



Episode 3: Black Girls Swim

Ongoing debates about how digital technologies impact children's health and well-being often frame sports as the opposite or even antidote to sedentary screen time. In this episode, Dr. Sara Grimes (Director of the KMDI) chats with Dr. Samantha White, Assistant Professor of Sport Studies at Manhattanville College (New York), about her work on children's sporting cultures at the intersection of race and gender, and how mapping the history and politics of children and sports is crucial for understanding contemporary ideas about childhood.

Dr. Sara Grimes 0:00

The Tokyo 2020 Olympics, which finally took place this past summer, were notable for many reasons, not least of which was the number of record breaking child athletes who competed and won. One of them, 12-year-old Kokona Hiraki of Japan, became the youngest Olympic medalist in 85 years when she silver in the park skateboarding competition. The silver medalist in the street skateboarding event, 13-year-old Rayssa Leal, was the youngest Brazilian to ever participate in the Olympic games.

Let's talk about data. These days everybody's talking about data, it's now common knowledge that the information economy relies heavily on the collection, exchange, and use of our data. Personal details, browsing histories, behavioral traces, photos, and posted comments, along with the enumerable associations, inferences, predictions, and classifications that are generated out of that data. These kids received a lot of attention from the traditional news media and across the internet, and rightly so. They're amazing. But while these wins gave them their first Olympic medals, it wasn't their first foray into the world of global media attention. In fact, a video of Leal skateboarding in a fairy costume at age seven was a global viral sensation a few years ago.

Sports has a long and intricate relationship with the media, which is carried over to digital media as well. In addition to allowing sports coverage to reach a broader, more diverse audience, the depth, duration, and nature of that coverage has exploded in the online environment. Sports fans can keep up with their favorite leagues, teams, and athletes year round or even round the clock. While this puts new forms of pressure on athletes, it 1

can also provide them with a power shifting forum for voicing their opinions or controlling the narrative. Superstar athletes Simone Biles and Naomi Osaka both use social media to make sure their respective sides of their respective stories were at the forefront when considerable amounts of media and public attention were focused on each of them this past year. Sports and digital media are also linked in ways that specifically impact children. In many popular and academic discourses, beneficial, physical play is presented as the opposite or even antidote to the much maligned digital play. Children's sports, especially organized sports, have served this type of ideological function for centuries, not only as a symbol of what constitutes as a good childhood, but as a reflection of the hegemonic culture, and as a system that reproduces that culture's ideals and biases. Understanding the history of children's sports is therefore crucial for understanding contemporary ideas about childhood, how we got here, and where we're headed.

Dr. Samantha White, Assistant Professor of Sports Studies at Manhattanville College and leading expert on children's sporting culture, is mapping that history. Her work fills critical gaps in our knowledge of children's roles in and experiences of sports and how this intersects with race, gender, and class. Applying an interdisciplinary, child-centric approach, Dr. White's research combines historical and archival work with media and discourse analysis to uncover the hidden but not lost experiences and representations of black children and especially black girls in sports across the 20th century. The theories and arguments she's building with this work provide incredibly valuable insight into the modern construction of childhood. Insight that disrupts the hegemonic historical narrative and highlights the key role that black girls have always played in American sports and leisure. Dr. White's research has been published in a number of journals, most recently in an article entitled *Ebony Junior and The Black Athlete: Meritocracy, Sports, and African American Children's Media*, which was published in *The Journal of Sport History* in 2020, and another entitled *Black Girls Swim: Exclusion, Beauty and Athleticism at YWCA Pools*, which was published in *Girlhood Studies in Interdisciplinary Journal* in 2021. She also wrote the entry on sports in the *Sage Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood Studies* published in 2020, and has been invited to present her research and lead workshops with academic and non-academic audiences both nationally and globally.

I'm Sara Grimes, Director of the Knowledge Media Design Institute at the University of Toronto and host of *The Critical Technology Podcast*. Today, I'll be speaking with Dr. Samantha White about two of her recent published works, *Ebony Junior and The Black*

Athlete and Black Girls Swim to find out more about her ongoing research on children's complex relationship with sports and sports media. Let's just dive right in, no pun intended. What is children's sporting culture?

