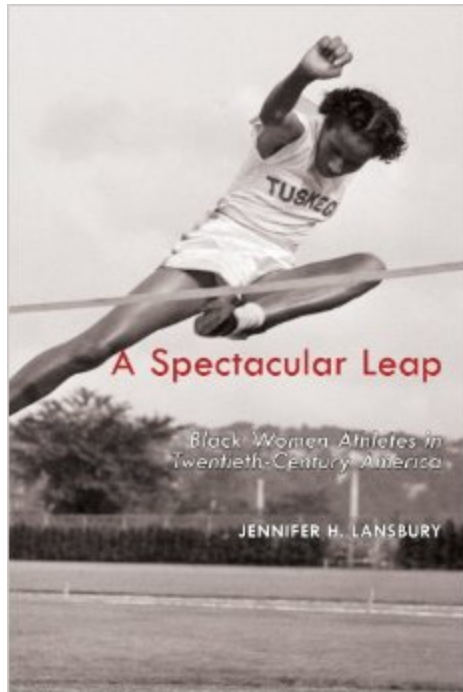


A review of *A Spectacular Leap: Black Women Athletes in Twentieth-Century America* by Jennifer H. Lansbury (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2014. 317 pp., ISBN 978-1557286581) by Drew Brown (drew.brown@temple.edu), Ph.D. Candidate, Department of African American Studies; Temple University.



Jennifer H. Lansbury writes on the largely ignored topic of Black woman athletes in her book, *A Spectacular Leap*. Here she chronicles the lives of six Black woman—Alice Coachman, Ora Washington, Althea Gibson, Wilma Rudolph, Wyomia Tyus, and Jackie Joyner-Kersey—throughout their athletic and personal lives as they confronted race and gender stereotypes. This timely book is critical to the subjects of race, sports, and gender given the lack of literature centered on Black women athletes. While the scholarship around race and sports seems to be growing, the history and experiences of Black woman in sport has yet to be adequately being addressed. Lansbury, a former history and sports culture professor at George Mason University, takes on the task of uncovering this often overlooked subject. She does this by using primary sources gathered from interviews and archives to document the inspiring stories found in this book.

Lansbury argues that nearly all of the six Black women used sports to flee poverty, escape working-class environments, travel, and take on educational opportunities. In addition, sports helped them contest racial and gender stereotypes that were often used to define them. Lansbury suggests that the image of Black women athletes experiences several transitions. She suggests that White middle-class women monopolized the conceptualization of Womanhood, while Black woman have been de-feminized by their participation in certain sports. This book shows how these particular Black women reject the stereotypes placed on them. However, Lansbury states, “rejecting the stereotypes of White society was not the same as ignoring them” (67). After an attempt to maintain its femininity, the image of the Black woman athlete became hyper-sexualized. What can be taken from this book is that throughout the transition of their image, Black women have struggled to assert a self-defined, and often differing, image of Black womanhood.

The insightful “Introduction” presents the main themes of the book and contextualizes the forthcoming narratives with theories of race, gender, and class. The book is divided into six major chapters, one for each of the selected athletes in chronological order. The final section is an Epilogue, “Performance-Enhanced Athletes and ‘Ghetto Cinderellas’: Black Women Athletes Enter the Twenty-First Century,” that discusses several related contemporary issues. In the “Introduction,” the aim of the book is clearly laid out. Lansbury states,

This is the story of African American women’s relationship with competitive sport during the twentieth century. It is a relationship that allowed athletically talented Black women, many of them from poor backgrounds to attend college, travel, and experience life in ways that otherwise would have been unknown to them. (p. 4)

The theme of each chapter is suggested in the chapter titles. In the first chapter, “Queen of the Courts: Ora Washington and the Emergence of America’s First Black Female Sports Celebrity,” Lansbury gives the early history of Black woman’s inclusion in American sports and the criticism that came with it. Through Washington’s participation in multi-sports, Lansbury argues that there was a fear among White (and some Black) critics that sports would “strip woman of their femininity and damage their reproductive organs...” (28). The second chapter, “‘The Tuskegee Flash’: Alice Coachman and the Challenges of 1940s U.S. Women’s Track and Field,” follows Coachman’s road to winning three Olympic gold medals. In the third chapter, “‘A Nationwide Community Project’: Althea Gibson, Class, and the Racial Politics of 1950s Black Tennis,” the focuses on the way the illustrious and hyper-confident Gibson navigated through the fame and criticism of a Black woman dominating a sport historically reserved for Whites, all while rejecting the role of a “race hero.”

