girls are better athletes than the black girls. In Brittney's case, truth telling becomes a form of resistance to and subversion of racial discourses (hooks, 1992; Ward, 2000). Resistance depends on individuals' effort to invoke an 'oppositional gaze' to dominant discourses of race, by being positioned and by positioning themselves at margins of mainstream social spaces (hooks, 1992).

However, while Brittney's narrative transcends the natural physicality discourse and deracializes the body, it engenders the phenomenon of 'natural'

athletic prowess. Brittney's position becomes more complicit with a hegemonic discourse of gender in sport when she argues that the natural black edge in sport is 'a guy thing – . . . for girls it's different, I mean girls do everything . . .' As one of the few girls who played a variety of sports in a school where male sport was centred in the community, Brittney's gender plays a more significant role on her views of race than her race does. Indeed, as a young black woman who plays 'white sports' (i.e. softball and cheerleading), and is sometimes called 'white girl' by fellow students, her position within these discourses seems to shift toward a liberal humanistic standpoint (Frankenberg, 1993) or liberal democratic discourse (Cooky and McDonald, 2005).

As mentioned in the methods section, both white female teachers were reluctant to talk about race issues. During the researcher's one brief, informal conversation with each of them about race, they seemed to disavow the notion of racial difference. Taking up a liberal democratic discourse, Ms Breck at Molson High School asserted firmly and sharply, that all kids, whites and blacks, are 'the same'; she believed that they all had the same potential to succeed if they worked hard. Ms Rayne at Walters High School responded also very briefly, contending that she did not believe in biological differences between blacks and whites with regard to athletic performance. The only additional information Ms Rayne shared with the researcher during that informal exchange was that she suspected that white students on the basketball teams at her school were intimidated when they played against predominantly black teams. The liberal democratic discourse they both adopted, founded upon notions of individualism and meritocracy embedded in whiteness, operates to erase cultural, economic, and political differences among ethnic groups (differences relevant to people's access to opportunities in society), toward the ideology of 'sameness' (Cooky and McDonald, 2005).

A similar position of 'power evasiveness' was adopted in this study by other girls, white students, who resisted the black edge discourse. For example, differently from Brittney, Virginia, who did not play any sports outside of school but loved her physical education class, asserted:

> I don't think blacks have different genes or different muscles. I just think that it's just normal. Because I know there's a lot of, like baseball players like Mark McGuire, he has one of the best hitting averages in the US, and he's white. So you don't really see black people in the category for baseball, you see 'em in basketball mostly. I think people judge' em by like the different sports that they are in, other than their structure. I just believe that, we're all people and we can all do whatever we think we can do. I don't think there is a certain type of person . . . it just depends on, like it depends on your structure, like you push yourself to do it.

Virginia debunks the genetic argument of blacks' natural prowess and repositions blacks from the 'other' of whiteness to a deracialized being, a 'normal' human. She disavows the black edge by drawing from the notion of culturally relevant physical activities, and offers the contrasting example of athletic performance in a predominantly white sport to prove that the overrepresentation of blacks in other sports is a matter of culture and structure (i.e. environment). By adopting a cultural context discourse, and in her effort to dissociate herself from racist notions, Virginia reconstructs people as raceless, asserting that blacks are 'just normal' and 'we are all people'.

Supporting and extending Virginia's explanation, Desire, another white girl, emphatically commented on the natural athleticism discourse as follows:

> I think that's bull, because you can have races in just about anything. Look at it this way, Tiger Woods – I mean golf is supposed to be like a white sport, you watch a golf tournament, all the guys are whites. Tiger Woods is black and he's an awesome golfer. Michelle Wei is Chinese or Hawaiian and she is an awesome golfer. Then go to basketball and if you look at Duke, you've got some very good players that are white . . . and just because you see a majority of one race in one sport, it doesn't mean that they are better athletes, it just means that they like the sport more . . . anyone can play any sport they want regardless of their skin color. And just because you see a lot of like, a majority of one race in one sport, doesn't mean that they are better athletes, it just means that they like the sport more.