Dr. Samantha White 4:39

For me, children's sporting culture is a really interdisciplinary look at the physically active sport health and fitness cultures of young people. And this can include historical approaches, or sociological approaches, even literary approaches, but really looking at either these informal sites of play. So pick up soccer games and playgrounds to even competitive sports leagues like competitive hockey leagues. For me, children's sporting culture is something that's really broad and looks at children as both participants but also consumers of sport, too, which is something that both of these articles explore. So really thinking about children's sporting culture is really broad and encompassing way of thinking about how children navigate physical activity, physical culture, and sport. And how I tend to approach this in my own research is looking at the ways that black youth, particularly black girls, engage in sporting culture, and I tend to do this from a historical perspective. Maybe looking at the 20th century, but thinking about how this includes everything from how black children are engaging in smart media to how they're participating in actual sports as competitors.

Dr. Sara Grimes 6:12

And who is the black girl athlete? What does her history tell us about sports, race, and gender?

Dr. Samantha White 6:18

So the black girl athlete, for me, has taken up different forms across historical and contemporary periods. But seeing how she's been a figure that's been shaped by not just these historical, social, and political processes, but also thinking about how she's shaped, I think, race, class, and gender. For me, the black girl athlete in my own research is anyone from a young, 14-year-old black girl who's participating in community sports at her local YWCA to, moving more towards the contemporary moment, thinking about how even celebrity athletes like Venus and Serena Williams as girls also encompass the black girl athlete. So looking at her as someone who's both represented in sporting environments as well as one who's an active participant in sporting environments, too. And, for me,

black girl athletes are anyone from casual sporting participants to these elite athletes, too. So it's not based on athletic ability. I think anyone who wants to be a black girl athlete can, and I was a pretty casual black girl athlete. I played soccer, coached soccer, played lacrosse at both recreational, a little bit of a competitive level. So it's also a way of me understanding my own relationship to, my own childhood attachment to these spaces.

But she plays such an important role in sport if we're thinking about how navigating such a profoundly un-level playing field. For black girl athletes, the sporting spaces aren't necessarily designed for them. They're not necessarily built for them. I think sports in general tends to be coded as a really masculine endeavor, having a boys' club. And especially if we're thinking about the ways that also race is shaping this, too. By analyzing and understanding the experiences of black girl athletes, we can see how they are really fighting against exclusion, these exclusionary tactics in sport, but also how they've really fought for inclusion, too. Making their own space, taking up space in these sporting worlds.

Dr. Sara Grimes 8:38

Why is it important to look at media and media representations when trying to better understand these relationships between children, sports, and society?

Dr. Samantha White 8:48

Yeah, that's such a great question. For me, sports media is such an interesting and fantastic and complex space, especially since sports media tends to be this really adult space in which experiences and perspectives of children and youth tend to be excluded even when their representations are sometimes included in this sphere. But I've found that even though children tend to be marginalized in the area of sport media, by digging a little bit deeper, their images are still there. They still engage with sport media from everything to thinking about how children and young people are watching to how they're participating in these major sporting events like the Olympics, to even thinking about different magazines and publications that are geared towards children and youth. But I think that it has a really interesting role in not just framing ideologies of sport for young people, for shaping the way that we are supposed to think about sport, whether it's sport as this universal good or sport as this patriotic or nationalistic enterprise. Sport contains all these different ideologies, and they're passed down to everyone, including young people. But also thinking about the ways that children are also part of these images and

and representations of sports, too, and how they're shaped into different symbols within these conversations, too.

Dr. Sara Grimes 10:38

Something you brought up in our previous conversation was the importance of bringing in black press when doing archival research on children and sports, or on childhood more broadly. Would you mind telling us about your methodological approach and how moving away from mainstream sources results in a richer and more inclusive understanding of cultural history and of black history specifically?

