“Futures—Past,” A Reflection of 40 Years of the Sociology of Sport Journal: An Introduction

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Today we can feel how time is a spiral, how the present moment is always layered with multiple pasts and underlying alternate futures. Time as a concept is not only related to one’s individual life but also to society that goes back many generations and in one’s community. (Ayana Jamieson, 2022)

We welcome you to the 40th anniversary special issue of the Sociology of Sport Journal (SSJ). For the last 40 years, the SSJ has served as the flagship journal of the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport (NASSS), operating in tandem (community) with the distribution of critical scholarship from diverse theoretical and methodological approaches on the sociology of sport, physical culture, and the physical body. As a publication, the journal has sought to have its finger on the pulse of the current moment to highlight critical themes as they arise in real time (e.g., hip-hop culture, activism, anti-racism, and microaggressions). In this special issue, the guest editors chose four major themes—liberation, futurity, intersectionality, and interdisciplinarity—that we see as being critical to the current moment with respect to the study of sport, physical culture, and the physically (active) body.

The themes we selected for this special issue reflect our hopes for the next 40 years of SSJ as a journal and NASSS as an organization. The four themes selected are interrelated and yet distinct concepts: Futurity, liberation, intersectionality, and interdisciplinarity speak to the kinds of scholarship that will be presented in this special issue and in future issues of the journal to come. Scholarship on sport, physical culture, and the physically active body is moving in new directions, including directions that seek to display the full humanity of consistently marginalized peoples. Crossing academic disciplines, for instance, allows for a deeper analysis of sport and physical culture, while a liberatory praxis makes plain the value in studying the marginalized and moving their stories to the center.

Throughout this introduction, the guest editors discuss what these themes mean to us, and to the future of SSJ and NASSS. We come to this special issue as emerging scholars from diverse backgrounds, with the intent of creating something that could capture the last 40 years, while keeping an eye oriented on the future. Throughout this process, we have each had the chance to reflect upon the themes selected, not only in relation to this special issue but in terms of our own individual and collaborative scholarship. Below we share with you those reflections, provide more detail into the themes, briefly discuss the selected articles, and make a statement about our hopes for the future.

From the Guest Editors

Letisha Engracia Cardoso Brown is an assistant professor of Sociology at the University of Cincinnati, where she is also an affiliate of the Africana Studies and Women’s, Gender, and Sexualities Studies programs. Her research focuses on the intersections of race and gender in sport, the experiences of Black girls and women in educational spaces, and issues tied to Black girlhoods. As a member of NASSS since 2011 and an editorial board member of SSJ since 2020, Letisha Brown was drawn to this special issue as a means of serving both the journal and the organization. As part of her role on the team, she pulled together five of the most brilliant and dedicated emerging sports scholars to aid in the special issue process. Each member of the team was selected with care, and their participation in this special issue is what has made the process and final product what it is. As an emerging scholar, Letisha Brown recognized the importance of elevating the voices of other emerging scholars from a myriad of backgrounds as special issue guest editors, in the hopes that scholars like us would feel the call to write and submit work related to the themes. As a Black feminist sociologist, Letisha Engracia Cardoso Brown’s work often centers the experiences and lived realities of Black girls and women, particularly in sports where Whiteness remains the status quo. Her work can be found in journals such as the South African Review of Sociology (2015), as well as in edited volumes like the (2018) Palgrave Handbook on Feminism and Sport, Leisure and Physical Education and Athlete Activism: Global Perspectives on Social Transformations (2023). Her public scholarship can be found at https://firstandpen.com/ and outlets including Nuts and Bolts Sports, and The Shadow League.

