

Straight-line stories: Representations and Indigenous Australian identities in sports discourses

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Abstract: There is an increasing body of literature, and awareness, of the nature of deficit discourse and its contribution to the essentialising of Indigenous identity. Through an analysis of sports writing since the 1960s, this paper explores how such discourses can develop.

Sport, however, has another attribute: it is the avenue by which Aborigines and Islanders have earned and demanded the respect of non-Aboriginal Australia; it has given them a sense of worth and pride, especially since they have had to overcome the twin burdens of racism and opposition on the field. It has shown Aborigines and Islanders that using their bodies is still the one and only way they can compete on equal terms with an often hostile, certainly indifferent, mainstream society (Tatz and Tatz 2000:33).

In the aftermath of civil rights victories, the politics of 'victimhood' became the predominant methodology of black advocacy and the reigning paradigm of public policy thinking (Pearson 2007:26).

Introduction

This paper is not a denial of the pervasive nature of racism. It is about how a particular discourse can become dominant in a discipline. The paper demonstrates how politics of recognition often leads to a restricted representation of Indigenous Australians — as discussed here, a representation, in particular, that foregrounds deficit and victimhood. Negotiating away from such a discourse is a complex process. In the politics of representing Indigenous identity it can be risky to allow the discussion to focus on anything other than the ideal of a 'fair go' for all Australians. So, it continues to be politically expedient to continue to use the language of victimhood, as Noel Pearson refers to in the quote above. I argue that there is a danger here in creating another stereotypically inferior identity by repeatedly considering this one aspect of Indigenous experience when there is

much richer and greater experience to draw from. By reviewing the literature of Aborigines in sport (with reference to comparable writing from sports journalism), this paper demonstrates the presence of a pervasive discourse of deficit and victimhood and briefly considers why recognition of this discourse and developing ways to broaden it is of critical importance today.

A grievance narrative

Shields et al. (2005) define deficit thinking as a concept where a group of people are described and explained as deficient. Difference, in deficit thinking, is pathological and linked to power because it relates to what is considered normal (Shields et al. 2005). Gorringer et al. (2011:9) have termed the accumulation of deficit representations about Indigenous Australians a 'saturating narrative'. They note the difficulty in moving

away from deficit discourse and argue that there is a need to replace negative representations with positive ones. Gorringe et al. (2011) reported on an AIATSIS workshop that was organised as a 'safe place' for Indigenous people to discuss ways of disengaging from the language of deficit. One participant at the workshop commented, '[I]t's amazing how quickly you can get white support if you kick black people' (Gorringe et al. 2011:11).

Noel Pearson and Marcia Langton are two prominent Indigenous Australians who participate in the discussion of deficit and the politics of identity in Australia. Pearson writes that 'compelling parallels' exist between the experiences of black Americans and Indigenous Australians during the civil rights era. Speaking loudly and often against stereotypes of innate abilities while detailing examples of racism were important parts of the efforts to advance the legal rights of black people in America and Australia. However, in seeking to move on from this discourse, Pearson (2007:20) takes what he calls a 'compelling line' from African-American Booker T Washington to argue that black people should not 'permit our grievances to overshadow our opportunities'. Pearson takes this line as a foundation to his philosophy of participation in mainstream Australian society. He argues that an identity of victimhood (internalising victim status) is 'destructive' and 'demeaning' (Pearson 2007:30). Pearson challenges people to consider the consequences of the dominance of the representation of Aborigines as passive victims of racism.¹ Marcia Langton (2011) describes the volume of work done by anthropologists to collect humanist data and criticises people who use essentialist representations to grind ideological axes. She points to a hijacking of discourses as a reason to expand the conversation. Pearson (2007) and Langton (2011) offer a discourse of personhood as an alternative to conversations about victimhood that is yet to be taken up.

Writing about Aborigines in sport is a small academic field, although it is a more common feature in non-academic literature such as biographies and newspapers. However, an overrepresentation of Aborigines in popular sports means that the sports fields are significant sites for public representations of Aborigines. Collectively, the academic and non-academic stories told about

Aborigines in sport (the dominant discourse) constitute what American columnist and author Jack Cashill (2006:3) has termed a 'grievance narrative':

We all have grown so used to this shame-on-us school of storytelling that we take it for granted. Today, those who shape our culture — writers, critics, publishers, broadcasters — movie and TV producers — routinely calculate the essence of individuals, especially racial minorities, not as the sum of their blessings but rather as the sum of their grievances.

As an example, Cashill offers the following portrayal by a noted American author, Joyce Carol Oates, of Muhammad Ali as a hero of the resistance to racism:

[R]ejecting any number of alternative ways to introduce Ali. She [Oates] could have informed the reader that he was the much-loved offspring to two devoted parents... which may explain his confidence. He had a skilled muralist for a father, a mathematician for an uncle, and a math teacher for an aunt, which may account for his creativity and instinctive smarts. As for his drive, that likely derived from his status as the first child in an ambitious African-American household... Oates chooses instead to introduce Ali the way Malcolm X might have, not as an American, but as a victim of America, the grandson of a slave (Cashill 2006:4).

