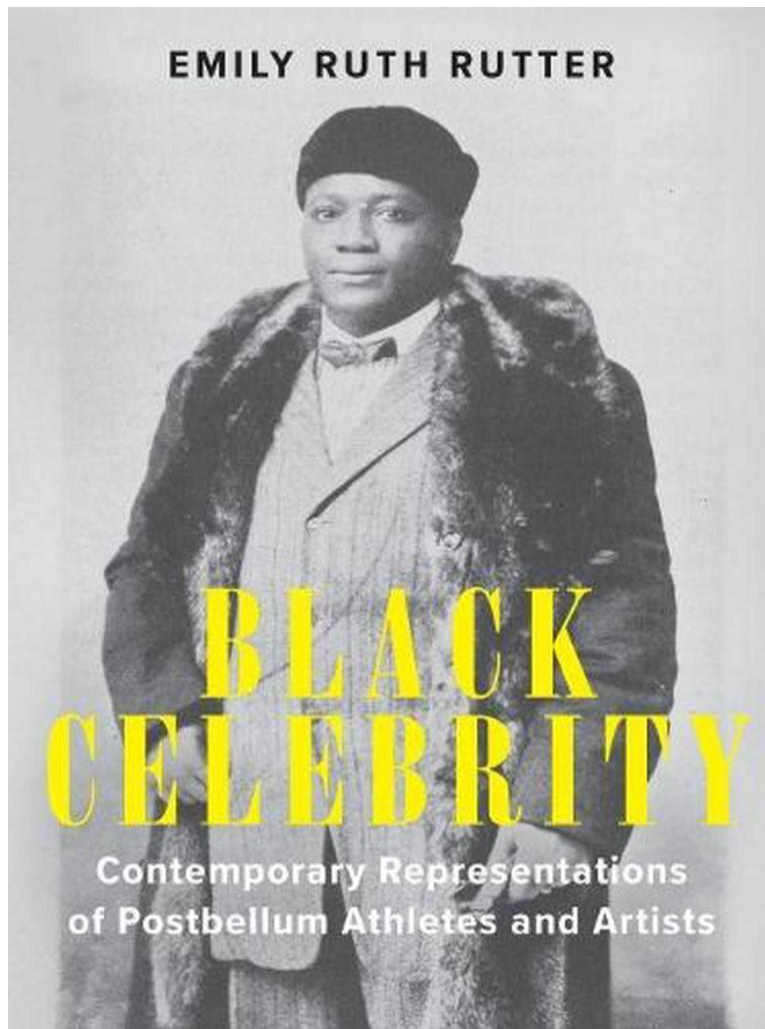


# Black Celebrity: Contemporary Representations of Postbellum Athletes and Artists by Emily Ruth Rutter

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Emily Ruth Rutter has written a fascinating monograph as part of the “Performing Celebrity” Series from University of Delaware Press, which is publishing works in “the emerging field of celebrity studies” (Rutter ii). *Black Celebrity* examines six contemporary creative works of poetry and fiction, three of which focus on post-bellum sports stars, two on boxer Jack Johnson and one on jockey Isaac Murphy; and three of which focus on performing artists, including pianist Thomas Greene Wiggins (“Blind Tom”), stage artists Bert Williams and George Walker, and other black performers of the Postbellum era.

Rutter dedicates a chapter to each creative work: two poetry collections focused on Jack Johnson, Kevin Young's *To Repel Ghosts: the Remix from the Original Masters* (2005) and Adrian Matejka's *The Big Smoke* (2013); Frank X. Walker's poetry collection *Isaac Murphy: I Dedicate This Ride* (2010); Caryl Phillips's novel *Dancing in the Dark* (2005); Jeffrey Renard Allen's novel *Song of the Shank* (2014); and Tyehimba Jess's poetry collection *Olio* (2016). In each chapter, Rutter examines how these creative works allow contemporary writers to interrogate past representations of these postbellum celebrities and to explore aspects of their inner lives, motivations, and relationships that writers of that time—journalists, novelists, biographers, and archivists—did not have access to or chose to ignore. Rutter's approach to these texts through textual analysis with reference to archival representations is similar to her excellent approach to literary works on Black baseball players in her important *Invisible Ball of Dreams: Literary Representations of Baseball behind the Color Line* (2018).

As Rutter explains in her introduction, "Portraits of Fame, or, The Past as Blueprint for the Present," she utilizes Jacques Rancière's conceptions of heresy and dissensus to "read these poets' and novelists' juxtapositions of archival materials with imaginative representations of historical artists and athletes" (Rutter 12). But she also weaves into her discussion a wide range of writers as well as recent sports and artistic Black celebrities, to interrogate how much and how little white readers/spectators continue to view/consume black performers through racist lenses. In Young's poem, "Black Jack (B. 31 March 1887)," for example, Rutter observes that Young inverts "the white gaze in order to voice Johnson's imagined understanding of the multiple and conflicting ways he is seen and understood: . . . 'I am black & they /won't let me forget it.'" (Rutter 34). According to Rutter, Young has captured "what W. E. B. Dubois terms 'double consciousness'" and "implies Johnson's deep awareness of the denigrating stereotypes projected on him" (Rutter 34).

Later in her chapter on Young's *To Repel Ghosts*, Rutter compares Jack Johnson's experiences facing "Great White Hope" Jess Willard and others in the ring to LeBron James's own "awareness of the double-edged nature of Black athletic success" when he faced ridicule from "the right-wing media" because he used his "celebrity platform to amplify the concerns of the Black Lives Matter movement" and responded by launching his three-part Showtime series *Shut Up and Dribble* (Rutter 37). Similarly, in examining Matejka's poetic portraits of Jack Johnson and his lovers and wives in *The Big Smoke*, Rutter asserts, "In creatively recuperating Johnson alongside his wives and lovers, Matejka suggests the ways in which his postbellum experiences laid the blueprint for the experiences of today's Black male athletes" (Rutter 78).

I particularly enjoyed reading Rutter's insightful analysis of Tyehimba Jess's *Olio* in the concluding chapter of *Black Celebrity*, "Let This Belting Be Our Unbinding." Rutter explores how, for example, in his poem "Millie McKoy & Christine McKoy Recall Meeting Blind Tom, 1877," Jess invites readers, to read juxtaposed lines in different ways—vertically, horizontally, and diagonally—to develop multiple meanings and add depth to the reader's understanding of the poem's speakers, conjoined twins exploited, like "Blind Tom" by white managers to perform for white audiences: "*Blind Tom never saw my two bodies He could only hear the way we were joined*" (Rutter 173-175).

Over the course of *Black Celebrity* Rutter effectively connects the creative representations of postbellum athletes and artists such as Jack Johnson, Thomas Greene Wiggins, and the McKoy sisters with the experiences of Black athletes and artists of more recent times, from athletes such as Muhammad Ali, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and Tiger Woods to artists such as Beyoncé, Lil Naz X, and Donald Glover. Rutter's ability to weave textual and cultural analysis into her examination of these literary texts makes her one of today's most important scholars of sport literature and popular culture.

Emily Ruth Rutter. *Black Celebrity: Contemporary Representations of Postbellum Athletes and Artists*. University of Delaware. 2022.