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Basketball, Zapatistas, and Other Racial Subjects

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This essay, in struggling to account for the twisted intersections of sport and race across the US-Mexico border, argues that the cultural critic must account for not only hybridity and transnational flows of labor and capital but also for structures of feeling and structures of interaction. In this framework, basketball reveals a postmodern emotional self for the indigenous Mexican that is at once gendered, racialized, resistant and complicit, flexible, and strategic. Examining the pleasures of basketball for indigenous Mexicans in both Mexico and Los Angeles, the author asserts that while playing this game with so much passion, the players are devising their own sets of racial and ethnic premises, authoring, as it were, their own theories of difference and identity.

Keywords: race; basketball; Mexico

In the early 1990s, a period in time when many of the contributors to this issue were studying with Norman K. Denzin at the University of Illinois, Bill Clinton had begun his first term as president of the United States; the athletic mascot of University of Illinois Chief Illiniwek was facing increasing resistance from students, faculty, and Native American groups; NAFTA was voted into law by the U.S. Congress; and a broad rebel movement was crystallizing in many Lacandon Maya villages in southern Mexico. When not working with students and colleagues in his campus seminars and when not conducting his own field research during those years, Denzin variously spent time confronting national and global political challenges through activism; hacking away on his home computer writing books and journal articles by the dozens, paced by the rhythms of ESPN’s college basketball Game Night blaring on the TV outside his study; and struggling—with many others—to attenuate the omnipresence of his university’s infamous Illiniwek (see Denzin, 2002a).

In the 1970s but especially in the 1980s, Denzin formulated ambitious arguments about the centrality of emotion, lived experience, and the making of symbols and other meanings to the endeavors of social analysis. In the 1980s, he insisted evermore that the social research project embody a political and psychological reconsideration of the role of the researcher as subject, in particular as author and writer of texts, while advocating new forms of telling the public, by highlighting the personal contours of social action. A significant number of sports studies scholars, in particular, embraced this project, becoming custodians to its many tendrils. And as Denzin
(1995, 2001, 2002b), in the 1990s, grew increasingly committed to an interactionist critique of the racial subject and racial order in American life and film, many of these scholars have highlighted the racial dynamic of sport, arguing that it is the prevailing narrative and the most seductive representational field of athletics today.

Numerous moments from the past two decades illustrate how race has saturated American sport. For example, in 1993, the varsity men’s basketball coach at Central Michigan University, Keith Dambrot, introduced his version of America’s racial order to his players in a way that raised many eyebrows. The racial makeup of his team was not uncommon among NCAA Division I programs: 11 African American and 3 White players. During halftime of a game against Miami (of Ohio), Dambrot reportedly asked his Chippewa players for permission to use with them the word nigger. It was a word his players commonly used themselves, and Dambrot reasoned that it would help him communicate with his players. After gaining their approval, the coach began urging the team: “We need to be tougher, harder-nosed, and play harder. We need to have more niggers on the team.” He then began to apply this label, variously, to each one of the players. He picked out a White player, extolling his play by calling him a nigger. He then went around the locker room, labeling some of his players as niggers, others as half-niggers, and most insultingly of all, others as non-niggers (Kennedy, 2002, p. 142). Although it would have been similarly in bad taste, Dambrot might have opted instead to borrow the CMU nickname, the Chippewas, in exhorting his players to fight more like “real Indian warriors.”

Once word of the locker room speech leaked, Dambrot ran into difficulty with various CMU administrators, and even state legislators, and ultimately, the university fired him on April 12, 1993. Nevertheless, he never lost the support of his players, who protested his termination. The coach attempted to clarify his interaction with the team, claiming his choice of words was used “for instructional purposes and with the permission of my African American players, and I used the term in the sense in which it was used by my African American players... to connote a person who is fearless, mentally strong, and tough” (Kennedy, 2002, p. 142).

Dambrot’s troubles at CMU demonstrate that “race continues to imprint intercollegiate athletics, as well as the idioms, identities, and imaginaries animated by it” (King & Springwood, 2001, p. 8). Indeed, C. Richard King and I have argued that sport has emerged as a site where individuals and institutions struggle over the significance of race. Ironically, American sport is an arena, in the popular imagination, which simultaneously celebrates itself as a racial utopia while erasing race and racism. Many of Denzin’s insights into filmic inscriptions of race are suggestive of our insights into sport. As he argues is the case with Hollywood, we claim that “the celebration of sports as the ideal, if not the only, instance of racial harmony in post-integration America exacerbates the difficulties of thinking about representations of race in association with sports” (King & Springwood, 2001, p. 8; see also Andrews, 2001; Denzin, 2002b).

