

## Book Review

### **Smith, D. (2015). *When Race, Religion, and Sport Collide*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.**

R. Jamaal Downey  
University of Massachusetts

Dr. Darron Smith's book, *When Race, Religion, and Sport Collide* makes the connection between historical teachings of Christianity, more specifically Mormonism, and the contemporary realities of the Black male student-athlete. This exploration is heavily informed by Feagin's (2009) theory of racial framing, which is a generic meaning system that rationalizes the system of material of oppression. Since Smith is Black, Mormon although not practicing, and graduated with his doctorate from Brigham Young University (BYU), his analysis is informed by personal experience, as well as theoretical research. This insider examination of the ways religious universities exploit Black athletes allows the secular individual to understand how religion is used disproportionately against non-religious student-athletes but ultimately exploits most student-athletes similarly. The book is divided into eight chapters and begins by making the connection between sports and the frames by which society sees and stereotypes the Black body, then ushers the reader through an in-depth historic contextual understanding of how Blacks are viewed in the Mormon Church. The final chapters expound on the idea of free education, whether student-athletes obtain an education at all, and just how free it is. Because Smith is both a Ph.D. and a physician assistant, links between injuries incurred throughout student-athletes' free education, the consequences of social isolation for Black males on predominately white institutions (PWI) and the detrimental effects of colorblindness are solidified by cross-referencing medical studies, statistical data on student-athletes, and a sociological understanding of race, religion, and sports.

What differentiates BYU from most other PWIs and their exploitation of Black student-athletes is that the doctrines of Mormonism are interpreted and applied to the BYU honor code. Most parents see church-sponsored post-secondary private education as somehow safer for their children than non-religious public schools. Mormons believe they have a universal mission to proselytize and convert all people to their faith. Black males, once they arrive at BYU, are at a considerable disadvantage as they are not members of the dominant faith, yet they will be judged and disciplined by those same standards. It does not seem fair to hold these men to a standard created from Mormon theology.

In general, Black male student-athletes at PWIs find themselves under a different form of unequal treatment in which they are used in collegial sports for the mighty dollar—a prostituting of the Black male body. Between 2007-2010, Black male bodies made up 57.1% of college football teams and 64.3% of men's basketball teams at predominately white institutions (Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013). Feagin's white racial frame

theory states that a “uniquely American racist framing of society” was created due to old world views of minorities in Europe, colonization, and slavery, which has shaped our morals towards the human condition (Smith, 2015 p. 32). This lens allows the reader to comprehend the race-based inequalities of the Black student-athletes.

In his book, Smith examines the role and exploitation of the modern day Black athlete within the university system. Specifically, he looks at religious institutions and their contribution to furthering the marginalization of Black student athletes, which is contrary to the underlying belief in the universal worth of souls that many Christians routinely espouse. Smith implores the reader to focus on the intersection of not only race and sports, but how society sees Blackness as it is situated within Christian hegemony—a founding principle of the United States. Smith unpacks the notion of the racialized Black body as a capitalistic exploit in sports at PWIs with the promise of a *free education*. This free education does not include the toll taken on the body, both physically and mentally from the sport, and also the consequences of colorblindness.

For many athletes who view professional sports as a viable road out of deprivation, college athletics is the only avenue. However, only two percent of college athletes reach the professional level (Smith, 2015). Education then, becomes a much more practical option for an attainable future. But, as Smith illustrates, the promise of a prime education in exchange for battered and bruised bodies is never truly awarded. As a fair number of Black male athletes start college behind the benchmark due to the poor quality of public education in urban communities throughout America from which they are recruited, and without an intensive academic immersion program, these men are cheated out of a valid university degree. Once their battered bodies stop producing winning results, they are tossed to the ash-heap, degree or not.

The gaze upon Black males in this book was intentional since college football and men’s basketball are usually the only revenue generating sports. In 2011-12, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) raked in a staggering \$871 million dollars; head coach Nick Saban of the Alabama Crimson Tide made slightly over seven million dollars (College football, 2015). But, as Smith reminds us, “more than 85 percent of full-scholarship FBS athletes live below the federal poverty line while in school as full-time students” (Smith, 2015, p. 129). This was made abundantly clear when University of Connecticut basketball star, Shabazz Napier, once famously stated that he often goes to bed starving (Ganim, 2014).

There is no question for the need of this book now, with the current war of racial politics in America at its pique. Given the state of politics that has Donald Trump and his racist rhetoric as representative of the silent majority that has crawled their way out of the crevasse of America, coupled with deaths of Black citizens at the hands of the police, and the direct attack on the NFL by Trump for kneeling during the National Anthem, there are still very serious consequences for being a person of color in the U.S. Further, Smith’s analysis examines these issues in a nuanced way by writing about Christianity that allows for full historicity when connecting institutions’ modern policies to old white supremacist frameworks, such as religion. Even though he writes directly about the Mormon Church, it

is not a far leap to understand how these structures operate in different fields, institutions, and/or religions.

Being able to chart the changing and morphing ways of racist terrain is important in predicting what is going to happen next. This book does just that: it names old fashion racism anew. *When Race, Religion, and Sport Collide* provides a roadmap of what to expect for future generations of mostly minority athletes as they advance into college. Religions and major institutions (including but not limited to public institutions) all operate and collide to “blight[ ] the life chances” by robbing the Black community of its youth, strength, and vitality (Smith, 2015, p. 32).

This book allows for the flowering of individuality and identifies that when one limits life’s chances, one squelches the human capacity of a fellow human being. Smith’s book untangles and allows us to better understand the dynamics of how these layers of oppression, segregation, and domination operate in order to better understand what is happening on a grander scale. This is significant because these institutions are colliding and reproducing these structures regularly and they manifest in every day interactions.

The glaring omission from the detailed analysis by Smith in his book is gender. Black female athletes are no less affected by white supremacy than their male counterparts. Their precarious stance consists of a double bind; their Blackness and their gender position them in a different and more tenuous location.

References

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