Preoccupations and Prejudices: Reflections on the Study of Sports Imagery

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Abstract: This essay examines the predicaments and possibilities of the anthropological study of sport, arguing that it offers anthropologists unique opportunities to fashion engaged, critical, and public anthropologies. It focusses on sports mascots and how they epitomize the promise of the anthropological study of sports. It begins with a consideration of the disciplinary biases and barriers that have prevented anthropologists from taking the study of sports seriously. Against this background, it reviews a number of ongoing struggles over racialized imagery in sports, highlighting their relevance for the formulation of engaged anthropologies.

Keywords: anthropology/philosophy, cultural politics, identity, racialization, sports mascots

Résumé : Cet essai examine la situation et les possibilités de l'étude anthropologique du sport; il soutient que cette étude offre aux anthropologues une chance unique d'élaborer des anthropologies engagées, critiques et publiques. Il se concentre sur les mascottes et leur potentiel pour représenter les promesses d'une étude anthropologique des sports. Il commence par une analyse des biais disciplinaires et des barrières qui ont empêché les anthropologues de prendre au sérieux l'étude du sport. Il passe en revue un certain nombre de luttes actuelles au sujet de l'image racialisée du sport, soulignant leur pertinence pour la formulation d'anthropologies engagées.

Mots-clés : anthropologie/philosophie, politiques culturelles, identité, racialisation, mascottes

In November 2002, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) celebrated its centennial at its annual meetings. The massive convention, attended by several thousand students, academics, and practitioners, showcases the discipline, offering a ritualized display of its priorities, preoccupations, and prejudices at the start of the 21st century. While one could attend panels devoted to art worlds, immigration as a divorce strategy, posthuman media, hostess bars in Taiwan and the future of food studies, noticeably absent again was a single session on sport. In contrast, sport not only brought host city New Orleans, Louisiana, to life, but it also framed the meetings as well. The evening of my arrival at the conference, the driver, who took me, along with several colleagues, from the airport to our hotel, raced against the conclusion of a professional basketball game and the subsequent street closing. Throughout my stay, the local media pivoted around athletic events and exploits, devoting more attention to the popularity of the new basketball franchise, the Hornets, and high school football than to pending elections or economics. The meetings themselves were held in the shadows of the Superdome, home to the New Orleans Saints football team and host to the annual Sugar Bowl and regularly to the National Football League Championship game, the Super Bowl. And, in my hotel room, of the roughly 15 cable channels, 2 were dedicated exclusively to sports programming. Sport was literally everywhere but at AAA.

The pronounced presence of sports in the rhythms of everyday life, structures of urban space, and flows of public discourse in New Orleans, North American societies generally, and increasingly in communities and nations throughout the world, when contrasted with their virtual absence from the annual meetings of AAA is simultaneously telling and promising. Indeed, as I argue in what follows, although too often ignored within the field, sporting worlds afford important opportunities to fashion engaged, critical and public anthropologies.

In advancing this position, I build on the works of anthropologists, both the celebrated and the unknown, who have recognized in sports a powerful and privilege occasion to understand local communities, global processes and human conditions (see for instance, Appadurai, 1993; Blanchard, 1995; Dyck, 2000b; Geertz, 1973; Gluckman and Gluckman, 1977; MacClancy, 1996; Sands, 2000). In fact, anthropologists have seized upon sporting worlds. Clifford Geertz (1973) turned to the cockfight to unlock the meanings animating Balinese culture and character. In his attention to the subculture of bodybuilding, Alan Klein (1993) sensitively probes the workings of gender and identity. Similarly, Charles F. Springwood (1996) uses sport to disentangle a powerful ideological knot, namely the intersection of nostalgia and the new right in the Baseball Hall of Fame and the farming community that served as the setting for *Field of Dreams*. In a wonderful ethnography of sport and China, Susan Brownell (1995) discerns the linkages between nation, gender and the body. And, Arjun Appadurai (1993) examines cricket to grasp the significance of global shifts in the wake of decolonization in south Asia. For me, each of these ethnographers and many others underscore the promise of studying sport for anthropology.