The themes of liberation, futurity, intersectionality, and interdisciplinarity are directly related to her broad body of work, especially as they relate to sport, physical culture, and the physically active body. As a Black feminist scholar with a background in both Africana Studies and Sociology, intersectionality and interdisciplinarity are central to her research, teaching, and service. Moreover, these themes encompass the directions that SSJ and NASSS are moving toward. With the backlash1 against anything remotely tied to race and or gender identity, the necessity of a space to unpack the issues that arise from anti-Black racism, homophobia, and transphobia and more, is even more crucial. The SSJ has the potential to be such a space, a place where critical scholarship is not only welcomed but also seen as
necessary. As a Black woman, Black feminist, and sports enthusiast, both SSJ and NASSS are part of her dreams for the future of the field of sport scholarship as sites in which emerging scholars are nurtured, challenged, and given opportunities—including guest editing a 40th anniversary issue. From start to finish, this special issue has been a challenging endeavor, it has also been a learning experience, one that was guided by the editors of SSJ as a means of training us up for the future of the journal and NASSS as an organization. The guest editors of this special issue are part of the future of both SSJ and NASSS, a future that encompasses liberation, intersectionality, and interdisciplinarity.

A liberatory sociology refers to an intrinsic orientation that moves beyond studying the social world to ultimately transform social relations “in the direction of expanded human rights, participatory democracy, and social justice” (Feagin & Vera, 2009, p. 1). Intersectionality means being attentive to the ways in which systems of oppression including racism, sexism, and poverty are mutually constructing (Collins, 2000) and must be recognized as such to truly begin dismantling. Moreover, interdisciplinarity recognizes the strengths that come from the utilization of various literatures, theories, and methodologies when it comes to scholarship on sport, physical culture, and the physically active body. Taking part in this special issue process has made Letisha Brown more dedicated to the contribution of critical scholarship and increased her hope for the future of sports scholarship within SSJ and NASSS.

Chen Chen (陈晨) maintains his day job as an assistant professor at the University of Connecticut, a higher education institution with land-grant status, located on the Mohegan, Mashantucket Pequot, Eastern Pequot, Schaghticoke, Golden Hill Paugussett, Nipmuc, and Lenape Peoples (Land Grab Connecticut, n.d.). To his own dismay, Chen has no longer held the love for sport he had as a teenager when he would eagerly listen to a radio station on the score of a Houston Rockets game featuring Yao Ming or wait until Sunday night to catch an Italian Serie A game on a 21-inch television. More disappointingly, Chen has no longer held the naive expectations of academia as a place for transformative social change. Is this a valid reason why he was invited to be part of this special issue? He does not know for sure, but here he is.

To reflect on the experience of guest editing this special issue of the SSJ, Chen would like to properly situate SSJ—an academic journal published by a for-profit company headquartered in the United States that (a) benefits from the free labor of academic workers in the form of writing, peer reviewing, and editing, and (b) charges users to pay for its content (Fazackerley, 2023). Therefore, SSJ constitutes a tiny part of the academic—industrial complex (Best et al., 2010), and as Chen (2022a, 2022b) would argue, the ideological apparatus maintained by and for the bourgeoisie interest in the area of the world where capitalism is most “developed.” This objective material reality puts SSJ and other well-intentioned, progressive academic publishing enterprises in a contradictory position. When commenting on the French Revolution, Marx (1972) noted that people “make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past” (p. 245). Chen clearly felt the tension when facilitating the production of the “product”—published papers of the special issue—and thus strongly encourages the readers to always foreground the political economy of knowledge production under capitalism. After all, maybe we need to lower our expectations and entertain a moment of humility, to concede that SSJ, regardless of its themes and topics, will likely NOT be the vanguard of liberation?

