Introduction: Sport, Feminism and the Global South

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Feminist scholars have long been at the forefront of advancing the study of sport to address the intersections of gender, race, class, sexuality and ability in framing sporting encounters and experiences (Douglas, 2005; Hargreaves, 2000; King & McDonald, 1997; Scraton, 2001). The field, however, is largely dominated by research that details the gender operations of sport across North America, Europe and the United Kingdom (what is often referred to as “the Global North”) leaving women’s everyday encounters with sport as players, audiences, workers and media subjects across “the Global South” open to further investigation.

This special issue seeks to broaden the geographical, theoretical, social, cultural and intercultural scope of writing about women, gender and sport. The papers assembled bring together key contributions from feminist sport research undertaken in, with or by scholars from the Global South. While the Global South can be understood in terms of the geographical space that is Australasia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East, alternatively, it envisions a critique of the production of knowledges “from the viewpoints, perspectives and problems of metropolitan society”, which are presented as universal and applicable to all cultures and contexts (Connell, 2007, pp. vii-viii). Conceptualizing the Global South in this way allows for a reimagining of the global periphery so that it is understood not as a fixed location, but as a material effect of unequal power relations experienced both within and beyond the Global South.

It has been well established by feminist Indigenous, decolonial, postcolonial and transnational thinkers that the ongoing legacies of colonialism, coupled with global flows of capital, people, media and commodities, generates complex and interconnected webs of social relations with effects on different groups of women at local, national and regional levels (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994; Lugones, 2010; Mohanty, 2003). These feminist movements have been instrumental in recognizing practices of resistance and activist campaigns worldwide that draw attention to both women’s agentic capacities and the sophisticated and sustained workings of colonial and imperial domination. Crucially, they have foregrounded the embodied and situated dimensions of knowledge production and raised the need to consider who speaks, whose voices are heard, which perspectives are validated, and on whose terms (Mohanty, 2003). More recently, Piedalue and Rishi (2017) have advocated for feminist knowledges that “unsettle the South’ and attend to all of the representational baggage carried in references to the global South” (p. 548).

A consideration of the Global South in feminist sport studies encourages scholars to situate the displacements borne by marginalized communities both within and across borders, and to reflect critically on the power of Eurocentric ideas and values in reproducing structural inequality. It thus demands greater attention be paid to the specific socio-cultural processes and historical conditions that influence which knowledges, practices and experiences are, and continue to be, privileged in sport research. Here we advocate for the ongoing relevance of feminisms that critically engage with ideas of the Global South, especially in relation to sport research originating out of, or produced in and by those within the Global North (which is the case for many of the contributions in this volume and the field more broadly). This special issue builds on the important feminist work being done in critical sport scholarship that advances feminist thought, practices, perspectives and knowledges in these terms (see, for recent examples, Hayhurst, 2016; Jamieson, 2003; Kim, 2013; Ratna & Samie, 2017; Samie et al., 2015; Sykes, 2016).

Central to framings of the Global South are the multiple voices that bring to attention the Global North relations of marginalization, subordination and exclusion that have contributed to the epistemological and ontological erasure of alternative ways of knowing or intellectualizing the Global South. One of the ways these voices and relations have been understood is through the lens of Southern theory – or theories. Several of the papers address the emergence of Southern theory and its relevance for sport, feminism and the Global South, so we don’t wish to rehearse those debates here, other than to acknowledge that “Southern Theory draws critical attention to global periphery-centre relations, with a focus on the power relationships underpinning knowledge. It aids in unveiling how the epistemologies of the Global North profoundly shape global knowledge production; the structures and institutions which support academic research often ignore, subordinate, and discredit epistemologies from other parts of the world, including those of Indigenous peoples living alongside and within settler...
colonial states (Connell, 2007)” (Henne & Pape, this issue). In this regard it engages with, and is indebted to, the insights established by postcolonial, decolonial and Indigenous feminist thought (Falcón, 2016; Piedalue & Rishi, 2017).

With questions of gender, race and ethnicity increasingly at the forefront of global issues in sport, this special issue highlights the need for ongoing discussion about the geopolitics of knowledge in sport feminism. It draws inspiration from recent calls for “a more democratic global structure for feminist theory” as a way forward for feminist thought (Roberts & Connell, 2016, p. 135). Articles in this special issue address a number of pressing worldwide concerns for feminism as they intersect with sport. These include tackling violence against women (Hayhurst, Sundstrom, & Arksey) and increasing female empowerment (Oxford & McLachlan; Seal & Sherry) on a global scale through sports participation; addressing discrimination experienced by trans, intersex and gender non-conforming people (Henne & Pape); improving women’s health outcomes through physical activity (McGuire-Adams & Giles; Roonkainen, Shuman, & Xu) and attending to the marginalization of women of color in media representations (Stevenson; Thorpe, Hayhurst, & Chawansky). Collectively, the articles in this special issue grapple with the problems that arise when Northern theory produced in the urban metropole predominates in feminist and sport debates. They highlight the sustained need in feminist sport studies for methods, approaches, ways of knowing and co-producing knowledge from parts of the world that challenge Northern perspectives (Ratna, this issue).

