Wearing My Heart on My Sleeve: Transgressing the Traditional Boundaries of Sport History

Christine O'Bonsawin
University of Victoria

I was raised with stories. As a young girl, I was tucked into bed many nights by my Father, who shared countless stories with my older sister and me, most involving our four-legged relatives. His stories were often about nolka (deer), awasos (bear), tmakwa (beaver), w8kwse (fox), but usually about m8lsem (wolf). At the time, I thought these stories were fables shaped by my Father’s imagination, contrived tales to assist his (sometimes harrowing!) efforts after a long day’s work to get us to sleep. I assumed that because my Father was visually impaired and unable to read traditional children’s books, he had no choice but to make up such tales. It was not until I grew older that I realized his stories held important lessons—nolka and awasos were some of the greatest sources of winter protection for my Abenaki ancestors, and m8lsem were (and are) among the most revered of our nonhuman relations. As I grew older, I came to understand that his stories were not simply constructions of his imagination. On the contrary, my Father’s stories contained important teachings and life lessons.

In reflecting on the importance of stories in her thought-provoking work titled, “Honouring the Oral Traditions of My Ancestors through Storytelling,” Lyackson scholar Qwul’sih’yah’maht (Robina Anne Thomas) shares,

I used to only half listen to the talk of my Grandparents, Aunties, and Uncles and think that I would probably not have this type of “idle chat” with my children. I now realize the wisdom that made up those stories . . . In fact, not only do I share these stories but also I now understand that they are vital to the survival of First Nations peoples . . . these stories leave us with a sense of purpose and pride, and give us guidance and direction—these are stories of survival and resistance.1

Qwul’sih’yah’maht explains that through stories, historical facts are handed down, and cultural, traditional, educational, spiritual, and political teachings are imparted. Stories are central to the lives of Indigenous peoples as they bestow our sense of identity and belonging, thereby situating us within our lineage. They are rooted in kinship responsibilities and establish our relationships with the natural world.2

O’Bonsawin (cobonsaw@uvic.ca) is with the University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, Canada.
Storytelling enables us to convey counterstories of land dispossession, colonization, genocide, violence, and importantly, Indigenous survivance.¹

I first came across Qwul’sih’yah’maht’s story about storytelling in early 2007 when asked to review the edited collection, Research as Resistance: Critical, Indigenous, and Anti-Oppressive Approaches (that includes this chapter) for The Canadian Journal of Native Studies. I had just completed my doctorate and was preparing to relocate to lək’wənən and WSÁNEĆ territories (Victoria, British Columbia) to start my position at the University of Victoria. In reviewing this collection, I noted that a prominent theme woven throughout the anthology was that of readiness. As contributing authors challenged traditional research approaches, including dominant ideas about researcher objectivity, neutrality, and application of reason, all expressed their readiness “to explore the emancipatory possibilities of new approaches to research, even when these transgress the boundaries of traditional research and scholarship.”² The critical challenges presented in Research as Resistance, specifically those put forth by Qwul’sih’yah’maht, helped ground me in these early years, putting names and concepts to radical, transformative, and transgressive research possibilities, some of which were already seeping into my scholarship.

As a young scholar, I was accused of transgressing the traditional boundaries of sport history scholarship on more than one occasion. Once, for example, a prominent senior scholar with considerable influence challenged me on the seemingly subjective and biased tone of my writing, accusing me of “wearing my heart on my sleeve.” In their estimation, my work lacked objectivity, was biased in that it went too far to advance Indigenous interests, and, thus, had fallen short in meeting disciplinary standards. Even though I was unsettled at that moment, I was proud then—as I am now—that the scholarly piece under inspection was understood to have been written from an Indigenous perspective and functioned to recenter Indigenous primacies. This is but one example of the double dealing in a field of study that, as Lindsay Parks Pieper and Carly Adams suggest, “has often failed to interrogate the kinds of histories told and by whom . . . [and is] guilty of and complicit in the ongoing silencing of stories, perspectives, and worldviews from outside ‘the canon.’”³ Commensurate with other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, sport history is a field of study wherein the privileging of whiteness has been internalized, prioritized, and protected through disciplinary norms and largely through established “dominant ideas about what constitutes ‘good’ research and ‘acceptable’ research practices.”⁴ As Adams contends, whiteness continues to be (re)produced throughout the field of sport history, allowing some individuals and their bodies of work to feel welcome and “at home” while remaining hostile to marginalized scholars and their bodies of work.⁵ I wholeheartedly concur with Adams’s supposition.

Truth be told, there have been times when I have felt sport history spaces to be unwelcoming and even hostile, and there was even a time when I stepped away rather than stepped up. It was a three- to four-year hiatus from sport history spaces whereby I contemplated whether this was the academic “home” for me. It was a period of immense transition in my life—from the east coast to the west coast, from student scholar to faculty scholar, from kinesiology to Indigenous studies, and the transition to motherhood. As I segued into more Indigenous-centered academic spheres, where I naturally felt more at “home,” I questioned why my participation
in sport history spaces sometimes needed to be so hard. Following a few years of deep reflection, I felt a pull back toward sport history—the academic space I had called “home” for so long. I recognized that there were urgent and necessary contributions to be made to a field of study that largely lacked Indigenous bodies and bodies of work. I agree with Pieper and Adams’s suggestion that we are “collectively responsible” for a field of study that has failed on multiple fronts and silenced, often purposely, those from outside the canon. I understand myself to be part of this collective. As such, I take up the challenge to reimagine and rebuild an academic field that is “home” to anyone who wishes to participate in this space. One way we might do this is by taking up radical, transformative, and transgressive research approaches and by pushing “the edges of academic acceptability not because we want to be accepted within the [field of sport history] but in order to transform it.”

I began this piece with my own story about storytelling to deliberately put forth potentially transgressive possibilities that we might imagine in the field of sport history moving forward. Although nolka, awasos, tmakwa, w8kwsees, and m8lsem have yet to feature prominently in my published works (though one day, they may!), I share this context so that readers may better understand the importance of stories in the lives of Indigenous peoples. They are our most valued sources. Stories may not always feature prominently in our scholarship; however, they are always with us. They situate us within our lineage, affirm our relationships and responsibilities to kinship and the natural world, and empower us to present counterstories about colonization and celebrate our survival in the face of violence. Before meeting Qwul’sih’yah’mahnt, she had already become an important teacher in my life, helping me better see and understand the significance and value of stories in academic realms. I have had the great honor of working alongside Qwul’sih’yah’mahnt for the last fifteen years, and in this time, she has become one of my greatest mentors and a dear friend. In further reflecting on the importance of stories and storytelling, I think of my Father, who, like Qwul’sih’yahmaht’s Grandmother, is now in the Spirit World. Although my Father is no longer physically with us, the stories he shared live on with me, my children, and my future grandchildren, reminding us of who we are, our relationships and responsibilities, and the importance of always wearing our hearts on our sleeves.

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