An example of how the grievance narrative is often used in Australian writing about Aborigines in sport comes from Robert Drane's (2006) article 'The fight', published in *Inside Sport*. In the article, Indigenous boxer Anthony Mundine is framed according to a discourse of deficit and victimhood, rather than his social reality. Like Ali, Mundine's success could easily be the story of the middle-class son of a champion athlete who lived a life with many advantages provided by two loving parents (i.e. he was not from an overcrowded and impoverished home), and who was exposed to top-class training and coaching from an early age. Instead, Drane frames Mundine's story in line with expectations of the way Indigenous athletes should be seen. Anything else runs the risk of minimising the pervasive effects of racism and challenging the

victim label. Drane (2006:88) writes that Mundine has 'come to represent every Aboriginal, especially every Aboriginal who never had a chance'. Conforming with the grievance narrative, Drane (2006) tells us that Mundine won for his tribespeople who had died at the hands of white neglect. Suggesting that the stereotypical language he uses is appropriate, Drane (2006:85) asks, 'Is there another way of seeing' fights between black and white boxers, before answering his own question that there is not. Conforming to such an identity, Mundine himself embraces being associated with the grievance narrative as part of his approach to self and event promotion and to confronting racism in society. For example, Mundine planned to use his profile in sport to 'send our plight to the world' (cited in Falcoux and Silk 2006:325).

Prominent in the current politics of identity in Australia, the 'grievance narrative' is of concern because ultimately it restricts representations of Aborigines, as so many other stereotypes have done in the past. Presenting only the image of the Aborigine as 'victim' can constrain how people view Aborigines and how we view ourselves. This paper will now look in detail at sports writings over the past five decades to illustrate how the dominant discourse on Aborigines in sport uses a language of deficit, which is characteristic of a grievance narrative.

Location of the researcher

I am the son of two hardworking, responsible Wiradjuri parents. My blessings include growing up in a working-class home in a nurturing, stable community at Erambie Mission. My own experience, going from Erambie into university study, was that the writing about Aborigines in sport told part of the story very well. In 1987, the year Colin Tatz published *Aborigines in Sport*, my community's football team was denied entry into a local competition. Subsequent applications in 1996 and 2004 were also denied because we were told that 'Aboriginal teams are too much trouble'. Having regularly confronted various forms of racism on and off the sports field, I recognised from experience the stories of racism that were common in the literature. However, as I read more of how people were writing about Aborigines in sport, I realised that the whole picture was not represented, and a very significant part of the story

was almost completely absent. This absence was emphasised by the discrepancy in how sports stories and those about community life were told by my own community and how they were told in the literature.

Within my community, stories about racism were part of a much broader repertoire held by our storytellers. It was the absence of this broader repertoire in writings about Aborigines that caused me to question how my community was being represented. Reading an accumulating story of deficit in the literature led me to resent the way that Indigenous communities seemed to be unrelentingly represented as terrible places. I felt a responsibility to defend communities such as Erambie from misrepresentation and unfair criticism by outsiders. I concluded that writing about race and sport in Australia was contributing to a dominant discourse that constrained understanding of communities as solely negative places. My response was to reject that part of the writing about Aborigines in sport, and instead to seek new ways of writing that could articulate the reality of sports experience, and recognise the impact and effect of racism, but to do so without engaging and perpetuating a grievance narrative.

This does not mean that my experiences of racism have ended. While completing this paper I witnessed a scene at a junior football match that brought home the importance of continuing to tell stories of racism. A group of 12-year-old boys (four white and one Koori) were playing kicks and engaging in friendly banter, when one said to the Koori boy, 'Darkie, you not white c*#@#, kick me the ball', and the game and banter continued without disruption. This type of incident is common enough to show that the need to confront discrimination, prejudice, racist words and actions is ongoing. However, broadening the discourse will bring the representations of Aborigines in the writing about sport more closely into line with the richer lived experiences of individuals, and this in itself combats racism.

Theories of representation

This paper examines what the word 'Aborigine' has come to signify. It focuses on the ways that representations in the discourse about Aborigines in sport accumulate social meanings (Barthes 1972 [1957]). Cultural theorist Stuart Hall's ideas

on production and reception of representations are used here to analyse the ways that common stories are told and heard. Hall's work is an extension of linguistic, anthropological and psychoanalytical theories about difference. Developing theory using the work of Freud, Derrida, Bakhtin, Fanon, Barthes and others, Hall offers four theoretical approaches to explain differences in representation (Media Education Foundation 1997). The first two are influenced by linguistics, both stating that difference is essential to creating meaning and that meaning can only be constructed in dialogue with an 'other'. The third approach, the anthropological explanation, asserts that meaning is assigned through categorising or ordering. The fourth, psychoanalytical, explanation considers that the 'other' is fundamental to knowledge about the self.

Hall developed his theoretical position to explain representations of race in Britain in the context of social order. One of the key ideas that Hall takes up in developing theory, particularly in relation to the influence of anthropology, is anthropologist Mary Douglas' (1966/2002) argument that classification is a universal and rational part of ordered human behaviour. Hall summarises how he uses Douglas' work as follows:

Classification is a very generative thing once you are classified a whole range of other things fall into place as a result of it...It is not just that you have blacks and whites, but of course one group of those people have a much more positive value than the other group. That's how power operates...to ascribe to the black population, characteristics that used to be used for the white ones, generates enormous tension in the society. Mary Douglas...describes this in terms of what she calls 'matter out of place'...You know exactly where you are, you know who are the inferiors and who the superiors are and how each has a rank...What disturbs you is what she calls 'matter out of place' (Media Education Foundation 1997:2-3).

Martin Nakata, a Torres Strait Islander academic, termed the place where two cultures meet a 'cultural interface'. For Nakata, the cultural interface is a place where all interested people can meet to create knowledge based on a melt-

ing of multiple standpoints: 'It is a multi-layered and multi-dimensional space of dynamic relations constituted by the intersections of time, place, distance, different systems of thought, competing and contesting discourses within and between different knowledge traditions' (Nakata 2007:10).

