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Chinaza K. Asiegbu
Harvard University

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Abstract

Especially in sports that are societally regarded as feminine, such as gymnastics and figure skating, Eurocentric beauty standards are an unspoken feature of the game. Undergirded in ethnic disparities within gymnastics are financial and aesthetic barriers for black women, specifically. This essay will explore the sport of gymnastics as a case study to demonstrate the ways in which black women have historically been excluded from 'feminine sports.' I argue that black female gymnasts have been historically marginalized from mainstream gymnastics on the basis of finances and white conceptions of femininity, both two components crucial to success in the gymnastics realm.

Keywords

black gymnastics, black athletes, sportswomen, black sportswomen

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Chinaza K. Asiegbu | *Harvard University '22*

The rhinestones on her shiny pink leotard glistened against the backdrop of flashing lights and cameras. The crowd held its breath as she hoisted herself into the air, performing twists and turns that defied gravity. Upon landing, her feet simultaneously stuck to the ground beneath her. The crowd roared. Gabby Douglas was not only a vision of excellence but the embodiment of history in the making. At the 2012 Olympics, Douglas became the first black gymnast in Olympic history to become an individual All-Around Champion. Also, Douglas became the first American gymnast to ever win gold in both the individual All-Around and team competitions.[1] However, the moment she became a champion, the main topic of conversation was centered neither on her victory nor her triumph, but her hair. Slicked back into a ponytail with hair clips to prevent flyaways, her hair was labeled "unkempt," "embarrassing," and "nappy."[2] These comments and

[1] Liriel Higa, "Before Simone Biles, These Women Broke Barriers," *The New York Times*, August 10, 2016.
[2] Lauren McEwen, "Gabby Douglas and Her Ponytail: What's All the Fuss about?" *The Washington Post*, August 6, 2012.

media attention they attracted demonstrate one truth: despite how far black women have come in sports, they still have a long way to go before they will be judged equally compared to their white counterparts. Especially in sports that are societally regarded as feminine, such as gymnastics and figure skating, Eurocentric beauty standards are an unspoken feature of the game. Undergirded in ethnic disparities within gymnastics are financial and aesthetic barriers for black women in particular. This essay will use gymnastics as a case study to demonstrate that black women have historically been excluded from so-called "feminine sports." I argue that black female gymnasts have been historically marginalized from mainstream gymnastics based on both finances and on white conceptions of femininity, two elements that are crucial to success in the realm of gymnastics.

Historiography

Using sports as a lens into cultural hegemony in the United States, it is clear that black women are uniquely positioned at the interphase of racialization and gender socialization in sports, notably to their detriment.[3] Although journalists have documented the progression of black women in gymnastics, it is still a

[3] James Hannon et al., "Gender Stereotyping and the Influence of Race in Sport among Adolescents," *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 80, no. 3 (2009): 676-84.

relatively recent history that historians have yet to dissect in depth. Black women have gradually become more involved with gymnastics, yet narratives have focused on the accomplishments of a few elite women, primarily in track and field and basketball.[4] While this gap raises the stakes as to why more scholarship must be created regarding black women in gymnastics, it also necessitates an expansion of the historical scope to encompass the general history of black women in sports. Because of this gap, I have focused on literature tracing the history of black women's participation in sports.

Several academic works reveal the continuing tradition of descriptive, chronological accounts of the history of black sportswomen. These accounts have celebrated tokenism and romanticized the struggles of black women in their fight to gain recognition from white people. However, it is also important to commend the increased legitimacy of the overall study of black sportswomen through its proliferation in historical surveys of American sports in the late twentieth century. In 1939, Edwin Henderson was the first person to write a comprehensive book on black athletes, in which he devoted a singular chapter to women

[4] Linda Darnette Williams, "An Analysis of American Sportswomen in Two Negro Newspapers: The Pittsburgh Courier, 1924-1948 and the Chicago Defender, 1932-1948" (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1987).

called "Negro Girls in Sports."[5] He overviewed the brief history of black sportswomen, highlighting the success of Tuskegee Institute girls in track and field and the Philadelphia Tribune Girls in basketball. However, he failed to note the differences in the experience of playing sports between black women and white women. In 1981, Temple University Professor Tina Sloan Green released an anthology of essays, biographical sketches, and philosophical investigations entitled *Black Women in Sport*.[6] This collection delved deeper into the prejudicial aspect of playing sports for black women, yet still focused on biographical sketches of seventeen "outstanding black sportswomen."[7] In 2014, Jennifer H. Lansbury published her book *Spectacular Leap: Black Women Athletes in Twentieth-Century America*, which followed the careers of six famous black sportswomen to "uncover the various strategies the athletes use to beat bad stereotypes."[8] She iconified certain black women as physical blueprints for all black women rather than illustrating the sporting experience of black women within their own culture. As Green has stated, "the challenge lies

