

Introduction

Sporting Blackness and Critical Muscle Memory on Screen

Yes, and the body has memory. The physical carriage hauls more than its weight. The body is the threshold across which each objectionable call passes into consciousness—all the unintimidated, unblinking, and unflappable resilience does not erase the moments lived through, even as we are eternally stupid or everlastingly optimistic, so ready to be inside, among, a part of the games.

—CLAUDIA RANKINE, *Citizen: An American Lyric*

In *Citizen*, Claudia Rankine poetically assesses the racial imaginary, detailing episodic transgressions, microaggressions, and violent acts that are endemic to Black quotidian experiences.¹ Composed of prose-poetry, images from popular culture, and work from Black artists such as David Hammons, Glenn Ligon, and Carrie Mae Weems, *Citizen* is visually punctuated and “thematically unified—its question one of intimacy, its fabric the intersection of social and personal realities, its bruising frame one of race.”² Rankine reflects on tennis icon Serena Williams, who for many is the GOAT (Greatest [Athlete] of All Time). She examines Williams’s on-court rage—her fury and frustration over sporting and other slights—that has her stereotyped as an “angry Black woman,” among other racial tropes. Rankine calls attention to the overt racism and mocking Williams faced from officials, fans, and even her fellow tennis pro and friend Caroline Wozniacki. Williams, as well as her sister Venus, have been subject to an “ambivalent reception in the [white and wealthy] sporting world” of tennis because of their athletic dominance on the court, which has made them outliers as much as outsiders in the sport.³ As Nicole Fleetwood further explicates, their public treatment “uncovers a serious divide in how race, gender, and physical prowess are perceived by black fans of the sisters and the majority of white sports journalists and tennis fans.”⁴ White athletes are thought to embody tennis’s cultural and sporting norms. Through their participation, the Williams sisters contest and transform the narrow ideals associated with the sport in a dramatically public fashion. Rankine describes the years of Williams’s strength and dignity

on the court in the face of individual and institutional hostility as a “kind of resilience appropriate only for those who exist in celluloid.”⁵ Williams, she attests, dwells within representational and discursive spaces specific to Black women’s experiences in American society.

Rankine assesses how Williams’s sporting blackness in the tennis arena, historically an exclusively white space, becomes a site of racial projection, shaped by her identity and play as a kind of athletic enclosure bound by history, celebrity, politics, money, and fear.⁶ Drawing on Zora Neale Hurston’s words—“I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background”—Rankine’s essay produces an affective mapping of Williams’s experiences of “curious calls and oversights” throughout her career, including the incidents at the 2004 and 2009 US Opens.⁷ Indexing a ledger of racial slights against the tennis pro, Rankine suggests that these moments are symptomatic of sporting and systemic issues that trap Williams’s body in a racial imaginary, an unlevel playing field where the rules are applied discriminately against her. She also traces the projection of Williams’s experiences outward: “Every look, every comment, every bad call blossoms out of history, through her, onto you. To understand is to see Serena as hemmed in as any other black body thrown against our American background.”⁸ With Williams, Rankine reminds us that sporting blackness—racial and athletic identity at play—operates within a signifying paradigm and functions as a mode and motor of experiential overlap between the extraordinary Black sports star and the everyday Black person. As the introductory epigraph claims, Williams’s physicality and bearing can be read as historical, even if they are historically unprecedented. This is because the body has memory, carries more than its weight, and keeps score of its encounters. Rankine’s description of race as epiphenomenal, lived largely in quotidian moments and yet experienced via phantasmic projection, suggests a kind of historiography, intra- and intertextuality, and sociality of the Black sporting body.