Nakata's description of his own encounters with knowledge created about Indigenous Australians — and the standpoint theory he developed out of his own efforts to understand them — are also useful in understanding reception and production of representations (Nakata 2007:1-12).

What I have taken from Hall and Nakata is that the locations of the writer, and the reader, are critical to reception of representations. Together, Hall's and Nakata's parallel ideas offer a way of explaining competing narratives I encountered in the ways that stories about Aborigines in sport are told. The typical representations of Aborigines in sport that are included in this paper are thus considered within the wider context in which they were produced.

Ending silence

Much of the academic writing about Aborigines in sport takes the form of historical narrative. The stories told span the entire period of colonisation. In this time a lot of unremarkable life has occurred within Indigenous communities. There have also been many positive events and developments. However, it is also true that there has been a great inequality of rights, and the discourse on Aborigines in sport has sought in some ways to address this.

DJ Mulvaney's *Cricket Walkabout* was published in the year of the 1967 referendum — as one successful Indigenous rights campaign came to an end. Mulvaney's book joined an emerging discourse about Aborigines and civil rights that challenged racism, in this case by writing about the 1868 cricketers as people and highlighting the restrictions they experienced. Representations of Indigenous Australians mattered during the lead up to the 1967 referendum (Attwood and Markus 2007; Stokes 1997), and books that challenged the existing place of Aborigines were published during this period (Manne 2003). The year after the 1967 referendum, anthropologist WEH Stanner's 'Great Australian Silence' lecture

about dispossession and its consequences was broadcast. However, demonstrating the persistence of old-style stereotypes, in the same year Jack Pollard introduced his book *The Ampol Book of Australian Sporting Records* with the following statement:

The Australian aborigine has a fascinating facility for sports which demand whippy reflexes and strong backs. Periodically he has played spectacular roles in Australian sports, ranging from the dramatic delivery of knock-out punches (Ron Richards, Elley Bennett, Jack Hassen, Lionel Rose), to flashing speed on the wings of football teams. He is a superfine fisherman of unorthodox methods (spears, nets, stones), an amazing cross-country runner (up to 200 miles), but often cannot deal with the celebrity sporting success brings. The unpredictable aborigine is an integral part of the Australian sporting scene regardless of whether the game is soccer, amateur or professional fist-fighting, bike riding, sprinting, or cricko (Pollard 1968:1).

Pollard reinforces racism by reproducing the stereotyped representations of the physically gifted and unpredictable Aborigine. In doing so, he creates meaning about Aborigines by classifying people according to a preferred order based on an assumed prevailing racial hierarchy that always required Aborigines to be represented as an inferior race.

The field of writing about Aborigines in sport has developed in a social and political context in which representations continue to matter in the ongoing pursuit of civil and human rights. Representations matter because social and political progress is to be found in the democratic process. Although approaching the issue from different perspectives, both Mulvaney and Pollard were writing about difference in the midst of the Freedom Rides (1965), the Land Rights Acts of the 1960s and 1970s, the creation of the Aboriginal flag as a symbol of unity and difference, and in the lead up to the establishment of the Tent Embassy (1972). They were writing at a time when some Indigenous Australians were living in communities that were controlled by government agents. Their books were published just prior to Wiradjuri

writer Kevin Gilbert's 1973 classic (republished in 2002), *Because a White Man'll Never Do It*, which included the dedication to all Aborigines, who he referred to as 'patriots' and 'poor buggars [sic] all'.

Proceeding decades witnessed a continuing social justice movement and the introduction of landmark legislation. The 1980s saw the Queensland Government declare a state of emergency and make street marches illegal to combat criticism of its Indigenous policy during the Brisbane Commonwealth Games (1982). There were competing narratives about the bi-centenary (1988) as either a celebration or an insult. The 1990s witnessed the report on the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991), the passage of Native Title legislation (1993) and in 1994 Cathy Freeman controversially carried the Aboriginal flag on a victory lap at the Commonwealth Games. In the two years following then Prime Minister Paul Keating's historic 1992 speech in Redfern, high-profile incidents involving club officials, supporters and players in 1993 and 1994 forced the Australian Football League to introduce a Racial and Religious Vilification Rule (Gardiner 1997, 2003). So far in this century the elected Indigenous representative body (the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission) has been abolished (2005), the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cth) was suspended to allow the federal government's 'Intervention' in some Indigenous communities and a National Apology (2008) was offered for past racist acts by governments.

Strategic representations

Amidst the historical context briefly outlined above, the language of deficit was established early on in the writing about Aborigines in sport. In reference to the idea of an egalitarian society (which, as Kane (1997) notes, is so central to Australian national identity), it was necessary to point out the difference in how Aborigines and non-Aborigines were treated. Repeatedly demonstrating unfairness was the dominant method used to challenge racism, and by doing so the use of this type of discourse challenged the ideal of an egalitarian society.

In his 1980 article, 'Professional Aboriginal boxers in Eastern Australia 1930-1979', Richard

Broome (1980:69) asserts that there is a 'basic oppression' of Aborigines. Similarly, Bret Harris introduces the La Perouse community in his 1984 biography of the rugby-playing Ella brothers in the following manner:

La Perouse [the community the Ella family lived in] is Sydney's Soweto, the inverse mirror image of the Lucky Country. It is difficult to imagine the Aboriginal ghetto, on the inhospitable peninsula which juts into Botany Bay south of the city, is only a 10 minute drive from some of the most expensive and exclusive real estate in Australia (Harris 1984:9).