[5] Edwin Bancroft Henderson, *The Negro in Sports*, rev. ed., in *Black Biographical Dictionaries, 1790-1950*, vol. 126 (Washington, DC: Associated Publishers, 1939).
[6] Tina Sloan Green et al., *Black Women in Sport* (Reston, VA: American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, 1987).
[7] Green et al., "Black Women in Sport."
[8] Jennifer H. Lansbury, *Spectacular Leap: Black Women Athletes in Twentieth-Century America* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 2014).

in not just being the first or second, but in creating a pool of Black players, starting in the neighborhoods."[9] The challenge that historians must face is capturing the history of black sportswomen in neighborhoods, beyond the perspective of white audiences. Overall, despite the increased quantity of work about black sportswomen in books, there is still a need for more rigorous, contextualized engagement with the experience of black sportswomen, explaining why they are predominately in sports regarded as masculine instead of those regarded as feminine.

Financial Barriers of Gymnastics for Black Communities

Firstly, just as the history of black sportswomen has been written for the consumption of white people, the sports culture of gymnastics was built for the participation of white women from an economic perspective. Sports that required more equipment and facilities, including "feminine" sports such as figure skating and gymnastics, had disproportionately fewer black women. Given that the status of black women in society translated to their status in sports, black women were more likely to have fewer facilities and equipment available to them, and the quality of those available to them have been very poor.[10] In 1996, former Olympic gymnast

[9] Mary-Christine Phillip, "The Lady and the Tiger: Stanford Gets Eldrick and Dominique," *Diverse Issues in Higher Education* 11, no. 15 (1994): 16.
[10] Green et al., *Black Women in Sport*.

Wendy Hillard was spotlighted in *Essence* magazine for addressing these financial barriers as an "athletic activist."[11] That same year, she officially founded the Wendy Hillard Gymnastics Foundation to provide free and low-cost gymnastics lessons to underprivileged youth in predominantly black communities of New York. Her first open house was hosted at Central Baptist Church, a staple location in the black community.[12] Over the past two decades, Hillard has taught over 15,000 inner-city children, and she has even expanded her foundation to Detroit.[13] However, in a world where gym membership, coaching, leotards, travel, and physical therapy expenses are commonplace, the Wendy Hillard Gymnastics Foundation is an anomaly.

Black women did not refrain from participating in gymnastics due to lack of skill or interest, but to lack of money. Due to its high costs, it was nearly impossible for low-income and minority children to continue gymnastics at a competitive level. In 1989, *American Visions*, a bimonthly magazine of African American culture, recognized a black organization undertaking

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[11] Joy Duckett Cain, "WENDY HILLIARD: Athletic Activist," *Essence* 26, no. 11 (1996): 58.
[12] Dustin Walsh, "Homecoming Spurs Expats to Give Back, Invest in City; Invitees to Return to Detroit This Week for Second Event," *Crain's Detroit Business* 31, no. 39 (2015): 1; "African-American Begins Rhythmic Gymnastics," *New York Amsterdam News (1962)*, 1995.
[13] Higa, "Before Simone Biles, These Women Broke Barriers."

similar work called the Ebony Flyers in Compton, California. Despite their aspirations to compete in the Olympics, the "talented youngsters who could not afford an expensive gymnastics program," which cost $30,000 to $40,000 a year, attested to only being able to participate because of the forty-dollar per semester program.[14] According to the coach, "parents went wild" and were "spared of financial worry" because of the program, which heavily relied on generosity and donations to continue.[15] Outside these programs, the article noted that most black female athletes played the school-sponsored sports of track and field and basketball. In 1997, an article reported that "97% of the 4,000 Black female collegiate athletes participate in basketball or track and field," reducing their chances of earning college athletic scholarships.[16] This environment also reduced the "probability that a young black female gets 'started early' in a sport like gymnastics."[17]

Eurocentric Beauty Standards in Gymnastics

Secondly, the same barriers of entry into "womanhood" that have historically denied black women access to femininity extended to

[14] Henrietta E. Charles, "Flying High," *American Visions* (Washington, DC: Visions Foundation, April 1, 1989).
[15] Charles, "Flying High."
[16] Craig T. Greenlee, "Title IX: Does Help for Women Come at the Expense of African Americans?" *Black Issues in Higher Education* 14, no. 4 (1997): 24-24.
[17] Green et al., *Black Women in Sport*.