I came to the study of sport, specifically racialized representations in athletic spectacles, media coverage, and public debates, quite by accident. I watched sports, but never would have thought to study them. That is, it had not occurred to me until I began to recognize Native American mascots as unnatural, hurtful, powerful, meaningful and racist, precisely as I came of age as an anthropologist at a time when the discipline struggled with the lingering legacies of colonialism, continental philosophy, textuality, reflexivity, the postmodern turn, cultural studies and questions of power. Although by no means conventional, my take on these issues had pushed me to commit myself to doing anthropology at home, to studying up, and more to formulating anthropology as cultural critique (Marcus and Fischer, 1986). My realization that Native American mascots were problematic, my desire to scrutinize mundane features of American culture and my insistence that anthropology address political and ethical as well social and intellectual questions came together at the University of Illinois. The school not only had a rich tradition of using pseudo-Indian imagery in the figure of Chief Illiniwek and more generally in its team, the Fighting Illini, but also shortly after my arrival a vocal opposition to this tradition (see King, 1998; Prochaska, 2001; Spindel, 2000). In this context, I seized upon mascots and other stagings of and struggles over Indianness as a means to find a way to make a difference in and through anthropology.

For the better part of a decade, I have been striving in the words of Richard Fox (1991) to recapture anthropology through the study of sports. And, studying sport has afforded me the opportunity to craft an engaged anthropology. To me, this has meant producing a situated, responsive and anti-racist/anti-colonial anthropology, fostering dynamic exchanges between theory and practice as well as scholarship and pedagogy. On the one hand, it has allowed a presence for anthropology on radio programs, in editorials and as responses to misleading journalism (King and Springwood, 2001; King, Stavrowsky, Baca, Davis and Pewewardy, 2002). On the other hand, it has promoted political activism. For instance, my work on mascots allowed me to lobby the Iowa Civil Rights Commission to pass a resolution against the use of Indian imagery in educational institutions. Finally, sport, I have found, furthers comparative inquiry into the key concerns of American culture, especially racial stratification and ideologies (see King and Springwood, 2001). In essence, I am suggesting that the significance of sport for anthropology is that the study of it fosters critical anthropologies, attentive to race, culture and power, encouraging collaborative reframings of the taken for granted beliefs and behaviours.

In what follows, I want to explore the problematic and promising place of sport studies in anthropology suggested by the paradoxical absence of sport from anthropology in the United States and its implications for the field and its practitioners. I am interested in detailing the structures and sentiments that discourage anthropological engagements with sports and in explaining why anthropologists should be studying them.

To advance my central assertions regarding the importance of studying sport for an engaged and engaging anthropology, I narrow my focus to race and representation in contemporary American sporting worlds. I knit together ongoing controversies over the use of racialized imagery in athletics, specifically the creation and contestation of sports mascots: the embattled Colonel at Nicholls State University in Thibodaux, Louisiana, the long debated Fighting Illini of the University of Illinois, controversial team names at a Muslim flag football tournament in southern California, and the rhetoric at play in national debates. I begin my discussion with an overview of the prejudices and preoccupations that prevent anthropologists from taking sports seriously, before highlighting the significance of studying sporting worlds for the field.

Obstacles

The study of sport remains marginal to anthropology. A number of scholars have wrestled with the inability and

unwillingness of anthropologists to take sport seriously (Archietti, 1998; Dyck, 2000b; Klein, 2002; MacAloon, 1987). Here, I want to account for the neglect of sports and the more general failure to more fully integrate and accept sporting worlds through an examination of a number of overlapping biases and barriers in the field. My discussion begins with general observations, building toward more specific obstacles to the study of racial imagery in athletics.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to the study of sport worlds and the uses of race within them remains the anthropological canon. Despite a number of important struggles over interpretation and epistemology, positionality and power, gender and colonialism and writing and representation, a well defined hierarchy of knowledge production persists within the discipline (especially in the United States), legitimating certain ways of knowing, that is particular practices, sites and subjects, while excluding, undermining and silencing others. Sports remain illegitimate, questionable and marginal. Put simply, anthropologists from metropolitan contexts (typically still imagined as white, from Europe or North America) set off to study significant, serious topics elsewhere among people not like themselves, more or less authentic, if not exotic, others who can offer a comparative glimpse of the human condition. Four key structures of conventional anthropology impact the study of sports within the field: place (elsewhere), context (authentic), topic (serious) and people (others).

