

What can we learn from sport if we take sport seriously as a racial force?

Lessons from C. L. R. James's *Beyond a Boundary*

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Abstract

This article uses C. L. R. James's classic autobiographical study of cricket, *Beyond a Boundary* (1963/1983), to contribute to a fuller theory of the social force of sport as it pertains to race and ethnicity. Three aspects of the theoretical architecture embedded in this masterpiece of cultural criticism are highlighted: (1) the popularity and symbolic significance of sport in contemporary societies; (2) the cultural capital that sport provides for otherwise marginalized and excluded racial and ethnic minorities; and, (3) the moral structure implicit (if not always fully realized) in sporting practices such as cricket. It is argued that these points, in combination with the more critical insights developed by sport scholars in recent years, help us to better understand the complexity and significance of sport and popular culture more generally with respect to race and ethnicity in contemporary social life.

Keywords: Race; sport; culture; critical social theory.

Introduction

In recent years a number of prominent and influential critical race scholars in the U.S.¹ – Gerald Early (1989; 1993), bell hooks (1994), Robin Kelley (1997), David Theo Goldberg (1998), and David Roediger (2000 with Johnson) among them – have written on topics having to do with African American athletes and American sport in general (see also: George 1992; Wacquant 1992; Dyson 1993; West 1993; Lipsitz 1998, chapter 5; Patterson 1998, chapter 3; Wideman 2001; Yu 2000). Scholars outside the U.S., especially those working in more comparative, international and global contexts, seem also to have begun to take new note of

sport (Cf. MacClancy 1996; Gilroy 2000; Van Bottenburg 2001). This is the result, I think, of an emerging recognition among academics of the power and import of sport as it pertains to race and ethnicity in the modern world. Yet these works have mainly used sport as a way of illustrating and exploring general points about ethnic and racial formations in the post-Civil Rights, post-colonial period. They have not, with some notable exceptions (Cf. Early 1998), explored the independent social force of sport in the U.S. and throughout the world with respect to race and ethnicity. This limited emphasis compromises more than just our understanding of the unique racial significance of a particular popular cultural form. What is also compromised is a fuller understanding of race itself – of the centrality of popular culture as a site of social construction and reproduction, of the sheer depth and complexity of racial formations as well as of the problems, paradoxes and possibilities of struggling against them.

In previous work (Hartmann 1996, 2000) I have drawn on the writings of Stuart Hall (1981, 1996) to argue that sport is, at least with respect to race in American culture, best understood as a ‘contested terrain’ – that is to say, a social space where racial images, ideologies and inequalities are constantly and very prominently constructed, transformed and struggled over. This framing was intended as a corrective to race-based critiques of sport from specialists in the area which focus almost entirely on the ways in which racial inequalities and injustices are reproduced and reinforced in and through sport – an emphasis captured in the subtitle of one recent, highly controversial, contribution to the field (Hoberman 1997): ‘How Sport has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race’. This article will expand upon those earlier formulations in dialogue with C. L. R. James’s magisterial, autobiographical study of West Indian cricket in *Beyond a Boundary* (1963/1983). My purpose, more specifically, is to explicate the theoretical architecture embedded in this masterpiece of cultural criticism and use it to contribute to our understanding of the relations between sport and race in the contemporary world.

Beyond a Boundary presents an obvious reference, resource and source of inspiration for theorizing race and sport interactions. Not only is the book about a sporting practice that has unique racial form, force and history, it was written by one of the pre-eminent contributors to what Cedric Robinson (1973) has described as the ‘radical black tradition’.² More than this, James – who began his literary career as a sportswriter and reported on sports throughout his entire career including a regular column in the newspaper (*Correspondence*) he and his comrades published in the U.S. in the late 1950s and early 1960s – predicated the book on the proposition that ‘cricket and football were the greatest cultural influences in nineteenth-century Britain’ (p. 64). *Beyond a Boundary* is particularly useful for my purposes because of James’s

distinctive insistence that sport was not only a site where racial stereotypes and hierarchies were reproduced and reinforced but also a space where they could be effectively questioned, challenged and changed.

Unfortunately, the lessons of *Beyond a Boundary* do not appear in a simple and straightforward manner. For one thing, there is the problem of translating what is essentially a work of literature into systematic social theory. This challenge is acute in the case of *Beyond a Boundary* because it is a dense and very personal narrative. Only two chapters, really (chs 12 and 16), are explicitly theoretical, and one of them is a tantalizingly short seven pages. Indeed, when I tried to teach this book to undergraduate sociology majors, I found it difficult even to find quotes that capture the fullness, depth and complexity of its vision and depth. Even more challenging is the fact that the book is entirely a product of its British and West Indian culture and historical context. Most obviously, this means that comprehending this text requires a degree of familiarity with both cricket and colonialism that many students and scholars, especially American ones, are typically lacking. In addition, the book's grounded-ness also gives rise to inexorable questions about the generalizability of James's analysis of cricket as both a sporting form and political force.³

Nevertheless, it is precisely in confronting these challenges and in situating James's vision of the social power of West Indian cricket within and against prevailing theories of sport and race relations (as well as cultural theory more generally) that I believe it is possible to contribute to a better and fuller understanding of the racial significance of sport in contemporary social life. The broad, synthetic treatment of *Beyond a Boundary* presented here is informed by existing scholarly work on both cricket (Cf. Beckles and Stoddart 1995) and colonial sport (Stoddart 1988), as well as the voluminous secondary literature on James's writings (Buhle 1988; Bagues 1997; and Nielsen 1997; see also: Roediger 1991; Wynter 1992; King 2001; and edited collections by Paget and Buhle 1992; Cudjoe and Cain 1995; and Farred 1996). Finally, and needless to say, that small but substantial collection of works focused explicitly on *Beyond a Boundary* (Lazarus 1992; Surin 1995, 1996; Kingwell 1995) has been particularly useful in sharpening the reading and theoretical appropriation presented here.

Knowing cricket, knowing sport

The place to begin this exposition (as perhaps with any treatment of *Beyond a Boundary*) is with James's evocative preforatory query, the line that famously frames the entire analysis: 'What do they know of cricket who only cricket know?' (p. xxi; see also: p. 233).⁴

The question is, when taken literally (which is how American sociologists generally tend to take things), puzzling, paradoxical and tautological. How can someone who knows only cricket not know cricket? Of

course, the question cannot be taken literally. In certain ways James means it to call attention to the complexity of knowing itself: or, more precisely, to multiple 'ways of knowing'. (This is what he means, I think, when he says that the answer to the question involves 'ideas as well as facts'). But James's more immediate concern in asking what it means to 'know cricket' has to do with the issue of what cricket itself really is.

Here I think it is useful to realize that there are actually two different 'crickets' embedded in James's famous formulation. The most basic and most familiar is cricket-the-game, cricket with its rules, its players, its balls and bats and wickets, its technique and its history. This is actually the second use of cricket in James's question – that is, the cricket of those who 'only cricket know', what I might call cricket with a small 'c'. But it is the other meaning of cricket that James is most interested in. This cricket, Cricket with a capital 'C', is not just a game but an entire social formation. Cricket in this larger, more expansive sense cannot, of course, be understood without the first cricket but it is also much more than that. The game, in James's view, never just exists in the abstract or in isolation; it is played by actual, specific human beings with individual attributes and social characteristics, in particular historical contexts and in particular ways. Cricket in this sense refers not just to the game but to the players in the game, all those identities and experiences they bring to the game as well as what the game means or represents beyond the usual boundaries of the game itself.

Understood as such, it should be clear that James's question is fundamentally rhetorical. Those who know only of cricket-the-game, in fact, know nothing of cricket-the-social-formation, that cricket which is part and parcel of the social world, the colonial world in James's case, taken as a whole. Every page of James's seminal text is, in my view, predicated on this proposition, the proposition that one cannot understand cricket, West Indian cricket in particular, unless one situates it in the context of British culture and colonialism. The broader implications of this formulation should be clear enough. If, for example, we are to understand the racial form and function of American sport, we have to approach it with an informed sense of the meaning and structure of race in the United States in general.

