
How Not to Misread *Darwin's Athletes*: A Response to Jeffrey T. Sammons

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Jeffrey Sammons's review of *Darwin's Athletes* begins by suggesting that the book is essentially without "intrinsic merit," and almost all of the thousands of words that follow are dedicated to confirming the reviewer's premise that the book is "insidious," "offensive," "shameless," and, ultimately, "extremely disappointing." Indeed, Sammons finds this virtually jargon-free tome almost unreadable: finishing *Darwin's Athletes*, he says, is "a difficult intellectual test of endurance and sacrifice." If Sammons is right, the 5,500 people who bought this book within two months of its publication have already endured incalculable mental suffering. The evidence, however, suggests otherwise. Having read many reviews and private communications, having done dozens of radio and television interviews, including hours on black, call-in radio shows originating in Chicago, Detroit, and Baltimore, and having even received a letter of support from an African American prisoner incarcerated in a correctional facility in New York, I can report that Sammons's review is not representative of African American opinion. It is, in fact, the single most eccentric commentary on the book that has so far appeared in print.

Some of Sammons's criticisms, to be sure, are entirely or largely valid. It is true that *Darwin's Athletes* is one-sided cultural history, that it presents almost exclusively the negative aspects of the African American relationship to sport. Given the enormous volume of unrealistic positive thinking on this subject that has appeared over the years, I elected to concentrate on the evidence that the African American involvement with sport during this century has come at a significant price that both blacks and whites have tended to underestimate or disregard. It is also true that I have nothing to say about female athletes. This omission is due both to my lack of expertise and to the fact that it is the black male athlete, and not his female counterpart, who has been the primary focus of

potentially harmful fantasies about black athleticism. Sammons is also right to point out that *Darwin's Athletes* is at times both a polemical and a speculative work of scholarship. Whether these aspects of the book are seen as advantages or as disadvantages will depend largely on the reader's assessment of my arguments and the documentation that supports them.

Most of Sammons's criticisms, however, are misrepresentations of the book's contents and purpose. Sammons's most perverse misreading holds that my referring to the "angry, suspicious, or transfixed faces" I have seen in the classroom means that I am accusing my black students of "chauvinism." Given the magnitude of this misunderstanding, I will describe in a bit more detail what can happen when a white professor instructs black students on the origins of modern racism. Like their white classmates, most of my black students have little or no idea of where racist ideas come from. For this reason, they tend to be shocked and disgusted by the Victorian-era racial pornography that constituted respectable racial discourse during the later decades of the nineteenth century. These emotions need somewhere to go, and I am convinced that, by the psychological mechanism known as transference, some of these feelings are directed, if only temporarily, at the older white man standing at the front of the classroom, who understands what is happening and regards it as part of the educational process. In this case, it is Sammons who has projected his own overflowing anger onto a white scholar he plainly resents.

It is also in this context that Sammons says I have presented myself as 'an academic Larry Bird, a white man in a black game.' This is a curious comparison, given my evident lack of sympathy for the beleaguered white athletes and coaches whose travails are described in the book. My larger point, as any attentive reader of the book's preface can see, is that the study of race is not a "black" game at all. First of all, it should not be one; and for demographic reasons, it cannot be one, given the crippling shortage of black scholars that plagues our universities. It is also true, as I point out in the preface, that the racial politics of "black studies" can have the effect of excluding or ostracizing whites. This often problematic status of whites in what many people think of as a black field is simply a social fact of life that must be dealt with in an open manner that maximizes opportunities for good collegial relations and the knowledge sharing they make possible.

But what if the white scholar doesn't measure up to the challenge? Sammons's judgment is that I fall "woefully short as a qualified commentator on the black experience"-a view that many other African American readers apparently do not share. Still, this is a criticism that other well-qualified reviewers, such as Gerald Early and John Walter, have also made, so I am prepared to believe that, to one degree or another, it must be true, if only because I cannot draw upon the special emotional and intellectual resources that accumulate in the course of living an African American life. From this standpoint, I do not possess those "extraordinary gifts of insight" that W.E.B. DuBois required of cultural outsiders. It is worth noting that Franz Fanon set a somewhat less exacting standard in this regard. Dissatisfied with O. Mannoni's *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization* (1964), Fanon wrote with admirable self-restraint: "I sincerely believe