Dr. Samantha White 11:00

Definitely. So when I first started doing this research, the field of sport history is fairly large. It has been around for quite a long time, but the inclusion of children and youth in sport history is relatively small. And that is a problem that often historians of children and youth are confronted to when thinking about the sources of children and youth. Where can we find them in the archive? And as I started digging, as I started thinking about where these sources could be, oftentimes, they are not in traditional archives. I've gone to archives, I've looked at records, and sometimes they're there, but there's not an extensive collection on the experiences of black children or black girls in sport. For both of these projects, I relied on the black press quite a bit in different forms, too. This includes thinking about the role of the newspaper specifically, black newspapers specifically, and the black press. And in researching black girls in sport within the black press, so black newspapers in the early 20th century, what I found was there were quite a bit of stories about their experiences.

There was a women in sport column in the Chicago Defender, a black newspaper, that was pretty much the national black newspaper of the time. But what I found was these columns about women in sport that specifically included conversations, and stats, and coverage of black girls competing in community and high school sports. And looking at this national newspaper and seeing not just scores and stats, but also images and representations, for me, that was a way of thinking of the archive as really, really expansive, and also a bit more accessible. Most of these sources are digitized, so I was able to code these newspapers, look through them, search pretty broadly across a wide spectrum of newspapers without having to travel across the country to all these different archives. But thinking about the role of the black press and black media more broadly, it's, I think, an important way of thinking about how we can approach sources differently.

Like how we can ask different conversations or ask different questions about our sources, ask where the voices of children and youth are, ask where the voices and experiences and representations of black children and youth are, especially if we're thinking about athletics and sport in the way that these sources can be used to really find the histories that are often left untold.

Dr. Sara Grimes 14:05

In your work, you draw on letters to the editor quite a bit, and you seem to be hinting at that in your response just now. Do you want to talk a little more about how these traditional forms of user generated content can reveal and enable us to discover these voices and perspectives?

Dr. Samantha White 14:21

Absolutely. So these letters to the editor are extremely important because they're not necessarily from a sports writer. These columns on women and girls in sport are coming generally from sports writers at these publications, versus these letters to the editor, they maybe most likely mediated to a certain extent that they are from the voice of the child who is consuming this media, reading these publications, and for in the case of Ebony Junior, reading these magazines and writing letters. And as I was reading these letters to the editor, everything from a child responding to a piece that they really liked, really excited that they saw Hank Aaron on the cover of the newspaper, or a girl talking about the importance of sports in her life, was really excited to play basketball or swim at the pool, and really noting the activities that shaped her daily life. Getting a good understanding of how children are not only responding to these adult athletes that they're seeing on the cover of the magazine, but also using the space of the letter to the editor to document and talk about and even analyze their own relationship to sport. I found these letters to the editor really, really fascinating, as well as the pictures that the parents and guardians would send in, too. In an issue of Ebony Junior in which Tiger Woods is in the publication, his dad sent a picture of him in early eighties. And, again, really thinking about the power of these images in the magazine, because the letters to the editor and the submissions from parents were side by side, but also going back and thinking about a childhood history of these major celebrity athletes. And I was not expecting to see him in Ebony Junior, just because most of these child athletes didn't end up being world famous athletes. Yeah, it was a really interesting and fun archival find.

Dr. Sara Grimes 16:29

A key focus in your article about Ebony Junior Magazine and something that also emerges in the Black Girls Swim article is the centrality of meritocracy in the social construction of black children's sports and sporting practices, which you describe as reflective of broader cultural trends and discourses. What does meritocracy look like in the context of children's sports cultures, and what types of ideologies, relationships, or social systems did or does this idea promote?

