

“Foul! A Historico-Theoretical Politics of Minority Student-Bodies (Inc.)”

Synopsis

This research paper seeks to understand and theorize the function of corporate sport athletics in relation to the contemporary trend of corporatizing higher education public structures and missions, alongside the role of historically marginalized students of color in the academy today. This research documents and correlates the historical development of the National Collegiate College Association (NCAA) along with the neoliberal commodification of difference. In order to conceptualize the varying complexities between student-athletes, neoliberal university ideology and plutocratic notions of intellectual property rights, this paper adopts a multidisciplinary framework, particularly but not limited to critical cultural legal studies, sports studies, critical ethnic studies, and critical educational studies. Consequently, I theorize that within the contemporary capitalist structure, student-athletes are perceived to be the intellectual property of/and by transnational corporations; college athletic organizations—such as the Pacific-12 Conference of NCAA Division I—are a means of transfer by which the American public further adopt, negotiate, and resist identity-politics of difference. By placing the overlap between university academic spaces and public consumption of sports into conversations with one another, the aim of this research is to dispute pervasive notions of American meritocracy continually guised under umbrella terms such as multiculturalism, colorblindness, and post-racism. Interlocking academic institutions, transnational corporations and marginalized student bodies becomes imperative given the misguided preferences in believing that universities should continue to harbor discourses of individualism and corporate consumerism rather than disseminate opportunities for collectivism and organic intellectualism.

Project Description

My research seeks to find the ways by which academic and athletic spaces function as ‘frontiers of capitalism’. Anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing evidences that frontiers of capitalism constantly reimagine colonial/imperial fantasies. Writing in her seminal excavation, *Friction: An Ethnographic of Global Connection*, Tsing posits that frontiers are “made in the shifting terrain between legality and illegality, public and private ownership, brutal rape and passionate charisma, ethnic collaboration and hostility, violence and law, restoration and extermination” (33). Through this lens, this research paper applies Tsing’s articulation of frontiers as it pertains to the reimagining of university institutions as sites whereby capitalist consumption of entertainment can operate within spaces of academic rigor and discourses. Reviewing the historical relationship between racial-ethnic student bodies, the academy and state capitalism, Roderick Ferguson borrows from Foucault’s archives of power. Opposing liberal rhetorical perceptions that view the student movement as harbingers of multicultural equity and justice, Ferguson theorizes to the means by which academy, the state and capital appropriate politics of difference to institutionalize a new kind of bio-power. Indeed, *The Reorder of Things: The University and its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* remind us that “a [new] mode of power was forming that would ingest various revolutionary formations and, in fact, build its strategies around their dissection” (22). Ferguson, in short, helps us re-conceptualize university institutionalization of difference not in opposition of historically led collective activism, but very much a part of it. Following Frederick Jackson Turner’s conceptualization of American frontiers, both Tsing and Ferguson provide the crucial interventions this research investigation seeks to place itself under: positioning academic and athletic spaces as frontiers of (neoliberal) capitalism, this paper negates preferences of binary, dichromatic constructs of reality.

Like Ferguson's focus on capital, the state, and the academy, I also seek to understand the means by which three agents interrelate with one another. A triploid analysis to the historical-development of student-bodies and politics of difference; the implementation of neoliberal ideology to restructure public institutions' purposes and agendas; and the growth of transnational intellectual property rights with regards to politics of commodification and cultural branding is where this research will make its most significant interventions. To do so, I follow, apply, and advance what Tsing has posited to be local and global scale making projects. Taking her academic advice that within "these times of heightened attention to the space and scale of human undertakings, economic projects cannot limit themselves to conjuring at difference scales—they must conjure the scales themselves" (57), this paper will trace the varying degrees of by which each of the three agents stated above maintain, undermine, and operate with another.