Obvious as it may seem for those of us who already know and appreciate the social embeddedness of popular cultural forms, the claim that sport is intimately interconnected with larger social forces is perhaps more significant and revealing than at first meets the eye. This is because the study of *sport* still seems to be plagued by a paradox the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1987/1988) identified over two decades ago (albeit almost two decades *after* James was writing): that, on the one hand, those who know the most about sport tend not to have the inclination or ability to realize its broader social connections and significance, while, on the other hand, those who have the requisite

skills to understand the broader social dimensions tend to ignore or dismiss sport as a phenomenon worthy of social scientific investigation or serious political consideration. Writing almost two decades before Bourdieu, in fact, James realized that this challenge was particularly pronounced for the Left which had inherited from Marxist theorists like Trotsky (p. 150) the notion that sport was an opiate for the masses (for additional examples, see p. 250 and the chapter entitled 'What Do Men Live By?' [pp. 151–58]). Here, the problem was not so much that social analysts and cultural critics *missed*, but rather that they often *misunderstood* the social power of sport, interpreting it in a one-dimensional, moralist fashion.⁵ If the social cricket and the cultural cricket were, in James's conception, two analytically distinct if empirically entangled domains, then I think he also meant to insist that the nature of the relationships between them was both more complicated and more consequential than Western intellectuals and activists typically assumed. At stake in conceptualizing these relationships properly was (and is) nothing less than an understanding of the broader social and symbolic significance of sport in social life, its role in the modern world.

Of windows, worlds and the depth of play

To my way of thinking, James's understanding of the general symbolic significance of cricket is based upon three specific social characteristics, each of which is shared by sporting forms worldwide as well as by many other genuinely popular cultural forms and practices. The first two will be very familiar to popular cultural scholars: one has to do with what large numbers of people actually do; the other involves what these people are passionate about, what they actually want and desire, deeply, passionately or, as James puts it, 'greedily'. The power and importance of popular forms and practices such as cricket (and sport more generally) thus involve both the demographics of involvement and the depth of investment in that involvement.

A third aspect of cricket's social significance has to do with the paradoxical fact pointed out repeatedly by James: that despite its manifest importance in people's lives and social life taken as a whole, sport tends to be left out of the history books, the political tracts and philosophical treatise on the meaning of human life. This tension or contradiction obviously harks back to the paradox of the two crickets captured in James's famous epigram and reminds us again of Bourdieu's description of the problem of intellectual labour in and around sport. In this context, however, it is crucial to realize that sport's paradoxical social status is not just a matter of intellectual labour (as the former formulation implied) it is also and indeed more fundamentally *a condition of the form* itself. That is to say, sport, as it is generally practised and experienced in the contemporary social world, is built on the paradox of being a social form that is

both serious and non-serious, at once trivial and insignificant and yet also weighty and deeply meaningful. Extending from this, I would argue that much of the power of popular cultural forms such as sport derives precisely from this paradox, what the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz, in his seminal paper on cockfighting in Bali (1972/1973), called 'deep play'.

Geertz actually borrowed (or re-deployed) the phrase deep play from the classical utilitarian theorist Jeremy Bentham (the enlightenment thinker who is most often remembered today as the inventor of the panopticon made famous in Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*). Deep play was defined by Bentham as 'play in which the stakes are so high that it is . . . irrational for men to engage in it at all' (quoted in Geertz, p. 432). Such play, according to Geertz, posed an ethical or moral problem for Bentham's rationalist, utilitarian perspective for it could not, logically speaking, be justified or explained. For a social analyst like Geertz, however, deep play is an intriguing sociological phenomenon precisely because of this fact. Despite the force of Bentham's analysis, as Geertz puts it, 'men do engage in such play, both passionately and often even in the face of law's revenge' (p. 431). James's comment on the lengths he would go as a youth to play cricket – skipping school, forging documents, borrowing money, defying parental injunctions, lying and making excuses – is a perfect illustration. 'I was not a vicious boy', James insists, but simply a boy with an 'inexhaustible passion'. 'All I wanted was to play cricket and soccer, not merely to play but to live the life, and nothing could stop me' (p. 28).

'Such play', Geertz writes, 'is less a measure of utility . . . than it is a symbol of moral import perceived or imposed'. That is to say, it captures and conveys, or, as is often said, 'reflects' very real and important facts about the social world of which it is part, especially with respect to the social values held by those people who engage in such play. Geertz describes cockfights in the language of an art form, a form which, as he puts it (p. 443), 'renders ordinary, everyday experience comprehensible'. 'It achieves this effect', Geertz goes on to say, 'by presenting [everyday life] in terms of acts and objects which have had their practical consequences removed and been reduced . . . to the level of sheer appearances, where their meaning can be more powerfully articulated and more exactly perceived'. Such a cultural form 'catches up themes . . . [and] presents them in a such a way as to throw into relief a particular view of their essential nature' (p. 444).⁶

The parallels between Geertz's portrayal of the cockfight as deep play and James's conception of cricket are multiple and manifest. The first chapter of *Beyond a Boundary* (and the entire first section of chapters as well) bears the title 'Window onto a world'. This phrase is, for James, personally descriptive as well as theoretically appropriate for he says that it is through cricket (in combination with the literature of Thackeray and

Puritanism itself) that he came to know and understand both British culture and its racist, colonial underside. Just as Geertz does for the cockfight, James insists that cricket is an 'art form' – 'not a bastard or a poor relation but a full member of the community ... with theatre, opera, ballet and dance' (p. 196).

James goes to great lengths to delineate the artistic qualities and characteristics of cricket. He details cricket's structure as 'dramatic spectacle', and highlights the 'glorious uncertainty' (p. 197) that endows this spectacle with particular dramatic effect. He also insists upon the centrality of the body: its sheer physical form and visual sensuality, the movement and motion that is inherent to the practice, and the importance of technique itself. 'Cricket is a game of high and difficult technique', James writes. 'If it were not, it could not carry the load of social response and implication it carries' (p. 34). He also highlights the way in which the game enacts timeless tensions such as those between the universal and the particular, innovation and conformity or, perhaps above all else, the individual and the society. These ideas, developed in a chapter entitled 'What is Art?' (which is as much a critique of high-cultural conceptions of art as a defence of cricket), are far deeper and more developed than I can possibly do justice to here. Perhaps it is better simply to let James speak for himself.

Its quality as drama is more specific [than other games and cultural forms]. It is so organized that at all times it is compelled to reproduce the central action which characterizes all good drama from the days of the Greeks to our own: two individuals are pitted against each other in a conflict that is strictly personal but no less strictly representative of a social group. ... This has nothing to do with morals. It is the organizational structure on which the whole spectacle is symbolic of the larger whole. ... This fundamental relation of the One and the Many, Individual and Society, Individual and Universal, leaders and followers, representative and ranks, the part and the whole, is structurally imposed on the players of cricket. What other sports, games and arts have to aim at, the players are given to start with, they cannot depart from it. Thus the game is founded upon a dramatic, a human relation which is universally recognized as the most objectively pervasive and psychologically stimulating in life and therefore in that artificial representation of it which is drama (pp. 196–7).

Cricket for James (as with the cockfight for Geertz) is not just *like* drama or any other art form; it *is* drama, a cultural form that allows and requires all who interact with it in any meaningful way to engage and reflect upon the world of which it is part and parcel. This is what the American anthropologist Joseph Gusfield (1989), following in the tradition of Kenneth Burke, calls a 'dramaturgical' approach in order to

distinguish it from the more familiar dramatic framework associated with the work of Erving Goffman and symbolic interactionism (see also, Wuthnow 1987): a cultural form that captures people's attention and in doing so cultivates within them real knowledge and understanding of their surrounding social world.

It is also important to emphasize that the social knowledge which cultural analysts like James and Geertz believe is cultivated in and through dramatic cultural forms like cricket and cockfighting is not understanding in the conventional rationalist sense of the term. Understanding within a dramaturgical framework is instead a deeply embodied and intuitive, concrete and emotionally meaningful way of knowing, a kind of knowledge that may be usefully compared to what might be called, following thinkers as diverse as Alasdair MacIntyre (1982) and Marshall Sahlins (1976), 'practical understanding'. Explicit beliefs and hypotheses and concrete, factual information about the world are all obviously parts of this knowledge but, as Hubert Dreyfus (1980) has argued, 'these are seen only to be meaningful in specific contexts and against a background of shared practices' (p. 7). Practical knowledge then is not self-conscious but deep and intuitive, contained not so much in the mind but embodied in everyday social activities and shared understandings. Dreyfus used the metaphor of swimming to explain: 'Just as we learn to swim without consciously acquiring a theory of swimming, we acquire our social practices by being trained in them, not by forming beliefs and following rules.'