Although Harris (1984:13) does quote May Ella's more positive memories of one aspect of life at La Perouse ('Rodney [the oldest of the Ella boys] was spoiled with affection. His sisters doted on him and his uncles could hardly wait to teach him how to play football'), his writing focuses on the negative aspects of their environment. In focusing so strongly on a negative description of 'Sydney's Soweto' in the 'Lucky Country' and using words such as 'ghetto' and 'inhospitable' to demonstrate stark differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia, he confirmed Hall's theory that meaning is created through representations of opposites. Harris also references Australian national identity against the more readily acknowledged racism of South Africa as he challenged Australians to compare his representation of Aborigines to what they knew about apartheid. The similarities in background between the Ella brothers and those of many white Australian athletes, and the positives in the story May Ella told about her son developing sporting talent, are brief. Harris concluded his introduction with the summary statement:

Society has a duty to foster Aboriginal sporting talent. In the past sport has been possibly the only area in which Aborigines have been able to achieve any sort of equality with Europeans. This is largely because of the Aborigines' physical prowess. But it is also a reflection of the limited avenues open to Aborigines to express themselves (Harris 1984:21).

The representations of Aborigines in the developing field of sport writing were by necessity not

neutral. They were written to confront racism. Colin Tatz brought an approach to the discourse that was political, economic and legal. Where Mulvaney, Broome and Harris had written in detail about specific sports, Tatz wrote in more general terms about racism through the lens of sport. Tatz's approach was to build an overall picture using less detailed evidence from a number of sports. In *Aborigines in Sport* (1987) he set out his argument that sport mirrors a general racism in Australian society. He also cited Pollard, Mulvaney, Broome and Harris in making his case that Aborigines are victims of racism and non-Indigenous Australians are the victimisers. Tatz's work since *Aborigines in Sport* has generally repeated this theme, both in format and content. Even though it contains more research and analysis, his landmark text, *Obstacle Race: Aborigines in sport* (1995a), essentially advances the same arguments. The essence of what Tatz has written on the subject is captured in the following passage:

Sport is a mirror of many things. It reflects political, social, economic and legal systems. It also reflects the Aboriginal experience, especially since 1850. While playing fields are not places where people expect to find, or want to see, racial discrimination, sport is an important indicator of Australian racism... Denial of competition takes three forms. One is structural: because of their place in the political, legal, economic and social system, Aborigines and Islanders rarely go onto squash courts or group 1 golf courses or into ski lodges. They never hang glide, play polo, ride bikes for Yamaha or drive cars for Ferrari. The second form is institutional: on settlements and missions — where many Aborigines have lived — there was, literally, no grass. There were no facilities such as coaches and physiotherapists, and scholarships are not part of their vocabulary or experience even in today's 'communities' which were, so recently, settlements and missions. Finally, there is blatant racism: the exclusion of individuals or teams from competition because they are Aboriginal (Tatz and Tatz 2000:7).

Accounts such as this tell a story about Aborigines in sport that parallels those that are told about

African-American sportspeople in the United States. The dominant stories of discrimination against Aborigines and African Americans in sport emerged out of similar struggles for recognition and power. Harry Edwards, an African-American sociologist and one-time activist who advocated boycotts at the Mexico Olympics to draw attention to issues of race, is prominent among those in the United States who argue that black prominence in sport can be traced back to an oppressive environment. Thus, for example, Edwards (quoted in Hoberman 1997:195) writes, '[B]lack athletic superiority results from a complex of societal conditions that channels disproportionate number of talented blacks into athletic careers.' The dominant discourse in writing about Aborigines in sport is aligned with Edwards' social mobility paradigm. Thus, as early as 1984, Colin Tatz made his position clear: 'the answers lie in the social structure of both society and of sport...I share Edwards' rejection of the biological determinism mythology. My view is that blacks excel where and when they are hungry and needy' (Tatz 1984:13).

Tatz's argument is linked intrinsically to race due to his belief that Aborigines succeed solely because of an impetus provided by the colonial racial experience, as opposed to any of the other reasons why an individual, regardless of ethnic background, might achieve in this realm. In doing so, although framed to combat racism, writing on this subject continues in effect to engage with the racial paradigm of earlier writings that established an essential connection between Aboriginal sporting achievement and racism. This approach is consistent with historical writing, which some have strategically labelled a politically correct attack on national identity, known as a 'black armband' view (McKenna 1997).

Accumulating power of the meaning of 'difference'

During most of the 1990s, little new primary material was added to the field. In this period there is a compelling restating by a number of authors of the general theme that sport mirrors racism in Australian society.² For example, Tatz (1995a, 1996) mostly repackaged his original argument from *Aborigines in Sport* and the work of Cashman (1995) and Adair and Vamplew (1997)

contributed two more overviews of the field but added little new information.

Hall (1997) argues that representations gain meaning by being read in connection with one another, and that these accumulate meaning together. In the 1990s, the writing in the field of Aborigines in sport accumulated meaning through repetition of the story of inequality. In citing each other (i.e. Cashman repeatedly references Tatz, and Adair and Vamplew reference Tatz and Cashman), the authors accumulated meaning together. While they built a strong case against racism, these texts are also limited in the way they represent Aborigines. Their writings are full of references to deficit, even when telling stories of success. Thus, Harris (1989:7) writes about 'poverty', and Tatz writes about 'the hungriest of people' (1995a:11), a lack of 'self worth', 'pride' and 'respect' (1995b:54), and refers to Indigenous 'communities' in inverted commas (1996:1). Cashman (1995:146) discusses 'improved social and economic status', 'social acceptance' and 'upward mobility', while Adair and Vamplew (1997:67) write about a contrast between Aborigines who unsuccessfully struggled to maintain tribal culture and 'well-to-do Australians'.

