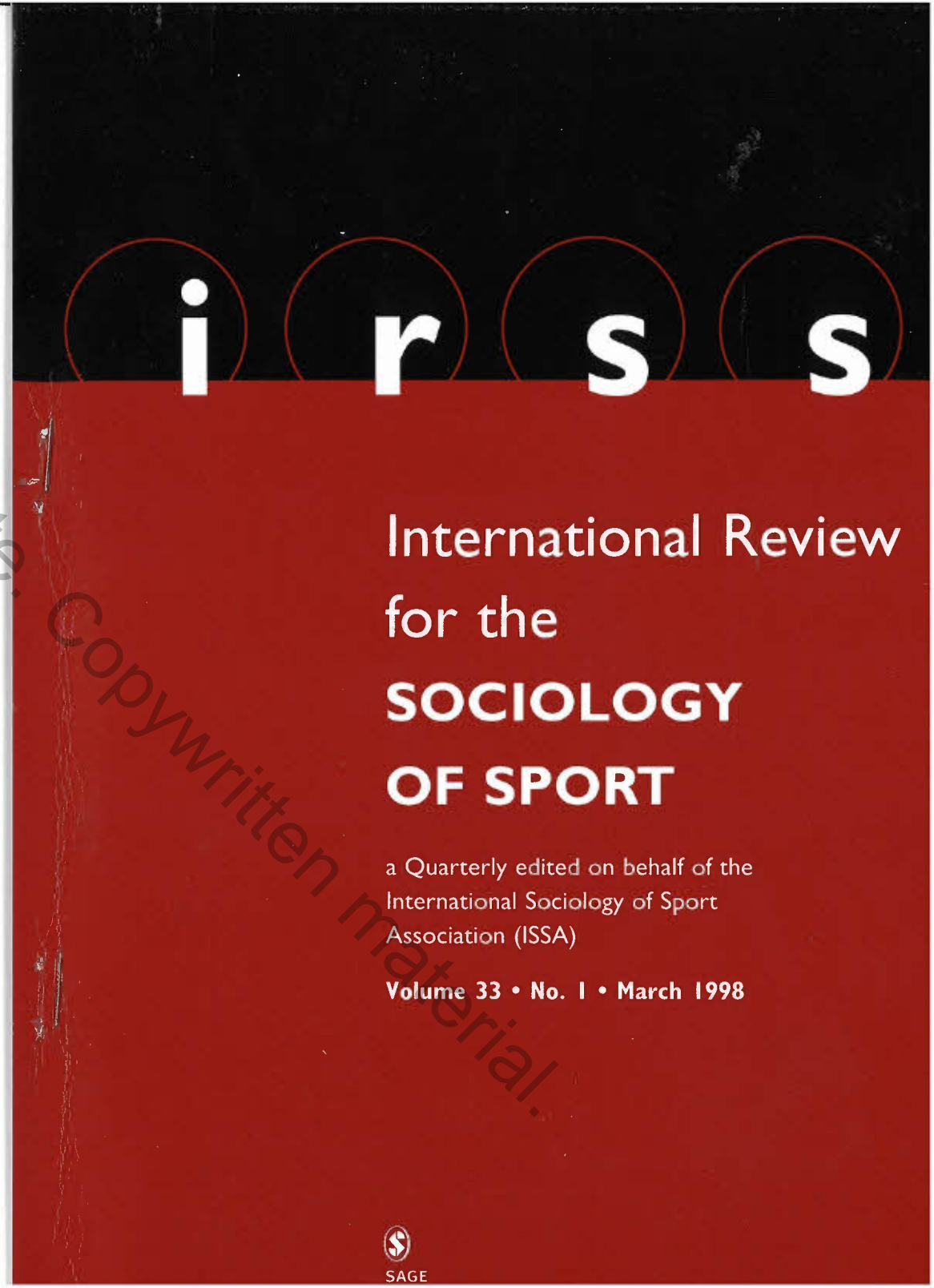

gender politics of media workers and critics. She is co-author, with David Roediger, of 'Hertz, Don't It: Becoming Colorless and Staying Black in the Crossover of O.J. Simpson' from the book, *Birth of a Nation'hood: Gaze, Script and Spectacle in the O.J. Simpson Case* (1997), edited by Toni Morrison and Claudia Brodsky Lacour.