Dreyfus's explication of practical understanding through the metaphor of swimming serves to highlight, by way of contrast, the breadth and power of Geertz and James's unique coupling of practical understanding together with drama and sport. At the crux of the matter for scholars working in this dramaturgical tradition is that 'participation' is conceived broadly to include not just those who participate in the game as players but also those who watch and follow the game actively and passionately as spectators and fans. For engaged audiences, the game and players in the game – one's style of play is always vitally important to James – come to represent and embody specific social groups and cultural values. Witnessing them, identifying with them and rooting for them provides an opportunity to reinforce and even reflect upon one's own (often implicit) place in and understanding of the social world. The knowledge and understanding thus generated and circulated in and through dramatic forms such as cricket is thus not only powerful and deeply embedded but also extremely open and accessible to all, perhaps even fundamentally democratic. As James writes: 'What matters in cricket, as in all the arts, is not finer points but what everyone with some knowledge of the elements can see and feel' (p. 198).⁸

So where does race fit into this scheme? Interestingly, the question of colour does not make its explicit appearance in *Beyond a Boundary* until

halfway through the fourth chapter, in the second grouping of chapters (pp. 49–65). There, James writes of the racial and class-based stratification of cricket teams in his region of the West Indies and of the ‘conflicts and rivalries which arose out of the[se] conditions’. (‘If for the reader this is “not cricket”,’ he comments wryly at this point, ‘then he should take friendly warning and go in peace’ [p. 51]). James’s implication is that the important dramatic and symbolic functions of cricket with respect to race were not inherent to cricket but instead were the result of the particular racial *form* of the West Indian cricket world itself and thus cultural meaning and significance attributed to it.

Much of this form obviously had to do with the racial (and class-based) disparities and injustices that James says could be found in West Indian cricket. Using Geertz’s language, we might say that they reflected the social structure of the society taken as a whole. However, the racial significance of cricket was also broader, more complicated and (at least potentially) more socially potent for James than this. Cricket, in his view, was a crucial cultural form – or forum – for West Indian racial issues also because of the prominence and prowess of West Indians who were otherwise racially and economically marginalized. Of course, many questions are obviously raised by the simple fact that members of racially marginalized and disempowered groups were so prominent and successful in this cultural institution that everyone took so seriously – not the least of which is how and why cricket came to assume this unique and seemingly progressive racial form in the first place? But the important point for the moment is simply that because of its particular social organization, all cricket’s artistic, dramaturgical qualities had racial overtones, implications and dimensions. In a society otherwise marked by deep and prevailing racial inequities the fact that cricket provided an arena where black and mixed race West Indians were highly visible (not to mention highly skilled and very successful) was not to be taken lightly or taken for granted. As far as race in the West Indies was concerned, cricket was thus a stage like no other.

Rethinking ‘reflection’: the realities of racism, racial conflict and inequality

As productive and revealing as they are, the parallels between James and Geertz on these points give us reason to pause. This is because in the social sciences Geertz’s essay has come to stand as an example of the functionalist theoretical approaches to culture that have, for some good reasons, fallen out of favour in recent years. There are at least three central criticisms of functionalist theorizing that are relevant in this context, any one of which raises red flags for scholars wanting to elaborate a genuinely critical theory of the relationships between sport and race. One is that it allows no real autonomy for cultural forms. Culture,

in this vision, is entirely bound up with the existing structures of the social world; its role is always secondary to a derivative of the existing social world – a cultural superstructure determined by a material base, to use the old Marxist language (which was not Geertz's). Secondly, and closely connected with this, functionalist theories allow little or no agency for social actors who engage in them; 'understanding' in conventional functionalist usage refers not to an active process of interpretation (as in: 'we are allowed to reflect upon and evaluate about the social world') but more of a passive response of acceptance, of fitting in, of making sense of the social world on its given terms. A third critique has to do with functionalism's disengaged, essentially conservative vision of this social world as a smoothly functioning, self-reproducing harmonious whole.

As one of the most sophisticated interpreters and practitioners of functionalist theory, Geertz offered a number of important clarifications, qualifications and subtleties to these notions. Most importantly, in my view, his famous 'model of and model for' formulation (1973, pp. 93–95) allowed cultural forms and practices somewhat more independence and impact in the constitution of social order than standard functionalist theorizing typically allowed. Nevertheless, as articulated in Vincent Crapanzano's (1986) famous critique of Geertz's cockfight paper, this formulation and his entire methodological practice of 'thick description' rested on the assumption that cultural practices play an essentially conservative, reproductive role in the maintenance and perpetuation of social order. At the core of Crapanzano's post-modernist critique was Geertz's particular usage of the metaphor of 'reflection' as a passive, reproductive social process rather than an active and potentially disruptive or transformative engagement with the social world. A fuller, more engaged social theory, Crapanzano rightly insisted, required more cultural autonomy and human agency than Geertz's functionalist formulations could allow. They also required breaking with the modernist normative assumptions unreflexively embedded in Geertz's own analytical framework.⁹

Because of these troubling implications, I was, when I first read this book as a graduate student some years ago, inclined to try to minimize the importance of the artistic metaphors and reflectionist overtones in James's theoretical argument about cricket. I tended to think that this language was peculiar to his own personal experience and not intended for more general theoretical purposes. Upon subsequent re-reading, however, I began to reconsider that view. More specifically, I came to believe that James's understanding of cricket as a cultural reflection on social life was in many ways quite distinctive from standard functionalist theories and that the ways in which it was unique were directly connected with James's own understanding of and emphasis on race and human agency more generally.

Perhaps most distinctive about James's use of the theoretical terminology typically associated with functionalism is his belief in the relatively autonomous as well as profoundly progressive force of cricket in Caribbean social life. Cricket, in his view, did not just reflect West Indian society uncritically – it also reflected its social problems, and even projected back images and ideals of how it could be different. Connected with this is James's active, agent-centred conception understanding of culture and the process of reflection itself: culture and reflection are not just passive processes enacted by unthinking, passive masses but that the masses actively, energetically and creatively engage popular cultural forms, practices and ideas. I will return to these points in the following section. But first I want to focus on what is unique about James's understanding of the social world itself, the world that James believed was being reflected (or reflected upon) in cultural forms such as cricket. For even to the extent James conceived of cricket as a window onto or reflection of the world, a text through which broader social relations were reflected and thus could be read, his understanding of what would be reflected or read was truly different from the functionalist Geertz.

The world that is reflected in James's radical Marxist and anti-colonialist view was *not* a modern world of harmonious organic unity, but rather a world of tension, contradiction and struggle, a world fraught with deep inequalities and contradictions. What is reflected, in other words, is not social order and stability but the *struggle for* order, the quest for change, not hegemony but the struggle for hegemony (Hall 1996; see also Lipsitz 1988). This point is easy to miss, I suspect, if you do not read James carefully or know something about his Marxist, anti-colonialist politics (as was the case for me when I first encountered the book). But the distinction – which becomes obvious when we recall the basic, inequalities and injustices endemic to British colonialism; race was, in short, a fundamental disorder that burned deep and hot in James's soul – is crucial. It suggests that James's theoretical contribution has to do not just with his theory of popular culture but also involves his understanding of society itself (not to mention the role of the cultural analyst therein). As an anti-colonial Marxist analyst, James insists that society is not a homogeneous, self-reproducing system but rather a site of social differences and inequalities, race being crucial among these. What cultural forms such as cricket reflect, therefore, are not only social order and consensus but also (or perhaps rather) tensions, conflicts and disagreements deep within the social order. Indeed, these insights were key to James's own understanding of himself and his role as a Marxist, anti-colonialist social analyst and cultural critic.

Geertz understood his analytic role as ultimately interpretive, standing over or above or outside of the peoples and cultures he was trying to make sense of. The culture of a people, Geertz famously wrote in the conclusion to the deep play paper, believed was 'an ensemble of texts,

themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong' (p. 452). In stark contrast, in James's Marxist-informed view, the task of the analyst was not just to understand (or reflect upon) the world but rather to engage it, critique it and change it.