Focusing on difference continues to be strategically necessary in the politics of identity in the first decade of the twenty-first century, and this creates meaning about Aborigines. Writing about Aborigines continues to address racism because racism continues to be part of society and sport. Both the fight against racism, and the connected use of deficit language in sports writing, is ongoing today. Examples are commonplace. Academic Stella Coram (2001:92) argued that Indigenous athletes 'by virtue of their history are political' and that Indigenous athletes come from 'impoverished communities' that are 'used to abject oppression' (Coram 2001:92). Coram (2001:97) tells a story of 'rags to riches' about successful Indigenous athletes. Greg Gardiner (2003) tells a similar story of Aborigines who have to overcome racism to succeed. Sport, writes Gardiner (2003:31), 'has provided Indigenous people with one of the few avenues for participation and success in mainstream culture'. Sean Gorman (2008:189) argues for sport as a place for understanding and changing society and that it is a place for 'struggle and

resistance'. He updates and contextualises racist incidents similar to the ones uncovered by Tatz and others in the 1980s. On the back cover of Lauren Calloway's (2004) story of the life of Indigenous jockey Darby McCarthy, the reader is asked to consider how 'this half blood black fella from a squalid camp in Cunnamulla became one of the really significant Indigenous Australians of the 20th century'. The book details McCarthy's life through a lens of both institutional and individual racism and tells us how he defied 'the expectations of a small country town entrenched in racism' (Calloway 2004:xiv).

It is not untrue to write that sport is one avenue to success for Aborigines. However, only following this approach constrains understanding of Indigenous engagement in sport in its variety and complexity. Individual identity ('personhood') takes a back seat when an athlete such as McCarthy becomes an Aborigine, jockey and victim of racism ('victimhood'), instead of Darby McCarthy the Jockey. Framing identities in this way contributes to the grievance narrative outlined above and the development and persistence of stereotypes — and this in itself contributes to the perpetuation of racism.

Richard Broome's writing on Aborigines in sport shows how difficult it can be to move away from the dominant discourse. With a greater understanding of agency and power, in 1996 Broome revised his 1980 story about Indigenous boxers. In 1996 he added that Aborigines were 'not only being victims' but also 'agents and manipulators of that power and discourse' (Broome 1996:2). Broome described his change in position in the following way: 'Through teaching, researching and reading Aboriginal history since 1980, reading the works of English Historian E.P. Thompson, and also listening to my colleagues in women's history, I have developed a stronger sense of power from below and the agency held by Aboriginal historical actors' (Broome 1996:1).

Ultimately, Broome (1996:2) returns to the dominant discourse by adding that such agency, 'might be transitory and subsequently overlaid by experiences of injustice and discrimination in reserves, country towns and other situations'. In addition, he later argues that sport 'made them feel the equal of other Victorians' (Broome 2005:225).

The dominant discourse has been summarised in at least one international journal as representative of the story of Indigenous Australians: Tatz 'concludes that "Aboriginal sporting success, no matter how brief or tragic, has given Aborigines more uplift, more collective pride, more Kudos than any other single activity."...[Broome] on the same subject...assert[s] that gains are short term, diversionary, and, ultimately, destructive. [R]einforcing the Aborigines' "basic oppression"' (Sammons 1994:248).

Although in 2009 Tatz and Adair restated the argument that racism in varying degrees is the 'essence of Aboriginal and Islander sport' (2009:5), their guest-edited edition of *Australian Aboriginal Studies* is notable as it also includes some new perspectives. For example, in her paper 'Sport, physical activity and urban Indigenous young people', Alison Nelson interviewed a number of young Indigenous people and her findings challenged 'some of the commonly held assumptions and "knowledges" about Indigenous young people and their engagement in physical activity...[including]...their "natural" ability, and the use of sport as a panacea for health, education and behavioural issues' (Nelson 2009:101). She found in her interviews that there was very little discussion about sport as resistance to racism and that:

Multiple, shifting and complex identities were expressed in the young people's articulation of the place and meaning of sport and physical activity in their lives. They both engaged in, and resisted, dominant Western discourses regarding representations of Indigenous people in sport. The paper gives voice to these young people in an attempt to disrupt and subvert hegemonic discourses (Nelson 2009:101).

Nelson also noted the importance of representation to the production of knowledge. She argues against 'pathologising' Aborigines and suggests that privileging Indigenous voices can lead to consideration of 'strengths and diversity' (Nelson 2009:103). Nelson contrasts the representations of identity she found among young Aborigines with the 'constant representations being made over time', which feed ideas of deficit and disempower Aborigines (Nelson 2009:102). Nelson's paper

demonstrates that restrictive representations can be challenged by empowering Indigenous voices. However, it is important also to note that privileging Indigenous voices can reinforce *or* challenge a dominant discourse.

Talking back: Indigenous voices at the interface

Indigenous voices have been heard on the topic of sport in varying degrees. Privileging Indigenous voices changes the discourse by blending in more complex representations of identity. Lynette Russell (2001) describes how a number of Indigenous identities can be blended into a representation. The phrase ‘blending of identities’ is also a good way to describe what privileging Indigenous voices adds to the discourse.