Dr. Samantha White 20:20

I still feel like meritocracy is a huge problem in children sport today. The idea of meritocracy is deeply rooted in individualism, and it's this idea that if you work hard in sports, and if you practice a ton, and everyone has the same opportunities, these are the ideas that center around meritocracy, that you can achieve everything by your own accord, and it's a completely level playing field. And these ideas, they were and they still are very prevalent and toxic in the field of children and youth sports. And in both of those pieces, I point to how sports isn't a meritocracy at all. Sports aren't neutral. They're shaped by access to certain incomes. Race shapes the ways that you participate in sports and navigate sports. Gender, class, sexuality, ability, all of these things shape participation and engagement with sport. This is why I find the idea of meritocracy really problematic in both the historical and the contemporary aspect.

But especially in the Ebony Junior Magazine. What I found in my research was that oftentimes the idea of meritocracy really rested front and center. It's present in the Black Girls Swim article, but I see it really exploding in Ebony Junior, and I think that's also reflective of the time period. Ebony Junior was published during 1970s, early 1980s. There is more of a rise in after-school sports during this time. Title IX is passed in 1972, so we see more girls starting to become involved in sports. So the idea of meritocracy is really embedded in the sports landscape by this time. And Ebony Junior really leads into this. I don't fault them completely. I see why that was an important idea to lean into, especially thinking about the ways that the rhetoric of natural athleticism was this really harmful, pseudo-scientific idea that black athletes are just naturally good at sport, which is a really harmful idea that is being debated in magazines during the time of Ebony Junior's publication. Ebony, the adult publication, they're shining light on his harmful rhetoric. Sports Illustrated during the sixties and seventies, they're also debating this in their sport pages.

So what I see is Ebony Junior is really leaning into meritocracy really hard in order to combat the stereotype, but at the same time, by leaning into this idea, the magazine also moves away from pointing out the ways that systemic oppression is really embedded in sporting spaces, too. Which their adult magazine, Ebony, does a really great job of. But for child readers, the editorial staff seems to have made it a really intentional decision to move away from these conversations and really just focus on this discourse of meritocracy.

Dr. Sara Grimes 20:31

Something that really stood out for me when I first read the Ebony Junior article is your concept of spectacular sports. I know you coined this term in reference to the magazine's own use of the word "spectacular" on this one specific cover, but it feels like there are also links to other theories about sports and spectacle, or even Guy Debord's Society of the Spectacle, particularly in relation to your discussions of class and consumer culture as fundamental parts of what makes a sport spectacular. So what are spectacular sports, and what function do they fill in children's sports media, sporting practices, and in the everyday lives of black children?

Dr. Samantha White 21:10

So, for me, the Ebony Junior cover on spectacular sports really helped ground some of these conversations that I wanted to have in the article, but also thinking about broadly in terms of what these spectacular sports are and the impact of our children who are reading the magazine but also participating in these sports, too. So Ebony Junior had names and also provided images and a bit of content along with the definition of spectacular sports, but had noted how swimming and gymnastics were these spectacular sports. And I think mainly because these were sports that weren't part of the mainstream sporting culture. They weren't basketball, they weren't track and field, they weren't football or American football. Swimming for black athletes, even though it could get into the mainstream white sporting culture, swimming for black athletes wasn't necessarily mainstream. Although, I note in my article on Black Girls Swim how there had been a long history of black girls' participation in the sport. As far as a wide, mainstream sporting culture, swimming did not necessarily fit into that category, so it did emerge as a spectacular sport. In addition, gymnastics is also a spectacular sport because of both its special stature. It's not considered mainstream, but also the class dynamics, too. So thinking about swimming and gymnastics as sports that are widely reserved for middle to upper class families.

So spectacular sports are coded in terms of class. Also, inaccessibility runs through these definitions or ways that spectacular sports are shaped. But in both the cover and the magazine, I was really struck by how young eight- to 10-year-olds were the ones who were front and center. And I think it's a really important project in thinking about the importance of representation by showcasing young black girls who were participating in these sports in which, at the time, there weren't a ton of black girls on a national or international stage participating in swimming or gymnastics.

So I think on one hand, these spectacular sports are about a conspicuous conjunction project for families and parents as well as kids who are reading and engaging with this magazine. But at the same time, it's also about the importance of representation in sports that tend to be exclusionary and lack representation of black girl athletes across these sports.