For example, in an interview with Rankine for the *New York Times Magazine*, Williams conveys a critical assessment of her own physicality, wherein she measures her faults and successes on the court in relation to other Black tennis players, stating: “Zina Garrison, Althea Gibson, Arthur Ashe and Venus opened so many doors for me. I’m just opening the next door for the next person.”⁹ Within her remarks, so lacking in braggadocio, is an enunciation and valorization of Black womanhood; Black sporting history; and the interventions made in, via, and by Black athletes and their skills on the professional tennis court. Williams reads her own athletic achievements and global recognition within a narrative of collective racial progress, one firmly situated

within the genealogy of Black American tennis players, such “that in addition to being a phenomenon, she has come out of a long line of African-Americans who battled for the right to be excellent in such a space that attached its value to its whiteness and worked overtime to keep it segregated.”¹⁰

I draw on Rankine’s essay and interview with Williams because both demonstrate a way to think through not only the sporting and social measure of blackness but also the formal consequences of the Black body as an excessive force that, as evidenced by Williams, is in direct contradistinction to and complicates the overall impression of what sport (and specifically women’s tennis) is and means. Her incantatory excellence—also known as “Black girl magic”—in the sport compulsively exceeds and revises the standards of play that have been established, a surpassing intensity that, as Williams explains, transformed tennis forever, “not because [she and Venus] were welcomed, but because [they] wouldn’t stop winning.”¹¹ As game changers, both sisters’ bodies were cast as anomalous to the sport—not quite right/not quite white for women’s tennis—and, in turn, altered expectations and set new standards for sports in general.¹² During her career, Williams specifically “made a decision to be excellent while still being Serena,” an athletic morphogenesis that is outside the conventional gender and racial constitution and conditioning of the sport.¹³ In other words, Williams’s sporting blackness belies mythic notions of meritocracy and white superiority in tennis and beyond as well as dogged attempts to equate blackness with inferiority, failure, and cheating. She has achieved her stellar and unparalleled athletic career without conforming to white sporting conventions. Rather, she wins blackly, via a virtuosic Black body in all of its cornrowed, catsuited, and Crip-walking glory. As Fleetwood explains, “Williams’s style of playing tennis, her ‘grunting,’ the musculature of her body, and her clothing produce affective responses that play into polarized discourses where such choices are embraced by many of her black and progressive fans while questioned by the normative American public as markers of the black figure’s unwillingness, or even inability, to conform to American and European conventions of sporting, femininity, and social cues.”¹⁴ From her long-standing reign as the Women Tennis Association’s World No. 1 player, her twenty-three and counting Grand Slams, her fashionista tennis outfits, her motherhood and sisterhood, and her most recent controversy at the 2018 US Open where she called the umpire a “liar” and “thief,” Williams’s body compels and challenges us to confront “our investments in the signs that we employ to make sense of her athleticism and embodiment.”¹⁵ In other words, her sporting blackness is a disruptive body-at-work and impresses upon, manipulates, and restructures codification and conventions (figure 1).



FIGURE 1. Serena Williams in her Nike catsuit at the 2018 French Open at Roland Garros. Photo by Jean Catuffe/Getty Images.

In this book, I work within the celluloid, focusing on sports films to analyze their depictions of sporting blackness and to theorize the anatomy of shared embodied experiences in a manner that parallels both Rankine's critical assessment of Williams's embodied histories and the tennis star's assertion of Black lineages and collective achievement (and defeat) against the idea of athletic exceptionalism and a dehistoricized Black sporting body. I also demonstrate how the Black body, thrown against the sharp white background of generic and social conventions that shape pervasive ideas of racial identity, operates as a historical force that exceeds the formal structures and representational strictures of sports films. Because the body's "physical carriage hauls more than its weight," I attend to the freighted racial representations and formal consequences of a study of blackness and historiography grounded in and through the on screen Black sporting body. In doing so, I evaluate the practices of Black memory at work within individual characters, athletes, filmmakers, critics, and audiences/fans, even if they are often at odds with or occluded by dominant film modes and conventions specific to the sports film genre.