Bernard Whimpress (1999) accepts discrimination as one aspect of the sporting experience for Aboriginal people, but his account is not dominated by this theme. His work is thus important in the current analysis because it provides a wider perspective, unconstrained by a dominant deficit discourse. For example, when discussing the introduction of cricket during the mission era, Whimpress (1999:43) makes the following observations about the ways that Aborigines played Western sports:

It would be far-fetched to claim that cricket played by Aborigines in the nineteenth century was *corroborised* although in matches such as those at Point McLeay, Corranderrk and Poonindie there are elements of play and resistance, of turning cricket on its head... In traditional society the way the boomerang was thrown was important. Similarly, the way that runs were scored could be more important than the number of them.

Writing about Indigenous cricketer Faith Thomas, Whimpress (2002) identifies a variation of experience not previously found in writing about Aborigines in sport. Thomas indicated to Whimpress that she had little experience of racism in sport when growing up in a small country town.

John Perry (2002) also makes some changes to the established style of discourse. Perry recognises that to get ‘even a partial and extremely limited insight into what happened’ to Indigenous cham-

pion sprinter Bobby Kinnear, a researcher must ‘travel to his home ground and have a look at where he started his run’ (Perry 2002:186). In doing this himself, Perry found that Koori informants told stories — in much the same way Whimpress did with Faith Thomas — that ‘did not harp on the theme of pathos so central to white depictions of their people’ (Perry 2002:186). Still, Perry does summarise Kinnear’s victory as a symbol of resistance: ‘His great run came to symbolise for Aboriginal people the refusal of their forebears to sit down and expire under the burden of oppression. From this perspective sporting achievements can be looked on as acts of resistance’ (Perry 2002:193).

The contributions that blend representations of resistance with other Indigenous identities are different in their tone to those that focus more narrowly on deficit. Aboriginality as tradition (persistence) is one common representation added to the established identity of Aboriginality as resistance.

Indigenous voices and prolonged observations underpin Brian McCoy’s writing about football within an Indigenous community. In many places McCoy writes from personal observations but it is clear that his in-depth understanding of witnessed events are supplemented by the voices of people in the community he writes about. McCoy (2002) writes extensively about differences in a way that does not suggest deficit. In fact, the romanticised tone of McCoy’s description can be read as an argument that Kimberley desert communities play football in ways that are superior to non-Indigenous players:

There are also other relationships at work on the football field. Most are hidden to the non-Indigenous world for these relationships are born and nurtured in men’s Law ceremonies. These relationships reflect an even deeper bond between men and they demand even further respect, even avoidance, for some men from others. Visitors to communities will not know of these relationships and might wonder as a player appears to hang back from tackling another too aggressively. Strong men’s business can exist even here on the football field (McCoy 2002:32).

In a chapter on football, McCoy (2008) weaves football into a discussion about life for Indigenous men. Alongside a discussion of history, health and prison, among other topics, McCoy (2008:145) again writes that 'football offers young men the continuity of being held by older men that began and was promised in Law' and adds a description of football played in accordance with cultural values:

If the deceased was a footballer...the playing area needed to be 'opened up' before competition could begin. This could be achieved by a group of women moving in single file around the oval, crying and sweeping the ground with leafy branches...remaining signs of where the deceased has been and walked (McCoy 2008:150).

Tregenza's (1995) biography of members of the McAdam family is an example of a complex and nuanced story. Where others tell stories about what happens to Aborigines at the elite level of sport, Tregenza wanders through the lives of the people who went on to become elite football players. When the subject of race and sport is considered, the reader can put those stories into context because they know more about them as people than the racism they have faced.

Even though race and racism are parts of the story that Tregenza tells, it is difficult to essentialise the McAdam family given the variety of topics covered. Tregenza allows family members to tell for themselves how generations of their experiences led to excellence in sport. Significantly, the family's humour, shared human values and connections to culture are covered in some detail. Tregenza, the narrator, stands aside to let Indigenous storytellers speak. What results is a complex explanation of excellence in sport. Charlie McAdam, father of Australian Football League players Gilbert, Greg and Adrian, tells the reader, '[T]he stories of my people go back to the time the sea covered the land and the moon was a young man fishing in the Ponton River' (Tregenza 1995:4). Of station life he says, 'I remember I used to have really good times at the station with all my playmates, my cousins and the others' (Tregenza 1995:7). McAdam and his sons tell stories about their lives and how they came to excel at sport. They cover topics such as hunting, initiation and

teaching, alongside discussion of shared human values and experiences of country life. When race and racism are discussed, the inclusion of stories about family, culture and joy give a more rounded picture of the McAdams as people who live complex lives that are not necessarily dominated by poverty, oppression and racism; their experience is not portrayed as one that is solely in opposition to (and thus controlled by) the dominant culture. Writing about Aborigines in sport is gradually expanding the conversation, mostly due to an increase of Indigenous voices.

Writing back

Further expansion in the field to include Indigenous voices as writers creates a more dynamic space where the complexities of Indigenous experiences in sport (and society) continue to emerge. Some Indigenous writers have been critical of the representations of Aborigines in sport. Their response appears to be similar to Nakata's description of his response to reading representations of his own people, which contributed to his development of standpoint theory (Nakata 2007).