Although the practice has become more common than it was in the past, anthropology in the United States still frowns on homework. Mentors regularly discourage graduate students and junior scholars from working at home, motivated at least in part by concerns over prospects for employment, publication and prestige. Anthropologists who wish to study the metropolitan center often wait until they have tenure, initiating a second career of sorts after establishing a reputation through their work on the margins; alternately, they may stray or be pushed beyond the discipline, finding themselves in interdisciplinary spaces like women's studies or like myself ethnic studies. Importantly, anthropologists working at home often seem to undertake projects designed to secure legitimacy through their responsiveness, practicality, prestigiousness and seriousness: health care, reproductive rights, public policy, the law, science and poverty. In this context of insecurity or overcompensation, it is difficult to find a place for the study of sports.

Anthropologists who do follow a more conventional path appear to be only a slightly more likely to study sport than their less conventional peers. In part, and perhaps more frequently in the past, this pattern derived from a desire to know the other through their words and deeds. Their institutions and expressive forms attracted anthropological interest over against local uses and reinterpretations of Western commodities and technologies. Consequently, sport, like media and technology, often was overlooked to salvage a snapshot of an uncontaminated other.

More important, here as there, the persistent illegitimacy of sport in anthropology surely has much to do with its perceived frivolity and triviality, contrasted with more supposedly important issues like work, politics, cosmology and well being. Indeed, the fact that anthropologists, in common with a broader public in North America, conceive of sport as entertainment and exercise, a recreational diversion and a mass spectacle, encourages them to dismiss its significance. As if things that were fun had no social, political, moral, or economic import. This reading of sport, which I would argue is terribly common in the field, suggests something deeper about the anthropological canon as well. It has yet to embrace or formulate an approach to or place for pleasure. Anthropologists have developed sophisticated means of analyzing kinship systems and political ideologies, of accounting for medical beliefs and economic transaction, of talking about suffering and arguably even oppression, but they have largely failed to integrate the study of desire and delight as well as the social scenes, cultural practices and human expressions they animate. Sporting worlds clearly hinge on pleasure and longing—the joys of play, dreams of future greatness, the *communitas* of the crowd, the stories passed from one generation to the next, the satisfaction of seeing a perfect catch or watching a winning goal, reliving past glories, the escape in collecting memorabilia or crafting a fantasy baseball team.

Finally, the anthropological canon has great difficulty including the self. Of course, anthropologists have investigated psychological issues and increasingly some stress the importance of postionality and reflexivity. By and large though, and yes there are exceptions to this rule too, anthropologists have not turned the tools of their trade onto themselves as teachers, parents, lovers, consumers, citizens, or fans. They compartmentalize their work and their lives. In their research, they pose questions, deconstruct and analyze. In their everyday lives, they run to the store, raise kids, have sex, watch television, play tennis, participate in an office betting pool and cheer on their favorite team. They work in universities, but do not study them typically, let alone think about how athletics and academics articulate within them as a cultural issue. This disconnect is crucial to understanding why

sport is not a more important part of contemporary anthropology. The hierarchy of anthropological knowledge production discourages what one of my thesis advisors negatively described as navel-gazing. The lingering potency of positivism encourages anthropologists to keep themselves out, to look at others, to turn away from the everyday. Indeed, objectivity, in particular, stressing detachment and neutrality on the one hand, while discouraging public advocacy on the other, seems to have militated against anthropological inquiry into sports. One anthropologist in response to an invitation to present a scholarly paper on the controversy unfolding around the use of pseudo-Indian imagery in sport on her campus remarked to me: "Things are going very badly here right now and I am much too close to the situation to be objective. I don't even want to be objective (which may be an awful thing for an anthropologist to say)" (March 7, 2001). Needless to say, she opted not to participate on the panel. The importance of objectivity to cultural anthropology as both an ideological structure and methodological tool, I would argue, accounts at least in part moreover for the tendency of the field to marginalize sport studies. That is, the centrality of pleasure, emotion and proximity all run counter to what many anthropologists still believe makes for good anthropology. In this context, sports other unsettling pleasures cannot enter into the anthropological imaginary as significant social artifacts.

