Unsettling Sporting Stories

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It is a daunting privilege to be invited to contribute to this vital conversation.¹ I am writing this on the stolen Lands of the Marin-balluk clan of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation. Like all the Lands that make up what is now a nation named Australia, they have never been ceded. The serious play of sport is all around me. People walk, run, and cycle on the Kororoit creek near my home, adults and kids play rugby union at the Arthur Beachley reserve across the street, and many of the television screens on show through my neighborhood broadcast the men’s Australian Football League competition and the 2022 Commonwealth Games, which are taking place in Birmingham, England. Across the Pacific Ocean, the men’s Major League Baseball competition continues as summer turns to fall in North America, and overnight the English “Lionesses” defeated Germany at a sold out Wembley stadium in London. After the victory, the English coach, Sarina Wiegman, proclaimed that “the world will change” for her players now that they have won the 2022 Euro.² Although just how much their worlds will change is unclear, the statement rings true. Such is the power of sport. The outcome of one game can transform lives.

The recent compelling editorial by Carly Adams—“‘Home’ to Some, But Not to Others”—interrogates the academic structures that continue to enact systemic violence on those who are not privileged by Whiteness with its unequal hierarchies of gender, sexuality, class, and physical bodies among other things.³ What I want to draw attention to here is the particularities of “modern” sport and how we tell sporting history, which I think lend a distinctive urgency to redressing these systems of discrimination, exclusion, and other forms of violence.

Sport is arguably the most powerful of all the forms of popular culture in places like Australia and Canada. The extraordinary meaning that it holds for so many people is both absurd and deep. Sports are a site of dreams, desires, passions, spectacular athleticism, multibillion dollar industries, and above all, of compelling stories that unfold as we watch and play. It is these sporting stories—as lived by athletes, fans, and many others—that shape, and at times transform, lives. Yet, if we focus narrowly on these stories as sports historians, on who won and lost, of how sporting competitions were developed, and of who played in them, then we risk compounding the devastating role that sports frequently play in the world.

Modern sports are the product of a world driven by ideologies of White supremacy and processes of genocidal colonization.⁴ As part of this modern world,
sports emerged largely as the province of men understood as White.\(^5\) This dehumanizing history continues to shape the present. Not only do many sports remain hegemonic spaces that continue to privilege White men, they also regulate, shape, uphold, and reinforce the values of Whiteness.\(^6\) This holds true not just in terms of race and ethnicity but also in terms of other key (modern) ways of classifying humans. For example, with regard to gender, modern sports still tend to reify aggressive forms of masculinity and to strictly enforce a rigid, unequal gender binary.\(^7\)

The ideologies of White supremacy are at the root of these continued practices. Yet, this tends to be hidden. One of the diabolical aspects of so-called modernity is that it has presented the emergence of the modern world as a reflection of the supposed natural order. In one aspect of what Unanga\(\hat{\text{h}}\)\text{at} scholar Eve Tuck and coauthor K. Wayne Yang refer to as “the invisibilized dynamics of settler colonialism,” White people, especially White men, are in positions of economic, political, social, and cultural power because they are characterized as more evolved, civilized, and so forth.\(^8\) Or so the story goes despite the immense violence that these peoples have perpetrated.\(^9\)

Sporting stories tend to be a key cultural site for the reproduction and dissemination of these dehumanizing notions of a natural order, which are repackaged as “common sense” (such as beliefs that men are stronger than women and White people are more intellectually gifted). Thus, histories of sport that do not seek to make visible the broader structural and systemic value systems that frame the past and present of sporting worlds can end up amplifying the harm that these processes continue to cause.

Of course I am talking here in broad brushstrokes that cover the complexity of this all. Nevertheless, there is no way to be neutral about this history and how it has shaped the present, regardless of its complexities, nuances, and subtleties. Nor can we be neutral about the central role that modern sports play in this. Either we aim to reveal, unsettle, and contest the ongoing effects of this past while creating possibilities for something else, or we produce histories that effectively continue to uphold the damaging forms of common sense around unequal power relations, discrimination, and worse that modern sports still tend to promote.

There are many aspects of this for historians to grapple with, especially those like me who benefit from the continuing privileges of being understood as a White man.\(^10\) What questions do we ask of the past and the present? Whose viewpoints and experiences do we center? How do we decenter ourselves? Whose knowledge do we privilege? Who do we cite? Who do we build relationships with? When is it best for us to listen rather than to speak and write? What role does the quest for justice play in our work? And when and how do we give up our power?

I want to finish, however, with a brief example of what is at stake in the stories that we tell around sport. Storytelling, notes Ngāti Awa and Ngāti Porou scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith, can be a central method of decolonization: “The story and the storyteller both serve to connect the past with the future, one generation with another, the land with the people and the people with the story.”\(^11\) Yet, many of our sporting stories do not achieve this and can, instead, uphold colonial practices and power structures.

