

**Hannah Borenstein reviews Munene Franjo Mwaniki's *The Black Migrant Athlete: Media, Race, and the Diaspora in Sports* (University of Nebraska Press, 2017).**

Adding to a dearth of literature on sporting migrations, Muene Frano Mwaniki's *The Black Migrant Athlete: Media, Race, and the Diaspora in Sports* brings a new dimension to literature addressing race, sport, representation and migration. Emeritus professor of sports science John Bale, who has written extensively on Kenyan running, wrote specifically about "the brawn drain" of Kenyan athletes in the 1990s - the recruitment of foreign born student athletes to universities in the United States. Paul Darby published *Africa, Football, and Fifa* in 2002, a study detailing the sporting empire's relationship to the continent. As a sociologist indebted to media analysis, Mwaniki offers important new dimensions to this literature, turning his attention to mediated representations of different athletes from the continent.

Mwaniki's book also comes at a time in studies of migration where the presumed figure of the migrant is someone fleeing desperation. African refugees running away from extreme violence come to the minds of many when they think of contemporary African migration. Other figures of movement include the migrant laborer - domestic labor for women and manual labor for men - in which Africans are working low-wage, undesirable jobs, to send meager remittances home. The assumption is that African migrant labor is incredibly low on the social and pay strata, and often desperate. Sports, especially for Africans, Mwaniki importantly contends, are different. These are "highly skilled migrant athletes" and the ways in which they are represented, and represent themselves, "reflect and reinforce the more recent changes realigning the nation-state" (13). Thus, Mwaniki sets out to parse popular literature of athletes in relation to social, critical race, economic, feminist, and cultural theory, to explore the "discursive practices of racism in Western sport media as they concern black African migrant athletes" (1). This book will appeal not only to those studying sports, but also to those interested in nuanced patterns of migration from the continent.

In order to foreground more contemporary forms of representation, Mwaniki begins by providing a historical and analytical frame through which meanings have been stabilized. In deep conversation with Ben Carrington, a sports sociologist who has written extensively on race, sports, and Marxism, Mwaniki agrees that the cultural distinctiveness of sports warrants more critical analysis. Mwaniki foregrounds how representations of black athletes, writ large, come into being through mass media.

Mwaniki turns to Jack Johnson, a black American boxer whom he sees as having changed the global representational paradigm of black athletes. The widespread acceptance of "muscular Christianity", with its postulate that a well-trained body was a moral one, was upended when the black boxer challenged an idea central to white supremacy, namely that white men were stronger than black men. His physical dominance in the boxing ring completely changed the rhetorical strategies of white-run media. Specifically, notes Mwaniki, the dichotomy of the mind and body would be employed to promote a "natural" athleticism in black bodies, thereby maintaining the idea that white people possessed a cognitive superiority. Mwaniki's ultimate contention in his first chapter importantly frames the rest of his book: "the notion that 'the black athlete' exists as a coherent subject is what is so problematic" (35).

Following a substantive introduction and contextual framing, Mwaniki begins his close discursive analysis of the everyday practices of "othering" as they pertain to specifically black African athletes. From this point forward, his analysis is primarily centered around ten athletes from the African

continent: Hakeem Olajuwon, Dikembe Mutombo, Tegla Loroupe, Christian Okoye, Tamba Hali, Catherine Nbereba, Mwadi Mabika, Tirunesh Dibaba, Didier Drogba, and Mario Balotelli.

After showing the ways announcers reductively nickname athletes and reiteratively discuss the athlete's country of origin and using diminishing descriptors, Mwaniki transitions to the expectations placed upon athletes who are tasked with being spokespeople for entire countries. To do so, he spends two chapters elucidating the tensions between the figure of the "model minority" and the "bad' black." Successful African athletes, the objects of Mwaniki's study, are often *expected* to contribute to development in their home countries. However, when they fail to adequately deliver, they are scrutinized in unparalleled ways.