marginalize black women aspiring to play sports regarded as feminine, such as gymnastics and figure skating. This unfair treatment, coupled with lingering stereotypes of immorality and inferiority against black women, was exemplified in post-Antebellum America when black women created self-help societies, such as the National Federation of Afro-American Women and the National League of Colored Women. Black women made these efforts to safeguard their virtue as women and "stand tall and develop within themselves the moral strength to raise above and conquer false attitudes" as black people, referred to as the "Double Task" of overcoming a gendered and raced existence.[18] In "The Impact of the 'Cult of True Womanhood' on the Education of Black Women," Linda M. Perkins described how white womanhood was "a model designed for the upper- and middle-class white women" that failed to acknowledge the femininity of black women.[19] In a culture where they were encouraged to be vessels of racial uplift, black women stood at the crossroads of being "passive, submissive, and nurturing" within their race, and "aggressive, active, and autonomous" within their

[18] Gertrude E. Ayer, *The Task of Negro Womanhood in the New Negro: An Interpretation* (New York: A. and C. Boni, 1925), 171.
[19] Linda M. Perkins, "The Impact of the 'Cult of True Womanhood' on the Education of Black Women," *Journal of Social Issues* 39, no. 3 (1983): 17-28.

"traditional" sports to a predominately white audience.[20] Because black women were streamlined into "masculine" sports, such as track and field and basketball, these sports operated as platforms where black women served as heroines for black people.

Though less restricted to participate in activities featuring strength and force than white women, black women were seen as inadequate in sports featuring grace and precision due to European beauty standards. Rutgers coach Umme Salim-Beasley, one of the few gymnast coaches of color, claimed that "there are stereotypes that follow African-American gymnasts, like that they are gymnasts of power, not so much gymnasts of grace."[21] Since the nineteenth century, when women were first introduced to gymnastics, "the prescriptive norms that were tendered and accepted in relation to women's gymnastics and their articulations of feminine rectitude" validated white, middle-class women and their desire to uphold traits of Republican Motherhood.[22] However, because the appearance of black women has been dehumanized since slavery in exchange for European markers of beauty, it is far more difficult for black women to advance in this aesthetic sport.

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[20] Hannon et al., "Gender Stereotyping and the Influence of Race in Sport among Adolescents."
[21] "Black Collegiate Gymnasts Describe Culture of Racism, Isolation," ESPN.com, August 14, 2020.
[22] Ann Chisholm, "Incarnations and Practices of Feminine Rectitude: Nineteenth-Century Gymnastics for U.S. Women," *Journal of Social History* 38, no. 3 (2005): 737-63.

Players and coaches have even reported that "judges like a specific look and they like that elegant European-style gymnastics look, and that gymnasts of color tend to not score as well because they don't have that particular build."[23] Sources have revealed that predominantly white recruiters and coaches tend to recruit a "specific type of gymnast."[24] Black gymnasts living in the myth of a post-racial America silently suffer from a tone-deaf sport with a clear disregard to their existence. Mesh leotards and athletic tape, common items in an athlete's bag, continue to only be available in an exclusively white "nude" shade. Margzetta Frazier, a former member of the U.S. women's national team and junior at UCLA, admitted to ESPN that she "felt the only way for the judges to get past my color was for them to at least see how beautiful and thin my body could look."[25] Gymnastics, which was founded on and has historically thrived upon conformity to white womanhood and European femininity, has put black people and anyone who is "one of a kind... at a terrible disadvantage."[26]

[23] "Black Collegiate Gymnasts Describe Culture of Racism, Isolation."
[24] "Black Collegiate Gymnasts Describe Culture of Racism, Isolation."
[25] "Black Collegiate Gymnasts Describe Culture of Racism, Isolation."
[26] Phillip, "The Lady and the Tiger."

Conclusion

When black gymnasts perform their dangerously impressive acrobatic stunts, they are not just defying gravity but historical norms about gymnastics itself. History has shown that black gymnasts, in order to be recognized or even involved in gymnastics, have had to be exceptional in both their social status and performance. Though white women have presided over mainstream gymnastics for two centuries, in the past three decades, black women have begun to disrupt such gatekeeping by increasing financial accessibility to the sport and inspiring a renewed vision of what its participants could look like. In response to criticism about her hair in 2012, Gabby Douglas retorted, "Are you kidding me? I just made history. And you're focusing on my hair? I just want to say we're all beautiful inside and out. Nothing is going to change."[27] Gabby Douglas, Simone Biles, and competitive black gymnasts across the country have the potential to represent a new generation of black gymnasts who refuse to conform to the predominantly white world of gymnastics—continuing to raise the bar of what it means to be a black female gymnast.

[27] Gabby Douglas, *Grace, Gold & Glory: My Leap of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012).

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