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ARTICLE

Rugby, Nationalism, and Deaf Athlete Counterhegemony: Insights From the Case of Fiji

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This article explores the nexus between power, sport, and disability with a focus on Deaf rugby in Fiji. Based on semistructured interviews with players, officials, and stakeholders, this article outlines their pursuit of rugby and participation in a recent international tournament under Fiji's specific postcolonial social conditions. It examines what this experience means to the players and officials, and the sociopolitical significance it holds in the multiple relations of power that the game is embedded in. This article shows Deaf rugby as a significant counterhegemonic force that reconfigures Fiji's rugby discourse by appropriating its key constitutive element: anti-imperialist modern nationalism. This article further explores Deaf rugby's implication in prevailing gender/ethnoracial/corporeal politics with a view to offering nuanced insights into the question of resistance in/through disability sport in a Global South context.

The sociopolitical dynamics of disability sport have received extensive scholarly attention. There exists a large body of research literature that offers insights into the implication of sport in relations of power involving disabled persons and communities. On the one hand, sport has been identified as a key space for disabled persons' resistance to ableist marginalization and for their personal and collective empowerment (Ashton-Shaeffer, Gibson, Autry, & Hanson, 2001; Huang & Brittain, 2006; Lindemann & Cherney, 2008; Martin, 2013). For instance, sport may serve as a site for "oppositional identity work" (Berger, 2008, p. 650) wherein the athleticism embodied by disabled athletes challenges stereotypes of disabled persons as weak or frail.

On the other hand, researchers have pointed out that aspiration for athleticism itself may be shaped by "an ableist ideal of the athletic body" (Lindemann & Cherney, 2008, p. 110) and "able-bodied achievement values" (Berger, 2008, p. 656). Elite disability sport, in particular, has received much critical attention. Representations of Paralympians, wheelchair rugby players, and other elite disabled athletes (so-called "supercrips"—see Howe, 2011) have been shown to symbolically and practically reproduce able-bodied values of "coming out on top in the competitive struggle for achievement" (Berger, 2008, p. 670; see also Peers, 2009; Schell & Rodriguez, 2001) as well as prevailing discourses of masculinity and masculinism (that are also consolidated through able-bodied sports) (Gagen, 2007; Lindemann & Cherney, 2008; Wickman, 2007). Furthermore, disability sports may engender "divisions between disabled athletes and nondisabled athletes, and between disabled athletes and nonathletes within the disability community" (Smith & Sparkes, 2012, p. 337; see also Peers, 2009; Wickman, 2007). Peers (2009, pp. 654, 657–658), for instance, discussed from her own experience as a Paralympian how the discourses of heroic disabled athletes "serve to set us apart, whether up on the pedestal or down in the gutter." The literature suggests, then, that elite disability sports "contest stereotypical notions of disability while simultaneously accepting and reifying ableist values" (Lindemann & Cherney, 2008, p. 110). A growing body of work has also explored disabled athlete resistance within the ableist system (e.g., Peers, 2012; Spencer-Cavaliere & Peers, 2011).

Much of this literature rests on research undertaken in Western contexts (see Huang & Brittain, 2006; Le Clair, 2012 for notable exceptions). While it has offered valuable insights into the complexities of the nexus between power, sport, and disability, one may observe that the relative absence of Southern perspectives is indicative of continuing dominance of Global North voices in sport literature and, furthermore, poses a significant analytical void, given that the experience of disability is shaped by, among other things, culture, political economy, and global location (Mojtahedi & Katsui, 2018; Wickenden & Kembhavi-Tam, 2014). Two thirds of people with severe to profound hearing loss, for instance, live in low- or middle-income countries (McPherson, 2018) where hearing aids fulfill less than 3% of the need (World Health Organization, 2019). According to one of the few studies of disability sport participation rates in the Global South (Lauff, 2011), 23% of developing countries did not participate in Deaflympic, Paralympic, or Special Olympics World Games between 1991 and 2006, Oceania being the region with the least participation. In this light, the ways in which people with disabilities engage with sports in the Global South, under considerably different socioeconomic and sociocultural conditions, as well as the meanings that their sporting engagement holds for them merit greater sociological research attention. Lived experiences of disabled athletes in varied contexts warrant critical inquiry for a more nuanced empirical and conceptual understanding of disability sport as a social and political practice. This article is intended to contribute to expanding the literature by illuminating the voices and experiences of the Deaf rugby community in Fiji and revisiting the question of the implication of disability sport in relations of power in this specific context.