that a subjective experience can be understood by others; and it would give me no pleasure to announce that the black problem is my problem and mine alone and that it is up to me to study it. But it does seem to me that M. Mannoni has not tried to feel himself into the despair of the man of color confronting the white man.” In fact, a number of commentaries on *Darwin's Athletes*, including Sammons's review, have persuaded me that I, too, underestimated the “despair” that many black readers brought to the experience of reading a book that was designed to be a rough ride for everyone who engaged with it. Hence, the complaints by Sammons (and others) about what he calls “a serious problem of tone-at once accusatory and superior.” I employ, he says, a “condescending, top-down approach,” although he does not cite a single line of the book to document this charge. As I have just suggested, this is a problem I take seriously, although here, as elsewhere, Sammons takes leave of anything resembling moderation to charge that I make “no attempt to explore the minds and hear the voices” of the people about whom I'm writing. More attentive readers will recall the numerous stories and observations of my black students and others that appear in the introduction and elsewhere in the book. Even Sammons remembers these accounts, but for the purpose of later dismissing them as “unscientific interviews with men and women on the street and in his classroom.” As a matter of fact, I did not stop and interview people on the street. I made appointments with a variety of people, black and white, and I visited a couple of black high schools to talk to students and teachers.

Concealed in part by Sammons's scattershot attack on every apparent target of opportunity is the really important issue of power and how it has affected his response to the book and, without a doubt, the responses of many other people as well. For as he points out, the small community of black academics is, generally speaking, in a very difficult situation, and one aspect of this situation is the stereotyping of their own competence. “It is unreasonable,” Sammons writes, “to expect that they should accept a condition in which whites can speak to everybody and everything, but they can only speak to themselves.” It goes without saying that this is a condition I do not accept. Indeed, *Darwin's Athletes* is meant to encourage black intellectuals to range as widely as possible, even if this sort of encouragement will appear to some as “white” presumption on my part. This reflexive suspicion of “white” motives is one of the saddest aspects of the whole situation, and I will return to its origins and effects at the end of this essay.

Sammons is not satisfied by my treatment of black intellectuals in chapter 5 or elsewhere in the book, in part because he and other academic colleagues are either relegated to footnotes or not mentioned at all. As I told him while I was writing the book, my intention was to address the views of people with established public profiles so as to avoid an academicizing of the discussion. Before proceeding to more substantial issues, I would like to put to rest the idea that my treatment of the black intellectuals reflects “a harsh condemnation of the black elite Hoberman holds responsible for promoting black overinvestment in athletics.” First of all, and contrary to Sammons's impression, I have not mounted an assault, I have rather described a predicament—an attachment to, and even an entrapment

in, athleticism as an ideal—that has produced a unique relationship between this ethnic intelligentsia and the realm of sport. And to date not one reviewer, including Sammons, has challenged my analysis of the cultural origins of this special relationship. Second, anyone, who pays attention to what I have written, particularly in the introduction and chapters 2, 3, and 4, will understand that I regard black overinvestment in sport primarily as the consequence of the racist limitations on black achievement in other areas that have operated for most of this century. While it is true that I think black intellectuals should do much more to counteract the sports fixation among black youth, they cannot be “held responsible” for this fixation for the elementary reason that they do not, unfortunately, have anything like the power that would be required to contest the damaging appeals of popular culture that endanger *everyone’s* children, and black children even more than their white peers.

The most evident source of Sammons’s anger about my treatment of the intellectuals is the “insidious” manner in which I have supposedly forged an ideological alliance with a despised caste of black “conservatives.” Indeed, for all his talk of scholarly standards, Sammons’s review makes it clear that his operative criteria of quality derive from his preferred political orthodoxy. What is more, from Sammons’s point of view, quoting approvingly even a single line from a “conservative” author means that one has “embraced” his entire world view—what one might call guilt by ideological contamination. It goes without saying that nothing produced by any black “conservative” will meet Sammons’s standards. For example, a 1971 analysis of Afrocentrism by the National Book Award-winning Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson is invalidated by what he said about the Clarence Thomas case more than twenty years later.² If Glenn Loury (whose “conservatism” has been waning of late) deplores the racial “chauvinism” of blacks who take pride in black dominance of the NBA, this is due to Loury’s “conservative” lack of solidarity with the black community. On the other hand, if Harry Edwards or the Harvard psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint say essentially the same thing, their progressive credentials shield them from Sammons’s opprobrium. If Shelby Steele discusses anti-intellectualism among black youth, this is only one more symptom of his conservative apostasy; but if the liberal black columnist Bob Herbert makes exactly the same point on the op-ed page of the *New York Times*, then he, too, will be spared Sammons’s wrath.³ In fact, Sammons takes a highly selective approach to the many quotations from black writers that appear throughout the book. If I quote from conservatives, then I have “bonded” with them. If I quote from Ralph Ellison, it is blasphemy. If I quote from anyone else with a politically clean bill of health, this goes unremarked, unless Sammons sees yet another opportunity to lay on the cudgel. For example, if I follow DuBois in faulting the truncated version of “Negro education” promulgated by Booker T. Washington, my reward is being denounced for an “incredibly naive reading” of Washington. My question to Sammons is the following: If I have misread Washington, where does that leave DuBois and his “feeling of deep regret, sorrow, and apprehension at the wide currency and ascendancy which some of Mr. Washington’s theories have gained” (*The Souls of Black Folk*, pp. 32-33)?

