Between Street Culture and Global Sport:
Double Dutch’s Turning Points
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In the early 1970s—so the condensed version of the origin story goes—two (male) African American police officers, David A. Walker and Ulysses Williams, were helping to set up organized sports to get African American kids “off the streets” of New York City. In the more elaborated versions of the narrative, Walker and Williams organized bicycle races and other competitions that drew wide participation, but girls did not seem to excel at these activities. As a result the police officers looked for a sport that would appeal specially and specifically to girls. In the shorter versions of the story, the police officers were walking down a street, noticed girls jumping rope (they were jumping "double dutch") and impulsively decided to organize and institutionalize it as a sport. The longer versions say that the police officers contacted their friend, radio personality Vy Higginen, who previously had mentioned double dutch to the police officers and who had been wanting to organize a double dutch association for some time. The two police officers and Higginen then worked together to set up the sport’s first governing organization, the American Double Dutch League. This was in 1974.
Since the 1970s, double dutch has moved from urban streets and asphalt playgrounds into gymnasiums and on stage at Harlem’s Apollo Theater. Double dutch’s commercial appeal has been exploited by McDonald’s, Xbox360, and Madonna (who, as part of her 2008-2009 Sticky and Sweet Tour, skipped rope and jumped double dutch alongside animated, Keith Haring-inspired jump rope figures). Double dutch has been featured on ESPN, Disney, Nickelodeon (Gullah, Gullah Island), and Regis & Kelly (a daily morning talk show in the U.S.). It has been the highlight at NBA halftime shows and appears in the musical, Memphis, which opened in New York at the Shubert Theater in 2009. The New York Times featured a double dutch video short on its website, and keeps its readers updated about the latest in double dutch. In October of 2009, Charles M. Blow’s op-ed, “The Magic of Michelle,” declared Michelle Obama “the coolest first lady ever.” Michelle’s coolness factor? …Jumping double dutch on the South Lawn as part of a ‘healthy kids fair.’” Blow writes,

I couldn’t imagine recent first ladies jumping a puddle on the sidewalk, let along two ropes swinging at the same time in opposite directions. So, on behalf of New York City, the so-called double Dutch capital of the world (so much so that this year it became a varsity sport in the city’s schools), allow me to say: Well played.

In the midst of all this public, institutionalized recognition and success, double dutch remains symbolically situated: a gendered, racialized embodied performance of rhyme, beat, and the material conditions of the inner city. Imagined as a practice bound within a once ostensibly isolated black female vernacular culture, double dutch is now produced and consumed as “sport” in multiple contexts by a broad demographic and has become a platform for national excitement, representations, and identities.

In this article, we examine four documentary videos and a made-for-TV drama about double dutch. The documentaries include Skip Blumberg’s independently produced Pick Up Your Feet, from 1981; Rhythm of the Ropes, an ESPN documentary from 2006; and two independent documentaries from 2001 directed by Nicole Franklin, I Was Made To Love Her and The Double Dutch Divas! The fictional show is a recent (2006) made-for-TV Disney movie, Jump In! In addition, we discuss a two-minute documentary about double dutch that ran frequently on the Disney channel as part of the marketing build-up to and promotion of Jump In!

We want to focus on the ways these texts represent African American girls, and, in particular, how they represent them in relation to urban culture, African American male youth, and sport. We argue that despite the primary position of African American girls in the origin myth—in other words, without the African American girl who presumably needed protection from the streets, double dutch never would have become an organized sport—these texts displace and redefine her in various ways: as irrelevant, as a backdrop or support for boys, or as co-opted. These representational moves carried out by these texts are particularly troubling because double dutch is the one sport and playground activity historically associated in the U.S. primarily with African American girls (Gaunt, 2006). These documentaries about double dutch miss an opportunity to explore the complexity and contradictions of African American girls’ experiences. They miss an opportunity to understand the relationships among race, gender, youth, and sport on the playground and in organized athletics, and
to complicate our understanding of the larger genre of sports documentary. They miss an opportunity to pay attention to the athlete most often neglected by the sports documentary genre: African American girls. These texts refuse the chance to embrace alternative perspectives and to disavow the stereotypes regularly encountered in representations of African American girls, and, likewise, the relations among gender, race, youth, desire, and nation.