REVIEW SYMPOSIUM (continued)

reviewed by **Douglas Hartmann**
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The unparalleled prominence and prowess of African-American athletes in the United States is certainly one of the most striking features of a society otherwise marked by deep and abiding racial inequalities and injustices. This dramatic contrast between the experiences of African-American athletes and those of their non-athletic counterparts gives rise to at least two kinds of social scientific questions. One is of *cause*: how do we account for this striking difference? The other is of *consequence*: what has the success of Black athletes meant for African Americans and race relations in general? It is certainly John Hoberman's answer to the second of these questions — that sport has 'damaged Black America and preserved the myth of race', as announced in the book's subtitle — that marks *Darwin's Athletes* as an important and controversial public document and that accounts for the rather substantial media attention the book has so far received. But what makes the book intellectually significant and provocative (if deeply problematic, in my view) is the way Hoberman comes to this conclusion by linking the question of consequence with that of cause.

Hoberman's argument, as I understand it, is focused around one basic and very fundamental aspect of athletic activity: its use of the body, its inherently physical nature. The reason that sport is a negative racial force, according to Hoberman, has to do with the way in which western culture separates mental and physical attributes and privileges the former over the latter. Also at work here is what Hoberman calls the 'Law of Compensation': the belief that there is an 'inverse relationship between mind and muscle, between athletic and intellectual development' (p. 225). For Hoberman such mind/body dualisms dictate that all Black athletic achievement, whether the result of actual physiological difference or not (Hoberman is deliberately ambiguous), is necessarily contained within and thus contributes to an essentialized identity that is mentally and even morally inferior. As he puts it in one place: '[T]he apparent intractability of our images of African physicality suggests that destroying the myth of the black body will require eliminating the black athletes as a charismatic role model, precisely because he will always be a creature of the colonial imagination' (p. 119). This imagination is, I should note, one that Hoberman believes persons of color are trapped in as much as anyone. A large portion of the first and certainly most controversial section of the book is devoted to demonstrating how African Americans themselves have bought into and perpetuated this racialized identity

In its broad outlines Hoberman's is an important and intuitively appealing argument, one that no serious student of sport, race, and human physiology will be able to ignore. Indeed, with its wealth of historical detail I suspect *Darwin's Athletes* will be a useful and ready resource, perhaps even a standard source. Hoberman also makes many interesting points along the way. In the concluding chapters, for example, he argues that the 'liberal' (or politically correct) unwillingness even to engage physiological theories of Black athletic excellence actually perpetuates racist stereotypes. Even more to the point is Hoberman's understanding of how the cultural fetish surrounding Black bodies (and blackness in general) that emerged with their commercialization and commodification in the late 1970s has intensified and exacerbated the racializing tendencies of western sport. But for all its insight and detail, *Darwin's Athletes* should not be taken as a full theory of race and sport interactions.

Hoberman is certainly correct to call our attention to how sport can function as a powerful symbolic confirmation of racist assumptions. But it is just as certain that sport, race, and the relationships between them are much more complicated and multi-faceted than this one-dimensional, deterministic critique can capture or comprehend. Sport, for instance, is also an *institutional* symbol of the possibilities and limitations of racial change. What made sport such an important and progressive racial force in pre-Civil Rights America was that it was one of the only institutions in the country that afforded African Americans any significant degree of individual opportunity or collective public presence. (In a society increasingly impervious to racism of any sort, this is also why I think sociologists of sport have been so intent upon demonstrating that sport continues to suffer its ill effects.) Practices of sport serve a variety of other racial functions as well: they can provide role models and heroes or serve as a site for community-building. This is not to say sport is always a progressive racial force but rather to point out that it serves — or at least can serve — a variety of racial functions depending upon the contexts and communities in which it is practised.

Hoberman calls attention to many of these functions (especially in his discussion of sport in the pre-Civil Rights era) but for him they are all contained within — and thus hostage to — the idiom of absolute, physiological difference. Unfortunately, his rigid application of this proposition simply doesn't allow him (or us) to appreciate the differential impacts that sport has upon the racial order under different socio-historical conditions. For someone who claims to be writing a 'racial history of modern sport', Hoberman is surprisingly insensitive to the nuances and subtleties of historical change. Even more problematic, this universalist causal claim seems to be rebutted by Hoberman's own evidence; specifically, his discussion in the middle section of the book of how westerners came around to using racist mind/body dualisms only *after* athletes of color began to challenge their athletic supremacy. (Initially, according to Hoberman, colonials had taken their domination in sport as a sign of their racial superiority.) This development suggests that it may not be the physicality of sport that is at the root of the problem but the racialization of institutionalized forms of social practice such as sport. In light of this evidence, in fact, one could imagine a quite different subtitle for Hoberman's book, something like 'how racism damaged