Core elements of the anthropological canon, then, retard inquiry into sports. Not only do they often turn attention away from crucial dimensions like frivolity and pleasure, but they also rely upon conceptualizations (such as objectivity) that inhibit understanding.

Imperatives

Anthropologists should be studying sports. I have noted that for me a key rationale for studying sport has been a desire to craft a more engaged anthropology. Of course, this is neither the only way to do anthropology in the present nor arguably the best space in which to elaborate transformative anthropologies. Nevertheless, anthropologists should be studying these topics for several reasons.

Sports are not only ubiquitous features of everyday life, but uniquely meaningful and powerful for countless individuals and institutions as well. In fact, judging from television audience, everyday conversation, wagering, talk radio, media coverage, domestic abuse rates and merchandise sales, many Americans know more and care more about the outcome of events from the Super Bowl and Kentucky Derby to March Madness and the World Cup, as well as the success or failures of superstars and high school players, professional dynasties and even little league teams, than they do about any number (perhaps any other set) of political, economic and social issues. Consequently, if anthropologists wish to craft a public anthropology, that is, an anthropology that addresses a broader public, encouraging it to pause to consider, perhaps even seriously contemplate, social arrangements and cultural practices, I would argue, they must study sports. While they continue to attend to media in Sri Lanka, genocide in Rwanda, globalization in China and environmentalism in Amazonia, because these and many other pressing topics afford profound insights into human conditions, they must increasingly interrogate the signs and spectacles animating sporting worlds precisely because they speak so powerfully to so many people, hailing them where they are at, act and imagine. Studying sports even might allow anthropologists to stop talking only to themselves and other experts in arcane languages about subjects most people know little about and care for even less, ideally opening a space for a proliferation of anthropological voices and perspectives about an array of topics in public culture. If nothing else, sporting worlds offer one of the best contexts in which bridges can be built between anthropologists and the public.

Anthropologists have much to learn by studying the structures and symbols of sport. Indeed, even if one sets asides these aspirations as hopeful, examining sport worlds and the place of racialized imagery within them speaks to concerns central to anthropological inquiry and public debate. To illustrate these contentions, I want to present a series of snapshots from local and national struggles over the use of racialized imagery in association with athletics.

Continuing the Intifada in L.A.

In the late fall of 2003, Sabih Khan began organizing a flag football tournament for Muslim youth in Southern California (see http://www.muslimfootball.com). According to Han, he hoped "to keep them off the streets and to them an opportunity to have fun participating in organized sports" (statement, 2004). While the event posed fascinating questions about immigration, sport and assimilation, more intriguing was the manner in which some teams opted to use the tournament as an occasion to stage identity and comment on global concerns. Initial entrants included teams named Intifada, Soldiers of Allah, and Mujahideen, accompanied by images of masked youth, some hurling rocks, and Arab warriors bearings swords or daggers. Although some may find in such imagery a rather conventional and universal appeal to masculine tropes of power and bravado, a more nuanced and

grounded reading would insist that these symbols speak to local and global concerns, resonating in powerful ways within and beyond the Muslim community in southern California. In the wake of the 9/11 attack and the subsequent state of siege endured by Arab Americans, including intense surveillance, pronounced stigmatization and open hostility, it is not surprising that young men would select warriors and rebels to imagine themselves or would clothe themselves in symbols signifying resistance and defiance. Of course, Intifada and Mujahideen also reference (depending on one's politics) at one extreme (represented by some of the players) illegal occupation, righteous uprising and indigenous resistance and at the other extreme (for instance how the Jewish Defense League understood the situation), terrorism, suicide bombings and inhuman evil. In either case, the team names and their associated images not only assess the conflict in the Middle East, but link the players and likely their predicament with it as well. A seemingly minor sporting event emerges as an important occasion for players to make the popular political, to articulate an empowered identity in an emasculating context of terror and to enunciate what too often remains unspoken or at least inaudible—who they are, what the world is like and what is at stake in the game of life.