This, I think, is how those American race scholars who have recently written about sport (the ones I referred to in my introduction) have tended to understand both sport and its symbolic relevance for American social life as well as their roles as cultural critics. That is to say, they have understood sport as a site which reflects and, if read properly, can reveal the racial formations, inequalities and injustices that are pervasive and problematic in contemporary American society. These scholars have used sport to explore, among other themes, the unrecognized privilege of whiteness, the construction and reproduction of stereotypes of racial difference, and the connections between race and masculinity. And the most sophisticated of them realize that it is not just racial inequality, injustices and racism that are enacted in sport, it is also the *struggles* surrounding race. Gerald Early's (1998) recent discussion of the public furor that surrounded the fiftieth anniversary of Jackie Robinson's breaking of the colour barrier in American Major League Baseball is a perfect example. What was interesting and important about this event, in Early's view, were the radically different ways in which it was interpreted by liberals and conservatives. On the one hand, conservatives saw it as a symbol of the achievements of the Civil Rights movement and the triumph of individual initiative, talent and hard work; liberals, in contrast, saw the integration of baseball as the result of group-based political mobilization and yet also an indication of America's shortcomings and unfulfilled promises. These multiple and contradictory reactions illustrate for Early how sport reflects and highlights the social conflict and contestation that surround questions of race in the U.S. Early's own earlier essays on boxing (1989; 1993) remain, in my opinion, among the finest examples of this theoretical point to be found anywhere in the literature on sport and race.

This understanding of sport as a reflection of racial problems is nothing new for sport scholars. At least since the late 1960s, sport specialists have emphasized persistent inequalities, injustices and discrimination in the world of sport itself and argued that what is reflected, in short, is not social order but social disorder, not racial justice but racial injustice. In their 1991 review of the previous two decades worth of work in sport sociology, the leading disciplinary home of this work, James H. Frey and D. Stanley Eitzen (1991, p. 513) summarized:

American sport sociologists have devoted considerable attention to the examination of racial discrimination in sport. The major conclusion of this work . . . is that just as racial discrimination exists in

society, [so also] it exists in sport. Blacks do not have equal opportunity; they do not receive similar rewards for equal performance when compared to whites; and their prospects for a lucrative career beyond sport participation are dismal.

Sport, in other words, simply reflects and reproduces the racism and discrimination that exist in the society at large. The title of Richard Lapchick's widely-read 1986 volume captured the point succinctly: *Fractured Focus: Sport as a Reflection of Society*. In recent years sport scholars have pushed these insights in somewhat different directions – focusing, as I will discuss further below, more on mass media and symbolic functions of sport in mainstream American culture and moving away from a faith in liberal democratic ideals – but the basic theme of the cultural reflection and social reproduction of racial inequities has remained at the heart of the contemporary scholarly critique of sport.¹⁰

Sport as a relatively autonomous social force

Describing James's sense of social life as inherently conflicted and contested might imply, in the arena of sport scholarship at least, that it is not Geertz but Bourdieu who would have provided the more appropriate theoretical lineage within which to situate James's work after all. This is because of the latter's relentless Marxist emphasis on class and class struggle as well as his pioneering efforts (1978, 1988) to show how sporting practices in France – and the meaning and significance attributed to such practices – are implicated therein. There is a good deal of truth to this, as I shall discuss further momentarily. But as important as Bourdieu has been for developing the serious, critical scientific study of sport, I believe such a comparison may confuse more than clarify in this particular case.

There are several reasons for this. One is that Bourdieu has little to offer with respect to the questions of race, ethnicity (and nation) that concern us here. Another has to do with Bourdieu's understanding of how sport is implicated in processes of social distinction and differentiation. He focuses on differentiated sporting practices (such as the way in which the working classes tend to participate in sports such as boxing and soccer, while the upper class tend to play golf or tennis) rather than on the mass, popular sports – such as cricket in the West Indies or American sports such as baseball, basketball and football – where people from different groups and classes interact with the same cultural form in different (often technologically mediated) ways. In this respect, Bourdieu's is a *social* rather than a *cultural* critique of sport. A third reason why Bourdieu's otherwise generative work on sport does little to help explicate James's understanding of the racial significance of sport is even more fundamental. It goes to Bourdieu's understanding of sport as

reproducing and reinforcing dominant social hierarchies and unequal relations of power.

Although he sees social life as profoundly conflicted and contested and clearly sees himself as a critic of these arrangements, Bourdieu tends to see sport as playing an essentially conservative role in reproducing dominant social hierarchies and relationships. This is the case not only because of the social differentiation and separation generated by sporting practices but also because Bourdieu seems to adopt the traditional leftist line that the investment of the working masses in various sporting practices distracts them away from broader social inequities and injustices. Even stronger, Bourdieu has portrayed sport as part of a complete and continuous system of working-class containment derived directly from its original form and function for boys and young men in elite English public schools (see 1978, p. 365). Bourdieu comes to these conclusions (which parallel those that others have drawn with respect to race) for what I think are mainly practical or empirical reasons rather than theoretical ones: that is, those having to do with the rigid class structure of French society, his central empirical case. But whatever the reason, these formulations seriously limit the usefulness of Bourdieu's model for understanding the independent and potentially progressive social force of sport, especially with respect to James's animating concerns about racism and colonialism and the struggle against them.

Bourdieu and his racial reflectionist followers focus primarily (if not exclusively) on the ways in which the social organization of the sports-world maps onto or even matches the social organization of the society taken as a whole. That is to say, such critics focus on social injustices inside and directly surrounding the world of sport without comparing sport's social composition with that of other organizations and institutions, much less situating them in the context of the structure and organization of the society taken as a whole. The result is that many of the conventional conclusions about the role of sport in contributing and reproducing the broader racial order are little more than trivial observations about sport reproducing or reflecting society's racial problems (recall Frey and Eitzen's conclusion: 'just as racial discrimination exists in society, it exists in sport'). But it is also important to recognize the ways in which the racial organization of sport does not identically replicate the racial order taken as a whole and it is precisely the ways in which it is different – as is the case, for example, for the racial order of cricket in the West Indies – that gives sport much of its independent impact and power.

A recognition of the distinctive and atypical racial organization of cricket in the West Indies is at the core of James's unique understanding of its unique power and possibility. James's view is that cricket did not just passively reflect racial struggles in the colonial order but is, or at least can be, a site of active resistance and transformative critique. There are

several different aspects to James's understanding of sport as an independent and uniquely progressive influence with respect to racial and national questions. Two of these go back to James's understanding of the cultural prominence of sport and the attention attracted to cricketers themselves. I will discuss them first, and then in the following section turn to a third aspect of James's vision of sport, his sense of what might be called the 'moral structure' of the enterprise itself.

At a very basic level, James believes that the unique racial organization of cricket – the prowess and prominence of otherwise racially marginalized and disempowered West Indians on the playing fields – provided West Indians more generally with an otherwise unparalleled medium of social interaction, communication and self-expression, a source of social solidarity, collective identity and group pride. West Indian teams and star players served as symbols of the entire community, rallying points, a way to establish collective identities and express collective sentiments. This is not to suggest that the social energies enacted in and around cricket were necessarily racially progressive in and of themselves. 'All the shouting and patting on the back of "our boys" doesn't mean a thing to me', James wrote, 'if it cannot be translated into a way of life for them' (p. 110). But it is to point out their political importance in a context that offered few other modes of social organization and affirmation for minority peoples. Robin Kelley (1994), following James Scott, has described some similar formulations as a kind of 'pre-politics': a very sociological appreciation of the social, experiential roots of even the most spontaneous appearing forms of collective behaviour. But for James I would say it is even a bit stronger than this: for him, this active engagement actually was politics insofar as it cultivated, shaped and nurtured the identities, ideas and commitments upon which more institutional politics were based.