Fiji is a Pacific island country with a population of approximately 837,000 (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2017) and a developing economy relying mainly on tourism. The multiethnic population consists of indigenous Fijians (57%), Fijians of Indian descent (largely descendants of indentured laborers brought from India under British colonial rule; henceforth "Indo-Fijians") (37%), and

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other groups (6% in total). While the World Bank (2019) classifies Fiji as an upper-middle-income country, a Fijian economist estimates that as much as 45% of the population lives in poverty (Narsey, 2014). Formal social protection coverage is low: Only 5,157 disabled persons are reported to receive a disability allowance, whereas 113,595 persons have at least one form of disability (Mala, 2019). While no official statistics exist, around 80,000 Fijians are estimated to be living with hearing impairment (Reece, 2018).

Rugby union is widely recognized as Fiji's "national" sport. According to the Fiji Rugby Union, the country has the highest player–population ratio among rugby playing nations: Rugby is "the 'Heart and Soul' of this country and has the ability on any given day to unite the country or dampen the aspirations of the many" (Fiji Rugby Union, n.d., p. 8). Not surprisingly, then, the sport has attracted a considerable amount of research attention. Anthropologists have highlighted its cultural anchoring in indigenous martial tradition and ideals of communality, spirituality, and masculinity (Guinness & Besnier, 2016; Presterudstuen, 2010; Schieder, 2012). Sociologists and others have investigated the role of the sport as a key (ethno)national identity marker, its exclusion of nonindigenous Fijians, and its deployment for political purposes (Cattermole, 2008; Connell, 2018; Kanemasu & Molnar, 2013a). There is also an emerging body of work on women's rugby as an oppositional voice to gender normativity and heteronormativity in rugby and wider Fijian society (Kanemasu & Johnson, 2019; Kanemasu & Molnar, 2013b, 2017, 2019). But no research attention has been paid to the country's Deaf rugby community and very little to disability sports in general (see Devine et al., 2017 for an exception), which parallels the social exclusion and invisibility of disability communities in Fiji and the Pacific region.

Given the immense popularity of the game, one may not expect it to be particularly problematic for Deaf Fijians to play their "national sport." However, their rugby pursuit has been a long journey of struggle. Although Fiji ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2017 and introduced the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act in 2018, the medical and charity models of disability remain dominant among service providers and stakeholders. Along with a "traditional" perception of disability as a curse (see below), these models shape grassroots attitudes toward disabled persons. Despite progress made through advocacy, many people with disabilities continue to be "marginalised, neglected and isolated due to negative attitudes, false perceptions, myths and stereotypes the families and communities have towards them" (Pacific Disability Forum [PDF] & Australia Pacific Islands Disability Support [APIDS], 2011, p. 4). In this context, Deaf rugby as an organized activity began in Suva (the capital city) in the late 1990s under the initiative of a few Deaf athletes and leaders (Fiji Deaf Rugby Union [FDRU], personal communication, April 6, 2019). Deaf rugby has since struggled with a lack of support at the family, community, and institutional levels. They have not been able to secure formal affiliation with the Fiji Rugby Union or sustained sponsorship from any public, community, or corporate body. They have operated in near-total isolation, financing all activities through fundraising. In 2017, they were formally organized as FDRU under the umbrella of the Fiji Association of the Deaf (FAD). The player membership remains small—approximately 30 mostly indigenous Fijian men in a country where 60,000 play able-bodied rugby (Fiji Rugby Union, 2020). Remarkably, against many odds, FDRU obtained funding from a statutory body to participate in the 2018 World Deaf Rugby Sevens (WDR7s) in Sydney, Australia, their first major international rugby tournament, where they won the bronze medal.