FROM SKIN IN THE GAME TO SKIN IN THE GENRE

My purpose in this book is to scrutinize the performative embodiment of blackness that is confirmed and contested by representations of Black athletes in film, specifically, but also sports media and culture more generally. Sports films are not simply narratives about athletes in rule-governed contests; they are also allegorical stories of physical racialization. The sports films under investigation here foreground the disciplined, competitive, excellent, and failing Black body across documentaries, feature-length melodramas and comedies, experimental short films and videos, television series, and music videos. *Sporting Blackness* offers macrocosmic as well as close reads of how narratives become embodied and examines how representations of Black athletes can intervene in and supersede their loaded iconography. I argue that representations of Black sporting bodies contain what I call "critical muscle memories," 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.

The sports film is an under-theorized genre, particularly in terms of race and representation. Much of the scholarship on blackness and sports films focuses on what I call "skin in the game," meaning narrative strategies for representing race in sports films and the stereotypes attached to

representations of Black athletes, an already tropified and mythologized (and often male) body in the public imagination. There has been little attention to how blackness functions in sports films beyond an analysis of the politics of representation and the idea of positive or negative images. My concern for criticism that includes but also goes beyond studies of stereotyping as well as my broad interdisciplinary grounding—drawn from film and media, sports, gender, performance, critical race, and cultural studies—propels me to examine how racial representation impacts this film genre. I show how the portrayal of Black athletes in sports films has an important influence on pervasive ideas of racial identity and vice versa. I also consider the ways in which racial representations can be formally countered and, sometimes, revised in socially progressive ways.

I argue that we must conceptualize race in sports films not only in terms of content but also in terms of genre and film form. This is a charge predicated on the idea that we must, as Alessandra Raengo asserts, “think of blackness both as a challenge for film form and as a reservoir of surplus expressivity, mobility, affect, and pathos that has benefited film aesthetics since the cinema’s inception.”¹⁶ I therefore pivot away from examining race in sports films solely in terms of “skin in the game” to include what I call “skin in the genre”—evaluating what Black characters, themes, and cinematic-athletic stylistics do to the sports film in terms of generic modes, codes, and conventions. As my opening exegesis on Serena Williams suggests, *Sporting Blackness* addresses how, despite stereotyping, the Black sporting body on screen is a threshold and a rendering force. It shapes, inflects, challenges, and upends sports cinema’s ideologies, discourses, and conventions in order to make larger claims about the meanings, resonances, and intra- and intertextuality of the Black body in motion and contest in American cinema and society.

Race and *blackness* are not synonymous terms, nor are they on a chain of equivalence in sports films or my analysis of the genre. While *race* is often used to scientifically categorize differences among groups as naturalized, Henry Louis Gates Jr. explains that “race, in these usages, pretends to be an objective term of classification, when in fact it is a dangerous trope.”¹⁷ In American cinema, race has played and continues to play a significant role in the medium’s development and textual systems. Daniel Bernardi argues that “race informed the inception and development of fictional narrative cinema—crossing audiences, authors, genres, studios, and styles.”¹⁸ In his trilogy on the “birth,” “classical period,” and “persistence” of whiteness in Hollywood films, Bernardi tracks how whiteness remains the norm; its cinematic pronouncements and permutations shape popular genre images and

imaginings in visible and invisible ways.¹⁹ Popular genres, then, “are perhaps the most obvious place to look for the reflection of ideologies and myths over cinematic time, mainly because they rely on reoccurring themes and motifs in order to play to viewer expectations.”²⁰ As such a popular genre, classic and contemporary sports films represent and narrate ideologies of race (alongside other axes of identity including gender, sexuality, ability, ethnicity, nationality, etc.) in ways done previously by other popular genres such as the western, musical, and action film, making whiteness appear natural, seamless, and patriotic.²¹ Hollywood sports films function in a similar manner to these other genres in popular culture. These mainstream works often discount and dissimulate the importance of race as they propagate predominately utopic, “color-mute” stories meant to affirm mythologies of excellence, individualism, and self-reliance in American society.²²