Historian John Maynard wrote hopefully in predicting that Aborigines would find a place in the writing of Australian history. With its goal of telling an untold story of participation in one sport, Maynard's (2002) *Aboriginal Stars of the Turf: Jockeys of Australian racing history* tells a history that is characterised by more than racism. Similar to Whimpress (1999), for Maynard, Indigenous stories had been 'derided, hidden and even erased' but persevered to 'lift and reveal rich tales of survival and inspiration' (Maynard 2002:v).

Daryle Rigney (2003) labelled the lack of Indigenous voices in the sports literature 'oppressive'. Rigney argues the need for 'revisiting and rewriting the events, processes and history from an Indigenous perspective' in order to develop writing in the field that he criticises as historically 'limited in its quality' (Rigney 2003:48). Barry Judd and Chris Hallinan (2008:19) make similar judgments about 'the discourse on Aboriginality' that is 'characterised by essentialist understandings of identity': 'The construction of Aboriginal identity in the literature of Australian sport and sporting history continues to reply [sic] on simplistic notions of indigeneity which do little more

than reiterate the colonial myths, fears and desires of the past'. Judd (2005:32) writes that identity is 'central to any consideration of Aborigines in sport'.

Larissa Behrendt (2001:29) has called for the Australian media to accept 'all the parts that make us human...not just the easy parts that do not raise awkward questions about the continuing inequality between Indigenous people and all other Australians'. The increase in Indigenous voices does not result in less awkward questions being asked. It does increase the 'parts' of the story told and makes us more human. The parts that Indigenous voices add to the story include Indigenous viewpoints on existing topics related to race, representation, power, inequality and identity. In addition, continuity of culture is a frequent theme in Indigenous writing on sport.

Heidi Norman's (2006:170) history of the annual New South Wales rugby league Knockout shows how a contemporary sport has also been used by Kooris as a vehicle for a number of important values and meanings:

Every aspect of this event speaks to Indigenous realities. In documenting this event perhaps a new account of Aboriginal history might be discerned in the context of self-determination, or at least a period 'more free' of the oppressive role of the Aboriginal Welfare Board. The field of Aboriginal history necessarily hovers around black and white relations, while the focus of this all-Aboriginal celebratory event is only briefly concerned with non-Aboriginal relations. But this is not to falsely elevate Indigeneity as a rarefied, separate reality, but rather to understand how this event emerged from particular experiences that are both culturally continuous in a traditional sense and historically produced.

Using interviews from people who participated in the event, Norman describes continuity of culture in a contemporary sports event alongside a discussion of political, economic and racial issues. She describes how the Knockout is used to maintain and even re-establish kinship and relationships to country. In 2009 Norman wrote about the Knockout as a political event. However, representations of difference can be both positive and negative and they can be read as having

multiple meanings (Hall 1997). When read in comparison to McCoy's description of football in north-western Australia, Norman's description of the Knockout can also be read as an attempt at authentication of identity for Aborigines from the south-east of Australia. Norman approaches difference in a number of ways. She writes the familiar story of inequality in treatment while adding a story of cultural difference as it relates to authenticity of identity. However, the blending of narratives of persistence with the narrative of resistance (Russell 2001) could also be read as an essentialist representation of a homogenous Indigenous identity. It could create an essentialised identity based on the 'cultural Aborigine' (Langton 2011:13).

In a *Sydney Morning Herald* article entitled 'A Knockout blow to racial stereotypes', Debra Jopson (2010) draws upon quotes that refer to the Knockout as both a cultural event and a form of resistance:

Football is a byproduct of this weekend. The major focus of most people who come is to catch up because we are in the majority. No matter what happens, 'Aboriginality is in the ascendancy,' says Bob Morgan, 61, one of the knockout's founders and original players...For many indigenous people the knockout is the year's social highlight, 'bigger than Christmas', or looking further back, the cultural successor to four-day corroborees, says Aboriginal historian, Heidi Norman... 'It is like the lifeblood in their communities... Taking the trophy is the greatest moment of their lives,' says another of the founders, Bob Smith...Says Morgan: 'We spend most of our time struggling for our rights and freedoms. This is the opportunity to celebrate.'

Two narratives from another Indigenous researcher, Darren Godwell, reinforce that representations from Indigenous people are context dependant, just like writing from non-Indigenous authors. Godwell (1997) collected testimony from eight Indigenous rugby league players for his unpublished thesis to examine the meaning his informants attributed to their experiences. A substantial amount of testimony emerged that indicated that the men played football for more than just reasons related to resisting racism. One

interviewee suggested that ‘community prestige’ was a factor in participation in ‘All-Blacks carnivals’ (Godwell 1997:57). Another responded that ‘community identity’ was important and that participation in these carnivals ‘goes with the whole image of your community’: ‘It’s the biggest event on the Aboriginal calendar. People love to hang out for that three day week-end. They get together and see their people, and it brings the community together’ (Godwell 1997:57).

In his analysis, Godwell hints at the idea of continuity when he suggests that the football carnivals have internal value as ways to maintain connections to tribal identity:

These carnivals also offer the chance for Aboriginal people to personalise their culture and their traditions. In everyday life Aborigines are contrasted against the non-Aboriginal world which encompasses their lives. In these all-Aboriginal spaces differentiation is made not by skin colour but by tribal, geographic lineage and Aboriginal heritage. This process very much personalises being Aboriginal by redefining the importance of elders, geographic boundaries, cultural differences, languages and tribal affiliations. In this sense the carnivals provide a rare contemporary chance to reaffirm such connections... At a more symbolic level what activity better represents community identity than having two brightly uniformed teams competing against each other in a decisive competition – a knockout where only the winners move to the next round? At all levels these carnivals offer something for Aboriginal people (Godwell 1997:60–1).