This article explores the experiences of this small community with a focus on their journey to and success at 2018 WDR7s, guided by the following research questions: (a) How do Deaf athletes and officials experience rugby under Fiji's postcolonial social conditions? (b) What does their rugby pursuit and success mean to them in this context? and (c) What is its sociopolitical significance in the relations of power the game is embedded in? This article is informed by Antonio Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony/counterhegemony, which explicates relations of power as a dynamic process both maintained and contested through the medium of ideological and cultural struggle. The strength of the Gramscian concept is its attention to the multifarious and dynamic nature of the interplay between forces of domination and resistance. Hegemony/counterhegemony is not a simple case of the imposition of an already formulated discourse but of differential interests and discourses continually aligned, realigned, and disaligned to form a "common conception of the world" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 349). Using this theoretical lens, which has been employed in previous studies of alternative (especially women's) voices in Fiji rugby (Kanemasu & Johnson, 2019; Kanemasu & Molnar, 2017, 2019), I will show Deaf rugby as another significant counterhegemonic force that subverts the power dynamics of the dominant rugby discourse in Fiji by appropriating its key constitutive element: anti-imperialist modern nationalism. I will then consider the implication of the game in the reproduction of prevailing gender, ethnoracial, and corporeal relations of power. My aim is to offer nuanced insights into the sociopolitical meanings and impacts of Deaf rugby in a Global South context informed by the lived experiences and voices of athletes and officials.

Method

The primary data for this study were collected in 2019 through semistructured interviews with five Deaf rugby players, one coach, three FDRU officials, three FAD Sports Committee officials, and one service provider. Eleven participants were males and two were females. One was Indo-Fijian and the others were indigenous Fijian. The players were aged between 20 and 34 years, and the rest of the participants aged between 25 and 54 years. Ten players/officials had completed secondary education at Fiji's only school for the Deaf, whereas one was a current student of the school, one had completed primary education, and one had never been formally educated. Other than the one student, all players/officials were in paid employment. I first met the participants in 2018 through a rugby-themed community outreach event that I organized at The University of the South Pacific and that they participated in. I subsequently presented my interest in undertaking research about their rugby experience to FDRU, which offered assistance and played a central role in the selection/recruitment of participants. The interviews, conducted through a Fiji Sign Language (FSL) interpreter, lasted between 40 and 90 min. Two participants were interviewed together on two occasions and three participants were interviewed on one occasion upon request (which resulted in longer interviews). One participant, who managed the team's day-to-day activities, was interviewed three times. The FSL-English interpretation of the participants' responses was audio recorded, transcribed, and put to thematic coding (Chowdhury, 2015): The data were segmented and categorized for thematic analysis wherein initial themes were drawn from the research questions and others (e.g., "marginalisation by hearing rugby" and "nationalism")

emerged from the data. In the following sections, interview quotations are presented in indented paragraphs or with inverted commas, with the participants referred to by pseudonyms.

A brief note on my positionality as a researcher is necessary. I am a hearing, nonsigning, and nonrugby playing Asian woman. I have lived in Fiji for over two decades and previously studied Fiji's able-bodied rugby, which shaped the selection of the country for this study. My hearing status, combined with my Western education and academic occupation, placed me in a dominant position in relation to many participants. The discussion presented here is, therefore, framed primarily by my "researcher voice." At the same time, I consider Fiji my home and am emotionally attached to its people and cultures, which resulted in my research practices being guided by Talanoa, a Pacific Island methodology (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2012). While Talanoa is embedded in diverse Pacific cultures, in indigenous Fijian contexts it embodies the indigenous worldview to which values such as empathy, respect, love, and humility are integral. In research, this is expressed as "empathic apprenticeship as an intentional, embodied, emotional, and intersubjective process between the researcher and the participant" (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2012, p. 2). My empathic apprenticeship with the Deaf rugby community has developed within and outside of this study and fostered a partnership between FDRU and The University of the South Pacific, where the team currently trains and a Deaf rights awareness event has recently been held as a result. The study has thus become an entry point for my ongoing relationship with the Deaf rugby community.