The conversations that framed Dambrot’s racialized pep-talk and subsequent firing illustrate this cultural inhibition of a thorough, critical unpacking of racial
dynamics. The public was preoccupied with primarily two things. First was the debate about whether the coach should have been fired. In general, public sentiment favored this termination. Second was the significance of the basketball players’ support for their coach. Although many African students at CMU wanted Dambrot fired, some of his supporters cited the approval of even the Black players as evidence that his pep-talk was not offensive. Of course, reducing the incident to these concerns bypasses a broader discussion of the racial and power asymmetries of college athletic rosters, coaching staffs, and administrations. It also obscures an understanding of racial subjectivities and transracial relationships, and it sidesteps the issue of race as commodity. Most significantly, it fails to confront practices and stories that essentialize difference.

In 1995, having strayed a bit too far into the margins of my graduate discipline, cultural anthropology, by writing and publishing my doctoral dissertation on baseball, tourism, and the Hall of Fame (Springwood, 1996), I found the job market exceedingly uncooperative. I decided to go to southern Mexico, to the state of Oaxaca, to study something more orthodox, if only a little: indigenous textile museums in local villages. Between the many hours examining Zapotec tapestries and the traditional looms used to produce them and in spite of having enjoyed far too many cups of local mescal, I came to notice what was unmistakably a significant source of pleasure for the residents of the village of Teotitlan del Valle: basketball. Indeed, contrary to my expectations, the American sport was more popular in Teotitlan than was baseball, or even soccer. As gifts, I had carried with me mementos from the 1994 World Cup of soccer (which took place in the United States) and while those trinkets were appreciated, most folks repeatedly asked whether I had brought any Chicago Bulls items. Moreover, knowing that I hailed from central Illinois, a few hours from Chicago, on more than one occasion, villagers asked me if I knew Michael Jordan. Since that initial research excursion, I have returned to Oaxaca and other parts of Mexico many times, for both research and pleasure. Most recently, to begin research on firearms and culture, I spent June of 2005 in a variety of Mexican locales, including some indigenous villages. Again, I was struck by the popularity of American basketball.

In the balance of this essay, I chart some of the key features of the social field of rural Mexico that help to explain how basketball is pleasurable in these communities. In truth, although I had not anticipated the ubiquity of basketball in Zapotec, Mixtec, and Mayan speaking communities, its popularity made sense in terms of all I thought I knew about the global circulation of media imagery and the commodification of the NBA. I was well aware of the more conspicuous dimensions of what has been termed “the global Jordanscape” (Carrington, Andrews, Jackson, & Mazur, 2001), and as a race theorist, I sought to read the racial stories that surely animated the practice of basketball in these southern Mexican villages. I wondered at once about how the fascinating and fearful spectacle of the black body and the commodification of blackness informed the identities of basketball players in Mexico. Once
I began to look closely, however, I did not encounter as readily as I had been expecting signs of the appropriation and performance of blackness, effected though style, talk, and politics. To be certain, the indigenous players understood that in America, many people saw basketball as Black at its surface and Black to its core. And while they sported some of the commodity apparel of the NBA, what seemed to be missing was a more prominent embodiment of the cool pose caricature—in neither voice, dress, or movement—that so often accompanied the circulation of basketball across national and ethnic space.

Within the broader spaces of a more nationalized popular culture and non-indigenous, mestizo social world, the youthful engagement of Black pose, from music to dress to slang, is visible. And, indeed, reflecting the increasing global popularity of basketball, Mexicans play hoops with greater frequency than in the past. But in terms of national consciousness, basketball is nowhere close to as significant as it is in the indigenous communities where, from the hinterland villages to ethnic barrios in Mexico City to Los Angeles, it is practiced as a form of commitment, community, and ethnicity. Playing basketball is a way of thinking about the meaning of indigenousness, of relating to one’s self and to other ethnic groups, and of integrating action, movement, habit, and discovery. And throughout, I argue, while playing this game with so much passion, the players are devising their own sets of racial and ethnic premises, authoring, as it were, their own theories of difference and identity.