Dr. Sara Grimes 24:11

This segues well to my next question, which relates to the Black Girls Swim article, which focuses on a specific spectacular sport, swimming. In this work, you delve even more deeply into the relationship between dominant discourses about black children and swimming and the embodied experiences of real girls navigating and challenging the racist policies and rhetorics surrounding pools, swimming in sports more generally, in the early to mid 20th century. In particular, your discussion of embodied respectability and the emphasis placed on beauty and aesthetics builds a really innovative and rich theoretical framework for understanding these relationships. Would you mind describing what this term means, and how you've used it to create a dual level analysis of cultural discourses and practices?

Dr. Samantha White 25:00

Absolutely. For me, embodied respectability was something that I noticed was coming across really strongly when I was in the archive and reading through reports or reading through program materials about the experiences of black girls swimming across YWCAs or Young Women's Christian Associations in the urban north during the 1920s and 1940s. Because it wasn't just about the act of swimming, but I noticed that there were all of these conversations happening about their bodies, their presentation of their bodies, how they had to look a certain way. There was a particular emphasis on how their hair needed to be presented after they left the pool, and all of these acts, all these ways

of shaping and disciplining and adorning the body seems like it wouldn't necessarily be a function or a highlight of their physical education or physical activity or sporting practices, but it really was.

And this focus on aesthetics wasn't just a vanity project, but as I found in my research, it was also a way of confronting you and using whatever tools that they had to speak back against racist rhetoric that deemed their body unhealthy or unhygienic, which was a rhetoric that really permeated a lot of conversations around the pool. More so than any other physical activity. More so than tennis or basketball. There was something about being in the pool that really raised all of these racist fears and rhetoric around the black body and the health of the black body. So reading these reports from national organizations that are documenting the systemic discrimination that black girls are facing as they try to enter these pools during this time, I read and analyzed that, but also was noting the ways that black organizations and black girls were also finding whatever means, whatever tools that they had to show that their bodies were healthy. Their bodies were beautiful. They were using all of these tools to show that both in and out of the pools. This is a respectful body.

So, for me, embodied respectability was something that I had found was incredibly relevant to thinking about the ways that black girls navigated the sport of swimming during this time. But it's something that also applies, I think, more widely to thinking about sport and health and athletics for black girls. Thinking about the ways that the politics and respectability really informs how they're not only participating but also how they're received in sporting spaces, too.

Dr. Sara Grimes 28:16

What are the implications of all this for the black children who were consuming sports media and practicing sports during the time periods covered in your research?

Dr. Samantha White 28:24

Yeah. So I think this has really major implications if I'm thinking about the time period in which I talk about in *Black Girls Swim*, thinking about the early 20th century. And this is a time in which the landscape of girls sports is finally starting to emerge, and more girls are going to high schools, more girls are going to college. And as I look at, in my larger research, looking at black girls who are at high schools but also historically black 10

colleges, there's a rise in black girls participating or the emergence of black girls participating in sport during this time. And the implications of seeing how embodied respectability, this way of navigating racist assumptions about the body is really key for black girls who are participating in sports during this time and as well as the rest of the 20th century and even today. But I think is really poignant especially during the early 20th century, in which while the field of girls sports is starting to emerge and explode, oftentimes this is looked at as something that is geared towards white girls and white women. Which is why I think these representations are so key. One, understanding that black girls have a long history in participating in sports at the community or recreation and competitive level, but also pointing to the ways that their experiences are shaped by racism and sexism, as well as classism.

But even as it's really important to name those systemic oppressions that they're fighting against, but also highlight the joys that they're experiencing in these spaces. Highlight the ways that they're making a claim for themselves in these sporting spaces, whether it's swimming or whether that's other sports during this time. Basketball, track and field, et cetera. I think it's really important to note the ways that they are also front and center in some of these publications as a way of not just identifying their representation, but also showing that they are present in the archive. They have been a part of sport media for such a long time, and really thinking about the importance of centering black girls in historical sport media, and using that as a roadmap to move forward. Thinking about what these representations look like today, what kind of cultural work they do for young people who are participating in sport or watching it on TV, or want to coach one day. Really thinking about the ways that these representations can serve as a roadmap.