Fiji's Hegemonic Rugby Discourse

To appreciate the context in which Deaf Fijians pursue rugby, it is necessary to examine the sport's distinctive sociocultural and sociopolitical embeddedness. Previous studies (e.g., Cattermole, 2008; Guinness & Besnier, 2016; Kanemasu & Molnar, 2013a, 2013b, 2017, 2019; Presterudstuen, 2010) have outlined the contours of the hegemonic discourse that has developed around the game as well as its implication in ethnoracial, gender/sexual, and postcolonial relations of power. Building on them, one may observe that this rugby discourse represents an intersection of multiple and interrelated constitutive discourses, namely: (a) ethnonationalism, (b) masculinism, (c) centrality of physical power, and (d) anti-imperialist modern nationalism.

Ethno-Nationalism

Rugby in Fiji has developed a profoundly indigenized nature since its colonial inception. The game is said to embody the essence of indigenous cultural ethos: It is commonly associated with the country's precolonial martial tradition, and it has historically developed close linkages with powerful cultural institutions of chiefly rule and Christianity. In particular, the martial tradition, whereby every male was expected to be a warrior defending his chiefs' territories, is regarded as deeply fused with the intensely physical, combative, and collective nature of the game (Presterudstuen, 2010). Rugby is not merely a foreign sport that ignited Fijian enthusiasm but a key marker of indigenous Fijian identity and heritage.

By virtue of its primordialist emphasis on indigeneity, the ethnonationalist discourse excludes nonindigenous Fijians to the extent that rugby is defined as an essentially indigenous Fijian cultural practice (Kanemasu & Molnar, 2013b). This parallels the country's racialized political trajectory. Under colonial rule, indigenous Fijians were incorporated into a patronage system, which upheld their political paramountcy over Indo-Fijians in return for their allegiance to colonial interests (Durutalo, 1986). Despite intraethnic, class-based, and regional disparities/conflicts, the colonial government's ethnically compartmentalized development policy and differential treatment of these communities prompted the politicization of ethnicity, which, in the postcolonial era (1970–), culminated in ethnonationalist coups d'état in 1987 and 2000. These entailed sociopolitical marginalization of Indo-Fijians as well as violence targeting Indo-Fijians in 2000 (Naidu, 2013). The most recent coup of 2006 was staged by the military, which radically shifted from its former role as a champion of ethnonationalism and presented itself as committed to a multiethnic nationhood (Ratuva, 2007). However, the long history of political separation of these communities has deeply conditioned many social arenas, including sport, wherein indigenous Fijians predominate (Kanemasu, 2018; Sugden, Kanemasu, & Adair, 2019). Rugby is the epitome of a sporting expression of such ethnoracial relations (Guinness & Besnier, 2016).

Masculinism

The ethnonationalist rugby discourse is bound up with indigenous ideals of masculinity wherein male rugby players are evocative of precolonial warriors (Presterudstuen, 2010) and extolled as national heroes carrying the pride of the postcolonial people. The exclusion of women from this rugby symbolism is consolidated by the country's postcolonial gender and sexual order. The heteropatriarchal nature of Fijian society is evidenced by, for instance, a low Gender Gap Index (106th out of 149 countries; World Economic Forum, 2018), some of the world's highest gender-based violence rates (Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, 2013), and widespread lesbophobia, homophobia and transphobia (Diverse Voices and Action for Equality Fiji, 2019). Rugby, under these conditions, has assumed an intensely gendered and heteronormative nature. While men's rugby is celebrated as a national sport, women players were previously left almost on their own to finance and organize their activities. They experienced severe sanctions such as family/community disapproval, stigmatization, and verbal/physical abuse, exacerbated by many of them being or suspected of being transmasculine and lesbian/gay (Kanemasu & Molnar, 2013b, 2017). More recently, however, their growing international profile has prompted some positive shifts in community perceptions of and institutional support for the women's game (Kanemasu & Johnson, 2019).