Sammons's political suspicions and guilt-by-association strategems are also directed at the author of *Darwin's Athletes*. This modus operandi includes brushing me up against Dinesh D'Souza and the authors of *The Bell Curve* with a touch that is just light enough to permit what the CIA calls "plausible deniability." Thus, my criticism of *The Bell Curve* on page 10 of the book Sounds eerily similar to D'Souza's *The End of Racism*,³ even if the eeriness—let alone the implausibility—of this connection leaves Sammons at a loss as to explain how the connection is to be made at all. If Sammons really wants to know what I think of D'Souza's agenda and intellectual sloppiness, he can turn to pages xiv and 236 and find out. In a similar vein, Sammons finds me "borrowing" from *The Bell Curve* in a book that presents the work of Murray and Herrnstein as both intellectually lazy and perverse in its genetic fatalism.

Sammons is also irate over the fact that I managed to overlook an op-ed piece about overemphasis on sports, by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., that appeared several years ago in *Sports Illustrated*. The more significant points that Sammons does not address are: (1) that Gates's essay, like most op-ed pieces, was a candle in the wind that left no tangible legacy and (2) that America's most prominent black intellectual, to judge from what he publishes, is not particularly interested in sport as a social issue—an orientation he shares with his colleague Cornell West and, no doubt, many others. It is here, in fact, that Sammons overlooks an opportunity to deal with some of the questions addressed in chapter 5, regarding how black intellectuals deal with the athleticizing of black male identity, including the predicament of the "black nerd." As Gates writes of his own childhood: "I despised sports because I was overweight and scared to death . . . My one time at bat was an experience in blindness; miraculously, I wasn't hit in the head." Gates also makes it clear that being unathletic contributed to making him an alien—"an android, something not quite a person," as he puts it—within the black male world he wanted so badly to belong to: "Daddy and Rocky would make heavy-handed jokes about queers and sissies. I wasn't their direct target, but I guess it was another form of masculine camaraderie that marked me as less manly than my brother."⁴ As I suggest in the book, how African Americans come to the rescue of "black nerds" like Gates and Sammons—and, for that matter, W.E.B. DuBois—will have a profound impact on the future of the black community in the United States. This is the crucial point Sammons overlooks in his incoherent objection to my critical remarks on the hypermacho posing of Leroi Jones and Eldridge Cleaver back in the 1960s, a period Sammons seems to find irrelevant to the black experience today. Without even realizing what he is doing, Sammons confirms the relevance of my analysis by pointing to "the inflammatory masculinist rhetoric" that characterized the Black Power movement, which was precisely my point. For whatever reason, Sammons finds it intolerable that a white author should object to Jones's baiting of black intellectuals like Sammons himself.

Finally, Sammons objects to what he accurately calls my "unwillingness to even consider athletic excellence as a form of genius." Here I must confess to a cultural conservatism many will not share.⁵ To be sure, this is an aesthetic problem

that can be debated, and I would be less than devastated if I were to lose the debate. The context here is my claim in the book that athletic aptitude is, generally speaking, more important to black intellectuals than to white intellectuals, and that this will inevitably affect their responses to the idea that African Americans are overinvested in sport. A related question is why the most hyperbolic claims about the cultural status of sport for African Americans seem to go uncontested among black intellectuals. As a white intellectual who is both fascinated and distressed by this kind of rhetoric because it bears on the prestige of academic ambition, I would like to ask a few questions of those who are closer to this situation than I am. For example, how many black intellectuals really accept Michael Eric Dyson's euphoric assertion that basketball is nothing less than "the metaphoric center of black cultural imagination" (*Darwin's Athletes*, p. 87) and that, given Michael Jordan's "herculean cultural heroism," this is actually a good thing? Or what about Harry Edwards's statement that: "If I were charged with introducing an alien life form to the epitome of human potential, creativity, perseverance and spirit, I would introduce that alien life form to Michael Jordan" (*Darwin's Athletes*, p. 9)? If Edwards wants to introduce aliens to black geniuses, why not pick the Nobel Prize-winning poet Derek Walcott, who is at least the magician Michael Jordan is? Why play right into the sports fixation Edwards himself has been decrying for the past twenty-five years?