For James, this is connected with a deep understanding of the importance of civil society and voluntary public associations. 'I am always in favor of public affairs being carried on by organizations of citizens who are not in any way connected with the government . . . The inherent strength of older countries owes much to the fact that they have had time and opportunities to develop such bodies'. His faith in the collective power of sporting masses may be clearest in his final chapter on the 'welfare state of mind' written some years after the vast bulk of the manuscript was completed, refuting what a number of journalists and reporters had had to say about the supposed hooligans in the riots that had involved international test matches at the time. 'The theory of a few hooligans is not only dangerous but without sense. I know of no instance where a few hooligans have disrupted a major public function, unless they knew or sensed that public opinion was either on their side or at least neutral' (p. 239). James even goes so far as to suggest that the remarkable accomplishments of West Indian cricketers were derived

from the organizing function they served for their community: 'It was not mere skill. [The Trinidad cricketers] played as if they knew that their club represented the great mass of black people in the island' (p. 55). But its primary impacts had to do with the people whom these players represented. As James says of the great Wilton St. Hill: 'performing *in excelsis* in a sphere where competition was open . . . was a demonstration that atoned for a pervading humiliation and nourished pride and hope' (p. 93). West Indian cricketers were political because their visibility, their playing style and their success marked them as unmatched public representatives of and for racial issues. This is why style – performance and presentation of self – was so critical for James.¹¹

A second aspect of James's sense of the unique racial force of sport has to do with what might be called (borrowing from Bourdieu's larger milieu) the cultural or 'symbolic capital' of sport. This comes through powerfully in James's extensive discussion of the great early twentieth-century West Indian cricket star, Constantine. This was a man (one of James's own first and great benefactors) whose 'abiding ambition' was 'to use his reputation and the financial competence it gave him as a means of advancing the cause of the West Indian people' (p. 119). Constantine worked toward these ends, on the one hand, by providing guidance and leadership for the masses he inspired through his performance within the boundaries of the game (James no less than other West Indians). And Constantine was not just a representative to his own people; he also represented his people to others outside the colony. James, in fact, accompanied the star on a famous tour in Great Britain designed to call attention to the situation in their homeland.

At a very concrete level, Constantine's athletic resources obviously provided the financial means for the speaking tour itself. They also helped to finance the publication of James's *The Case for West Indian Self-Government*, one of the earliest and most successful political tracts the young writer would ever publish. But cricket afforded more than just concrete, material resources. 'Constantine by his cricket, by the demeanor of himself and his wife . . . generated enormous interest in the West Indies and West Indians' (p. 117). And it was not just that his reputation allowed Constantine to bring his political views to a captive audience as it did on his speaking tour with James. More than a captive audience, James and Constantine discovered an interested and sympathetic audience through the common ground that sport provided. James discovered this in his own public speaking: 'Seasoned with a cricketing metaphor or two, they were always uproariously welcomed and put us all back on the home ground' (p. 118).

Taken together, these points suggest that sport afforded self-conscious and politically committed racial activists both a forum and a set of resources to use in drawing attention to their cause. It is a point I have gone to some lengths to describe in my own study of the 1968 African

American Olympic protest movement (Hartmann in press). In that case, African American Olympians and their associates used the national visibility and voice afforded them by their sport celebrity to call attention to the deep and persistent problems of American race relations in the immediate post-Civil Rights era. 'I am', as basketball star Lew Alcindor put it, 'simply using what I have' (Edwards 1969, p. 53). Although their message was not received as they might have wanted or expected, these African American athletes found in sport a unique platform for speaking out on issues of racial inequality in an era where such statements were increasingly infrequent and ineffective.

Cricket as a moral practice

Almost all of what I have said so far holds, at least in theory, for a variety of popular cultural forms: music, dance, film, etc. But James was convinced that there was something about cricket that was even more particular and that made it a uniquely progressive social force. That quality had to do with what I might call the 'moral structure' of the game: the ideals of meritocracy, competition, respect for the rules, loyalty and such embodied in the playing of the game itself.

These ideals, elaborated in a paper by Mark Kingwell (1995) entitled, 'Keeping a Straight Bat', were important for James in several different respects. Perhaps most obviously, cricket's values, norms and standards were part of what allowed West Indians who faced prejudice and discrimination everywhere else in society to participate in and excel at cricket in the first place. 'Here, on the cricket field, if nowhere else', James wrote, 'all men in the island are equal' (p. 55). In this sense, cricket's moral order was essentially egalitarian and democratic. Connected with this, these ideals had the larger, if unintended effect of casting a shadow on the established racial-colonial regime itself. They highlighted what James describes as the 'contrast between the *ideal* [of democracy] and the *real* [of racism and colonialism]'. As sport sociologist Mike Messner (1992) put it, '[T]he game provided a context in which the contradiction of racism and colonial domination were revealed for all to see' (p. 11). James's conviction of the built-in, moral-democratic content and character of cricket – and here certainly of sport more generally – helps account for why he opposed the boycott of South African international sports teams long after such a position was fashionable. 'A pitiless light would have been thrown on the irrationality and stupidity of apartheid' (p. 239).

In a certain sense, these ideas (or ideals) resemble Geertz's useful depiction of culture as a 'model of and a model for' action in the social world. But where Geertz's conception of modelling was inherently conservative and reproductive (it was, as I alluded to above, a model in the sense of to copy or emulate, thus serving to reproduce how things

are), James gives specific, progressive content and import to the notion as a model of and especially for social life. The notion of model as it would be applied to James would be that of a model in an abstract, ideal sense: a moral ideal that stood outside of and thus put demands upon the social world as it currently existed. Model, in this sense, was an ethical standard to which to aspire. This formulation also invokes Loïc Wacquant's (1992) depiction of boxing's appeal for young African American men in inner-city Chicago. Boxing appealed to these young men, Wacquant suggests, not because it reflected the disorder and disorganization of life in an impoverished, desolate community but precisely because it presented an alternative that was relatively structured and orderly. Boxing, in Wacquant's description, was an island of order, stability and predictability in an ecological sea of chaos, crime, poverty and drugs.

The moral structure and democratic impulse of cricket was marked for James not only by a formal, structural equality but also by a deep and intuitive sense of the self-discipline and individual morality that was required to make this competitive system work, the moral character and social style required to play the game (not to mention live a good life). James described this early in the book when recalling his early childhood initiation into the culture of the game:

We were a motley crew. The children of some white officials and white business men, middle-class blacks and mulattos, Chinese boys, some of whose parents still spoke broken English, Indian boys, some of whose parents could speak no English at all, and some poor black boys who had won exhibitions or whose parents had starved and toiled on plots of agricultural land and were spending their hard-earned money on giving the eldest boy an education. Yet rapidly we learned to obey the umpire's decision without question, however irrational it was. We learned to play with the team, which meant subordinating your personal inclinations, and even interests, to the good of the whole. We kept a stiff upper lip in that we did not complain about ill-fortune. We did not denounce failures, but "Well tried" or "Hard luck" came easily to our lips'. We were generous to opponents and congratulated them on victories, even when we knew they did not deserve it. We lived in two worlds. Inside the classrooms the heterogeneous jumble of Trinidad was battered and jostled and shaken down into some sort of order. On the playing field we did what ought to be done. Every boy did not observe every rule. But the majority of boys did. The best and most-respected boys were precisely the ones who always kept them (p. 25).

Obviously one thing that stands out in this passage is the way in which cricket functioned to unify this 'motley crew' of young boys who were so different from each other in so many ways. But what is more important

for my analysis (and easier to overlook) are the moral terms in and through which James says they came together. So deeply embedded in the practice of the game where these ideals for James and his schoolboy friends (and so deeply invested in them were the boys) that he writes that he would sooner have lost a finger than compromise or violate the rules of this code of conduct.

In the contemporary, post-civil rights, post-colonial era, it is easy to be cynical or sceptical about the progressive utility of such abstract, universalist norms and values – the Olympic historian John Hoberman (1986), for example, has written derisively of the movement's 'universal amorism'. However, even though he was a lifelong critic of liberal democracy, James was not so pessimistic. On the one hand, he seemed to believe these ideals provided moral standards or guidelines for privileged groups to (try to) live up to, that compelled them to make changes in the social world as it was (which was certainly another reason for the effectiveness of the cricketing metaphors and stories James and his pal Constantine deployed to such great affect on their trip to Britain). Perhaps more importantly for James, these ideals inspired those who were exploited and disadvantaged to stand up for their rights as citizens and human beings. Again, going back to the points about art and drama made above, I want to emphasize that for James sport didn't just reflect and reproduce racial tensions. It highlighted them and intensified their absurdity precisely because of the ways in which cricket allowed them not only to be abstractly understood but physically and emotionally experienced. 'My Puritan soul burnt with indignation at injustice in the sphere of sport', he says in one memorable passage (p. 65). Finally, for James, the democratic sensibility cultivated in sport also generated a deep commitment to social change and certain kind of personal and collective discipline required for effective collective action. If cricket afforded a form of cultural capital that could be mobilized by representative leaders, in other words, it also afforded for the masses, in James's view, the kind of personal self-discipline required for any kind of effective social movement or collective action.