Centrality of Physical Power

Intersecting these racialized and gendered rugby discourses is the centrality of physical power. In Fiji, physicality—muscular prowess and physical might—is associated with indigeneity and masculinity and profoundly connected with the country's postcolonial social hierarchies. Along with rugby, the military as a primary expression of physical (and political) might is dominated by indigenous men (Teaiwa, 2005) and excludes both Indo-Fijians, who are often disparaged for allegedly being less physically robust than indigenous Fijians, and women, who are similarly defined as socially and physically subordinate (Teaiwa, 2008). The sociopolitical marginalization of both groups has taken violent, physical forms manifested most clearly in ethnonationalist coups and gender-based violence. As noted by Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (2013, p. 70), "the use of violence as a form of discipline and conflict resolution is normalised" in Fiji. Who claims physical power—the combative game of rugby, the

military as an institution of state violence, physical might as a means of control and repression, and so forth—is indicative of Fiji's postcolonial social order.

In this corporeal-political landscape, Indo-Fijians and women are not the only subordinated groups; so are all those whose bodily functions are least aligned with the dominant ideals of physical prowess, especially disabled persons. This entails widespread ableism in grassroots sports and other social arenas. Disabled people's organizations emerged in the mid-1970s, building on shared interests in sports and musical activities (PDF & APIDS, 2011). The Fiji Disabled People's Federation was formed in the late 1970s as an umbrella body to FAD, Psychiatric Survivors Association, Spinal Injuries Association, and United Blind Persons of Fiji. These organizations were, however, largely isolated and unsupported until the 2000s, which contributed to their strongly member-driven nature. Similarly, though Fiji has a long history of Paralympic sports (its first Paralympic Games participation dating back to 1964) and most recently won its first gold medal (in high jump) in the 2012 Summer Paralympics, para-sport federations have historically faced financial challenges and lack of family/community support. There is a near absence of published statistical data on disability athlete populations in Fiji, and available information points to low levels of participation, with opportunities limited mainly to Suva: Para-athletics, for instance, currently has only 19 participants (FPC Board Member, personal communication, February 28, 2020). Thus, although Fiji's disabled persons' organizations and sporting communities have been actively operating, they have done so against formidable barriers. Along with women and Indo-Fijians, they are located in decidedly subordinate positions in the country's physical hierarchy. In rugby, the marginalization of disabled persons finds an expression as a complete isolation experienced by the Deaf rugby community, which constitutes the most neglected section of Fiji's rugby-playing population.

Anti-Imperialist Modern Nationalism

Somewhat paradoxically, although rugby embodies Fiji's social hierarchies of ethnicity, gender, and physicality, it has also functioned as a symbol of a modern nationalism underscored by anti-imperialist sentiments. While sport around the world has been shown to be deeply implicated in the constructions of and contestations over national identities (e.g., Bairner, 2009, 2015; Harris, 2013; Malcolm, 2012), many "national sports" in the Global South are integral to the political and cultural dynamics of postcolonial nation making (e.g., Creak, 2010; Lutan, 2005; Majumdar, 2007). Given the keen sense of physical and politico-economic peripherality Fijians feel about their nation, rugby has served as a primary medium of their symbolic resistance against postcolonial marginalization and assertion of an alternative collective self-understanding (Kanemasu & Molnar, 2013a). Rugby, more than any other sport, is an icon of the pride and aspirations of the postcolonial nation. As described in a typical fashion by a local newspaper reader: "Rugby made the tiny dot Fiji shine like a star on the world map" (Fiji Times, 2016). Or, as the Prime Minister stated in a speech: "[Fiji's rugby] history teaches us that we Fijians can do anything. We can stand with people from any other nation . . . . Our rugby history tells us that we are a small nation that believes in its greatness . . . rugby is . . . part of who we are as a nation" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017).