In spite of a paucity of historical documentation, it appears that basketball was first played with any regularity in the 1920s, when the Mexican government attempted to introduce sport as a way of tempering the rebellious peasants (see Vaughn, 1997; Brewster, 2004) and civilizing and assimilating indigenous people. Federal monies were provided for the construction of basketball courts and baseball fields in outlying villages (Brewster, 2004). Throughout the rest of the twentieth century, basketball outpaced baseball in popularity, and in many towns today, it surpasses even soccer.

The game has become so seamlessly integrated into indigenous social and ritual life that an outsider might assume that basquetbol was as traditional as maize. Anthropologist Ben Feinberg (2003) lived in Hautla, Oaxaca in the 1990s while researching the local and global articulations of Mazatec identity. The 6’3” gringo was invited to join a team called Los Lobos to play in the local tournament, but he was unable to crack the starting line-up. Basketball tournaments, it turns out, are often the featured event at village fiestas, such that after the dances, speeches, rodeo, carnival, church mass, and orchestra performances that occupy the central square (often the basketball court) are finished, the game emerges to dominate the public space. Feinberg came to realize that these basketball tournaments, which featured teams from nearby and faraway villages, had emerged as a contemporary form of a very traditional, institutionalized system of “intraregional travel and [social] integration.” In part, basketball’s popularity among indigenous communities, often
nested in mountainous areas, is due to its smaller space requirements for soccer, or even baseball. Feinberg points out,

The Aztecs, Olmecs, and Mayas played a similar ball game, of course, but the source of the current Mesoamerican Indian fascination for the sport more likely comes from Naismith’s version and not Quetzacoatl’s. It is important to note, though, that basketball is not seen in the Sierra as anything new, or as an instance of acculturation. I asked the official in charge of the tournament in San Antonio, said to be the oldest in the Sierra, when the tournament there began. “Years and years,” he told me. I asked, “Since when, before you were born?” “Yes,” he replied . . . “Forever.” (2003, p. 104)

Although it would be an overstatement to claim that the high scale, postmodern global marketing regime of the NBA has not influenced the sport’s stature in hinterland Mexico, the political economy of this indigenous basketball is much older than the more recent transnational circulation of the Nike, Jordan, and the Dream Team semiotic triumvirate.

One particular basketball tournament in Hautla started very late in the day, as Feinberg recalls, and the championship game was not completed until about 3:30 a.m., by which time the mountain cold had frozen the very large audience, still in attendance. Feinberg’s Lobos team, although not the local favorite, prevailed to win the championship prize, a “highly reluctant bull.” Most of the villagers rooted for the team known as El Tri, also the nickname of the national soccer team (indicated the three colors of the national flag), which was comprised completely by Hautla natives. Feinberg’s team of outsiders has been started by a young lawyer from one of the wealthiest Hautla families, who had recruited a few players (ringers) from Mexico City, who stood over 6’ feet tall.

The games stayed close, and [the audience] taunted the hot-headed mestizo . . . until [he] slugged someone in the crowd and the latter was assessed a technical foul for arguing a referee’s call. They yelled and laughed: “¡Viva el Tri” “¡Viva el Tri” “¡Viva el Ejercito Zapatista.” But in the end, the bad guys won. . . (2003, p. 105 [the last phrase means, “Long Live the Zapatista Army!”])

Jeffrey Cohen (1999) has written an important ethnography of village life in Oaxaca, in which he analyzes the many forms of cooperation and reciprocity between households and even communities. An important feature of these community systems is the invention of new relationships and practices in response to novel challenges from global forces. Basketball has emerged as a centerpiece of the village festival in southern Mexico, as a ritual encounter between particular villages but, just as importantly, between Zapotec (or Mixtec, or Mayan, etc.) villages and the outside world. According to Feinberg (2003),

Most of the economic reasons for the travel which once inscribed a regional identity of a sort (particularly at fiestas) have vanished, but the basketball tournaments continue to
provide a form of cohesion based not on sameness but on interaction between differentiated communities, and on the exhibition of difference through competition. (p. 105)

Players on these teams dedicate a significant amount of time for practices as well as material resources for travel and food, in support of their tournament play. Rather than chasing Hoop Dreams of playing in the NBA or on some international stage, they seem motivated by a commitment to creating community through a cooperative, sporting embodiment.