My focus on Black representation in the genre locates race within and through the mediated sporting images, history, and achievements of Black diasporic peoples.²³ At the intersection of sports film and Black film criticism, *Sporting Blackness* examines American films about Black athletes in the United States, principally represented in the games of basketball and football. My attention to cinematic examples drawn primarily from these sporting worlds stems from the contemporary magnitude of these sports in popular culture and their importance (in terms of participation and cultural impact) to African American communities. While baseball *was* the Black national pastime and boxing has a long-standing sporting and cinematic history, basketball, even more so than football, “saturates popular culture and permeates our national identity.”²⁴ As basketball players circulate as celebrities/ambassadors of US culture in domestic and global markets, this sport (which dominates the majority of the films discussed in this book) looms massively in our contemporary public imagination and the cultural production of sporting blackness. Additionally, given the national parameters of the genre and my project, soccer (fútbol), which globally is the most popular game among African nations and in South American countries such as Brazil (the country with the largest Black diasporic population), has been left out of consideration, as have films and videos made and funded outside US cinematic infrastructures (e.g., studios, graduate school, art galleries, grants, etc.).²⁵

With *Sporting Blackness*, I use and expand existing scholarship on genre and Black representation in American cinema. Unlike more studied categories such as race films, Blaxploitation, and ‘90s urban films, sports films are not bound by a specific film movement, temporal period, or production

culture. Focusing on the broad and loosely defined genre of sports cinema, this book contributes to the work of scholars engaged with concepts of “race” and “ethnicity” in genre criticism.²⁶ I categorize the sports films discussed here as a “Black body genre.” My use of the term *body genre* nods toward but is distinct from Linda Williams’s description of the forms, functions, and systems that structure the representational and spectatorial excesses evidenced in the body genres of pornography, horror, and melodrama.²⁷ By *Black body genre*, I mean that sports films centralize Black athletes’ corporeal performance as a spectacle, such that blackness is realized, mitigated, succumbed to, and disavowed via cinema’s regimes of representation. Black bodies’ visual and racial excess organizes the representational forms, functions, and systems of the genre in various ways. The idea, then, of the Black body in this book is slippery and has shifting meanings that try to grapple with its materiality, abstractedness, psychic manifestations, gendering, and historical contexts. I reference and situate the Black body in time and space as a physical and corporeal being. But I also attend to how, as Harvey Young explicates, “when popular connotations of blackness are mapped across or internalized within black people, the result is the creation of *the black body*. This second body, an abstracted and imagined figure, shadows or doubles the real one.”²⁸ In this case, the Black body becomes primarily a repository for discrimination, racism, terror, and violence. I recognize, as Young suggests, that “we always see ourselves from a distance and from the (imagined) vantage point of another. It is the imagined and, yet, highly (mis)recognizable figure who shadows the actual, unseen body.”²⁹ In this register, the Black body is not a body at all but a psychic recognition of blackness by the Black subject, or what Frantz Fanon understood as the epidermalization of race and the colonial encounter.³⁰ Finally, as I consider in greater depth in chapter 3, gender is consequential to the rendering and effacing of the Black body. While I oscillate between these manifold connotations and dimensions of embodiment, I always ground my analysis of the Black body within specific generic, cultural, historical, social, and political contexts.

Through this categorization, I contend that contemporary sports films offer a vaulted if underappreciated viewpoint on the Black body given their racial representation concentration, mirroring the hypervisibility of Black athletes—particularly via televised and live games—in US competitive sports, specifically football, basketball, baseball (I am thinking Black Dominicans and Puerto Ricans here), and track and field. While using contemporary US film and critical race scholarship on the Black body, I locate and follow across these works the raced sporting body’s historical and spec-

tacular functions in service to and in excess of cinematic and national ideologies of value, self, and surplus. In my close readings throughout the book, I extend this consideration of the Black sporting body's sedimented meanings, which meld and overlay the symbolic and the historic, to Black sporting figures' representational schemas in media and to the production of resonant and shared experiences.