Like all the other black girls and almost all of the white girls, Desire, a student at Walters High School, positioned herself outside of the racialized discourse of naturalized black athleticism. In this narrative, Desire views Tiger Woods as black, misperceiving but not necessarily disavowing Woods' Asian identity, as he is often misrepresented in mass media. She continues her explanation by providing various examples of athletes of different ethnicities who are underrepresented in their sport, but portrayed as successful. By critically using sport media images of white players on the Duke basketball team to highlight white athletes' performance in sport (Stone et al., 1997), Desire subverts the racial stereotype, asserting that basketball is not just a 'black thang'. Her identification of elite athletes of diverse ethnicities allows her to refute the classification of particular sports settings as dominated by any one, homogenous racial group. Race is not a 'sticky sign' (Dyer, 2002) which attributes natural jumping ability to one race, according to Desire. At the same time, Virginia, Desire, and Brittney's narratives feature primarily male athletes popular in sport mass media to reject the dominant discourse of race. Conceivably, as Brittney's, Virginia's, Desire's, and Yasmin's narratives demonstrate, girls' resistance to the natural physicality discourse reflects an attempt to distance themselves from what they view and experience as a male androcentric discourse of race in sports, 'a male terrain'.

Discussion

Race, like gender and class, shapes young people's ways of thinking about athleticism, sport, and society and their performance of sporting bodies. In this study it first appeared that the socially constructed notion 'white men can't jump' was embedded in a male sport culture; it was especially produced and functioned in the physical education setting of Molson High School, where this racialized discourse about the black edge was promoted by the teacher. However, white boys (except for two students who were not involved in sport) from physical education classes at Walters High School, a predominantly white school, were also complicit with the notion of black physical superiority. On the other hand, it was certainly striking how all of the girls interviewed at Molson High School and almost all of the girls (except for two white girls) at Walters High School instead emphatically rejected the black genetic edge discourse, evading race and, at the same time, among other discourses, performing liberal humanistic discourses of sameness.

Young people's construction of race reflects their range of experiences, the cultural context of their upbringing, and therefore their standpoints toward notions of black athletic superiority. They inhabit discourses of race, but their performance of these discourses, as Frankenberg (1993) suggests, links to their social position of privilege or distance in relation to the dominant discourses produced in society. Findings from this study show the ways girls performed a range of discourses to explain the overrepresentation of blacks in certain sports, which in general encompassed an 'oppositional reading' (Van Sterkenburg and Knoppers, 2004). Girls, in differing degrees, positioned themselves outside of discourses of athletic performance upheld by sport, resisting the adoption of the dominant discourse of natural athleticism. They instead adopted an array of discourses, economics, the context of upbringing, and 'sameness' to explain the overrepresentation of blacks in certain sports.

Like Ms Rayne and Ms Breck, most of the girls disavowed cultural differences among ethnic groups, arguing for the recognition of people as 'the same'. Although their attempt to distance themselves from stereotypes of black physical superiority might reveal a liberal humanistic position, a discourse of 'power evasiveness', their disassociation might also represent a rejection of male hegemonic discourse circulating in sport. Like in the film *White Men Can't Jump*, where girls are located outside of the basketball court, girls' position of resistance in this study might reflect their view of themselves as outsiders to sport, as different from boys, and therefore as gendered beings. A rejection of this discourse, then, represents girls' participation in gendered discourses – as femininity is constructed in opposition to masculinity, remote from the masculinized mechanism of sport, resisting what they viewed as 'an affair between men' (Pinar, 2002), or a 'male preserve' (Therberge, 1991). Since the construction of femininity, in opposition to the construction of masculinity, is not tied to the performance of physical prowess through sport practices, girls at the margins of these discourses upheld alternative narratives of race.