The hegemonic rugby discourse encompassing these constitutive elements has become a powerful rhetoric shaping popular, official, journalistic, and scholarly representations of the game. Ethnonationalism, masculinism, and ableism are paradoxically, yet durably, entwined with modern nationalism in this hegemonic complex: Even as rugby represents the nation's postcolonial resistance, able-bodied indigenous men are its central embodiment while the sociopolitically and physically subordinate are designated as spectators on the margins. In the past decade, women athletes have contested this hegemonic configuration with considerable success by disrupting the masculinist element. Most recently, Deaf athletes have joined the counterhegemonic struggle with their remarkable feat at 2018 WDR7s, which is examined in the following sections.

Marginalization in/Thorough Rugby

Deaf athletes have played rugby for the past two decades in the face of severe adversities. Although most Deaf persons in Suva use FSL, the majority in rural areas are nonsigning and communicate through classifiers or miming. Many in rural areas are also not aware of the existence of FAD, its support services, or the accessibility of formal education in Suva. For those who use FSL, access to interpreters is a major challenge with only 42 registered interpreters across Fiji, of whom 35 work for the Minister of Education, leaving only seven available to many thousands of Deaf persons. Discrimination and stigmatization are rife, especially in rural areas:

> Most of the time when they [people] identify a Deaf person they think that it's a curse. It's still there . . . . Maybe it's a traditional way of thinking . . . . People say something like maybe the father did something bad . . . . So they don't keep in touch with the person. The person roams the village, goes to the village edge, stays away from their family. Very rarely you find Deaf people that are part of their family and integrated into their community. (Salote, service provider)

Many families of the Deaf do not learn FSL, and some Deaf persons "get thrown out of their homes and have to look for other homes to live in . . . . Then they go from home to home; they go and live with their uncle or cousin. They get chased from there and go to the next home" (Litia, official). For these persons, the only source of practical and emotional support is the Deaf community, organized through FAD. Whereas disabled persons in the Global North generally have their minimum daily needs met through formal services and informal care provided by families and friends (World Health Organization, 2011), as many participants highlighted, the majority of Deaf Fijians face a glaring absence of family/community support and limited accessibility of formal services.

Deaf athletes have pursued rugby against this backdrop. That they have not secured any sponsorship is significant because, in a country where rugby is held with such high esteem, most (men's) rugby teams, even in remote areas, receive financial and moral support from families, communities, and local businesses that subsidize player development where no institutional assistance is available (Kanemasu & Molnar, 2014). Deaf athletes do not benefit from this rugby-centric culture: "[W]e never ever had any support. We've always known that only the hearing get support" (Marika, official). They have self-funded training sessions, camps, equipment, gear, and all other necessities. As they sought to participate in 2018 WDR7s, they struggled to meet even the most basic needs, such as a training ground, which they eventually found in a small piece of land

with holes in the ground and no goal posts, shared with another rugby team.

Many athletes' families were hesitant or unwilling to provide financial or other support for their WDR7s quest: "It's so hard to get family support. I feel that they sometimes see it as a burden to come into a Deaf environment and try to support a Deaf person, thinking that they will not achieve anything. 'He's deaf, how can he do it?'" (Salote, service provider). They were similarly isolated from sporting bodies. They are not affiliated with Fiji Rugby Union and do not receive technical assistance from any sporting body, partly because Deaf rugby is not a Paralympic sport eligible for formal support. Consequently, they meet all technical needs within their community. Their only coach is a Deaf former rugby player: "If a hearing coach is not interested in coaching the Deaf, it's better if we pick a Deaf person to be trained as a coach" (Osea, official). They prepared for WDR7s with no assistant coach, trainer, or physiotherapist: The entire team consisted of athletes, a coach, and a manager.

Moreover, all participants noted that they routinely experienced marginalization by hearing teams and officials: "I used to play in a mainstream team. The coach and the managers watched and said, 'Okay, this is a deaf person. No, no, no, we'll just leave him aside for a while'" (Waisale, player); "[Hearing athletes] would look at me; they would have this selfish look. They would look down on me. Maybe because I am Deaf they didn't know I was a skilled player" (Tomasi, player). The exclusion meant a lack of playing time; they consequently divided the players into two teams so they could play against each other. But even as they trained in isolation, they faced negative sanctions. Osea recounted their experience of sharing the training ground with a hearing team:

> There were two teams, Deaf team on one side and a hearing team on another side. The ground is very small. Sometimes the hearing would give us a stubborn face, like, "Why are you people training here?" and they give us a smaller space. They block off their space . . . . They would leave us on the side far away from the tap. If the weather is bad, they would come early and put their stuff under the shelter, and the Deaf people would come and put their stuff in the rain. There was a lot of discrimination even on that ground.

