Turpin, Robert J. *Black Cyclists: The Race for Inclusion*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2024. XI + 233 pp. Notes, Illustrations, Index.

My cycling interests, both personal and academic, lean more toward long distance bicycle travel and touring, though I am also attuned to bicycle racing, commuting and any other activities involving two or three wheels and self-propulsion. To provide some personal and professional background, I have ridden tens of thousands of miles, exclusively in the United States and Canada, including dozens of centuries (rides of one hundred miles in a day) many of them multiple times. I’ve enjoyed rides with cycling friends and solo rides, one from Ashland, Ohio to Provincetown, Massachusetts, commuting to work at Lakehead University (Thunder Bay, Ontario), The University of Alabama (Tuscaloosa) and Ashland University (Ohio). In 1991 I completed a forty-seven-day transcontinental ride from Los Angeles, California to Boston, Massachusetts. For more than a dozen springs I’ve ridden as a marshal in New York’s Great Five Boro Bike Tour, returning to Gotham in the fall to marshal in New York’s Multiple Sclerosis charity ride. For the last several decades more than thirty thousand cyclists ride the Five Boro, while the MS ridership equals several thousand cyclists.

Academically I am an American social/intellectual historian who focuses on why we are the way we are as Americans, especially as how it relates to issues of race and ethnicity. My research centers on bicycle travel and touring, having written one book with another in process, multiple articles and dozens of papers at a number of historical meetings. I read and reviewed Turpin’s earlier book, *First Taste of Freedom* (Syracuse University Press, 2016), an interesting look at how following the collapse of the 1890s “bicycle boom” marketers turned the American bicycle industry toward the youth market, despite a small but dedicated number of adult riders who continued traveling by bicycle, including many who used their wheel to travel around the world.

David Herlihy’s quote on the back cover of *Black Cyclists: The Race for Inclusion* is accurate but the reader needs to realize this book is far more than another biography on Marshall (Major) Taylor (1878-1932). Despite his wealth from bicycling and a self-published autobiography, *Marshall Tayor: The Fastest Bicycle Rider in the World* (1928)*,* Taylor died penniless, buried in a pauper’s grave, forgotten until Andrew Ritchie resurrected him by authoring *Major Taylor: The Extraordinary Career of a Champion Bicycle Racer* (1988). Other biographies include Todd Balf, *Major* (2008), Conrad and Terry Kerber, *Major Taylor* (2014), and Michael Kranish, *The World’s Fastest Man* (2019).

Were I the author, I might have titled this interesting and informative volume, *The Race for Inclusion: Black Cyclists In a White World*. which seems to be Turpin’s intent. I see his thesis clearly stated: “in spite of cycling’s racist history in the United States, Black cyclists have been steadfast in their use of the bicycle as a means of affirming their freedom, masculinity, and equality” (p. 6). This succinctly encapsulates Taylor’s cycling career, as well as the efforts of the myriad other Black riders long forgotten. Despite discrimination on and off the bicycle, including tactics to prevent Taylor from winning, sometimes resulting in serious injuries, he persevered. A classic tactic used against Taylor was “pocketing,” where White riders would surround him to prevent him getting to the front and winning the race. In 1898 and 1899 he set multiple world records for races from one-quarter to two miles. In 1899 he won the one-mile sprint event to become the world champion. While the racing in Europe and Australia offered less resistance to the Black riders, even there they did not gain the respect or acceptance they desired.

During this time the United States Supreme Court decided Plessy v Ferguson (1896), endorsing Black inferiority and acknowledging de jure segregation as law, The League of American Wheelmen, founded in1880, passed the Watts Amendment in 1894, denying membership to Blacks. LAW encouraged cycle travel and touring by, among other activities, endorsing hotels for cyclists. This created a potential problem—would a hotel with a Whites only rule be forced to register Blacks? It also set the rules for racing, which after that date made Blacks ineligible to compete in LAW sponsored events. This did not include Taylor, a crowd pleaser and huge drawing card, and Kitty Knox (1874-1900), a skilled bicycle racer and activist from Massachusetts. As a result of his star power, Taylor’s speed and skill in sprints forced LAW to allow him to race in their events, and since Knox had joined LAW the year before the passage of the Watts amendment, she was deemed exempt. The Watts amendment demonstrates the depth of racism, but at the same time Blacks were not necessarily all that interested in joining a White organization that didn’t want them. Though more is known of both Taylor and Knox, these are far from the only Black riders that Turpin includes in this comprehensive analysis; his tenacity in poring over late 19th century cycling periodicals to uncover the names of long forgotten Black riders is admirable.

We likely all have memories of learning to balance, steer and pedal a two-wheeler. At whatever age this requires a stout heart, determination, strength and skill, all traits believed to be lacking in Blacks. On pages 82 and 83 Turpin includes four lithographs of the fictional “Darktown Bicycle Club,” printed in 1892 and 1895 by the Currier and Ives Company. They caricature Black men and women on bicycles trying but failing miserably to rise above their station. These disgusting illustrations are bracketed by two 1890s photographs. The first the photograph from 1898 of Anna Morrison of San Diego, California, posed with her bicycle and wearing a stylish hat, jacket and skirt just touching her boots. The second photograph from 1985 shows Kitty Knox at the Asbury Park LAW meeting. Posed with her racing bicycle Knox is wearing rational dress designed for the modern woman. The juxtaposition of the lithographs and photographs makes a stunning visual of racist belief and actual fact.

While I am not cycling as much recently (perhaps the last decade or more), I am not as sanguine as Turpin is in his Epilogue, where he sees “the Black cyclists of the present era are more intentional in their push to diversify the sport.” (197). He finds more professionals and amateurs alike “taking to the roads and trails on a daily basis,” which “means people will be forced out of their racial and ethnic bubbles (197-198).” While I hope he is right, on my transcontinental ride in 1991 I had fifty some companions ranging in age from the twenties to the seventies, equally divided between men and women. All White. For the Five Boro in the 1990s, 2000s and 2010s, the vast majority of riders are from the Greater New York area, though riders from around the world enjoy a traffic-free forty-two-mile ride through Gotham. The White population of New York is approximately thirty percent while the Black population equals about twenty percent. From my experience the tour was nowhere near two-thirds White and one-third Black. The same was true for the MS charity tour in New York City. Clearly there appears to me to be a paucity of Black cyclists, a conclusion that is furthered by the small number of Blacks who participated in the centuries I’ve ridden over the last several decades. Melody Hoffman, in *Bike Lanes are White Lanes* (2016) concludes that while more working class and people of color are cycling, in Portland, Oregon, bike lanes are also leading to gentrification, further discriminating against both groups.

In 1879 Charles Pratt, “an attorney, writer and early philosopher of the wheel, argued that cycling was a ‘gentlemanly recreation, a refined sport (5).’” This coincided with the conclusion of Reconstruction and the origins of de jure and de facto segregation which relegated Blacks to an inferior status in the United States which sadly continues to this day, despite major civil rights advances. This widespread belief needs to be abandoned to encourage more Blacks to take up cycling as a sport and recreation which will go a long way to end the racist views of American society. Casual and committed cyclists along with antiracists will find encouragement in *Black Cyclists: The Race for Inclusion.* However incremental, I sincerely hope Turpin’s optimism is more accurate than my experiences, which are more dated than his.

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