For Chen, the theme of this special issue, “liberation, futurity, intersectionality, and interdisciplinarity,” must be situated squarely against the current (de)pressing moment we live through, as capitalism deepens its vicious attack on both labor and nature worldwide. Marx (1977), after all, was not exaggerating when he characterized the arrival of capital in the world as “dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt” (p. 926). For Chen, a serious intellectual engagement of “liberation” in the sociology of sport means collectively reflecting on the historical task of “Global North”-based academic workers of all identity backgrounds and confronting head-on capital’s siege of land, air, water, and life: sport, bodily movement, and physical activities included (Chen, 2022b; Henhawk & Norman, 2019; Kalman-Lamb et al., 2021; Wallace, 2022). This means to relentlessly support all members of the working class in the sport industry in their local struggles against capital, to resist the ideological capture of sport under capitalist imperialism, militarism, and jingoism; to highlight the urgency of the ecological disaster caused by petro-capitalism (which uses sport as a billboard); and to ensure that the sport industry will not be “business as usual” for long regardless of what the transnational capitalist class would like us to believe (Chen, 2023b). Importantly, “Global North” sport sociology must caution against the inducement of riding on the “diversity,” “inclusion,” and an eviscerated version of identity politics or “intersectionality” bandwagon designed by and for capital: Never equate radical/revolutionary politics with “diverse” identity; understand, deeply engage with, but never uncritically fetishize individual experience as if it guarantees the authenticity of knowledge (Adams, 1989; Aguilar, 2015; Taylor, 2016, 2023). There is also an urgent need to strengthen the organizing efforts around the precarity of academic labor, particularly in building solidarities with temporary faculties, and graduate student workers, and connecting these struggles with the broader efforts outside the academy in building an international, anti-imperialist (eco)socialist movement (Chen, 2023a).

Tomika Ferguson is the assistant dean for Student Affairs and Inclusive Excellence and assistant professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at the Virginia Commonwealth University School of Education. Tomika’s research focuses on the intersection of race, gender, sport, and educational equity. This intersection has led to a scholar-practitioner approach to her work through the development of programming and scholarship centered around disrupting social inequality within educational spaces. In response to intersected social inequality within education and sport, Tomika identifies as a scholar-practitioner to leverage the hybridity of administrative capacity and researcher acumen to disrupt systemic inequities that carry over to the daily lives of historically marginalized individuals. Tomika’s work has been included in academic journals, books, podcasts, encyclopedia entries, and varied media outlets. As a scholar-practitioner, Tomika has designed curriculum to produce equity-minded leaders, led research projects to transform educational policy and practices, and developed leadership programs to enhance the lives of Black women student-athletes. Thus, this special issue and the work within align with her commitment to illuminating the power of individuals existing head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt.
an athletic climate that promoted activism among student-athletes to challenge the educational structures that silenced her in her early college years? While she may never know what could have happened, Tomika is well aware of her responsibility in the college years? While she may never know what could have happened, Tomika is well aware of her responsibility in the academy is to now support athlete activism through her role as a practitioner, educator, fan, and co-conspirator. SSJ is a medium for scholar-activists, researchers, graduate students, and others to disseminate strategies and knowledge to enhance the performance of and participation in sport and physical activity.

What does radical thinking about the study of sport require? This special issue challenged scholars to think creatively about “liberation, futurity, intersectionality, and interdisciplinarity” sport as an impetus for futuristic explorations within the sociology of sport and physical culture. Paulo Freire stated that, “human activity consists of action and reflection: it is praxis; it is transformation of the world. And as praxis, it requires theory to illuminate it. Human activity is theory and practice; it is reflection and action. It cannot . . . be reduced to either verbalism or activism” (p. 125). Radical thinking requires an acceptance of dynamic scholarship. What is published by scholars is not fixed and is only sustained by action, critical reflection, and practice. One hope Tomika has for SSJ includes resisting contentment by the number of articles published and the number of citations associated with each article. Rather, the next 40 years should produce work that illustrates how to include Indigenous ways of knowing, and sport participation within curriculum illuminates the success of international grassroots sports movements that empower women, and the outcomes of interdisciplinary approaches that dismantle inequitable gender policies that disrupt physical and psychological violence against women in sport.

Hope. We must continue to combine hope with radical thinking that pushes us forward to do work that is meaningful work. SSJ provides an opportunity for hope in the form of a critical space for scholarship where possibilities to eradicate socially constructed margins are intellectually invigorating and open doors to radical practice within sports. This is evidenced by the great work within this special issue. Scholarship that remains in the margins will continue to silence voices and promote ways of thinking antithetical to liberatory pedagogies and ways of being. And, to Tomika, SSJ is the space for radical thinking and possibility models for change.