It was, therefore, a major breakthrough when a statutory sporting body provided ad hoc funding to assist the team's travel to WDR7s. As Viliame (player) explained: "Having to fundraise for all these Deaf members was hard. There was no donation, no family support from most of our team members . . . . When we heard the announcement [of the funding], most of us cried." He was emotional as he described their arrival in Sydney:

> When we arrived at Sydney Airport, it was the first time for us, the Deaf rugby team, to participate on an international level. When we met the Deaf from other countries, they asked us: "How did you people get here?" I told them: "We were training for so many years. But we never ever, ever had the opportunity to represent our country—to participate on an international level, let alone to represent our country." It was an achievement on its own to be there and to be in a competition with other countries.

Their WDR7s participation and winning a bronze medal were, then, nothing less than a historic milestone. It held not only personal but also significant sociopolitical meanings for the players and officials, as explored in the next section.

Claiming Rugby Symbolism: Deaf Athlete Counterhegemony

For all participants, the personal sense of pride and achievement was inseparable from its sociopolitical significance. Marika asked the players on their first night in Sydney:

> "How do you feel being here?" Most of them said: "This always happens to hearing people. It never happened to us. It's happening to us now and we're representing Fiji." I told them: "Make sure you know that you are representing Fiji. You hold your head up high and do what you are supposed to do." There was quite a lot of emotion.

This was not only a triumph over ableist marginalization; more specifically, to many, it was a claim to physicality central to the hegemonic rugby discourse that had thus far excluded them. In Waisale's words:

> Most hearing people think that Deaf people can't do this on this platform. Sometimes, they look at us and think, "Why are you doing this? You're deaf, you can't play. You can't hear the whistle." I have represented my country and I have brought back a medal and I want everyone to know that *I am strong as well* [emphasis added]. It doesn't matter that I am Deaf . . . . And we also have individual skills that hearing people sometimes don't have. *We are strong and fit enough to represent our nation* [emphasis added].

Furthermore, the success enabled them to appropriate the powerful national symbolism of the game. Representing the nation in rugby—"donning the Fiji jersey" as is commonly phrased by Fijians—is, in itself, regarded as an utmost honor (Kanemasu & Molnar, 2013a). The players claimed this honor publicly and decidedly with a medal to legitimize it. A particularly evocative moment was their return from Sydney: "When we landed, there were so many people there at the airport to greet us . . . . I was amazed. . . . There were also a lot of Deaf from Suva who took a bus down to Nadi to greet us" (Marika). A cheering crowd at the airport is a welcome usually reserved for a victorious hearing national team. Similarly indicative was the speech delivered by the captain when the team was invited to a community outreach event at The University of the South Pacific. He effectively invoked the modern nationalist rugby discourse by situating their medal as a success of the nation, rather than of the Deaf: "It [the medal] is not only for the Deaf; it's for Fiji. It's for you guys. This medal is not for me; it's for everyone, all the Fijians." The (predominantly hearing) crowd responded with an enthusiastic cheer. The athletes thus captured not only the physicality of rugby but also its modern nationalist symbolism. Rugby stars are not only celebrities but national heroes in Fiji (Kanemasu & Molnar, 2013a); they claimed this symbolic status:

> Because our pictures were in the papers, most people know us now. They're like: "Wow, you are in the Deaf team!" and I'm like: "Yeah, yeah." They take selfies with us. Some people see us and congratulate us. I think we earned some respect. (Waisale)

We are reminded of rugby's immense symbolic power. Cattermole (2008) highlighted rugby's critical role in representations of Fijian nationhood, which has been captured by the state to project an image of national unity at times of domestic political tensions.