It is not surprising, therefore, that boys in general were more complicit with dominant discourses of race in sports, considering that sport and sport media remain male institutions (Scraton et al., 2005). Boys participated in the discourse of blacks' 'natural' athletic performance in racialized, hierarchical terms – seeing blacks as biologically different from whites and as physically superior, or by embodying the 'hoop dream' discourse. While the majority of the white boys adopted a 'preferred reading' of the dominant discourse of race and athleticism (Scraton et al., 2005), black boys, except for Randy, negotiated this discourse by rejecting the black edge narrative, but at the same time, complying with the 'hoop dream' discourse. White males, in particular, were more complicit with the maintenance of the racial order in sport, the 'essentialized project of race', which implicitly upholds the construction of 'normal' white masculinity; a masculinity imagined as threatened by the presence of hypermasculine blacks in sport.

Implications

There is no doubt that the power of sport media and sport as an institutionalized practice enters schools, merges with the school culture, and colonizes young people's and adults' body performances. Sport, physical education, and media function as pedagogical sites of identity construction and culture, through which young people as subjects negotiate dominant discourses of race and gender. The school culture produced by physical education teachers, coaches, students, and administrators might reinforce dominant discourses of race, sport and athleticism produced by the media. As findings in this study suggest, the notion of the black edge is not only a racial stereotype, but it is also profoundly gendered. Since girls' performance of discourses of race and natural athleticism might reflect their marginal positioning within the status quo of sport as yet a 'male preserve', undoing race through critical pedagogy should be informed by the contemporary 'performative turn' (Giardina, 2005: 152) and intersect with undoing gender in order to dismantle sexist and racist discursive practices.

To this end, research that shows the vulnerability and ambivalence of the 'natural black athlete' or 'white men can't jump' discourse is needed to destabilize, deconstruct, and resist these racialized narratives. In light of the girls' narratives about the notion of black natural athletic superiority reported in this study, and considering the lack of research in this area, further inquiries specifically on girls' embodiment and negotiation of discourses of race and natural athleticism in a variety of sport contexts, and the ways their embodiment links to their performance and/or engagement in sport should be a priority. Given that the stereotypical image of 'white men can't jump' or the black edge are particularly attached to the construction of masculinity in traditionally male-dominated sports, to what extent are these stereotypes also circumscribed among young female athletes who participate in these sport contexts? And specifically, how does race impact girls' negotiation of these discourses in these traditionally male-dominated contexts? As Hayes and Sudgen (1999: 103) assert 'natural advantage does not seem to be associated with traditionally female activities, such as dance and gymnastics'.

While young people's embodiments of dominant discourses of race and athleticism in sport take form in and through various institutional sites in society (i.e. school, media, families, sport organizations, etc.), schooling might work as an educational site to disrupt racial stereotypes. As a political and cultural tool for social change in sport and physical education studies, the researchers endorse the notion of teaching to transgress by promoting conversations among young people about race and athletic performance in sport and physical education (Harrison and Lawrence, 2004; Harrison et al., 2004), and by implementing critical media pedagogy in schools (Morrell and Duncan-Andrade, 2005). To expose the fragility of racial stereotypes and open up possibilities for their rupture, it is crucial that physical education teachers, coaches, educators and scholars adopt critical ethics and practices to reconstruct, reinterpret, and pedagogize physical activity school practices as politically contested sites (Azzarito and Solmon, 2005; Giardina, 2005; Harrison et al., 2004). Educators' selection of empowering and transgressive popular sport images might work as a powerful tool for critical reflection. As

such, by schooling critical media pedagogy among young people in school and by raising critical awareness in physical education teacher education programs, school sports and physical education sites can become *progressive, cultural, educational spaces* to re-inscribe the body, and to disseminate the notion that the 'black genetic edge' is not a scientific fact; that 'white men can't jump' is a racist myth; and that the male preserve of sport which imagines black female athletes as 'nappy headed ho's' is a discursive practice embedded in sexist and racist fantasy.

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