Double Dutch: The Origin Myth

Black girls playing double dutch are necessary to the origin myth, but, ironically, the story functions to displace African American girls. We see this through the way in which this myth intersects with the much vaunted national narrative popularized in the 1980s of sports—specially basketball—"saving" African American boys from the dangers of drugs and gangs in the urban environment. These police officers, this story goes, wanted to protect African American youth from the supposed dangers of the urban streets, and they did so first for the boys, and then for the girls. It is not clear in the double dutch narrative, however, why the girls need to be saved from the street.

According to the origin myth, the post-industrial urban streets are the source of the girls' creativity and community. Double dutch is quintessentially an urban sport, played on the concrete sidewalk, playground, or blacktop of the street, “discovered” by the police officers in that context. Thus, the street is both the source of double dutch and the space from which double dutch is meant to save girls. Not surprisingly, then, most of the documentaries feature scenes of double dutch being practiced inside gymnasiums. The relationship between the origin myth and this national narrative displaces girls by effacing gendered differences in the construction of racialized social problems and rescue narratives and offering no explanation about why organizing double dutch would be good for girls. While the origin myth is ostensibly about girls, it is not clear why it is about girls in particular. This vagueness facilitates various other ways in which the documentaries displace African American girls. Beyond the documentaries, this collective move also contributes to what Michelle Wallace (1990) and Patricia Hill Collins (1998), among others, have defined as U.S. popular culture's representation of African American women (and girls) as highly visible but without voice. Even though the origin myth is built on the bodies of African American girls, in the end, African American girls, their cultures, and their interests are pushed to the sidelines.

Pick Up Your Feet (1981)

Pick Up Your Feet is a 1981 Emmy Award winning documentary. Directed by Skip Blumberg, the documentary is considered a classic, was included in the Museum of Television and Radio’s TV Critics’ All-time Favorite Shows exhibition, and is one of the 70 videos included in US Express, a U.S. Department of the State project that “showcases aspects of American life not frequently seen by people all around the world.” Of the films we consider, Pick Up Your Feet dedicates the most time and space to African American girls. Made only seven years after the American Double Dutch League formed, it highlights a variety of teams, almost all of which are made up exclusively of African
American girls.

*Pick Up Your Feet* includes a significant amount of interview footage of the girls, not as "talking heads," but in groups before, during, or after a practice or performance. Skip Blumberg can be heard occasionally asking questions off-camera, and the girls seem to respond to him openly and with interest. They talk about their pleasure in the sport and about their goals for improving and for winning contests. In one scene, a girl whose team has just won cannot stop crying. The camera stays with her, showing her struggles, until an adult woman (presumably her mother and/or coach) hugs her and asks her why she's crying. "I'm so happy!" she responds. The documentary takes the time to show the complexity of emotion and experience involved in performance and competition. The documentary also includes long sections showing the girls' practicing and participating in competition. We get a clear picture of their hard work, their pleasure, and their success. In all these ways, the documentary centers on African American girls.

Nevertheless, there is at least one segment of the documentary that suggests an "underside" to the girls' pleasure and success. While interviewing one team—the previous year's champions and the team that was hired by McDonald's to make a television commercial—the interviewer probes about the girls' relationship to McDonald's. He asks why they are not competing this year, and they respond that they cannot because they made the commercial: They are no longer amateurs. The interviewer than asks, "Would you make the McDonald's commercial again if you got the opportunity today?" They respond, "No, because there are scholarships and all kinds of things you can get today."

This segment powerfully draws attention to the increasing institutionalization of the sport, as well as its availability for co-optation by consumer capitalism. By focusing on the girls who do not have access to the perks of institutionalization and who do not consider their co-optation—their 15-minutes of fame enabled by double dutch—as a positive experience, the documentary becomes critical and predictive. It understands the institutionalization of the sport as undermining African American culture and girls' experience and as contributing to the potential co-optation by corporate capitalism, a co-optation that, in this case, actually disadvantages the athletes. (One wonders how much McDonald's paid the girls? How much did they lose in potential scholarships?)