SPORTING BLACKNESS ON SCREEN

Sporting Blackness argues that sports films are an important genre for representing race in American cinema, particularly blackness as kinetic and kinesthetic movement, modes, and meanings.³¹ As a genre, sports films blur cinematic and social worlds, drawing on real sports history, events, and figures to construct themselves as part of a recognizable reality. The formal verisimilitude (cinematography and editing conventions that mimic television sports coverage), actor's physical training (making them credible as athletes), and overall studio production infrastructure (location shooting, uniforms, technical consultants) work together to make these films assuredly plausible, pleasurable, and predictable. These elements cohere within Hollywood film genres, such as the biopic, in formulaic ways that recycle standard narratives about (white, male) athletic heroes whose hard work, self-sacrifice, and paternalistic coaches help them overcome obstacles to win the big game in the end. Issues of race and the histories of racialization often do not go beyond the surface and are easily constrained to the playing field. Remember, this is a conservative genre where structural inequalities can be overcome by a buzzer-beater or a dignified loss; the latter, of course, being punctuated by an emotionally (dis)ingenuous slow clap.³²

As they manipulate athletes' histories into inspirational narratives and filter real events into sanitized sporting worlds, sports films are made to appear factual and intrinsic, grounded in the historicity of the genre's conventions. This documentary impulse engages sports films' historicity, and thus how the genre represents the sporting body as connected to situated histories, communities, and national contexts even as it effaces how these contexts shape social identity. "Blackness in motion," as James Snead explains, "is typically sensed as a threat on screen and so black movement in film is usually restricted to highly bracketed and containable activities, such as sports and entertainment."³³ Sports films blend these two enterprises. Whether drawing on nostalgia or realism, sports films' inscriptions of athletic verisimilitude into idealized narratives "offer a powerful and decidedly secure medium in which classed, gendered, and racialized ideas,

bodies, and structures are constructed, circulated, and consumed."³⁴ The Black athletic body is constituted in sports films as (hyper)visible and the narrative containment of its physical and discursive spectacle and excess is a common narrative arc seen in films such as *Glory Road* (James Gartner, 2006) via control over playing style, *Coach Carter* (Thomas Carter, 2005) via paternal disciplining by the head coach, and *The Hurricane* (Norman Jewison, 2009) via incarceration of a boxer on the rise. In these conventional movies, Black athletes perform spectacular, stylized athletic feats that often reinforce the racial status quo whereby "every critique doubles as a celebration."³⁵

As Aaron Baker has convincingly argued, sports films are not, like sports themselves, apolitical; they "contribute to the contested process of defining social identities" including race, gender, sexuality, class, and nationality.³⁶ Despite the overdetermined formulas that structure the genre, even the tritest narratives and most hegemonic representations of Black athletes expose ideological contradictions. For example, a biopic about Black sprinter and long-jumping legend Jessie Owens is called *Race* (Stephen Hopkins, 2016), a title meant to highlight his sport *and* blackness even in a narrative that subsumes the significance of race in favor of celebrating Owens (played by Stephen James) as an apolitical and color-mute national hero.³⁷ In the tradition of recent biopics about pioneering Black athletes such as *42* (Brian Helgeland, 2013), which recounts when Jackie Robinson broke Major League Baseball's (MLB) color line in 1947, *Race* telescopes in on a few years of Owens's life, peaking at his moment of Olympic glory at the age of twenty-two. The film details little of Owens's tumultuous life after this point, including the racism he faced upon returning to the United States and his struggles to find employment. At one point in his later life, despite being a beloved national hero, Owens raced against horses to make money to support himself. While Owens's personal life and motivations hazily make up the film's subplot, *Race* revels in the sprinter's record-breaking days at Ohio State and exalts his athletic feats at the 1936 Summer Olympic Games in Berlin, Germany, including his victorious long jump and 100-meter, 200-meter, and 4×100-meter relay races. The film shows that, while his record-breaking four gold medals decimated Nazi ideals of white superiority, his sporting successes did not isolate him from racism back home. As the film ends, it briefly mentions that President Franklin D. Roosevelt refused to invite Owens to the White House to honor his accomplishments.