Among Sammons's silliest remarks is the assertion that the book relies on "secondary sources"—an extreme misrepresentation even by the standards Sammons employs here. Even reviewers who don't particularly like the book have acknowledged that it is based on a prodigious amount of original research. Then there is his suggestion that *Darwin's Athletes* may have been conceived as a racial provocation to make money. On the same level is the dark speculation about whether *Darwin's Athletes* arose from a grievance against black people. The fact is that I have made a point of racially integrating my academic life over the past several years, and the relationships that have resulted from these experiences—including some of the responses to *Darwin's Athletes*—are among the best things that have ever happened to me.

These relationships, as well as the larger African American response to the book, make it clear to me that Sammons's response to *Darwin's Athletes* is atypical both in its hyperbole and in the sense of personal grievance that drove him to publish such an extreme and unbalanced reading of the book. The fact that he does not even realize that he has written a diatribe is a clear signal to anyone who may be prone to underestimate the complexities of interracial dialogue in the academy.

I could have spared Sammons at least some of his outrage had I more fully understood a year ago the feelings some of my black colleagues would inevitably bring to the reading of this book. The claims of Gerald Early and John Walter, that I do not sufficiently understand the black experience, appeared in newspaper articles that left little room for further elaboration of this point. Today I would guess that one of the things they meant was that, in at least one important way, I did not understand *them*, and in this I think they were right. "Quite simply, we

have to learn how to stop talking past each other. We have to figure out a way to communicate across the racial chasm. Our language is the same, but our frames of reference are so different.”

I have taken those last three sentences from Harlan L. Dalton’s remarkable essay, “AIDS in Blackface,” which appeared in the journal *Daedalus* in 1989. (At that time, Dalton, an African American, was associate professor of law at Yale Law School and a member of the National Commission on AIDS.) Dalton’s purpose is to explain the African American scepticism and hostility that had greeted efforts by a white health establishment to stem the spread of HIV in the black community. Having recently read Dalton’s essay for the first time, I am in a better position to understand why Sammons and some other black colleagues have experienced the book, to use Sammons’s term, as a “provocation.” Dalton writes:

Because our history is ever with us, we can never consider the slate wiped clean. It is, for example, difficult for us to divorce our dealings with white persons as individuals from our dealings with whites who preceded them. When you extend a hand in friendship, we can’t help wondering whether you carry trouble in the other one. When you invite us to dinner, we can’t help wondering why. If your manner of speech reflects considerable training and education, we wonder whether you are putting us down. If, instead, you speak in the vernacular, we wonder if you are being condescending. No matter how pure your motives, we will question why you are in our midst. No matter how deep your commitment, we will wonder what you are getting out of it.

My point, then, is that even as I invite you to bridge the chasm, I know it won’t be easy. While we insist that you respectfully come calling, we aren’t quite ready to put out the welcome mat. When you predictably bridle at our lack of hospitality, we will peer into your soul to determine whether you are simply one more white person who can’t stand to see black folks asserting themselves. But even if we decide that your pique is justified (in the sense that you truly have embraced our concerns and are anxious to work with us), we will expect you to be sympathetic to our predicament while we argue that you cannot expect us to be sympathetic to yours.⁶

This is the dimension of the black experience I did not grasp with sufficient depth, and I repent this naïveté in the light of what I have learned subsequently to writing the book I can now see an ethnocentrism in my approach that failed to prepare a significant number of black colleagues to read the book in the spirit I intended to convey. In so doing, I injured feelings that a greater sophistication on my part could have spared to one degree or another. Even if this is more a question of style than substance, it is still a matter of great importance, because this oversight goes to the heart of the imbalance of power that still characterizes human relations inside, as well as outside, the academic world. I will conclude with another passage from Dalton’s essay: “My vision is of a conversation that takes place both on the streets and in the academy, by design and by chance. My hope is for conversation characterized by mutual risk taking and mutual candor.

In the spirit of candor, I must warn you that not all will be pleasant.”⁷

1. Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* [1952] (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 86.
2. See Orlando Patterson, “Rethinking Black History,” *Harvard Educational Review* 41 (August 1971).
3. Bob Herbert, “A Word to the Wise,” *New York Times* (February 14, 1997).
4. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Playing Hardball,” in Don Belton, ed., *Speak My Name: Black Men on Masculinity and the American Dream* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 75-77.
5. Readers of my *Sport and Political Ideology* (1984) may recall an anecdote taken from Hegel’s lectures on aesthetics. Hegel writes of “the man who had taught himself to throw lentils through a small opening without missing. He displayed this skill of his before Alexander [the Great], and Alexander presented him with a bushel of lentils as a reward for his frivolous and meaningless art.” See John M. Hoberman, *Sport and Political Ideology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), 246-247.
6. Harlan L. Dalton, “AIDS in Blackface,” *Daedalus* 118 (Summer 1989), 219, 223.
7. Dalton, “AIDS in Blackface,” 223.