While athletes are supposed to be grateful, hardworking, and appreciative of their new host country, they are readily and easily seen as deviant from this colonial script. In the chapter "Bad' Blacks", Mwaniki gives several examples of athletes being intensely scrutinized once they have found success. For instance, disputes about basketball player Dikembe Mutombo's age mirror accusations of "age cheating" that are common among discourses about African athletes. Mwaniki rightfully wants to bring to mind that age documentation is not available everywhere in the world, and that the value of "Western record keeping and the institutions that rely on and reinforce a strict separation of ages" are culturally and racially coded with imperial power dynamics (107). In this way, using a popular example, and being able to critique and deconstruct criticisms of well-known figures, Mwaniki strengthens his arguments about discursive renderings that may affect athletes more generally.

The politics in Chapter 5 "Immigrant Reception: Nationalism, Identity, Politics, and Resistance" find an important place not only in the study of sport, but in some of the most pressing contemporary modes of struggle. In this chapter, Mwaniki draws on anthropologist Aihwa Ong, and her notion of "flexible citizenship": "how highly skilled migrants often attempt to evade and manipulate nation-states for their own benefit while, simultaneously, nation-states are engaged in adjusting to global capitalism in such a way as to benefit the country at minimal cost" (126). Athletes, especially famous, successful, migrant athletes, indeed raise questions about citizenship and the anxieties surrounding national belonging.

In February 2017, not long before Mwaniki's book came out, the International Association of Athletics Federation (IAAF) implemented a new rule freezing nationality transfers. IAAF President Sebastian Coe told the press, "It has become abundantly clear that with regular multiple transfers of allegiance, especially from Africa, the present rules are no longer fit for purpose."<sup>1</sup> The present rules to which Coe referred were the relative ease with which African runners, often Ethiopians and Kenyans, would be able to change their national allegiance to run for other countries. This implementation also followed a slew of articles calling on the IAAF to stop making a mockery of the sport because African-born runners were running for countries to which they did not "really belong." That this issue arose as Mwaniki's book came out shows the imperative political intervention made in both this chapter, and in the book more generally. Flexible citizenship is a malleable concept, and athletes give rise to the malleability and tension present in its framing.

However, it should be noted that the cases of the ten athletes Mwaniki uses to situate a range of theoretical discourses are not representative for all, or even most, of black African migrant athletes.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-athletics-iaaf-allegiance/iaaf-stops-changes-of-allegiance-will-set-up-new-system-idUSKBN15L2B1>

That he chooses not only specific athletes, but incredibly successful ones, poses methodological limitations on the scaling of his claims and analyses. In addition to the fraught problematics of this limited discursive analysis, there is one significant shortfall to be noted that repeatedly comes up throughout Mwaniki's text. While analyses of female athletes make their way into chapters, they play a tertiary role. Implicit in much of the analysis is that the figure of the black African athlete—a figure whose existence Mwaniki claims to be wary of—is male. Female-centered analyses, when they do arrive, are often one-third of the chapter, and contextualized as specifically female. The specificity of a male's experience, by contrast, is never noted as such. While Mwaniki ought not to be responsible for capturing the whole of the producing the black migrant athlete subject, his framing, or lack thereof, of the specific unmarked subject (successful and male) is problematic.

That being said, the limitations that his study fails to overcome further augment the fact that more people ought to be looking toward black athletic migrations. Africans migrate for a multitude of reasons, and sports are significant both in the avenues it creates for more people to move, but also the hypervisibility that often accompanies these movements. Mwaniki lays an important foundation and raises questions and gaps through which multiple disciplines might approach the constructions and formations of race, sports, and migration. Drawing on a wealth of social theory, Mwaniki opens up space for those interested in diaspora, race, and transnational studies to look to sport, and those interested in sport to look outward to theories of migration, media, gender, and political economy. These numerous relationships are too great for one scholar, let alone one text, to take on. Thus *The Black Migrant Athlete* is a subtle, indirect, but imperative call for analyses to be formulated and take hold.