Nowhere is Hoberman less aware of the primacy, pervasiveness, and complexity of White supremacy than in his broadside attacks on Black intellectuals for their tendency only to celebrate African-American athletic achievement. The reason Black intellectuals tend not to be more critical (or openly critical) of sport, in my experience, is that they have a deep, organic understanding of the importance of institutions and practices like sport for their communities in the context of a racialized world that allows them few opportunities to participate and succeed so publicly. This is one respect in which a closer engagement with relevant and well-respected scholarship on race, culture, bodies, blackness, and masculinity would have profited Hoberman immensely. Not only would an engagement with these works have furnished a much deeper understanding of the social context of racism in the United States, they would have afforded a comparative context from which to substantiate Hoberman's claim that sport has become 'the most prominent symbol' of blackness in American culture. What is more, some are increasingly inclined to treat sport in a much more critical fashion than Hoberman seems to realize. To take one notable example, bell hooks in a piece called 'Feminism Inside: Toward a Black Body Politic' (1994), produces a reading of the political significance of black hypermasculinity in sports photographs that not only foreshadows the basic argument of *Darwin's Athletes*, but situates it in the context of a sophisticated and historically nuanced understanding of both the limitations and possibilities of sports imagery for challenging racist stereotypes.

And what is really at stake in all this is not understanding racism but understanding the way in which resisting racism often requires disadvantaged peoples to wage the struggle on and around the very social objects and activities that are also most oppressive to them. This is a difficult and paradoxical point which I do not think Hoberman grasps in its broad theoretical sense or even on his own terms. Indeed, my single biggest disappointment with *Darwin's Athletes* is the inadequacy of its 'post-liberal' approach to the research on athletic achievement and racial physiology. On the one hand, Hoberman seems to believe we need to throw off racialized ways of thinking and social practice of any kind; on the other hand, he says that we must take this research (which necessarily buys into the reality of race from the very beginning) seriously. But he does not give us alternative standards by which to evaluate it. If there is some physiological dimension to Black athletic achievement (a possibility Hoberman says we must consider), it is likely to be small, probably pales in comparison to the social and cultural factors that have gone into its making, and certainly cannot be analyzed in the absence of a much broader understanding of race and racism itself.

In summation, then, I would characterize *Darwin's Athletes* as an important and thought-provoking contribution to our understanding of sport and race but a limited one that, in the final analysis, shares many of the same theoretical shortcomings of conventional sociology of sport approaches. Such critiques, to be sure, provide a much-needed deconstruction of the popular hegemony of the sport-as-positive-racial-force ideology. Yet they do not go any further than this; to put it even stronger, deconstruction is virtually all that they do. These critiques make their points only by exchanging one totalization (that sport is a positive force for racial change) for the other (that it is a negative, impeding one). In

contrast, I would suggest the need for a more complex, multidimensional theory of the relationships between sport and race — one that is critical of the popular ideology of sport as a pure and perfect arena of racial progress, but that tries to grasp its social significance and emancipatory potential for African Americans living in a racist society.

Reference

hooks, b. (1994) 'Feminism Inside: Toward a Black Body Politic', in Thelma Golden (ed.) *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, pp. 127–40. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art.

Douglas Hartmann is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Minnesota. Much of his work is on the intersections of politics, culture, and race, focusing especially on sport. He is co-author with Stephen Cornell of *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World* (1997, Pine Forge Press). He is currently working on a manuscript entitled *Golden Ghettos: The Cultural Politics of Race, Sport, and Civil Rights in the U.S., 1968 and Beyond*. A portion of this work appeared in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (July 1996) under the title 'The Politics of Race and Sport: Resistance and Domination in the 1968 African American Olympic Protest Movement'.

REVIEW SYMPOSIUM (continued)

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Kinesiology, Women's Studies, Criticism & Interpretive Theory, University of Illinois
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Darwin's Athletes, Passionate Attachments, and Modern Power

'Athleticism', writes John Hoberman, 'carries a special authority inside the separate reality of African Americans because it can express black suffering in uniquely dramatic ways' (p. 52). Broadly speaking, the above quote identifies the subject of *Darwin's Athletes*: the relations between the athletic authority, the African-American identity, and what Hoberman refers to as mental habits. Indeed, *Darwin's Athletes* is a timely, ambitious, and well-intentioned effort to supply what its author claims are 'missing knowledges' about the celebrated and lofty status of athletic achievement within the African-American community, the profitability of the sport fixation for white-controlled corporations, and the repercussions of the pervasive anti-intellectual posturing among a generation of African-American youth. In sum, *Darwin's Athletes* seeks to show how African