In Mexico, nonmestizo indigenous people face extreme discrimination, usually coupled with great poverty. Middle-class Mexicans commonly view Indians as dirty, ignorant, and lazy at the same time as they glorify indigenous art and performance at museums and festivals. Many Mayan, Mixtec, and Zapotec speaking people—whose native communities are spread across the hinterland and rainforests of the two poorest Mexican states, Chiapas and Oaxaca—do not even view themselves, culturally, as Mexican. Sam Quinones (2001) actually speculates “that Oaxacan mountain Indians have been playing basketball for more than half a century—not soccer or baseball—is a metaphor for their separation from Mexico” (p. 121). During the 20th century, the Mexican government seemingly paid little attention to indigenous communities, who were often victimized by land policies, environmental destruction resulting from various government project, and inadequate educational and health programs (see Barry, 1995). Indeed, things reached the boiling point in the early 1990s, and on New Year’s Day in 1994, the Zapatistas (EZLN) moved from the cover of their smaller villages and rainforest canopies to seize a handful of towns in the state of Chiapas. The rebellion, which had been organizing for some 10 years, was indeed armed, although many of its arms were small-gauge rifles, shotguns, machetes, and, in some instances, even pretend wooden guns.

As some indigenous communities were focusing their energies on organizing and participating in the Zapatista rebel movement, people from other villages in Indian Mexico moved to the United States, reinforcing paths of migration many decades old. In fact, the largest Mexican ethnic group in the United States is the Zapotecos, who number in Los Angeles alone perhaps as many as 200,000 (Quinones, 2001). Ironically, to America, they brought with them their beloved sport of basketball, and today, there is no paucity of Zapoteco basketball tournaments. Quinones estimates that at least one such tournament—hosting up to 50 teams—is held every weekend for most of the calendar year. And these tournaments generate income, from entry fees to refreshment sales, which is often sent back to Mexican villages. In fact, Los Angeles teams with players hailing from particular villages will sometimes send tournament prize money back home, which in turn, may be used for prize money and uniforms in Mexico (see Lopez, Escala-Rabadan, & Hinojosa-Ojeda, 2001).

Zapotec immigrants seek out Zapotec basketball venues and tournaments as a way to reconnect with their ethnic home life from Mexico and to speak their language in a public space. Zeus García was one such person who sought the psychological
comfort of Zapotec basketball after moving north in the early 1980s, to the Los Angeles suburb of Torrance, from his Oaxacan hometown, Santa Ana. He soon discovered that 15 miles away, in West Los Angeles, Zapotecos regularly played pickup basketball games, so he immediately moved there. García had been quite a well-known player in Oaxaca, and once he realized just how many Zapotecos resided in the Los Angeles area, he began to envision the possibility of a more extensive network of tournaments and opportunities for Oaxacan players. He scouted players, coached several teams, developed sponsorship for big tournaments, and generally, became the de facto president of Zapotec basketball in Los Angeles. After playing with African American and White players in Los Angeles, Zeus articulated his own reading of racial difference in basketball.

I liked playing with [Black guys] because it was really hard basketball. They’re arguing all the time. But I liked playing with them because they were tall, and I liked trying to fight them for the ball. [White guys], you can’t run into even a little, because they’ll turn and say, “Are you all right?” They’re very worried about you. Blacks don’t care about that. (Quinones & Mittelstaedt 2000, p. 3)

Although these teams are comprised of players from the same village, García had a different vision. He formed a team called Raza Unida (“One Race”), the only Zapotec team with players from a variety of different villages. All from lowland Oaxacan villages, the Raza Unida players approach their sport with great seriousness: they wear slick uniforms with warm-up jackets, skip work to attend tournaments, and they have a coach who brings a clipboard to practices. Not so much because of their polished image but rather owing to their largely lowland heritage, the team has upset the political landscape of Zapotec basketball in Los Angeles. In Mexico, the highland villages tend to be a bit more affluent, play on better courts, and sport fancier uniforms. Even in Los Angeles, the lowland-highland differences prevail, and as a result, in the beginning at least, the larger, more well-funded and public tournaments were run by highland Zapotecos. Zeus and Raza Unida showed up to play in one of these highland tournaments in 1997, and initially, nobody wanted them to play. For one thing, there was fear that they would dominate the tournament. Nobody wanted a lowland team to win, particularly one made up of players from different villages. Nevertheless, in a gesture of goodwill, the captains of the other teams voted to allow Raza Unida to play, and indeed, they dominated all of their opponents, winning the tournament with ease. They have continued to play, and to win, effectively dominating the Zapotec basketball scene in Los Angeles into the present. Although generally hated for being so good, they are also respected for their willingness to risk crossing boundaries and are sometimes lauded as a symbol of Zapotec unity (Quinones & Mittelstaedt, 2000).