There is, of course, a very real irony in all this. For such considerations of morality, equality and self-discipline were a larger part of the reason why cricket was introduced to the colonial subjects by British colonialists in the first place: to make proper subjects of them, to instil British discipline and cultivate British character, to 'colonize consciousness' as the anthropologists John and Jean Comaroff (1991) might put it (Cf. Stoddart 1988).¹² Yet, at the same time, this British consciousness and morality also helped to reveal and expose the contradictions of British colonialism and generate meaningful opposition to and resistance against them. Messner (1992) summarizes: 'On the one hand, public schools – especially [through] cricket – taught middle class mulatto (mixed race) West Indian boys and young men the value of "Puritanism"

and “moral restraint” as well as the general superiority of British culture’ (p. 11). As a result, many West Indian males like James had ‘British tradition’ soaked deep in them. But at the same time, this culture, liberal and democratic as it was, contained the seeds of its own resistance.¹³

What is perhaps most important in all this is that James did not come to see his experiences in sport as examples or reflections of broader racial and class exclusions and discriminatory practices he learned about later in life. Rather, James insists he learned to recognize, understand and combat social injustices, both class and race-based, in and through his experiences in sport. James, in other words, did not go into cricket with his politics but came to his politics out of cricket. Sport actually generated a tremendous degree of new understanding and commitment to action. ‘Cricket’, James wrote in what is probably the book’s most memorable and oft-quoted passages, ‘had plunged me into politics long before I was aware of it. When I did turn to politics I did not have too much to learn’ (p. 65).

Is sport really all that? Limitations and qualifications

James’s belief in the powerful and inherently progressive social force of cricket is not unheard of in the sporting world. Quite the contrary, sport idealists and cultural conservatives have trumpeted such ideas about sport for years, especially with respect to race (see Hartmann 2000, pp. 332–34). What is unique about the general theory of race and sport relations that might be derived out of his analysis of cricket is not what it is, but rather where or from whom it comes: namely, from a radical social critic who was profoundly sensitive to the problems of both race and cultural hegemony in contemporary Western and colonized societies. James’s position, it needs to be reiterated, stands in stark contrast to the vast majority of the critical scholarship on sport that has been produced at least in the United States since the 1960s. Though some of these scholars might agree with James that sport is a relatively autonomous social force, most have argued that racial inequalities and injustices are not so much challenged and overcome in sport as they are reproduced, reinforced and even exacerbated there (for a full review, see Hartmann 2000). It is, I think, useful, both for our understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of James’s thinking and for our understanding of the relationships between sport and race more broadly, to situate the ideas explicated in *Beyond a Boundary* in this context.

I have already mentioned that sociologists have conclusively demonstrated that the institutions of sport have often not lived up to the high, anti-racist democratic ideals often associated with them. But there is much more to it than that. Indeed, in recent years American sport scholars have emphasized the ways in which sporting practices in the U.S. have actually cultivated, exacerbated and reproduced racial stereotypes

themselves. One of the most established critiques focuses the inherent physicality of sporting practices. This claim, articulated most recently and provocatively in John Hoberman's *Darwin's Athletes* (1997), is that the athletic success of African Americans does not discredit racial assumptions about inherent African American inferiority. Rather, because of sport's de facto association with bodies and the mind/body dualisms at the core of Western culture, African American athletic excellence serves to reinforce racist stereotypes by grounding them in essentialized, biological terms where athletic prowess is believed to be inversely associated with intellectual and/or moral depravity.

James would certainly have had a response to this critique. After all, he prefigures scholars such as Harry Edwards or Loïc Wacquant (a student of Bourdieu's) who have argued, convincingly, that athletic excellence is based as much on hard work and deep, intellectual understanding as in natural or genetic endowments. (James's understanding of these points comes out especially in his chapter 10 discussion of Constantine's athletic brilliance cited above.) However, I think James would have had a more difficult time with a second variation on this theme of cultural containment and racial reproduction: namely, the argument that the media-based celebration and commodification of excellence in sport can actually come to reproduce and reinforce deeply held cultural stereotypes of racial difference.

Articulated in the last decade or so by scholars such as Cheryl Cole and David Andrews, this critique derives from a deep critical understanding of the role mass-mediated, market-based cultural forms such as sport play in generating contemporary racial images and ideologies. At the core of this work is a recognition of the enormous gap between the social position and racial experiences of highly visible and often highly paid African American celebrities and entertainers as compared with the vast majority of African Americans – and the fact that many mainstream, middle-class Americans are unable or unwilling to realize this disjuncture. In this context, African American athletes come to serve as what Andrews (1996), borrowing from the French theorist Jacques Derrida, calls 'floating racial signifiers': images that are dynamic and complex and, because they are thoroughly disconnected from social life, can be interpreted in virtually any way an audience wants. Given the persistence of race and racism in American culture (a structural condition the importance of which cannot be overstated), sport images thus tend to serve one of three essentially conservative or reproductive racial functions. One is that attention to African American athletic success can deflect attention away from, distort or minimize the more general and widespread problems of racial inequality, discrimination and racism itself. Secondly and even worse, the cultural prominence of African American athletes can be used to excuse or legitimate existing racial inequalities by making it seem as if there were no fundamental barriers standing in the way of

African American mobility and assimilation. If in sport, the implicit thinking goes, why not in other social spheres? The third point has to do with the claim that images of African American athletes are thoroughly racialized, indelibly linked with the racial stereotypes that permeate the culture no matter what other symbolic functions they may serve.

This latter point is important to discuss a bit further as it runs counter to many of our standard popular and scholarly conceptions of racism and prejudice. We tend to think of racism and prejudice negatively, in terms of beliefs and behaviours that exclude and privilege one group over another. Yet the images of African American athletes that appear in the American mass media and popular culture are ostensibly positive, even celebratory and flattering. Cheryl Cole and her colleagues (with Denny 1994; with Andrews 1996) have developed this argument in detail by examining how media portrayals and the cultural commodification of African American athletes typically exaggerates their social difference, on the one hand, and how quickly the celebration of racial differences can turn into a condemnation of social deviance on the other (see also Page 1997). In one of her most provocative papers, in fact, Cole (1996) argues that there is a prevailing cultural logic that links, albeit by inversion, racial images in sport with racial images having to do with delinquency, crime and violence.

There are other ways to think of the cultural paradoxes and ironies that surround the presentation and consumption of images of African American athletes in American culture as well. For example, following Eric Lott's (1993) seminal study of blackface minstrelsy, one could also see this formation through the lens of white desire which projects images of exotic difference onto African American athletes and turns them into sources of inspiration and profit, on the one hand, and at the same time mystifying the historical and institutional sources of racial oppression and absolving whites of responsibility for it. But the critical point in all these critiques – which are less about sport itself than about the power and pervasiveness of racism – is that what seems to be 'positive' about such cultural images to unreflective consumers tends to be exaggerated and one-dimensional, so stripping African American athletes of agency and working to reinforce imagined racial traits and characteristics. In a way that seems to cut directly against a number of James's crucial insights, sport is thus revealed as part of a complicated cultural system which often ironically finds expression in the celebration and consumption of images of racial difference itself.

It is possible, I believe, to reconcile these phenomena and insights within the more general theoretical frame for thinking about race and popular culture that is embodied in James's broader body of scholarship, especially his essays on American culture and society (1993; see also 1992). In these writings, it becomes clear that James was no mere idealist or moralist, no naïve popular cultural romantic. Consider his critique of

American popular culture in the 1930s.¹⁴ American popular culture of the period was, in James's view, a site for liberation and individualism in a world otherwise experienced as restrictive and constraining. This was the case for movie stars and celebrities who seem to 'live grandly and boldly', but applied also to lawbreakers and deviants in the movies whose stories 'allow audiences to release the bitterness, hate, fear and sadism which simmer just below the surface' (cited in Lipsitz 1998, p. 111) of regular, everyday life. However, these cultural forms were also, for James, deeply, if not tragically ironic, not just because of mystification and misrecognition (the conventional line among sport scholars today) but also because the masses actually resented (at a deep unconscious level) the freedoms they projected onto their erstwhile heroes. James's vision of popular culture was thus marked by a strange mix of 'adoration' and 'murderous rejection'. It was a perversion endemic to modern, mass, capitalist societies, according to James, both because of the reification of the commodity form and because the vast majority of citizen-subjects cannot realize or actualize their deepest desires and dreams under such social arrangements.