Dr. Sara Grimes 31:31

We're recording this interview at the tail end of the Tokyo Summer Olympics where young black women and girls of color have been at the center of a substantial amount of the sports media coverage circulating in the US, in Canada, and worldwide. What else does your work on the history of black girl athletes tell us about contemporary children's sporting cultures and experiences?

Dr. Samantha White 31:53

So I think the important thing is to use the history of black girls' participation and representation in sport cultures is to really frankly just show that they have a long

history of being here. I think the world of sports, and that includes sport media, tends to downplay and marginalize their experiences. But really by showing that black girls have been participating in a wide range of sports, they've been present in sport media, they have been at the center of these conversations, I think that's a really important way of laying the foundation for understanding the experiences of contemporary girl athletes today, and especially thinking about the ways that the Olympics tends to shape our ideas and conversations around young athletes, particularly young black girl athletes.

Just thinking back to not just the Tokyo Olympics but the last couple Olympics in which black girls really have been front and center, I think about Gabby Douglas and Simone Biles as gymnasts, younger gymnasts, really showing the impact of representation in a sport that has been pretty predominantly white for quite some time, and the ways that they're really changing the landscape of who is imagined to be a gymnast. And that gymnasts don't necessarily have to look a certain way. But at the same time, I think these Olympics have been really important for showing the ways that athletes, such as Simone Biles, have really shown the importance of the agency and really saying no, and looking out for the health of their bodies and minds. And I think that's a really important lesson, not just for adults but also for young people who are watching these Olympics, too.

I'm also keeping an eye on the Paralympics, and that's something that I've begun to follow more closely, but also looking at the ways that, as a scholar of childhood youth and sport, I think we continually need to be thinking about who's included and really thinking about the ways that disability studies is also a really important part of sport, too.

Dr. Sara Grimes 34:17

I'm going to shift gears a bit and ask you a question I'm asking all my guests this season. The United Nations recently adopted a new general comment confirming and outlining how children's rights supply in the digital environment. Do you think this will have any impact on children's sporting cultures or on children's relationships with sports media?

Dr. Samantha White 34:37

So as far as thinking about children's relationship to structured and organized sport, I'm actually not entirely sure it will have an effect. I think there's such little connection with the digital sphere. I don't really see it having a big impact.

However, moving away from organized and structured sport, and thinking about physical culture and fitness, I think it might have an impact. I've been following conversations on the role of social media in terms of thinking about body image, and earlier this summer, Pinterest banned all weight loss ads and cited young people as one of the reasons. So there have been really interesting conversations about the way that digital environments are impacting body image, fitness diets of young people, specifically girls, and seeing these big companies like Pinterest take steps to regulate it is really interesting, and I'm curious as to whether other social media platforms will do the same.

But I think that is one way that I see the general comment playing into my research and not just thinking about sports, but also physical activity, fitness and the body more generally. Thinking about how these harmful diet culture and even [inaudible 00:36:16] fitness ideas or ideologies of the right kind of body and how they're disseminated to young people. I think they have great stakes for not just physical but also mental health of children. So I think that is one area where it does touch on some of the themes I address in my own research.

Dr. Sara Grimes 36:38

A big thanks to Professor White for joining us today. Please follow the links in the podcast description to find out more about Dr. White's research, her recent articles, and the other publications mentioned in today's episode, as well as information on where to send your questions or comments. The Critical Technology podcast is produced by me, Sara Grimes, with support from the KMDI. Audio mix and sound designed by Micah Sustar, music by Nicholas Manolo, theme song by Taikim Park. Our logo was designed by JP King and the artwork for today's episode was created by Kenji Toyoka. Please subscribe to stay up to date on new episodes and posts as they become available, and thank you for listening.