Down South in Dixie

Whereas some may want to read the use of imagery by Arab American football teams to be heartening, a resistant moment in which the marginalized speak truth to power; more often than not, racialized symbols and spectacles in sports tend to reinforce conventional formulations of identity and hegemonic articulations of culture and power. Beginning in 1957, Nicholls State University in Thibodaux, Louisiana chose "The Colonel" as its mascot. For nearly a half century, the mascot has led cheers at home games, where until rather recently the marching band played Dixie and after each touchdown scored, cheerleaders would run the Confederate flag the length of the field and back. According to the administration, the school symbol is harmless, originating in the Reserve Officers' Training Corps tradition once at the core of the institution. That such a defense is thinkable unveils the lingering residue of white supremacy in American society.

Nicholls State is named for Francis Tillou Nicholls, a Confederate war hero who later became the first post-Reconstruction governor in Louisiana. What's more, the university is built on a former plantation and white students are known to visit the former slave quarters after dark for a creepy thrill. Finally, the Colonel has more than a passing resemblance to Colonel Reb, the famed mascot of the University of Mississippi (King and Springwood, 2001a). Together, these elements suggest the sports mascot is a nostalgic appeal to a lost racial order, an effort to reformulate, if not reclaim, a glorified white identity. Only occasionally has it faced questions, first, briefly, in 1973 as the civil rights movement sputtered, and then again in 2003. In both cases, African-American students have voiced concern about the Colonel, asserting that it evokes the Old South and honors the Confederacy and by extension slavery. Then as now, African-American students have found the mascot to be alienating and terrifying. And, likely because of the Colonel and the social relations that it sanctifies have become embattled, African-American student leaders report being harassed by students and alumni, "Hey, nigger, the mascot is not bothering you, so you leave it alone" (Krupa, 2003).

Debating Pseudo-Indian Mascots

As these sketches of local stagings and struggles hint, arguments over the significance of racialized sports imagery turn on profoundly different interpretations of race, culture and history. Indeed, conflicts over mascots are not simply, as some would have it, instances of political correctness gone awry; rather, they invariably are ideological struggles over memory, community and possibility, about what it means to be an American, to be a citizen, to be human.

King (2003) outlined the following schematic patterns from a study of an Internet survey about the appropriateness of pseudo-Indian imagery in athletics. Whereas supporters argue that mascots foster respect, honoring indigenous people, opponents insist that they denigrate Native Americans, perpetuating historical patterns of discrimination and dispossession. These distinct positions point to deeper differences: supporters stress text (honor, intention), while opponents emphasize context (history and racism). Supporters isolate; opponents make connections. Supporters argue for intent; opponents argue for effect. Supporters think of symbols and names as flat and more or less unimportant; opponents think of symbols as powerful cultural forms that reflect social relations and reinforce historical inequalities. Supporters deflect and deny the import of race; opponents highlight the centrality of race.

Through their arguments, supporters and defenders advance competing visions of race. Supporters advocate a largely hegemonic understanding, asserting that "we are all more or less equal," that the ill intentions of prejudiced individuals produce racism, and that discussions of discrimination should be confined to "real" and "important" social domains. In contrast, opponents advance an

interpretation that reads the social relations and cultural categories against the grain, exposing the power and meaning embedded within accepted norms, ideologies and behaviors. They argue that race and racism ground the American experience, that racial hierarchies structure everyday life, and that mascots far from being frivolous are significant measures of race relations. In this light, the ongoing controversy over mascots is as much about conflicting interpretations of race as it is a series of arguments over the appropriateness of Native American images in popular culture.

Anthropological Advocacy

Often hidden beneath the ideologies, images and identities fundamental to racialized sports mascots are the institutional contexts animated by and animating them. Of particular concern for academic anthropologists should be the ways in which such symbols and associated spectacles saturate educational institutions. A letter from the University of Illinois Department of Anthropology faculty to the Board of Trustees illuminates the many and varied ways in which the school's Chief Illiniwek impacts them (Department of Anthropology Faculty, 1998). The use of pseudo-Indian imagery, they contend, has "a number of adverse academic effects on the Department of Anthropology."