While trafficking in racial narratives, *Race* suggests that skin color does not matter and undermines the importance of Owens, as a Black American man, competing in Germany during Hitler's reign. The film attempts to nul-

lify this significance by pushing forth a competing ideological narrative that suggests that sports are apolitical even when they are being used as international metonyms for the mediation of supremacy. For example, in his decision to run in Berlin after being pressured to boycott the Olympics by the Black community, Owens expresses to his coach Larry Snyder (Jason Sudeikis)—the film’s requisite white, paternalistic sports sage—the idea that race matters socially but not in sports. When running, he explains: “In those ten seconds, there is no black or white. There is only fast or slow.” The track, in this sense, is an arena for the physical transcendence of race, wherein the only measure of a man’s worth is his sporting ability. In *Race*, the cultural fiction and lived dimensionality of race is expunged; winning is self-defining because, in sports, winning is everything. In this view (and counter to the film’s title and telos), only the result—not race—matters. In the end, *Race* frames sporting blackness as an obstacle (like the hurdles Owens jumps in the film) to be overcome in order to truly succeed in sports and American society.

Race is not much different from the conventional, “feel good” sports cinema that populates the contemporary media landscape, including acclaimed films like *The Blind Side* (John Lee Hancock, 2009), which lobotomizes the life story of left tackle Michael Oher into a “Black Frankenstein”/white savior narrative, or fan favorites such as *Remember the Titans*, the interracial football fantasy based on the real T.C. Williams’s Titans that showed “how the goal line came to replace the color line.”³⁸ In fact, *Race*’s trite conventions are in keeping with many films I examine or reference in this book such as *Friday Night Lights* (Peter Berg, 2004) and *Juwanna Mann* (Jesse Vaughan, 2002), which, despite their respective twists on the genre, operate in typical sports film fashion. However, I am insisting that Black sporting bodies can representationally and formally disrupt and protest their stereotypical depictions and conservative generic scripts. An analysis of sporting blackness, then, becomes a way to get at the explicit and implicit work going on in these texts as well as the work we can do with these representations. This is an improvised labor that operates against sports films’ entrenched position in the flow of capital as lucrative entertainment with formulaic modes of ideological storytelling: white saviors, individual achievement through gradualism, Black straight romance, poverty as moral depravity, and so on. *Sporting Blackness* demonstrates how the Black sporting body functions as an unruly historical force that exceeds the generic constraints within sports films’ idealized worlds to challenge not only the construction of social identities but also the historical narratives attached to those identities and the formal ways in which they are enacted on screen.

To properly situate the mythos of race as a cultural fiction endemic to sports films, it is necessary to understand the protocols and investments in the representation of blackness in American cinema. Blackness has always been a mutable subjectivity on screen. Its representational fluidity is devised from the ways in which “Black skin on screen became a complex code for various things.”³⁹ Even when there are no Black bodies represented, as James Snead describes, Black racial imagery codes Hollywood films, making legible the devices of mythification, marking, and omission that shape the capacious meanings attached to blackness on screen. As evidenced from the ubiquitous blackface and minstrelsy images in US film history and visual culture, the cinematic Black body is a commodified and overdetermined figure with surplus value and expressivity.⁴⁰ However, the overdetermined cinematic Black body is not just a repository of symbolic excess but also a floating signifier, shifting meaning and enunciative functions depending on the sociohistorical context.

