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Book Review

Things That Make White People Uncomfortable

Bennett, Michael, & Zirin, David. (2018). Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books. ISBN 9781608468935 (cloth) US$24.95; ISBN 9781642590234 (paper) US$17.95; ISBN 9781608468942 (e-book) US$19.95. 268 pages.

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> *Whether I die tomorrow or in sixty years, if the only things about me that people talk about are the Pro Bowls and the Super Bowl appearances, I will have failed. I want my legacy to be what I did in the community and the positive changes this work might have created in people's lives.* (p. 29)

As I finished reading Michael Bennett's memoir,[1] *Things that Make White People Uncomfortable*, and began writing this review, countries around the world were coming to grips with and developing ongoing responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, and protestors were taking to American and Canadian streets to demand justice and an end to murdering Black and Indigenous people at the hands of police. As the Coronavirus continues to shape our social, political, and economic lives, and Black and Indigenous people remain subjected to systemic and targeted racisms, one might suggest that sports are not the priority of the day, and so a memoir written by a professional American football player could seem somewhat unimportant. This notion, however, would be shortsighted, as Bennett shares his lived experiences in American football to show that participation in sports can actually provide opportunities for critical discussions around social justice, while the *business* of sports wields too much power, turning players into property and perpetuating dehumanizing racisms. Ultimately, through this book, Bennett is calling out the NCAA and professional sports as systems of (Black) human

[1] Dave Zirin is an author and editor of sports publications and acted as a supporting author for this book, which is why he is credited as an author. The stories told and reflections offered primarily represent the voice of Michael Bennett.

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exploitation, and he aims to offer readers the lessons he has learned about what is truly important and the tools for disrupting discriminations.

Bennett's story is one of determination and perseverance in the face of racist obstacles, all while keeping a critical eye on the path down which he walks. He speaks with passion for both what he believes is being done well and what he thinks needs to change in the worlds of college and professional sports, education, and activism against racism, sexism, food insecurity, and more. Through tales and commentary on his journey from rural Louisiana to becoming a professional football player, to where he wants to his life to go next, the book is an overall discussion of how and why Bennett strives to leave the legacy he describes in the quotation at the start of this review

Before discussing what messages the book offers, I first want to acknowledge that the book does have one main shortcoming that could detract from a general audience's engagement with various stories Bennett uses to contextualize his points on the discriminations at play: he takes too much for granted about what his readers already know. I approached this book with a variety of personal and academic knowledges that allow me to read and understand the experiences and concepts within the book the way it seems Bennett hopes, but this will not be the case for all readers. I am a scholar of racism and antiracism, specifically in and through different forms of education, so when Bennett discusses the relationships between racism and academia, I understand his perspective on educational systems. I have been to the American South, including Louisiana, which Bennett describes as being integral to whom he has become. I grew up playing and watching football, and tend to keep up with American sports and political news, so Bennett's references to different sporting events, team names, playing positions, and activist athletes are not lost on me. Finally, I have family members who have competed within the NCAA system, so, I have learned second-hand about how the lives of student-athletes are regulated, and understand the collegiate context in which Bennett played college football. I don't want to suggest that someone without these perspectives would miss Bennett's overall points, or that I didn't miss certain aspects of Bennett's narrative, but I did find that my experiences and knowledges helped to fill in some gaps in the description that informed Bennett's messages. There are times when Bennett seems to assume that readers are simultaneously seasoned sports fans and social justice advocates. He writes as if his audience already knows the names of role model activist athletes he talks about (e.g., Muhammad Ali, John Carlos, Colin Kaepernick), and are familiar with these people's actions of protest. If a reader is not a sports news or history person, a few quick internet searches might be helpful while joining Bennett on his journey.