One important part of this analysis is that Godwell considers sport as a space where Indigenous, Australian and human values are maintained. Discussion of connections to place, people and the symbolism of Aboriginal-only sporting competition are impressively woven through the analysis. Support for this point of view is found in the testimony of Indigenous people and it is clear that the theoretical discussion Godwell conducts has come from the words and ideas of the people being studied. In this story, Godwell writes that sport has value to Indigenous people in part, but not only, because it fits in with existing values and cultural practices.

Godwell (2000) later used the testimony from his thesis to focus much more narrowly on racism. For example, while positive quotes about continuity (such as the one above) are not used, he does use quotes about negative experiences with racism:

Yeah, a bad experience. They had a negative experience – yeah and those bad experiences that they may have, they last forever, you know – you know, whether they got ripped off in the grand final, or whatever. And it comes back to – ‘these bastards are doing it again! And they’re doing it to *us* again!’ (Godwell 2000:18).

Godwell’s later work (2000) is similar to that of Broome (1996) in that it demonstrates how difficult it can be to move away from a discourse of deficit. Godwell reduced the variety of experiences of the men he had interviewed for his thesis to make two main political points. The first point is that their sporting experiences were related to their Indigenous identity as colonised people. The second was that racism restricted opportunities in rugby league. Although these experiences are significant, as Godwell showed in his thesis, they are not the sole story of Aborigines in sport.

By joining the discourse about race and sport, Indigenous Australians have added rich detail to existing stories while inviting outsiders to share experiences not previously heard about. The result is an expanding discourse that tells more about Aborigines as people (individually and collectively) than only the sum of our grievances.

Representations about Aborigines articulated by Indigenous people rely on difference to create meaning in the same way that non-Indigenous writers do. This means that they can use the same methods, theoretical frameworks of understanding and produce similar types of stories. The field becomes more dynamic, though, as Indigenous people respond to restrictive representations, add insights from insider perspectives, challenge the dominance of certain narratives and reverse positions of dominance in the binary of difference. Even the addition of essentialist representations from Indigenous voices makes for a more complex picture.

Straight-line stories

The same remains the same, riveted onto itself (Foucault 2002 [1966]:28).

Us blackfellas don't tell stories in a straight line, we go all the way around it (Laurie Crawford, pers. comm., 20 September 2007).

Representations of Indigenous Australians are not neutral. This paper shows how writing about Aborigines in sport is dominated by a discourse of deficit. However, such discourse is not alone in being read from a number of ideological positions. Sticking to stories about grievances is politically expedient. Concession of Indigenous advantage could be co-opted by people with ideological axes to grind. However, saturating the discourse with deficit language may be necessary to confront racism, create change and respond to politicised readings, but it has also created an essentialised and constraining image of Aborigines. Differences are represented as a binary where Aborigines are the victims and non-Aborigines the victimisers.

Mary Douglas' ideas about all matter having a place in an ordered society highlight the danger of drawing from one aspect of rich and varied experience to accumulate language of deficit. One reading of the dominant discourse tells us that Australian society does not live up to the ideal of the 'fair go'. Another way to read the same language of deficit is that Indigenous communities are inferior to the rest of the country. The differences that are described in the discourse contribute to reinforcing this order. The same remains the same because Indigenous Australian communities are pathologised as deficient. The locating of Indigenous communities as inferior is not at issue in political debate. I read in the discourse two versions of one story about deficit.

In the early 1980s I was a young boy playing football with my mates at Erambie. We ran, kicked, jumped and tackled around and over a sewerage blockage that caused human waste to run through an open ditch along the side of the dirt streets. My great aunt was among the women who spoke loudly and often about the injustice of living under such conditions when white people in the town did not. They told a straight-line story to people from outside the community in order to create change where it was needed. In this respect they essentialised our community identity as

victims of racism just as writers about Aborigines in sport were doing.

When outsiders were not around, my great aunt, and other storytellers within the community, talked about racism as just one of a greater repertoire of stories. They focused much more on telling about the wonderful life experienced within the mission community. They spoke carefully about the achievements of Elders and great sporting events within the community (and some shared with outsiders). They talked about the essence of our culture being sharing and caring for each other and the importance of maintaining our own ways of being. They talked about what made our community a great place to live. The dominant discourse within the community was not about deficit. It was focused on the advantages of being part of the Erambie community.

In the quote above, Crawford refers to stories told in certain contexts when he says that stories are not told in a straight line. Aborigines do sometimes tell straight-line stories because, as Langton (2011) observes, essentialist representations of difference are the foundation of Indigenous activism in modern Australia. There are a few stories being added to the discourse that do not represent difference as deficit. However, there is work left to do so that a complex, nuanced representation of Aborigines as more than the sum of our grievances can be told without vindicating critics who seek to impose an alternative reading of Aborigines as irresponsible. The challenge for those who write and read in this area is to locate middle ground where we can offer more stories that share human experiences in sport without the constraints imposed by a deficit discourse.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Maddison 2009; Pearson 2000, 2007, 2009; Sutton 2009.
2. Tatz (1995a, 1995b) continued to make the argument that sport mirrors racism in society. More examples of accumulation of this argument can be seen in Cashman 1995; Coram 1999; Corris 1980; Hallinan 1991; Hallinan et al. 1991, 1999; Hartley 2002; Mallett 2002; Trengrove 1996; Vamplew and Stoddart 1994.

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