The next two chapters, “‘Foxes, Not Oxes’: Wilma Rudolph and the De-Marginalization of American Women’s Track and Field” and “‘The Swiftie from Tennessee State’: Wyomia Tyus and the Racial Reality of Black Women Track Athletes in the 1960s and 1970s,” shows the emergence of the world-famous Tennessee State University track dynasty under the leadership of legendary coach, Ed Temple. Lansbury charts how Rudolph and Tyus use various tactics to shed the “tom-boy” image associated with Black women track athletes. The last, and by far the best chapter, “‘A Jackie of All Trades’: Jackie Joyner-Kersey and the Challenges of Being the World’s Greatest Female Athlete,” is just as much about Florence Griffith-Joyner as it is about Kersey. It is here where Lansbury asserts the impact of Title IX on sports and shows how these two Black woman are similar in their winning ways but present themselves very differently on the track.

This book starts and ends with exciting tales around some of the most spectacular athletes of all time. Lansbury makes an important political gesture by using the term “Black Woman Athletes” in the title rather than “Black Female Athletes.” Her decision to acknowledge these athletes as women, and not simply females, speaks to the continuous efforts to affirm Black women’s peoplehood and humanity.

Lansbury incorporates the ways social-political climates affected athletes, such as the Civil Rights movement in chapter five and Title IX in chapter six. She narrows her focus to African American women rather than African woman globally. While, it is important to place the narratives of Black women in the context of the larger African Diaspora, Lansbury found it best to highlight the specific contributions of *African Americans* woman to the history of struggle. The book manages to capture the strength and agency of Black woman toward the oppressive stereotypes that have often been used to subjugate them. However, she also captures the unhealthy responses to race and gender stereotyping that results in further discrimination. Lansbury claims that these women were de-feminized when they first began to participate in sports. She also suggests that, as time passed, they attempted to avoid this by portraying “feminine” characteristics. For example, Ed Temple stated that the Black woman athletes on his team were “young ladies first and track girls second” (132); the Black media printed stories about some of them having boyfriends and dreaming of getting married; and a few of them, like Griffith-Joyner, wore lipstick and make-up while competing. The attempt to conform to social constructs of womanhood, mixed with the historical fetish for Black women’s bodies, led to the hyper-sexualization of Black woman athletes. Lansbury does a good job identifying this throughout the book with the help of some incredible sources. She interviewed both Alice Coachman and Coach Ed Temple, and was able to visit the archives of Tennessee State University and Tuskegee University. These great sources bring unquestionable legitimacy to her research.

Lansbury’s historical data is outstanding and there are portions of Lansbury’s work that benefit Black liberation. However, this book has its limitations. Lansbury fails to directly connect White society’s attempt to de-feminize and hyper-sexualize Black woman with the deeper matters of racism. In fact, she gives little to no mention of White supremacy and colonialism nor does she address the broader social issues that alienate Black woman from “womanhood.” For example, Sojourner Truth’s famous speech, “Ain’t I a Woman,” describes the denial of Black womanhood, which has little to do with sport yet is directly related to Lansbury’s argument. She does not clearly acknowledge that the rejection of Black womanhood or femininity is an attempt to suppress Black woman’s humanity in order to elevate that of whites. Because this book lacks these sorts of contextual trimmings, it does not fully capture the struggles of these Black women.

Overall, this serviceable book captures many of the early and defining moments of Black women's athletic achievements. More importantly, it shows the tradition of struggle and resistance remains active as Black woman continue to tear down oppressive stereotypes. What make this book noteworthy are the primary sources and the current necessity for scholarship on Black woman athletes. This book may ignite new scholarship on Black woman athletes. Hopefully the forthcoming books provide more of a Black perspective.