Basketball, for Zapotecos, is a masculinely gendered activity, especially in Los Angeles. In Oaxaca, girls and young women may take their turn on the court, but tournaments are exclusively for men. East and south of Oaxaca, however, pick-up
basketball games are more likely to include female players. This is especially so in the state of Chiapas, where many Mayan-speaking communities exist and where the EZLN movement originated and continues to flourish. In fact, a common feature of Zapatista gatherings—along with food, dance, music, and fireworks—is basketball. Both male and female ski-masked participants populate the basketball court while more senior level Zapatista commanders (including both women and men) meet in nearby tents (see “Indígenas Celebran Segundo Aniversario de Gobiernos Rebeldes,” 2005; WeSSERT, 2005). EZLN’s famous spokesperson, known as Subcommander Marcos, posts periodic communiqués to the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada* and online at the international EZLN Web site. In one of these messages, dated July 2003 (see Subcommander Marcos, 2003), Subcommander Marcos playfully announces to the world a Zapatista basketball tournament to which he jokingly invites international teams to compete, including the United States, Spanish, and French national teams as well as Euzkal Herria, or the team from Basque Country. These teams, Subcommander Marcos indicates, will play against the Dream Team of the January 1st 1994 Rebels Secondary School of the Autonomous Zapatistas. He writes that, of course, the final contest will be EZLN versus EZLN because, “in order to guarantee it, generous portions of sour pozole (corn gruel) will be served to the other teams” (see Subcommander Marcos, 2003). Subcommander Marcos adds that any foreign team that dares to defeat the Zapatista team will be taken prisoner and forced to listen to all of the program Fox Contigo, a radio broadcast of President Vicente Fox’s weekly message.

Recently, however, some indigenous basketball-playing communities may be growing self-conscious about their passion for hoops, fearing that non-Indian Mexico might see their pastime as backward. They might be making, in fact, a conscious effort to turn to soccer, a more cosmopolitan, international sport. Subcommander Marcos, on behalf of EZLN, actually sent a formal proposal in the spring of 2005 to the Italian soccer club F.C. Milan, inviting them to a soccer match against an all Zapatista team (see Subcommander Marcos, 2005). The invitation actually calls for a two-match series, with one game in Mexico City and a follow-up game in Italy. Although some of the F.C. Milan players are enthusiastic and they want to assist the EZLN by participating in the tournament, the logistical difficulties have blocked further developments of this otherwise serious proposal. And, in Hautla, where ethnographer Feinberg documented a fanaticism for basketball, the sport seems to have fallen from favor. Feinberg (B. Feinberg, personal communication, 2005) claims that it has been replaced with futbol rapido—a smaller, faster version of soccer played on the basketball court with small goals. Mazatecans from Hautla are claiming that soccer is more sophisticated, or cool, to the outside world while basketball is too indigenous.

Indigenous basketball in Mexico matters. It matters because it is pleasurable to its participants. It matters because it demands from its participants material and emotional investments. It matters also because it reproduces social relationships and creates new ones. But mostly, it matters because it circumscribes a discursive space of difference.
and identity for indigenous Mexicans and their transnational ethnicities. Denzin (2001), in an essay urging interactionists to embrace a more performative approach to analyzing race, explains that ethnic and racial communities form images of themselves and others in the larger context of race relations “based on a constantly changing set of social constructions that classify and locate individuals within” (p. 245) a prevailing racial order. The racial subject emerges out of a politics of representation, transformed through the sites and practices of embodied interaction. For Zapotecos, Zapatistas, and other ethnic Mexican communities, basketball (partially) unifies these sites and practices. Through basketball, the indigenous Mexican, especially the Los Angeles immigrant, contemplates and inflects his identity in terms of race and ethnicity but in ways very much different from Black, White, or Latino youth in the United States.

To Zeus García and the thousands and thousands of Zapotecos living in Los Angeles, basketball is a way of animating their ethnic traditions to define themselves against, and indeed buffer themselves from, not only a dominant White America as well as a pervasive Black and Asian America but from a prevailing Latino and mestizo Mexican population in Los Angeles that too often scorns them. Their sporting pleasure teaches something about globalization and the mediation of the local and the global. To understand it, the cultural critic must account for not only hybridity and transnational flows of labor and capital but also for structures of feeling and structures of interaction. Basketball in this framework reveals a postmodern emotional self for the indigenous Mexican that is at once gendered, racialized, resistant and complicit, flexible, and strategic.

References


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