Moving on to thinking about the messages Bennett shares, I admit that in reading Bennett's story, I was at first critical of how he positioned himself as facing forms of oppression in football, with coaches, team owners, and even team fans being the oppressors. Initially, the answer seemed simple: don't play. No one is forcing him to participate, so he could choose to leave the

million-dollar contract and walk away from the discriminatory environment. The messages that Bennett aims to convey, however, go beyond his presence in the league. He is simply using his experiences as a gateway to problematizing the treatment of (particularly Black) athletes. The foundational message I read was Bennett's link between sports as a multi-billion-dollar industry – at college and professional levels – and historic systems of Black enslavement. In both, Bennett suggests, Black bodies are dehumanized by treating them as property and as a means for financial profit. He makes additional connections between systemic issues, such as the prevalence of food insecurity in racialized neighbourhoods and perceptions that sports, rather than systemic change, is a way out of poverty. The vanishingly small percentage of young athletes who do rise to the professional level of their sport earn money that allows them to care for themselves and their families, but do so by enduring the physical and mental strains of being a tool for creating a product: a winning and therefore financially profitable team, usually headed by a white owner.

According to Bennett, one main way forward in battling this dehumanization both in sports and everyday life is through what he calls *intersectionality*. The intersectionality that Bennett speaks of, however, reads more like *solidarity* and *relationality* than the intersections of identity that have been examined and taken up by Critical Race Theorists and Black feminist scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw and bell hooks. I highlight this difference not to squabble over terminology, but to clarify the distinction and then move on to addressing Bennett's actual point. His emphasis is on "understanding of how multiple oppressions can overlap" (p. 196) and recognizing the times when "their oppression sounded like his oppression" (p. 197). In the fight against discriminations of all kinds, Bennett says, "we are going to need to connect with each other to bring about these [societal] shifts" (p. 208). Sports are often looked at as apolitical (e.g., consider the "shut up and play" attitudes that continuously condemn players "taking a knee" during the national anthem), but Bennett points out the strong presence of politics in sports, the parallels we can see between sports and society, and the opportunities to use sports as a forum for connecting with and contributing to anti-oppressive change throughout society.

While Bennett uses his platform as a professional athlete to call out the racisms and injustices that he sees in the present, he also uses his celebrity voice to bolster efforts for a better future. He works to encourage youth – especially Black girls – to embrace education with a focus on STEAMED (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, Mathematics, Entrepreneurship, and Design). He partners with educational organizations where the goal, it seems, is to prepare youth for creating their own paths, becoming societal leaders, and not chasing after the slim chance of earning millions through the racist business of sports. In Bennett's words, the present generation of Black youth "is going to be decisive, and […] they need to get off their behinds and realize the power they have. They are the future" (p. 216). He refuses to

perpetuate the cycle of Black boys and girls being told that academics are not an option and that they should pursue sports. If Black boys and girls are interested and show potential in sports, Bennett believes they should be encouraged not to be a pawn for white owners, and to become leaders themselves, aspiring to be head coaches and team owners where they can change the ways the business of sports operates. As I write this, the NFL team Washington Football Team just named Jason Wright as the new president of the franchise, making Wright the first ever Black NFL team president. Change is clearly possible, but it requires breaking through a thick wall of Whiteness. Bennett obviously found success in his journey through football, and became a leader on the field and in the community, but the challenges he faced were not just in making it to the top; he was challenged with not being silenced by racism, not becoming mere property, and not surrendering his humanity along the way.

This is not a book that offers – or intends to offer – a new take on antiracist theory. Rather, Bennett shares his lived experiences and reflections to present contexts in which antiracist activism and practice has been and still needs to be enacted. It is about antiracist and anti-oppressive practices. The book provides a glimpse into the complexities and interconnectivities between the journey of a Black athlete and the racisms and antiracisms that occur in wider society. Michael Bennett is a professional American football player, but that is not all he is, and not all he wants to be remembered as. Throughout his narratives and commentary is a message that tells his readers that the path to overcoming racism is an uncomfortable one, but it must be travelled, and it must be travelled together. Bennett stands on his beliefs: "You have to be uncomfortable to grow […] If we feel uncomfortable, we are doing something right. That discomfort is just a period of transition" (p. 247).