But this framing of the subject also constructs the girls as naïve and suffering for that naïveté. The documentary does not, for example, explore other aspects of the girls' lives, nor does the interviewer ask them what their future goals are in relation to double dutch. Might they have gone on to become coaches or judges, for example? Instead, we are left to assume that their brief fame and monetary gain is actually their loss.

There is another segment in the film that provides insight into that which we presumably know about double dutch, its value system, and by extension, its participants. In this scene, we are introduced to Peter Harlem, a slight boy, maybe seven or eight years old, with a dancer's build. His coach, Larry, tells us, pointing to Peter as anomaly: "He came out, tried out, and (small chuckle), he wuz better than some of the girls." In an interview with Peter, it becomes clear that he has persevered despite being mocked and bullied. Indeed, the token spectacle of exceptional African American boys (pre-
teen and teen) willing to suffer the burden of double dutch’s gender divide turns out to be a favored plot device in popular representations of the sport. But the effect of accepting the symbolic importance of casting mandatory suspicion on African American boys who jump — extending from hetero-normative gender to the racialized gendering of sport — is taken for granted and not critically engaged.

**Disney's Double Dutch**

While *Pick Up Your Feet* does not answer questions about the girls’ on-going relationship to double dutch, Disney has an answer: By the year 2007, African American girls are the teammates, the helpmates, and the admirers of African American boys. In Disney’s fictional narrative *Jump In!,* Corbin Bleu of *High School Musical* fame plays a teenage African American boxer who has the potential to make it to the Golden Gloves— just as his now widowed father did before him. The film’s primary concern is with Izzy’s struggle— like Peter’s in *Pick Up Your Feet*— to come to terms with his true athletic love: jumping double dutch. Izzy has a crush on Mary (who also has a crush on him [played by Keke Palmer]), and he joins her double dutch team — just “to help them out”— when one of the team members leaves for a supposedly better team. In Jump In!, Izzy’s boxing and gymnastic skills — endurance, footwork and rhythm, as well as his sportsmanship— make him a double dutch natural. It is Izzy who transforms the girls into city-wide champions by renaming them and reminding them of their black girl venacular (pre-competitive, girl-street culture, “fun”) double dutch — made up of hand-clapping rhymes and improvisational tricks Izzy helps the girls learn how to do double dutch "better," joining the team and facing ridicule from a local boxing bully (the angry black male) and his peers for participating in a "girls sport." This helps him come to terms with himself and learn to love himself for who he is.

This narrative defines double dutch as (historically) a girls’ sport, and boxing as (historically) a masculine sport. The inclusion of a female boxer and other signs of diversity and multiculturalism suggest that Disney intends for the film to be seen as a progressive narrative that breaks down stereotypes. While the narrative includes a white girl boxer, occasionally nods to her struggles in a hyper-masculine space, and shows her in an interracial heterosexual relationship in the end, the focus here is decidedly on the acceptance of the male character participating in a girls’ sport. The narrative importance of Izzy coming to terms with his new athletic identity as a jumper is supported by numerous shots of Mary gazing at him, smiling at him, and praising him. Thus, while it is Mary who has the drive to win at double dutch, it is Izzy who, with personal growth, makes that happen. In this hetero-normative, double dutch story, then, Mary helps Izzy find himself, and Izzy’s personal struggle magically works to broaden the gender sensibility of his peers while diminishing the anger fueling the local boxing bully. To punctuate the point, Izzy’s struggles help his father — who was his boxing coach but who in the end learns to fully support his double dutch skills— become a better parent. Izzy’s accomplishments are read as accomplishments for the family, the community, and the nation.