> (i) it promotes inaccurate conceptions of the Native peoples of Illinois, past and present; (ii) undermines the effectiveness of our teaching and is deeply problematic for the academic environment both in and outside the classroom; (iii) creates a negative climate in our professional relationships with Native American communities that directly affects our ability to conduct research with and among Native American peoples; and, (iv) adversely affects the recruitment of Native American students and faculty into our university and department.

Racial imagery in athletics then, whether the Colonel at Nicholls State or Chief Illiniwek, works against the ideals of educational institutions. It produces false knowledge, fosters hostility and discomfort and undermines the creation of inclusive, democratic learning communities. For anthropologists, as the faculty at the University of Illinois make clear, racialized sports mascots place them in an impossible position, compromising their roles as scholars and teachers.

Opportunities

In short, examining racialized imagery in even a truncated fashion underscores the ways in which the study of sporting worlds overlaps and extends the substantive concerns and theoretical preoccupations of anthropology at the start of the 21st century. Quite clearly, it illuminates the signifying practices through which individuals and institutions create and contest identity, clarifying the conditions and terms that make it possible claim place, voice, history and community. Not surprisingly, it grants access to the ways in worlds of rationalized play work to make social hierarchies simultaneously real and invisible. It permits the mapping of the articulations of culture and power, particularly as manifested in appropriation, representation and authenticitation and the entanglements of commodification, symbols and public culture.

Moreover, studying the symbols and spectacles central to contemporary sports has important consequences for knowledge production in anthropology. On the one hand, it encourages cross-disciplinary dialogues and collaborations that foster fuller understandings and more dynamic interpretations. On the other hand, it prompts anthropologists to meet people where they are at; whether, in the context of current controversies over the imagery at play in athletics, the arguments advanced by students, parents, educators and political leaders concerned about mascots, racism and cultural citizenship or those marshaled by sports fans, alumni, parents, players and boosters intent to preserve tradition, celebrate masculine ideals, or sanctify collective memory. Such encounters and dialogues shift anthropology to the center, where it might craft (com)passionate, critical, and responsive accounts of the symbols and structures that so powerfully shape the conditions and possibilities of life as lived in the present.

Conclusions

In this essay, I have sought to further understanding of anthropology's vexed relationship with the study of sport, asserting that taking up sports enables anthropologists to simultaneously reinforce the fundamental concerns of the discipline and extend the field in dynamic new directions. On the one hand, I have highlighted the structures of the field that prevent full engagements both with racialized symbols and the broader sporting worlds which animate them; on the other hand, I have underscored some of the reasons why anthropologists should be studying them. Clearly, the anthropological study of sport and its symbolic contours continues to face challenging obstacles and afford great possibilities.

I have no illusions. I do not believe that the next AAA meetings will have an invited session on sport, nor do I think that a professional organization devoted to the anthropology of sport will materialize in the near future. In fact, given the existing structures of the discipline,

particularly the manner in which it organizes, ranks and legitimates knowledge and, in turn, trains, socializes and rewards practitioners, I doubt that a cohesive, recognizable or accepted subfield will solidify. As unpleasant as such circumstances are, they suggest something fundamental about what individual anthropologists interested in the study of the sport should be doing. Most basically, they must continue to study sport—in creative, unconventional and challenging ways. For if an anthropology of sport is to have significance, it will have to resonate and make a difference within and beyond the field.

For me this has meant embracing aspects of the discipline, abandoning others, and looking elsewhere to learn novel ways to pose questions, find answers and explain beliefs and behaviours. If nothing else, by studying racial imagery in sports, I have come to realize that it is only by multiplying our approaches, objects, audiences, media and networks that an engaged study of sport that is meaningful, relevant and responsive will emerge. Indeed, to my mind this is the only fashion in which an anthropology (of sport) that matters to indigenous peoples, to a broader public and perhaps even to other anthropologists will materialize.

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