To further theorize how academic and athletics should be construed as complimentary, contrasting, and co-dependent scale making projects, I apply the contributions of Paige West in her ethnographic analysis of how local, national, and global economies circulate and create consequences to/and for one another. In her 2012 *From Modern Production to Imagined Primitive: The Social World of Coffee from Papua New Guinea*, West describes the movement of local commodities and the global consumption of social perceptions—whether false or real—through a commodity circuit approach. She writes that this methodology "takes seriously the ways that both forms and meanings transform as commodities move, and it attempts to understand the social practices that lead to these transformations" (20). This proves worthwhile to this project in the sense that I am arguing student athletes to be commodities, in and of their own relationship to both a neoliberal university and growing global corporate entities, such as the NCAA, Nike, and Adidas. West further describes that this approach is never merely a horizontal or vertical point of analysis, but rather showcases the means by which material and ideological understandings and survival mechanisms are deployed within the contemporary capitalist moment. This contemporary capitalist moment—neoliberal global capitalism—is the socio-cultural context by which new understandings in the relationship between student minority-difference, corporate-college athleticism, and transnational monopolies disseminate twenty-first century (neoliberal) formulations of identity. Unfortunately, these popular imaginaries—now advanced both in university and societal spaces—reposition frontiers of capitalism through a re-hashing of American exceptionalism.

Importance and Timeliness of Research

In early 2010, President Barack Obama awarded the Los Angeles Lakers basketball team by publically inviting them to the White House. Acknowledging the organizations recent 2009 National Basketball Association championship, among specific individuals such as Kobe Bryant and Phil Jackson, President Obama laid forth to an American public imaginary the integration between national identity and sports consumption. It is along this timely vein that this project takes root. As the U.S. economy continues spiraling along its global hemorrhaging, the academic community must view the global consumption of sports—specifically basketball—as a crucial component to the contemporary capitalist moment.

While this paper does not analyze the 'professional' consumption of basketball, it does bring forth startling similarities in the means by which academic spaces reflect larger social spaces.

Leveling the levels of friction within university and society spaces at large is in fact one of the endeavors that this research seeks to make. In fact, as multiple scholars have noted in their historical analysis between 1960s student movements, the conflicts founded in academic spaces can be perceived to be the ‘great theatre’ of society at large.

Furthermore, this project is heavily important, and pertinent, to the current transformations taking place within the political regulation, dissemination, and consumption of sports in university spaces. In 2011, the Pac-12 landed a \$3 billion dollar television contract. Enacted a year later, this 12-year deal places an unmatched precedent in the ways that global news corporations, athletic marketing campaigns, and the ever-privatizing academic institutions can perpetuate to an increasing consumer-base with representation of student-athletes will be consumed.

Framing Research Questions

Ethnic male-minorities in higher education are a recent phenomenon. Dating less than half a century ago, and upon adopting a myriad of cultural-nationalist ideologies, ethnic minority students have historically altered the means by which U.S. society conceives the meaning of education and culture. However, despite dominant liberal discourses that views the ascendancy of minority bodies in university settings as emblematic of American exceptionalism, might historicizing minority difference via the prism of corporate intellectual property rights provide a more palpable understanding to the means by which neoliberal philosophy has appropriated non-hegemonic conceptions of reality? In other words, is it possible to locate cultural appropriation of minority student bodies, experiences, and knowledges through the study of university recreational services? Guiding this research are the question: what is the relationship between minority difference, corporate universities and neoliberal marketing/consumption of sports; has college sport conferences such as the NCAA furthered the appropriation of minority student bodies in an effort to bolster a neoliberal university ethos; and if so, might this suggest that student bodies are conceived of as the corporate *bio-intellectual property*? What have been the politics of exchange between student athletes, sport conferences, and global corporations?

Research Questions

- 1) What might we see and gain by placing the overlap between university academic spaces and public spaces of sports into conversations with one another?
- 2) Does there continue to be a process of commodification within an educational setting despite post Civil-Rights institutionalization of non-Eurocentric curriculum, departments, and resources?
- 3) Putting in conversation the monopolistic rise of college (national) sports entertainment and to what Roderick Ferguson theorizes to be the “hegemonic affirmation of minority difference”, have there been new restrictions placed on minority bodies?
 - a) if so, how do minority bodies navigate university policies?
 - b) to what ends?
 - c) and more importantly, what are their limitations?

