

Reviewed by Mikal J. Gaines

# *Sporting Blackness: Race, Embodiment, and Critical Muscle Memory on Screen*

by Samantha N. Sheppard.

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As I was reading Samantha Sheppard's incisive new study on Black representation in the modern American sports film, a genre she rightly describes as "conservative," since "structural inequalities can be overcome by a buzzer-beater or a dignified loss," I immediately began imagining how her dynamic interpretive framework, "critical muscle memory," could be activated to examine some of my own favorite sports films.<sup>1</sup> Then, of course, I began scanning the index to see if and how those films would find their way into the discussion. While some of my favorites do receive attention, it became clear that Sheppard's provocative choices—the texts she has selected, the wide breadth and depth of interdisciplinary scholarship that informs her arguments, and the measured methodological moves she makes—are all intended to position *Sporting Blackness: Race, Embodiment, and Critical Muscle Memory on Screen* as a deliberate act of scholarly resistance. The book is largely unconcerned with questions about sports films' box office success or critical reception, and it eschews a wide, comprehensive view of the genre in favor of detailed and sustained analyses of specific texts. Put another way, Sheppard provides not

1 Samantha N. Sheppard, *Sporting Blackness: Race, Embodiment, and Critical Muscle Memory on Screen* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020), 9.

the work we may believe we want but rather the work we *need* by positing an imaginative theoretical paradigm that has compelling implications for future studies of embodied Blackness across media.

Drawing on human kinetics—the study of the body in motion and the forces that act upon it—Sheppard deploys the term *critical muscle memory* to describe how representations of Black sporting bodies “contain embodied, kinesthetic, and cinematic histories that go beyond a film’s diegesis to index, circulate, reproduce, and/or counter broader narratives about Black sporting and non-sporting experiences in American society.”<sup>2</sup> Sheppard therefore presents the Black sporting body as itself a kind of haunted text, an endlessly signifying palimpsest whose power is integral to the sort of story that sports films want to tell even as it also serves as a site of disruption within those very same narratives. In this sense, sports films need the Black sporting body in order to make certain fundamental aspects of the genre legible to audiences. And yet, as Sheppard argues, the Black sporting body also “functions as an unruly historical force that exceeds the generic constraints.”<sup>3</sup> *Sporting Blackness* thus hopes to move beyond reductive treatments of “positive” and “negative” racial representations (“skin in the game”) to inspect “skin in the genre,” a more potent examination of “what Black characters, themes, and cinematic-athletic stylistics do to the sports film in terms of generic modes.”<sup>4</sup> This renewed emphasis on understanding how Blackness is continually conjured up and reconfigured within the particular aesthetic, political, and emotional registers demanded by the sports film feels in concert with Michael Boyce Gillespie’s and Racquel Gates’s recent calls for renewed focus on formal analysis in Black film and media studies.<sup>5</sup>

Sheppard demonstrates the reach of critical muscle memory as an investigative tool across four thoroughly researched chapters and varied case studies. Texts that center basketball and football are her primary focus due to their heightened prominence in the Black public sphere, though Sheppard acknowledges that her hermeneutic could just as easily be applied to films about other sports. Chapter 1, “Historical Contestants in Black Sports Documentaries,” looks at some films that longtime fans of sports docs will immediately recognize and others that are less familiar: *On the Shoulders of Giants: The Story of the Greatest Basketball Team You Never Heard of* (Deborah Morales, 2011), *This Is a Game, Ladies* (Peter Schnall and Rob Kuhns, 2004), *Hoop Dreams* (Steve James, 1994), and *Hoop Reality* (Lee Davis, 2007). What becomes apparent in this opening inquiry—and is further reinforced throughout the book—is that Sheppard intends to use her close readings as more than just evidence for her larger thesis. Instead, they function as a means of critical praxis unto themselves. For it is through the close, formal study of film that

2 Sheppard, 5.

3 Sheppard, 11.

4 Sheppard, 6.

5 See Michael Boyce Gillespie, *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Racquel J. Gates, *Double Negative: The Black Image and Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); and Michael Boyce Gillespie and Racquel Gates, introduction to “Dimensions in Black: Perspectives on Black Film and Media” dossier, *Film Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (2017): 9–11.

Sheppard's voice emerges at its most erudite and distinct; this is also where she demonstrates the concept of critical muscle memory most convincingly. In this way, the form and structure of *Sporting Blackness* does for the study of Black film the same kind of "unruly" work that the Black sporting body does within its respective genre.