A two-minute spot about real double dutchers ran often on the Disney channel during the run-up to the premiere of *Jump In!,* and mirrors this gendered narrative. This spot shows numerous teams,
with both African American and white athletes, but focuses on one African American sister and brother pair. While watching the team practice and perform, voiceovers tell us that the older sister was double dutching, so her younger brother wanted to join the team too. The sister says that he was immediately better than she, but that she still works hard. While the spot shows both athletes, the voiceovers, as well as the camera movement and editing, center the boy, paralleling the argument of Jump In!'s narrative: it's OK for boys to do this sport. Once again, the African American girl is a background figure to the boy. The centering of the boys, then, contributes to the legitimization of the sport, transforming it from a game girls play to a sport at which boys excel.

**Double Dutch Is a Real Sport: ESPN**

Disney's broader recent race-neutral celebratory multiculturalism (Valdivia, 2008) naturalizes this made-for-TV movie's almost exclusive focus on African Americans without any attention to the specificity of African American lives. (The only developed non-African American character in the film is the white girl boxer.) ESPN's 2006 double dutch documentary, Rhythm of the Ropes, dispenses with blackness as a part of the story altogether. ESPN is even more invested than Disney in legitimating double dutch as a sport. The documentary does this by centering male athletes and, through them, introducing the theme of a threat to U.S. national masculinity. In international competition, the team to beat is from Japan. Nation replaces a U.S. racial narrative. At the culmination of the competition and the culmination of the film, the Japanese team gets most of the screen time and commentary, during which the Japanese team's female members are positioned in the background through a commentary and camera position and motion that emphasizes the athleticism of the male Japanese athletes. The film is so invested in the narrative of the threatened "take-over" of the sport by the Japanese, that one has to pay a great deal of attention to even notice that, in the end, it is an all-female team from the U.S. that wins the championship. According to the ESPN documentary, double dutch is a global sport for boys and girls, but one at which boys excel. It is the U.S. boys who must defend the U.S. nationality of the sport against the threat of the Japanese.

**Nicole Franklin's version of Double Dutch**

Moving from the 1981 documentary, *Pick Up Your Feet*, through the recent Disney texts and the ESPN documentary illustrates the displacement of African American girls from the cultural representations of double dutch as a sport and activity. Nicole Franklin's independent documentaries, *I Was Made To Love Her* and *The Double Dutch Divas!*, resist that move, but nevertheless maintain an internal ambivalence about African American girls'—as opposed to African American women's—participation in double dutch. *I Was Made To Love Her* opens with the double dutch origin story, and then goes on to show primarily African American girls practicing and participating in double dutch competitions. The editing and talking head interviews, however, take a decidedly critical perspective on the competition. In particular, musicologist Kyra Gaunt, the foremost scholarly researcher of double dutch, talks about how the institutionalization of the sport has led to the loss of creativity, spontaneity, community formation, and the link between music,
rhyme, and double dutch.

Gaunt says in one interview, "When black things move into public space, [they are] reduced to one element." Gaunt is so critical of organized double dutch, in fact, that in one section of the interview she realizes she is being rather hard on the girls who compete, becomes flustered, and then acknowledges that they may in fact get something worthwhile out of the experience. Despite this momentary reflection, Gaunt reiterates her criticism of the regimentation of the sport, epitomized by the "speed jumping" category, something in which she claims the girls playing on the street never engage. The editing of the documentary supports Gaunt's perspective, interspersing her interview with shots of girls jumping as fast as they can and looking intense and anything but happy as they do so. The editing draws a strong contrast between those shots and girls having seemingly spontaneous and creative fun while jumping double dutch on the street. The first hour of the documentary focuses on the girls who compete, yet not a single girl becomes individualized or is given enough attention from the film to emerge as a character. Instead, the girls are represented as interchangeable, constructed as excellent athletes, but caught in an institutionalized system without perspectives of their own. Like Pick Up Your Feet, I Was Made To Love Her offers a compelling critique of some of the losses caused by institutionalization, but it does so, in part, by marginalizing the complexity of the African American girl athletes' perspectives.