As I noted at the beginning of this piece, part of the sporting focus in places like Australia and Canada at the moment is the so-called Commonwealth Games.
(Formerly the British Empire Games, they are also justly referred to as the Stolenwealth Games.) One of the most iconic moments in the history of these games came in 1994 when the Kuku Yalanji and Birri Gubba athlete Cathy Freeman celebrated her victory in the 400-meters event by holding aloft the Aboriginal flag as well as the Australian flag.

In a recent piece on this moment, the veteran Australian sports journalist Greg Baum quoted Freeman explaining that her gesture signified pride in her Blackness and that what she did played a role not only in Australian sporting history but also in the history of “social justice” in these Lands. Yet, rather than follow Freeman’s lead and explore these issues of Black pride and justice, Baum, instead, got White Australians (two athletes and a fellow journalist) to reflect on the meaning and importance of Freeman’s actions—spending more time on them and their feelings than on Freeman. Baum then concluded his piece by portraying the then Australian Commonwealth Games boss and chef de mission Arthur Tunstall in a redeeming light, despite Tunstall having vilified Freeman with a racist joke in the lead-up to the 1994 Games and then (unsuccessfully) banning her from flying the Aboriginal flag.

In Baum’s self-satisfied article, we can see how those things pertaining to the Australian nation are “socially and culturally constructed as a white possession” to quote the Goenpul scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson. Baum’s conceit is that Freeman’s gesture—which she stated repeatedly was directed at Indigenous people—had helped “flag” a better future for “Australia.” As if the moment could only be interpreted by White people thinking about what it meant for the nation that they see as theirs. This Australian nation is now characterized by Baum as better because the Aboriginal flag is regularly flown, and the one “bad” White man is forgiven in the end. To return to Tuck and Yang, forms of storytelling like this reinscribe “settler innocence,” “rescuing a settler future” in which settler guilt and complicity has been absolved.

So much is missing in this comfortable telling of a vital moment in sporting history. Indeed, readers might gain the impression that Freeman helped Australia move past its history of invasion and genocidal colonization to a just present. Part of what is elided here is the power of the Aboriginal flag. Not only is it the defining symbol of Australia’s (Indigenous-led) Black Power movement, it testifies to the importance of “land rights and self-determination” as the Gumbainggir scholar and activist Gary Foley and coauthor Edwina Howell put it. Designed in 1971 by Luritja/Wombai man Harold Thomas in discussion with Foley, the flag has red ochre for the soil, yellow for the sun, and black for the pride of the Black Peoples of the continent.

Baum also neglects to note that the call for sovereign Land rights embodied in the flag remains unrealized. Australian Governments might have recognized the Aboriginal flag since 1995, but they have failed to come to a treaty with the Marin-balluk clan of the Wurundjeri or any of the other Original Peoples whose Lands they illegally “attempt to rule over,” to draw on the framing of the Abenaki (Odanak) scholar Christine O’Bonsawin. Moreover, although Baum speaks of the present as if it is better than the past, since 1994 the incarceration of Indigenous People in Australia has more than doubled, while many other inequalities and genocidal practices persist.

The moment when Cathy Freeman held the Aboriginal flag aloft in 1994 is one of the many powerful stories produced around modern sport that sparks conversations, debate, analysis, and arguments that, among other things, draw the attention
of historians. Our task, as I see it, is to engage rigorously with these tales that shape so many lives while seeking to make visible the dehumanizing structures, systems, beliefs, inscriptions of innocence, and normalizing practices that still tend to frame these stories. To create space, in other words, for an alternate future by practicing history in a manner that connects generations, Lands, Peoples, and stories with an unsettling call to justice and recognition of Indigenous sovereignty at the heart of our craft.21

Notes

1. I would like to thank Fiona Kerr, Christopher Sonn, Karen Jackson, Paul Stewart, Gregory Phillips, Tracey Cooper, Jaime Schultz, and Gary Osmond along, more generally, with the members of the Community, Identity, and Displacement Research Network and Moondani Balluk for conversations, resources, and support that have helped shape my thinking on this topic. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewers of this piece for their feedback.


4. My thanks to Jaime Schultz, who first drew my attention to the importance of directly naming the ideologies of White supremacy.


7. For an excellent overview of the way gender binaries are part of the broader colonial project, see the Wiradjuri scholar Sandy O’Sullivan’s compelling, “The Colonial Project of Gender (and Everything Else),” Genealogy 5, no. 67 (2021): 1–9.


9. For example, see Angela Woollacott, Settler Society in the Australian Colonies: Self-Government and Imperial Culture (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

10. My thinking here is also shaped by work in other disciplines, such as community psychology. See for example, Christopher C. Sonn and Garth Stevens, “Tracking the Decolonial Turn in Contemporary Community Psychology: Expanding Socially Just Knowledge Archives, Ways of Being and Modes of Praxis,” in Decoloniality and Epistemic Justice in Contemporary Community Psychology, ed. Garth Stevens and Christopher C. Sonn (Cham: Springer, 2022), 1–19.


20. See, for example, Kathomi Gatwiri, Darlene Rotumah, and Elizabeth Rix, “BlackLivesMatter in Healthcare: Racism and Implications for Health Inequity among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in Australia,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 9 (2021): 4399.