The Black filmic image, and specifically the Black sporting filmic image, has been a subject of concern and control throughout cinema’s history. For example, this fear of Black representation, identification, and visual/symbolic excess is acutely personified in the fight pictures of John Arthur “Jack” Johnson during American cinema’s silent era. Johnson, who was the first Black boxing heavyweight champion, shaped in defining ways early cinema, censorship laws, and the representation of sporting blackness in the public imagination. As Dan Streible recounts:

During his reign as heavyweight boxing champion from 1908 to 1918 a radically new African American representation forced its way onto the screen. Motion pictures of his daunting knockouts of white champions Tommy Burns (1908), Stanley Ketchel (1909), and—especially—Jim Jeffries (1910) helped break other racial barriers imposed in the age of Jim Crow. Highly publicized feature-film presentations showing Johnson pummeling “white hopes” offered a potent challenge to the social conceptions of race upon which segregation was built. The African American community used these films as occasions for celebration and affirmation when they played on the emerging black theater circuit. White reception of Johnson’s image, after some initial curiosity and tolerance, however, was marked by alarm over this icon of black power.⁴¹

Johnson’s screen presence made him the “first black movie star.”⁴² The racial spectacle of Johnson defeating Jeffries, in particular, for the heavyweight title—a spectacle that shattered the myth of Black athletic inferiority and white supremacy—not only affected the circulation and later censorship of fight pictures but also brokered the larger debates around

the medium of film and its place in American culture. "Part of what troubled white commentators so much," sports sociologist Ben Carrington explains, "was not just Johnson's disruption of past racial logics, important as they were in sustaining the present, but what he portended about *future* racial conflicts in which the future suddenly began to look black."⁴³ As Johnson's cinematic sporting blackness evidences, *looking* Black as embodied and projected states of being and becoming, underscores how the Black athletic body in American cinema has historically performed in excess of itself, containing surplus meanings that always position it both inside and outside a film's singular narrative and representation.⁴⁴ In considering both sports films' historicity and the cinematic Black body's surplus expressivity, *Sporting Blackness* addresses how sports cinema shapes Black sporting bodies into what Stuart Hall calls "canvases of representation," whereby the Black sporting body is a creative and mutable corpus, a text made of texts, able to mean and mean again on screen and across media ecologies.⁴⁵

Throughout the book, I focus on the cultural signifiers of US blackness, which are contingent on the historical specificities, social engagement, and cultures and economies of production, distribution, and reception. To "sport blackness" is to challenge film and sports culture, especially for the fact that Black surplus expressivity and projectability is largely fashioned around Black excellence in athletic worlds. Sports films largely absorb, ignore, or disavow the challenging concepts that the films analyzed in this book bring to the screen via historical framing, contestations of Black iconicity, athletic genders in absurd and feminist registers, and revolt (of the Black athlete and the Black filmmaker). I query here race's both flattened and overdetermined functionality within the sports cinema genre, wherein reliance on stereotyping and the received racist notions of Black players and Black communities constrict the narrative to the national telos of race. Blackness here is less a stable racial category and more precisely a theoretical motor, a moving and contested discourse and performance by, of, and between Black sporting subjects. If "race is a story about power that is written onto the body," as Carrington explains, "then sport is a powerful, and perhaps at certain moments even a pivotal, narrator in that story."⁴⁶ Sports, therefore, becomes an important armature, medium, and modality for studying the rendering of the Black body in American cinema. An understanding of sporting blackness and its attendant critical muscle memories demonstrates how race, sport, and cinema tell "a *moving, visual, and contemporary* story that [is] not relegated to describing the past but [reveals] the flow of history into the present and even into the future."⁴⁷

CRITICAL MUSCLE MEMORY

I coined and deploy the phrase *critical muscle memory* to articulate the material and tangled histories of Black athleticism in sports films. The phrase and its meanings come from human kinetics, which studies “the motions of bodies and the forces acting upon them.”⁴⁸ Thus, I use the phrase to characterize the inherent property of muscles as well as engage the interdisciplinary work on corporeality and memory in Black literature and cultural studies. In human kinetics, muscle memory is the process by which motor skills are remembered in the brain and enacted through the body. A form of motor learning, muscle memory is mimetic and procedural, whereby the muscles of a given body consolidate, encode, and come to habituate or memorize specific tasks through the repetition of physical action and long-lasting changes in muscle tissue.