It is not difficult, I think, to see how these insights into commodification, mystification and misrecognition can be applied to the more general case of sport in the contemporary world and would thus serve to complicate and extend the vision of cricket that James presents in *Beyond a Boundary*. Indeed, I would venture to guess that not only would James accept many of the recent race-based critiques of sport, but also that his deep, intuitive understanding of such critiques provides the key to James's own often dim views of modern, American sporting forms.

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that such a reconstruction requires a broader and more complicated understanding of the social significance of cricket itself than James could allow or chose to develop in *Beyond a Boundary*. The book, after all, betrays no inkling of the commodification of cricket and has no doubt of its inherent moral-democratic value and make-up. It is important to consider how invested James was in his particular portrayal of cricket and what this may have cost him in a bigger theoretical sense?

One answer to such questions is that the views about how cricket is organized and practised and what progressive effects it can have which James put forward in *Beyond a Boundary* were not intended to be broadly generalizable but instead were developed specifically with respect to the specific case and historical context of West Indian cricket up until the first half of the twentieth century. I think this interpretation is plausible. On the other hand, enough of James's arguments about cricket are formulated in relatively unqualified, general ways, formulations that suggest he did consider *Beyond a Boundary* applicable to all of cricket if not other sporting forms as well. The problem with this broader take is that neither sport in general nor cricket in particular seem to have

maintained the particular democratic cultural values of discipline and internal moral development that James saw as so important.

This is a point the cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has made in his important book *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (1996). Appadurai, following James, acknowledges that cricket is a particularly 'hard cultural form' based upon a Puritan moral system that 'changes those who are socialized into it more readily than it is itself changed' (p. 90). Nevertheless, with the benefit of 30-some years of historical experience, Appadurai also points out that as cricket has been transported around the world it has been profoundly indigenized and decolonized, thus 'emptying out' (MacAloon 1995) the cultural content James so much associated with the structure and practice of the sport. Anthropologist Susan Brownell (1995) has described a similar process for Western sport in China and it is easy enough to see how racial minorities in the United States have changed the character, content and aesthetic of many American sporting practices. Nelson George's (1993) provocative description of basketball as having a uniquely African American aesthetic in post-Civil Rights American culture comes immediately to mind (see, also, Wideman's more recent, literary treatment [2001]). Appadurai, of course, sees this as a necessary if even essentially progressive development, one that actually accentuates and intensifies sport's significance as 'contested racial terrain' in contemporary global culture.¹⁵

An even deeper blindspot for James may be his understanding of and even faith in the democratic ideology he believes is contained, cultivated and conveyed in sport culture. I am thinking here of the claims advanced by recent critical scholarship on race and whiteness which suggest that democratic discourse and ideology is itself inherently racialized owing to the unavoidable social limitations of their claims to abstract, universal citizenship. Racial categories and classifications are, as David Theo Goldberg (1993) has argued, built into the cultural structure of Western thought and social practice (see also: Lipsitz 1998, especially chapter 8). It is easy to push this argument too far, but my own work on the 1968 African American Olympic protest movement (cited above) has been influenced by this line of thinking. Extending from MacAloon's ritual analyses (1982), I have argued that the political statements of these athletes were rejected and condemned because their calling attention to collectivist grievances and structural inequalities (rather than just barriers to individual opportunity and mobility) threatened to disrupt otherwise comfortable homologues among sport culture and liberal democratic ideologies. The point here is that there are colour-blind, individualist ideals at the root of much liberal democratic theory and practice that make it difficult, especially for the privileged, to even recognize racial categories and inequalities, much less provide mechanisms to address them.

One could go even further to argue that this commitment to Western-democratic ideals depends upon (or at least has an unfortunate habit of falling into) masculine assumptions about how collective action and meaningful social change are conceived and created (i.e., with an emphasis on competition, material rewards, heroic leadership and personal self-sacrifice). Hazel Carby (1998), for instance, makes this argument about James's work taken as a whole. Given sport's masculine ethos and historical domination by males as well as James's uncritical acceptance of the same, the feminist critique is impossible to dismiss. This is not to suggest that the masculine character of sport must be completely separated from issues of race. Quite the contrary, following Ben Carrington (1998), I would want to suggest that the possibilities of racial activism in and around sport can be better understood (and practised) with an attention to gender. One reason is that it is precisely because of its masculine character and its traditional domination by men that sport has provided racial activists an especially potent mantle to leverage against the racial status quo. On the one hand, attending to gender and masculinity cannot only help us see why racially disempowered male athletes can become involved with movements; on the other, it has the additional and final virtue of making it difficult for the male-dominated sporting establishment to dismiss movements without at least acknowledging the specific problems associated with race in the U.S. – this, because of the way the appeal to manhood cuts against sport's otherwise hegemonic and taken-for-granted association with masculinity itself.¹⁶ Indeed, some of the most interesting and exciting work in the sociology of sport today is being done by scholars who are trying to draw race and gender together (Cf. Cole and King 1998; Messner 1992).¹⁷

Conclusion

So James's vision of the social force of cricket in the West Indies cannot and should not be taken as an entirely accurate or complete general theory of the racial force of sport in the modern world. He misses how sport, contrary to its own stated ideals, can be a site for racial exclusion and discrimination. He pays no attention to the ways in which sport's mediated and commodified forms can serve to reinforce rather than resist dominant cultural conceptions of racial difference and can mystify or even legitimate the deeper social sources of racial hierarchies and inequalities. And his optimism about the democratic moral structure of sport (coupled with his ultimate faith in certain conceptions of democracy itself) seems to have limited his ability to imagine how notions of democracy, especially when abstracted from time and social space and turned into race-neutral, color-blind ideals, can be as much a part of the analytic and political problem as its solution.

That having been said, I would nevertheless point out that although

these points may not have figured prominently in James's vision of cricket, they dominate our own thinking about the racial form and force of sport. They are firmly established in contemporary critical thinking about sport and race relations – so firmly established, in fact, that they threaten to overwhelm and thus compromise our understanding of the complexity of the racial form and function of sport. It is this context, to reiterate, that makes James's *Beyond a Boundary* so useful and important. Many of the contemporary critics have not fully appreciated points that James took pains to emphasize and which are still entirely appropriate: the prominent and powerful cultural platform otherwise marginalized and disempowered racial groups are afforded in sport; the cultural and material capital sport provides for politically-conscious athletic figures; the democratic moral conceptions so crucial to sport's own conception of itself. Ultimately, therefore, what should be emphasized about James's vision is not that it is incomplete or even incorrect but rather that it can complement and extend our understanding of the 'contested racial terrain' that is sport.

And if bringing James's radical, progressive vision of the racial force of cricket into the picture affords us a fuller understanding of the complicated and consequential relationships between race and sport in contemporary culture, it also has two additional, more specific benefits, one analytical, the other more practical or even political. On the analytic side, *Beyond a Boundary* ultimately directs us toward modes of social scientific engagement that are not abstract but more cultural, more grounded and more ethnographic – by which I mean, that take the meaning and order of sport as understood and experienced by those who directly engage it seriously (Cf. MacAloon 1992; see also Morgan 1994). Sport, in this critical historical and ethnographic mode, is thus understood to have the possibility of producing multiple and multifaceted social impacts, impacts that are structured and determined not only by the social organization of sport but also by the (variable) meaning and significance that social actors attribute to the social form itself.

The implication with respect to agency, engagement and politics is embedded deeply and throughout *Beyond a Boundary* as well as in all of James's life and writings: it is that if contested social spaces are to have truly progressive impacts in the social world, they must be understood properly and acted upon deliberately. Resistance and social change, in other words, are neither automatic nor inevitable; they must be brought about by self-conscious, deliberate social actors. If James's optimism about the autonomous and potentially progressive racial force of sport seems misplaced, this impression may have as much to do with our own sense of the futility of meaningful politics and social struggles as it does with the social realities of sport itself. It seems, at least to me, a possibility well worth considering.