Courtney Szto is an assistant professor in the School of Kinesiology and Health Studies at Queen’s University. The trajectory of Courtney’s research has moved from issues around gender equity, to understanding race and racism, to environmental sustainability. Combining all that research together has led to her most recent work around food as the “first fight” and the importance of food sovereignty in the face of colonialism, capitalism, environmental degradation, racism, classism, and labor rights. Still, even as research projects evolve and what makes for a “trendy” grant application shift, some things remain constant in one’s life. The opportunity to think about the future for this special issue has made Courtney return to her original childhood dream, which was always (and in many ways continues to be) the dream of being a professional athlete.

Growing up in Vancouver, Canada, during the late 1980s when girls’ hockey was not yet “a thing,” much of her life revolved around chasing a future that seemed possible, yet consistently out of grasp. She remembers watching Cynthia Cooper and Cheryl Swoopes in the Women’s National Basketball Association of the 1990s and thinking that maybe she too could play professional basketball one day. Then, she watched as Martina Hingis, Anna Kournikova, Serena and Venus Williams took tennis, and the world more generally, by storm. That prolife was looking more and more realistic and attainable.

Fast forward to 2019, when the Canadian Women’s Hockey League collapsed seemingly overnight. All the players’ work conditions had been exposed: no pay (or very little pay), commercial air travel, everyone needing another source of income, late-night practices, and paying for your own food before or after games. Concurrently, social media made the travel woes of the Women’s National Basketball Association ever apparent with teams sleeping in airports because of missed or canceled flights. In the proverbial words of Guy Debord, the glitter could no longer hide the rot.

We have come a long way, yes. But women’s sports have so much further to go. Thus, Courtney’s call to action for the next 40 years is for scholars to be attentive to and document the labor that is making women’s professional sports possible. The use of the term “labor” here refers not only to the struggle for equitable pay structures and appropriate compensation for players and staff but also the labor that has gone into rooting out abusive personnel, policies, and structures to create safe sporting spaces. The labor of creating collective bargaining agreements that account for maternity leave, fertility treatments, childcare assistance programs, family planning, intimate partner violence, and so forth. The labor of creating wholly new professional opportunities and pathways. The labor of creating anti-oppressive sporting spaces with an appreciation for intersectionality. The labor of constantly serving as inspiration for the next generation. The labor of dreaming up new possibilities and challenging the status quo (e.g., 50+ dance crews for the Las Vegas Aces and Seattle Storm instead of traditional cheerleading squads). The labor to persist in the face of unrelenting misogyny and popular outlets such as Barstool. The labor of holding down multiple jobs or playing opportunities in order to support themselves. The labor of taking direct political action and the social justice work that goes beyond sport by supporting social causes that are often too “controversial” for men’s sports, such as Planned Parenthood, and gun control. The labor that we see as play is just the tip of the iceberg where women’s professional sports are concerned. It is an imperfect progression but what we are witnessing today, and will continue to witness in the coming decades, needs to be documented and analyzed because the archive of women’s sports has historically been both inconsistent and nonexistent. The academy has a great track record of research around the need for equal opportunities for girls and women in sports, but it has arguably been complicit in turning a blind eye to the conditions that are faced by girls and women once they accept those opportunities.

Anthony Jean Weems is an assistant professor of Recreation and Sport Management at Coastal Carolina University. His research broadly focuses on the intersections of—and tensions between—sport, politics, race/racism, nationalism, domination, resistance, and organization(s). As a dual citizen of France and the United States, Anthony is acutely aware of Whiteness as a global colonizing structure and reflexively examines co-reproductive structures of domination and the beings that maintain them. Much of Anthony’s work is shaped by a broader existential journey to (re)connect with a world (social, political, environmental, and cosmological) from which he is ever alienated by structural, cultural, and admittedly personal processes. As such, he adopts a liberation-oriented approach to conducting research (see Feagin et al., 2015) on sport and physical activity in efforts to actively engage systems of racial domination. His work appears in a variety of outlets including academic journals, edited book chapters, encyclopedia entries, blog posts, podcasts, press articles, and more. Perhaps the combination of these orientations and experiences is, in part, why he has been selected as a guest editor for this special issue.
of SSJ. Anthony views this issue as a unique opportunity to dream anew with a multitude of brilliant colleagues and contributors that can and will (continue to) shape sociological studies of sport, physical activity, and the sporting body.