The broad project of the special issue is to centralize and make visible those voices, knowledges, methods and subjects in feminist sport research that are sidelined in the Global North and in so doing un hinge some of the implicit biases and assumptions produced by this type of scholarship. The papers cover a broad range of cultural and geographical contexts and include research based on women’s sporting experiences in Afghanistan, Canada, China, Colombia, Nicaragua, the Oceania region, Papua New Guinea and Saudi Arabia, in doing so addressing questions of Indigenous knowledge and methodologies, colonialism, pleasure, activism, sport for development, empowerment, voice and representation.

Indeed, Aarti Ratna, in her piece that leads this special issue, asks us to take seriously the politics of researching “difference” and why it matters to do it with responsibility. As a feminist woman of color, Ratna traces out how and why the appropriation of the tropes of post-structuralism and post-feminism matter to women of color as subjects and authors of sporting feminist scholarship. This provides Ratna, and others, with a way into considering the analytical utility of Southern theory. As a general provocation on Southern theory, Ratna’s paper invites reflection on de-colonial feminist framings of knowledge production, for she is troubled by the general absence of these theorizations from discussions on sport, race and gender. In a similar vein, Henne and Pape’s contribution argues that the relegation of knowledges from the global periphery may have far-reaching implications for the diverse peoples living in the Global South. They call for sport sociology, sports governance and policy making to meaningfully engage with the tenets of Southern theory, using the case studies of gender verification regimes of track-and-field and the assumptions of gender empowerment within sport for development and peace (SDP) initiatives for women in Pacific Island nations.

De-colonizing sport feminism is the concern of McGuire-Adams and Giles’ paper. They draw on Indigenous feminist theory and Indigenous methodologies to investigate how Anishinaabeg women runners understand and resist the impacts of colonization on their bodies. By examining how ancestral storytelling and teachings regarding food and fitness can help regenerate Indigenous peoples’ health and wellbeing, McGuire-Adams and Giles demonstrate how physical activity, specifically running, can contribute to de-colonization. Here, the authors bring an embodied dimension to the lived experience of de-colonization, tracing out the causes and consequences of the oppression of Canada’s First Nation peoples. For Indigenous people, “decolonization entails developing a critical consciousness about the cause(s) of [their] oppression, the distortion of history, [their] own collaboration, and the degrees to which [they] have internalized colonialist ideas and practices” (McGuire-Adams & Giles, this issue). Decolonization requires auto-criticism, self-reflection, and a rejection of victimage, as the runners grow strong bodies through story-telling.

Issues of “voice” and “representation” frame several of the articles in this special issue. Both are contested concepts. The contribution by Thorpe, Hayhurst and Chawansky adds to the growing field of feminist literature on girl-focused sport for development (SfD) organizations by analyzing the politics of these organizations and the communication strategies they use to promote their activities. In exploring how the international SfD Skateistan uses social media to promote its skateboarding and education programs in Afghanistan, the authors illuminate the ethical implications and associated consequences of incorporating seemingly “positive” representations of girls from the Global South in SfD organizational campaigns. Also engaging with representational politics is Stevenson’s media analysis of Sarah Attar – a US citizen and resident representing Saudi Arabia at the Olympic Games. The author explores the various ways Attar is articulated in mainstream media coverage of the 2012 Olympics and via social media as an empowered women’s rights figure and agentic brand sponsor through discourses of neoliberal feminism. Stevenson mobilizes transnational feminist thinking to reveal the limiting effects of Northern imaginings of the successful feminist subject. In doing so, this paper draws attention to the discursive processes by which new forms of popular feminism emanating from the Global North circulate in transnational spaces and for whose benefit.

The theme of empowerment runs through several papers. Seal and Sherry’s article explores the emerging outcomes of a sport for development program in Papua New Guinea targeted at young women. It argues for contextual understandings of empowerment by providing a nuanced reading of micro-level interactions that can disrupt traditional gendered relations. Similarly, Oxford and McLachlan’s ethnographic work among Colombian footballers engaged in a sport for development project suggest that these young women display an ambivalent position towards femininity and practice an implicit feminism, which challenges gender norms. In their study of women’s running culture in China, Roonkainen, Shuman and Xu demonstrate the importance of contextualizing the uptake of running in China by urban, middle-class women for what it can reveal about the relationship between women’s feelings of emancipation and empowerment through physical activity and global discourses on health and well-being.

The papers variously tackle some of the methodological issues and innovations in exploring sport, feminism and the Global South. Although methodologically very different, the two explorations of women’s running offered in this volume – one focused on Canada (McGuire-Adams & Giles) and the other exploring women’s experiences in China (Roonkainen, Shuman, & Xu) – invoke epistemological and methodological strategies that foreground Indigenous and/or localized practices of gathering knowledges. McGuire-Adams and Giles’ study of decolonization...