Muscle memory is not just physiological. While it manifests through movement and ritualistic exercise, this form of long-term memory is also a cognitive process, with motor and brain systems working in tandem. In neuroscience, the term is something of a misnomer, as it suggests that muscles make and or store their own memories. Instead, “they respond to signals from the brain, where the actual memories of any particular movement are formed and filed away.”⁴⁹ While there is some debate about whether locomotory behavior and responses can be driven by independent muscle contractions, the notion that the body remembers repeated action propels many movement-based arts and exercises, including acting, dance, music, and athletics.⁵⁰ In this sense, choreographed and improvisational movements enact routine and trained skills and behaviors across time and space. A form of “kinesthetic intelligence,” the body has a “kind of spatial intelligence that operates through the muscles and includes muscle memory.”⁵¹ For athletes, this combined kinesthesia and proprioception allows them, through the rigors and discipline of training, to actively reproduce past movements seemingly without conscious effort. In sports, reinforced physical learning comes from belabored practices and repeated exercises such as drills, moves, and practice scenarios. Not only a form of mental priming, muscle memory as bodily instruction and mechanics likewise allows for efficiency, endurance, and perceived effortlessness, even if one does not reach hypertrophy. Often the effect of countless hours of training, athletic muscle memory is a ritualistic neural process that manifests through the sporting body in terms of skills and registers as fluidity on the field of play.

The kinesthetic metaphor of muscle memory has been used to theorize Black corporeality, individuality, and sociality in a range of disciplinary set-

tings, including sports literature and philosophy. For example, C. L. R. James's seminal book *Beyond a Boundary* employs the concept in its description of cricket as a "dramatic spectacle" and "visual art."⁵² James explains that cricket athletes have muscular memory, one that activates the spectator's embodied memory of their own movement to produce a kind of intra-corporeal and inter-corporeal sensibility. He describes cricket athletes' actions in terms of tactile values that accumulate, explaining: "In our world human beings are on view for artistic enjoyment only on the field of sport or on the entertainment stage [but] what is not visible is received in the tactile consciousness of thousands who have themselves for years practiced the same motion and know each muscle that is involved in each stroke."⁵³ Following James's critical link between athletes and entertainers, Michelle Ann Stephens extends his theory to an analysis of actor, athlete, and activist Paul Robeson's physique and presence, using the metaphor and poetics of his bodyline to concatenate sites of relationality and performative contexts.⁵⁴ Both James and Stephens underscore how Black athletes/actors' individuated movements and gestures (meaning distinct style) engender muscular reflexes that are at once corporeal and incorporeal, subjective and intersubjective. In other words, sporting bodies' individual styles operate within dramatic playing fields of shared physical histories and popular consciousness.

With such contingency, bodily symptoms—particularly muscle tension—are used as metaphors to describe a kind of quotidian muscle memory for Black people, athletes or otherwise. Darieck Scott, for instance, reads Frantz Fanon's notion of muscle tension—a psychic and bodily reaction to colonialism at once mental and physical—as a diagnostic "response to racial and colonial domination, as a kind of bodily knowledge."⁵⁵ Communal Black memory, a bodily knowledge, bearing, and conditioning for being in the world, then, repeats itself in and through individual encounters. For example, drawing on the history of the image of Emmett Till's mutilated body, Elizabeth Alexander explains that "the corporeal images of terror suggest that 'experience' can be taken into the body via witnessing and recorded in muscle memory as knowledge. This knowledge is necessary to one who believes 'it would be my turn next.'"⁵⁶ Black memory, then, becomes a muscle trained, flexed, and disciplined by colonialism, enslavement, and racial terror, as well as collective Black struggle, achievement, and cultural engagement.

Harvey Young's study of Black boxers Tom Molineaux, Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and Muhammad Ali's similar and repeated embodied experiences of captivity provides an instructive template for reading athletic Black memory, in my terms, as critical muscle memory. For Young, Houston Baker's