Throughout the next 40 years, Anthony hopes to see SSJ reflect a broader reorientation (reorganization) toward a liberationist praxis. From a research lens, this refers to a counter-system sociology (Feagin, 2001; Sjoberg & Cain, 1971) that is necessarily anti-fascist and anti-imperialist given the context in which we find ourselves. From a practical lens, this points to (a) the limits of an academic journal substantially disconnected from liberatory practices due to its place within a for-profit publishing system and (b) the need to transform SSJ itself rather than solely conducting additive work. While there have been a medley of influential calls to conduct research in new (often critical) directions over the past four decades (e.g., Birrell, 1989; Bourdieu, 1988; Hartmann, 2000; Ingham, 1985; Richardson, 2000; Thorpe, 2009), liberationist scholars are also called to question the viability of adding to a body of work (i.e., a journal) that is, to a significant degree, complicit in the routine operation of the academic–industrial complex (see Chen, 2022b). Thus, in calling for more research, there is a potential danger of mobilizing critical scholars in what seems like a productive direction; however, distinctions must be made between mobilization and organization.

Kwame Ture, a lifelong critic of—and organizer against—capitalism, racism, and imperialism, once differentiated mobilization and organization by arguing mobilization takes place around one-issue items, often leading to reform actions. Conscious organization, on the other hand, is framed as a permanent struggle concerned with the system at large. This emphasis on organization is reflected in Harry Edwards’s 2016 NASSS keynote address where he expertly articulated the “waves” of Black athlete activism framed by broader, organized movements (Agyemang et al., 2020). The organized nature of these movements distinguishes their impacts from the kind of temporary mobilization of which Ture was wary. “If we are not careful,” Ture (n.d.) said, “we allow mobilization to become events. The struggle is never an event. It’s a process—a continual, eternal process” (12:15–12:26).

Certainly, over four decades of diverse calls for critical research are reflective of a struggle with and against an elite-White-male dominance system. Whether or not that has been an organized struggle connected to movement beyond the publication process remains to be seen. This is ultimately how the theme of this special issue resonates with Anthony and the questions he asks himself about SSJ’s direction in the next 40 years. What will the future of SSJ look like and will it reflect a conscious effort toward organization? How will SSJ contribute to or hinder organization? Can SSJ substantively contribute to this organization process? Are sport scholars (including editors and reviewers) willing to earnestly investigate these kinds of questions and what will we do with the answers? While we may not have these answers at this moment, Anthony hopes the articles included in this special issue help build upon a foundation laid by several committed scholars over the previous 40 years and lead us into an organized future. Following the groundbreaking sociological work of W.E.B. Du Bois, Davidson (2023) argues it is here, between past and future, that “new worlds become possible” (p. 838).

Natalie Welch is an assistant professor of Marketing in the Albers School of Business at Seattle University. She is an Eastern Cherokee woman whose ancestors resisted removal to remain in the mountains of Western North Carolina. While she no longer lives in her home community, her family, heart, and drive remain connected to the land and the people of that beautiful region. She considers herself lucky to reside on the land of the Coast Salish peoples, who are very much still here.

Natalie’s work goes far beyond research, but the research allows her to create space for Indigenous people in the wide world of sport. She is not interested in conforming to the standards of “academic” writing in lieu of communicating the stories of those who have been silenced for so long. She has published in academic journals such as the Indigenous Business and Public Administration and Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal as well as produced research reports for the Women’s Sports Foundation and the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport.

She is also passionate about “nontraditional” forms of scholarship such as podcasting and documentary film. Her short documentary film, She Carries On, tells the story of Eastern Cherokee women reclaiming the sport of stickball in their community. The film appeared in several film festivals and has been screened at dozens of schools and universities, but perhaps most significant was the film’s impact on her home community, inspiring the Eastern Cherokee women to pick up the game of stickball again, after a decade of inactivity.

