
Citation:

Hylton, K (2017) The Unbearable Whiteness of Cycling. The Conversation.

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Document Version:

Article (Accepted Version)

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The Unbearable Whiteness of Cycling

Each July, cycling enthusiasts anticipate the start of the [Tour de France](#). As a result of such events, cycling is understood to have major economic and health benefits, though there are surprisingly few sources that explain the appeal, or experiences of cycling for the racialised groups that participate. [Steinbach, Green et al. \(2011\)](#) report that ethnicity, gender and income affect participation and preferences. In London, only one in three cyclists are women, and in a city where a third of the population identifies as Black, Asian and minority ethnic, 86% of male cyclists and 94% of female cyclists are White.

Cycling has been described as very [‘White’](#) and limited in terms of [which social groups participate](#). The unremarked nature of whiteness in cycling hints at how ingrained it is in cycling culture. Also, Olympic [Team GB cycling coach David Brailsford](#) recounted that,

Breaking down the barriers to wider participation from black and ethnic minority groups remains the great unconquered goal for British cycling.

Despite Boris Johnson’s (ex-Mayor of London) strategy to improve the demographics of cycling it maintains a conspicuously [White, male, middle class constituency](#). Like other sports, cycling is not equally welcoming purely because people choose to participate. There is a view that certain bodies can be deemed to be [‘out of place’](#) and *trespassers* marked out for differential treatment.

As a regular cyclist of African-Caribbean descent, I have considered how the quality of my rides have differed depending on where I go and with whom. In one group I feel hypervisible and in another I feel invisible. I am hypervisible in a group of White friends, yet this is generally never an issue for them or openly to others that see our peloton. The odd second look has not yet been followed by a negative racial remark, though uneasy gazes can be interpreted in ways that could be viewed as unwelcoming [microaggressions](#). However, where I am *invisible* my group is *hypervisible because they are all Black* and are a rarity in cycling circles. It is when I am in this group where passersby have taken time to wind their

windows down to throw racial slurs in our direction. Cycling journalist, [Matt Seaton](#) adds that he could count most of the professional Black riders in the UK as there are so few. At loftier levels the welcome for some world class Black cyclists has been equally disturbing. The [MTN-Qhubeka](#) Tour de France team from Africa have also complained about concerns of racism. In what was described as a [heat of the battle](#) exchange the offended rider was issued with an apology and the offending cyclist expelled. The team principal, [Douglas Ryder](#) added that in the previous year,

One of the biggest teams in the world...in the Tour of Spain,
[said] *you guys don't belong here, fxxx off to the back of the
bunch.*

The unbearable whiteness of cycling can be used to explain how White privilege, 'race' and racism appear in different ways in unexpected fashions. For instance, in Chicago, cycling is observed to be a place where 'race' and racism are significant in a way that accentuates the resilience of [racism in sport](#). Chicago is a city where the bulk of cycling infractions occur in the least popular cycling spaces. These spaces are racialised as Black and the unequal share of the citations are issued to African Americans and Latinos. For White people White privilege means that there is less chance of an infraction. Despite the popularity of cycling in predominantly White areas, over eight years (2008-2016) the [top ten citation areas](#) include seven that are African American and three that are Latino.

These cycling issues raise concerns over broader issues of the significance of 'race' in society. In a mundane way cycling infractions necessitate police action, though in Chicago they reveal a) how racial bias and discrimination directly affect Black cyclists b) the institutional criminalization of Black people c) White cyclists as model citizens. The statistics between areas differentiated by ethnicity make it difficult to move beyond the problem of White privilege, racism and the [Chicago police, criticised for its policing of Black cyclists](#) in Chicago. It has been suggested that the [bike stops are a pretext for other searches](#), with what has been described as *the new stop and frisk*. The Chicago police do not have a good record where 'race' is concerned and neither do other cities such as New York City.

Cycling, like other sports is subject to the same social problems influenced by wider dispositions to 'race' and racial bias seen in other social activities. For recreational cyclists like me in the UK, professional competitors and everyday cyclists in the US and beyond, the dynamics of 'race', racism and whiteness in cycling need to be more fully understood.