- 4) What do we see in the commodification of minority bodies in the post-Civil Rights institutionalization of minority bodies with the monopolistic rise of college and national sport entertainment?
- 5) Have university-corporatized sports appropriated student bodies and/or movements, while at the same time, have student bodies and/or movement appropriated university corporate sports?
- 6) Can student-athletes be theorized to be the “standardization” of the American cultural body?
 - a) What influential role does college-basketball have in an emerging global sports network?
 - b) What are the moments of friction by which students relate with university politics?

Research Design and Methodology

This research project is designed to be historically attuned, theoretically enriching, and ethnographically informed. Due to the immensity of such a proposal, I have decided to focus on one regional-area: the Pacific-Northwest. The Pac 12 Conference Division I encapsulate research one universities established in states such as California, Washington, Oregon, Utah, Montana, and Idaho. Interested to investigate my current locality, this paper will thus historicize and apply the above state theoretical formulations to Washington State University. Specifically, then, I am intrigued in configuring the development relationship between marginalized student bodies and university athletics as it pertains to the Cougar and Nike corporate branding.

Continuing alongside the lonely contribution into full-program athletics contracts of Samantha King, as well as other prominent scholars in the field of sports studies such as Michael L. Silk and David L. Andrews, I hope to reveal that Washington State University is an important case study worth analyzing as it showcases nicely the differential scale making projects within the confines of simply one university. This project will immensely benefit through collaboration with the current Associate Director of Athletics and Student-Athlete Development. Consequently, through initial contact, I have learned of a critical and necessary component to understanding student-athlete agency against hegemonic sport practices.

This research will conduct an ethnographic analysis of the ‘Student Athlete Advisory Counsel’. Guaranteed by NCAA regulations, this is the official voice of student-athletes. I hope to bring original analytical testimonies to the levels by which student-athletes negotiate not only university policies, but NCAA Conference regulations as well. Having an opportunity to conduct this project in the university I am housed under ultimately provides a wonderful opportunity to initiate in ethnographic research and apply theoretical- interdisciplinary approaches. Lastly, this will create forth a richer understanding to my current theoretical-hypothesis that student-bodies are the *bio-intellectual* property of corporate entities.

Scholarly Impact

In her groundbreaking advances to the social and cultural dimensions of intellectual property rights, Rosemary J. Coombe argues “intellectual property regimes...play a constitutive role in

the creation of contemporary cultures and in the social life of interpretive practice” (6). Her 1998 contribution to the field of critical cultural studies allows for this project to complicate contemporary neoliberal conceptions of intellectual property rights—or what I am advancing as *bio-intellectual* property rights. *The Cultural Life of Intellectual Properties: Authorship, Appropriation, and the Law* proves helpful to critically analyze the social-historical-cultural influence of trademarks and their role in influencing society: “trademarks represent an embodied otherness with imperialist precedents, social struggles over their circulation and connotation add more nuanced dimensions to our understandings of contemporary relationships between mimesis and alterity” (167), Coombe showcases how intellectual property laws, by “marking” the body, resulted in the “standardization of American culture” (173).

Similarly, this research draws necessary parallels for those invested in finding the correlations between the hyper-increased activity of promoting global intellectual property rights (Castells: 71, 2013) and to what Ferguson rightly states as the “hegemonic appropriation of difference” (54). As stated above, this research project seeks to apply multidisciplinary techniques and frameworks. As such, this research is interested in advancing current scholarship regarding Cultural Studies’ contributions in the realm of global intellectual property rights. This project also highlights and advances the fields of Education and American Studies through its showcasing of how global patterns of consumption interact with that of U.S. based academic institutions. In hopes of addressing questions of access and equity—specifically by critiquing the means by which a certain demographic of marginalized students can obtain a college education—I hope to also provide new ways to understand why academic enrollment and financial aid policies must be revisited and held accountable not to private board-rooms, but to state-elected legislatures.

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