Sheppard's choice of case studies similarly acts as a form of methodological resistance. The inclusion of *This Is a Game, Ladies*, for example, facilitates a closer look at the unique gendered entanglements that accompany Black women's sporting bodies within both the documentary itself and the larger, extradiegetic circuits of meaning where the bodies of the Rutgers women's basketball team are transmuted. Sheppard's reading of a highly metatextual moment when Coach C. Vivian Stringer watches herself on HBO's *Real Sports* is especially well rendered and lays the groundwork for themes that she returns to later in chapter 3's more detailed discussion of Black women in sports. And while one expects a film as iconic as *Hoop Dreams* to make an appearance in this chapter, the connections Sheppard traces between it and its lesser-known sequel, *Hoop Reality*, evince an impressive level of continuity in her approach. If many readers might not even know that the second film exists, Sheppard's inclusion of it suggests the need to think through the afterlives of the Black sporting body as it manifests in other spaces in the pop culture imaginary.

Chapter 2, "Racial Iconicity and the Transmedia Black Athlete," unquestionably serves as the book's best display of interdisciplinarity as Sheppard traces transmedia incarnations of former Texas high school football star James "Boobie" Miles. After his tragic tale was first chronicled in H. G. Bissinger's bestselling book *Friday Night Lights: A Town, a Team, a Dream* (1990), the character later appeared in *Friday Night Lights* (Peter Berg, 2004) and was then transposed onto other similar characters, specifically other Black star players Brian "Smash" Williams (Gaius Charles) and later Vince Howard (Michael B. Jordan), in NBC's cult favorite series of the same name (2006–2008; 2008–2011 The 101 Network). Sheppard considers how Miles's tragic injury during his senior year, before making it to college or the NFL, functions as an archetypal example of the Black sporting body's vulnerability. She then traces how his cautionary tale manifests in songs and videos by rapper Big K.R.I.T. As a persona whose legend transects multiple media, Miles represents one of Sheppard's strongest examples of how critical muscle memory performs its meaning-making work. She asserts, "Boobie's sporting history has become memorialized as iconic and familiar, a discourse on exceptionality and failure, and a site of cultural (re)production for those who (re)imagine him in popular culture."<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the chapter is an excellent example of a media phenomenon for which only a truly interdisciplinary understanding of different textual vocabularies would yield the necessary insight. Fortunately, Sheppard reads with fluidity and grace when moving from one interpretation of Miles to the next.

The last two chapters are no less artfully written and no less important to the book's broader themes. In fact, for many readers, it is only upon reading

6 Sheppard, *Sporting Blackness*, 71.

chapter 3, “Black Female Incommensurability and Athletic Genders,” that some of Sheppard’s earlier choices, such as the aforementioned discussion of *This Is a Game, Ladies*, begin to coalesce. More specifically, if Sheppard is right that the Black sporting body creates fundamental obstacles to satisfying the narrative desires that most sports films hold dear, then her readings of Penny Marshall’s *A League of Their Own* (1992), Gina Prince-Bythewood’s *Love & Basketball* (2000), and Jesse Vaughan’s *Juwanna Mann* (2002) in chapter 3 illustrate what is at stake when Black women cannot “coherently signify as athlete and woman simultaneously.”<sup>7</sup> Whereas most critics would likely turn their noses up at a film such as Vaughan’s deeply problematic gender-switch comedy, Sheppard finds productive tensions even in its failings, suggesting that there really are no such things as bad objects of analysis, only uninspired readings.

Chapter 4, “The Revolt of the Cinematic Black Athlete,” concentrates on L.A. Rebellion filmmaker Haile Gerima’s experimental film *Hour Glass* (1971). Like Sheppard’s concluding discussion of “The Fitness of Sporting Blackness,” this last chapter is invested in what happens when the Black sporting body refuses to play and thereby short-circuits the very transactional economies that leave it trapped in a liminal state between polarities of exploitation, exaltation, or expulsion. These final sections provide excellent jumping-off points for further study, as they leave the reader to ponder other fruitful directions for critical muscle memory. Certainly future applications of critical muscle memory might include recent docuseries such as Esquire Network’s *Friday Night Tykes* (2014–2017) or Netflix’s *Last Chance U* (2016–2020) and *Cheer* (2020–). The boxing film, which Sheppard does discuss briefly, also seems like an appropriate genre to expand upon; the *Rocky* series (1976–2006) and the related *Creed* films (Ryan Coogler, 2015; Steven Caple Jr., 2018) constitute one of the, if not the, longest-running, continuous sports film franchises. Even more significantly, all of the films in the franchise are animated by the Black sporting body of Apollo Creed (Carl Weathers) or his afterimage, following the character’s infamous death in *Rocky IV* (Sylvester Stallone, 1985). This is one among a seemingly endless series of Black representational sites awaiting the illuminative power of Sheppard’s approach. Indeed, as a new sourcebook for forward-looking Black studies scholarship and powerful contribution in its own right, *Sporting Blackness* “hauls more than its weight.”<sup>8</sup>

**Mikal J. Gaines** is an assistant professor of English at Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences University. His research areas include African American literature, film, popular culture, horror and gothic studies, and critical theory.

7 Sheppard, 26.

8 Sheppard, 5.