The final third of I Was Made To Love Her leaves the girls behind altogether as it focuses on an adult African American women’s jump-roping group: the Double Dutch Divas. In contrast to the documentary’s focus on competitors, Franklin develops the Diva’s individual characters. She tells the story of how each Diva got her performance name (e.g., Joy, Heart, etc.), what their everyday work and family lives are like, other activities in which they participate (e.g., running a marathon), and the community work they do by performing double dutch. Franklin’s interest in the Double Dutch Divas was so strong, in fact, that she took the last 30 minutes of I Was Made To Love Her and expanded it slightly to produce a separate documentary. This one is focused solely on the Double Dutch Divas and develops a loving and nuanced narrative about the women’s lives and their sport. We believe it is important not to lose sight of how the documentary's shift from the critique of girls' relationship to the sport to the celebration of the women contributes to the marginalization—even evacuation—of African American girls from the sport they supposedly originated: double dutch.

We acknowledge that it is possible to read this essay as participating in lamenting the disappearance of African American girls as scholar Kyra Gaunt does in her book and Franklin does in her documentary. We would like to point out that this concern about disappearance could function as a Romanticization of the idea of a pre-institutionalized or authentic double dutch that has been ruined by two police officers from New York, pushy coaches, McDonald’s, Disney, and ESPN. Our point is not that there is some ideal pre-history that could or should have been preserved or represented, but that these documentaries and other popular representations of double dutch miss an opportunity to bring as much complexity to our understanding of African American girls' experiences of sport generally, and double dutch in particular, as Franklin brings to the Double Dutch Divas.
Conclusion

On July 31, 2008, The New York Times reported that racial justice had entered into the enforcement of Title IX provisions when applied to High Schools:

Come next spring...as part of an effort to increase the number of students—particularly girls—participating in competitive athletics, the city will create co-ed double dutch teams at 10 high schools, many in predominately black neighborhoods like Bushwick, Bedford-Stuyvesant and Harlem, where ropes have long swung on asphalt playgrounds.

Despite the goal of increasing African American girls’ participation, several months later The New York Times featured a double dutch short video that highlighted a favored plot device — “one of the only boys on the team,” in this case, ZeAndre Orr. Once again, this video is primary dedicated to the emotional and physical harassment a boy has experienced and overcome. Arguably, the "boy who overcomes adversity" narrative has now become a required element of almost any representation of double dutch, thereby displacing the African American girl.

A recently released documentary, Doubletime (directed by Stephanie Johnes, 2007), moves in a different direction as it follows two U.S. teams as they prepare for international competitions. Doubletime, rather than telling the gender narrative, introduces a newer narrative about race-blindness. The documentary contrasts a team from an affluent North Carolina suburb, dominated by young white suburban girls, and a black team from an economically depressed area in South Carolina as both prepare to challenge the Japanese champions in the famed Apollo Theater. In interviews, Director Stephanie Johnes goes out of her way to suggest that racial and class differences driving her narrative are “simply coincidence.” The narrative nevertheless spends a great deal of time offering "balanced" coverage by maintaining the doubled focus on the two different—and clearly racialized and classed—teams. The focus on two U.S. teams heightens the theme of (and potential for) the United States trouncing Japan. This nationalist narrative currently dominates conversations about double dutch competitions. This narrative, we suggest, only helps heighten tensions and polarizes relations between Blacks and Asians/Asian Americans already present in hip hop in other cultural and social domains.

In Doubletime, African American girls are featured, but, as in all the texts we have discussed, they do not occupy center stage. The star of the film is Tim Martin, an African American teen who jumps with the affluent team dominated by white girls. While Tim Martin is extremely talented, talent does not explain the lack of black girl celebrities in double dutch culture. What is clear is that Doubletime put its marketing and promotion resources behind Tim. Double dutch is bound up with its commercial successes and possibilities, and its commercial viability is tied to hip hop—situated within a context of black masculinity—and extreme sports. The crucial turning points in ongoing representations of double dutch competitions all rely on the displacement of black girls. This development represents a denial, and a refusal to critically engage the complexity of, racial, sexual, and economic difference in
the context of globalization. The possible social narratives our stories about double dutch could be made to tell are not well served by being so uncritically and firmly integrated within America’s dominant nationalist and consumerist agendas.

Works Cited