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Notes

1. I am using the term 'critical race scholars' in the manner suggested in the title of Essed and Goldberg's (2002) recent edited collection. More broadly than the specialized body of legal scholarship which bears a similar title, critical race theory is intended to capture 'a specific theoretical disposition' that puts race and racism at the centre of critical theories of social and political theory of modernity (p. 4). It is 'critical' in the sense that Craig Calhoun (1995) refers to theory which breaks with descriptions of reality and instead attempts to engage the world and act within it and upon it.
2. There are at least two features of James's scholarship on race, resistance and revolution that mark and distinguish it from more conventional twentieth-century critical theory. One has to do with its emphasis on agency and understanding of the masses: the ways in which, as Robin Kelley (1994) has put it, James's work 'anticipated [and, in certain ways, outstripped, rather than followed] the "history from below" of E. P. Thompson and his followers in the 1960s' (p. 5). The second was James's deep intuitive grasp of the importance of popular cultural texts and practices in the construction of identities and movements, an understanding that allowed him to be attentive to racial and national formations on their own terms rather than reducing them to social and economic categories of 'interests' and 'ideas'.
3. In his introduction to the American edition of *Beyond a Boundary*, for example, the *New York Times* sportswriter Robert Lipsyte (1983, pp. xiii–xiv), suggests that certain facets of American sport – the boisterous taunting of spectators at baseball games or his incredulity at the national basketball scandal of the 1950s – may have eluded James. Here, however, it should also be noted that the great radical historian and sports fan George Rawick (1986) describes the baseball reporting in *Correspondence* as 'particularly fine and laced with comments of much historical and sociological insight' (p. 235).
4. Kingwell (1995, p. 362) claims this line can be traced to the great cricket writer Neville Cardus.
5. A personal anecdote offers another illustration. It goes back a couple of years when I was preparing to offer a special workshop on Olympic sport for graduate students interested in international and global issues. I mentioned the course to one of my colleagues (not a sport scholar or aficionado of sports). Our conversation put him in mind of an 'experience' he had had as a graduate student in the 1960s that he had never quite fully processed or got over. Apparently, my colleague and his classmates and friends had helped to arrange a campus visit for a radical, post-colonial scholar they had heard a great deal about only to discover, much to their confusion and dismay, that this scholar wanted only to talk about cricket upon his arrival. The protagonist of the story, it turned out, was none other than James himself.

6. For a discussion which ties Geertz's formulation to the sporting form of rock climbing, see MacAloon and Csikszentmihalyi (1975). In an important subsequent essay, MacAloon (1982) used the metaphor of 'double vision' to explore further the implications of the paradox of serious-play with respect to the symbolic role of sport and the Olympic Games in particular in contemporary American culture.

7. It may be worth noting that the study of sport – more specifically, of the knowledge and understanding necessary to successfully play a sport – has provided one of the most important social practices by which contemporary sociologists have tried to 'understand understanding' as something more than a strictly conscious, deliberate and wilful act, as a complex process of bodies and minds interacting in the world. It is no accident that some of the most important theoretical expressions of this deep, embodied conception of knowledge (such as Anthony Giddens' notion of structuration, Bourdieu's understandings of habitus and practice or Norbert Elias's figurational sociology) come from social theorists who were at one time sportsmen. Sport, play and bodily activity all provided the intellectual capital from which such theoretical explications have departed and been derived (Cf. Jarvie and Maquire 1994).

8. Just how much 'knowledge of the elements' any participant requires for the form to have the dramaturgical effects James describes is an open question. In a stimulating paper Neil Lazarus (1992) takes James's description of the technical complexity of cricket (James calls it 'a game of high and difficult technique. If it were not it could not carry the load of social response and implications which it carries' [p. 34]) as evidence that James would not see other sporting forms as cultural equivalents. If this is true, I believe it would be one of the few instances in which I believe James's fascination with cricket may have got the better of him. Indeed, in a little-known piece entirely independent of *Beyond a Boundary*, Joe Gusfield (1987) offers a sketch of the agnostic qualities of American athletic competition that has all of the dramaturgical qualities and characteristics James highlights. For other, essentially dramaturgical treatments of sport see, MacAloon (1981, 1984, 1990) and Brownell (1995). These works stand in stark contrast to the dominant theoretical framework offered by sociologist/historian Allen Guttman in *From Ritual to Record* (1978) in that they conceive of sport as intimately and dialectically connected with social structure rather than emphasizing how increasing specialization and rationalization transform the quest for excellence in sport into an end in and of itself.

9. I should note that Geertz has revised and reworked his thinking on some of these matters in recent years in the light of these critiques. See, Geertz (1988).

10. This general critical orientation is shared by many feminists working in and around sport who have followed Robert Connell (1987) in seeing sport as an arena of 'hegemonic masculinity', and rightly insisted that its cultural qualities are deeply connected with its twin social characteristics of being dominated by men and serving as a kind of 'male preserve' (Dunning 1986). For works that grapple with these issues, see: Willis (1982); Therberg (1985); Bryson (1987); Messner (1992); Whitson (1994), and the collection edited by Birrell and Cole (1994).

11. Jeffrey Sammons (1990, chapter 7) and Mike Marqusee (1999) use the case of Muhammad Ali in a way I would characterize as consistent with the points I am making about James here. It should be noted that Marqusee preceded this work with two volumes on cricket: *War Minus the Shooting: A Journey Through South Asia during Cricket's World Cup* (1996) and *Anyone but England: Cricket and the National Malaise* (1994).

12. This in mind, I would probably want to take issue with the portrayal of cricket as a colonizing tool in the recent Indian film 'Lagaan'. There, the game of cricket is foisted upon the local people by a brutish and egotistic English commander whose intent is purely to demonstrate his physical power, prowess and domination; he gives no thought to turning the locals into proper subjects with some degree of respect for the authority and legitimacy of British rule. A media portrayal that might represent this point (suggested to me by Dave Roediger) is the Channel 4 (GB) tribute to C. L. R. James which focused on the inter-sections of cricket, race and fair play.

13. There is, I think, a useful parallel here with Eugene Genovese's (1976, pp. 159–284) classic and controversial portrayal of the paradoxical social function of Christianity under conditions of slavery. Initially, according to Genovese, Christianity was foisted upon the slaves by masters who believed its doctrines of submissiveness and order would instil discipline and a respect for authority. However, the slaves soon discovered another tradition within Christian theology and iconography – namely, the stories of Moses and Jesus Christ himself, narratives of suffering and resistance and justice that not only sustained them but in numerous cases inspired and emboldened them against their masters and the oppression of slavery itself. 'No matter how obedient – how Uncle Tomish – Christianity made a slave', as Genovese put it, 'it also drove deep into his soul an awareness of the moral limitations of his submission, for it placed a master above his own master and thereby dissolved the moral and ideological ground on which the very principle of absolute human lordship must rest' (p. 165). Christianity was thus a complicated and oft-times contradictory cultural practice. One is also reminded here of the powerful and yet contradictory racial force of Christian churches in building and bringing about the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s despite being an institution widely recognized as among the most segregated in American life.

14. This discussion draws directly from Lipsitz (1998).

15. Here it is important to acknowledge that James did see the necessity and indeed inevitability of cultural change and innovation in cricket as in all forms of sport (witness his virtuoso chapters on W. G. Grace and the extended excerpts from his column on styles of cricket, pp. 213–19). But the point is that he saw these stylistic innovations as occurring entirely within the established structure of the sport rather than as fundamentally transforming the meaning, order and organization of the game.

16. As non-sport specialist Kobena Mercer (1994) writes: 'As a major public arena, sport is a key site of white male ambivalence, fear and fantasy. The spectacle of black bodies triumphant in rituals of masculine competition reinforces the fixed idea that black men are "all brawn and no brains", and yet, because the white man is beaten at his own game – football, boxing, cricket, athletics – the Other is idolized to the point of envy. . . . The ambivalence cuts deep into the recess of the white male imaginary' (pp. 178–79).

17. An excellent example of such work can be found in a paper the sports historian Jeffrey Sammons (1995) has on Muhammad Ali. Focusing on Ali's 'blatant displays of black cultural styles in body and mouth', especially his 'wolfing' or 'trash talking', his self-promotional poetry, and his trademark Ali Shuffle, Sammons calls attention to the way in which Ali inverted the traditional masculine culture of boxing by 'harping on his good looks', calling himself 'pretty' rather than 'handsome', and playing up his emotions, often to the point of hysterics. Sammons calls this Ali's 'dandification' of boxing. All of this, according to Sammons, must be set in opposition to 'the pattern set by the humble, unassuming, no-frills demeanour and style of Joe Louis. If Louis stood for quiet dignity then Ali represented loud arrogance. If Louis was blue-collar then Ali was somewhere between zoot suit and dinner jacket' (p. 161).

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