Upon reentry into academia after several years in the marketing and advertising industry, Natalie experienced a culture shock, but a similar cognitive dissonance felt in the industry of the expectations around meaningful production. No matter what is produced, our stories remain. Stories save us by preserving, motivating, educating, and inspiring meaningful change. She is a proud disciple of Dr. Richard Lapchick and echoes his words that “there’s something about sport,” (Wexelman, 2014) that something brings people together in a way that has not been seen in any other modality. She understands that her positivity and optimism can be unsettling in a culture of necessary critical thought, but she truly believes that sports can create stories and connections that allow for a greater movement toward decolonization and meaningful social change.

Natalie expresses great gratitude to Dr. Brown as well as her other co-editors, Dr. Chen, Dr. Ferguson, Dr. Szto, and Dr. Weems, not only for their academic prowess but for their genuine hearts. Like them, she hopes to see SSJ reflect a broader movement toward true equity and meaningful organization while minimizing the exploitation of the lives and labor of those who have been oppressed. Finally, she would like to express her gratitude to you, the reader, for participating in our quest to disrupt the status quo and promote environmentalism, Indigeneity, autonomy, and innovation. The beauty of NASSS and SSJ is the community it has created; these connections allow us to exercise our power toward creating a better world for future generations. Sgi! (Thanks!)

In This Special Issue (Outline of the Articles)

The articles in this special issue highlight the connectedness of the past of SSJ and the fields of sport, physical culture, and the physically active body while also looking toward the future. The themes of liberation, futurity, intersectionality, and interdisciplinarity encompass our hope for SSJ as one of the leading journals on sport, physical culture, and society. The articles that appear in this special issue are peer-reviewed, with an eye bent toward the future of the discipline, an eye on its history, or the potential that can come from liberation, via intersectional and interdisciplinary lenses. We were thrilled by the number of submissions that we received for this special issue and the critical work that went into developing the manuscripts.
included in this 40th anniversary issue of SSJ. The articles selected for this issue were peer-reviewed and thought to be the most reflective of the four themes: futurity, liberation, intersectionality, and interdisciplinarity. The articles chosen cover topics from feminist studies in sport media to the importance of reflexivity in research. We include an article that explores issues of sovereignty in North America, as well as a study of queer men’s experiences with harassment in online video games, as well as papers that deal with issues related to stereotype threat and future-oriented labor. Each article was selected because we believe that they make unique contributions to the field and reflect the last 40 years of the journal and the directions the journal is heading into. Each article provides a unique look at sport, physical culture, and/or the physical body, exploring a variety of topics and reaching across disciplines including sociological, geography, and media studies. The authors featured went through rounds of revisions to strengthen their arguments, and craft pieces that speak to the breadth of topics expected from a Sociology of Sport special issue. It is our hope that each of the works featured in this special issue speaks to the past as well as future directions of the SSJ.

Creating a special issue as emerging scholars has been a tough process; nevertheless, we have each learned and grown from this shared experience. So, we are grateful to SSJ and NASSS both for this opportunity and the continued support as we have worked on creating a 40th anniversary issue we hope that everyone will be proud of. The Drs. Weems, Szto, Ferguson, Welch, Chen, and I (Dr. Brown) have given a lot to make this special issue during times when many of us were facing unexpected trials—however, that is often the nature of the academy, and we persisted, nevertheless. Keep watch for our names as we continue to grow in the SSJ and NASSS communities, we will continue to serve and push for both the journal and the organization to do and be better. This special issue is a small step, but a contribution, nonetheless. Thank you to all who have read and will read what we as a team have crafted.

Thank you.

Notes

1. The backlash that I am referring to includes, but is not limited to, laws that have been passed in states such as Florida and are in the works of being passed in places such as Texas, the study of critical race theory and gender studies (or things perceived as such) within classroom spaces, as well as the growing anti-trans inclusion in sports that is happening globally. This backlash has lit a fire underneath those of us who value human rights in its multiple iterations, as well as the critical study of race, gender, and sexuality.

2. For example, as I asked elsewhere (Chen, 2023a): Why wasn’t there a collective call for boycotting U.S. athletes and teams at the dawn of the Iraq War in 2003, or prohibiting all British, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch athletes/teams for all the incalculable colonial crimes and damages?

References


Ture, K. (n.d.). Converting the unconscious to conscious. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=neaWEAFNlgA