Connell (2018) examined the ways in which the state has used rugby, especially the 2016 Olympic gold, to strengthen the national image in the international arena and support its claims to legitimacy. Rugby's symbolic potency has thus been mobilized for the purposes of various hegemonic struggles in the contexts of national and international politics. Here, Deaf athletes have waged their own counterhegemonic battle by appropriating rugby's national symbolism.

Deaf Rugby, Power, and Resistance: Revisiting "Supercrip" Critiques

Disability sport researchers (e.g., Howe & Parker, 2012; Purdue & Howe, 2012; Rees, Robinson, & Shields, 2019) have debated whether representations of elite disabled athletes may have disempowering effects for disabled persons and communities. "Supercrips" can be described as "those individuals whose inspirational stories of courage, dedication, and hard work prove that it can be done, that one can defy the odds and accomplish the impossible" (Berger, 2008, p. 648). The supercrip narrative may have othering effects in multiple dimensions. First, it reproduces ableism by positioning disability as an "opposite to a well-established aesthetic/functional norm," something to be overcome (Silva & Howe, 2012, p. 177). Second, it separates elite athletes from "the non-sporty, or pre-sporty, tragic disabled 'appendage'" (Peers, 2009, p. 657) as well as from nondisabled athletes (Smith & Sparkes, 2012). Third, it also often reproduces other relations of power, especially the masculinism that underlies elite athleticism (Schell & Rodriguez, 2001; Shuttleworth, Wedgwood, & Wilson, 2012).

In Fiji, athleticism is bound up with multiple relations of power as discussed previously. It may be argued that by appropriating the centrality of physicality in the hegemonic rugby discourse, Deaf rugby players consolidate, rather than challenge, the existing bodily politics. In particular, Deaf rugby resembles able-bodied rugby in some respects, and the players, their impairment being a sensory one, may approximate the able-bodied physical ideals of the rugby discourse. In this regard, celebration of their success may contribute to further marginalization of athletes with physical impairments. Indeed, a wheelchair user asked the team at the aforementioned University of the South Pacific event: "What would be the advice you would give to those of us with disabilities other than deaf[ness]?" Furthermore, by virtue of claiming the game's physicality that has historically been meshed with the warrior narrative of indigenous masculinity, Deaf rugby may serve to entrench the masculinist and ethnonationalist rugby discourses. In short, appropriation of the discourse of physical prowess may be implicated in the continued privileging of muscularity, as defined by the nondisabled, serving to reinforce its implicit ableism as well as exclusion of Indo-Fijians, women, and any other group perceived to fail to match this physical ideal.

Here, one may question whether the athletes' success, after all, confirms Huang and Brittain's (2006, p. 354) point: "Disabled people are expected to make an effort to conform to an able-bodied ideal and under pressure to prove themselves, to convince others that they are doing their best to fit in." It is essentially a question of whether authentic resistance is possible at all within prevailing sporting discourses and structures. Bale (2000) argued two decades ago that entrenched structures of Western achievement sport preclude possibilities of postcolonial athlete resistance beyond acts of transgression (i.e., entering and dominating the space of the dominant). Some feminists have similarly argued that competition and aggression promoted by conventional sports reinforce the privileged status of masculine behavior and the existing relationship between social and physical power (Farkas, 2007), leaving truly oppositional potentials to be found only in alternative sports (Bradshaw, 2002).

Notwithstanding the merit of these critiques, a more complex picture of Fijian Deaf rugby emerges upon closer examination. First, throughout the interview process, there was little invocation by athletes/officials of the masculinist rugby discourse (even when they were asked about the connection between rugby and masculinity). Meeting the ideals of indigenous masculinity was evidently not central to their rugby pursuit. The FDRU officials instead discussed their plan to establish a women's rugby committee, which they explained was inspired by the determination of the (hearing) women's national team. This was supported by FAD, which has a women's committee and positions gender equality as one of its key objectives. Similarly and significantly, FDRU's rugby pursuit runs counter to the ethnonationalist premises of the dominant discourse. Its WDR7s teams included two Indo-Fijians, making them the first Indo-Fijians to ever represent Fiji in rugby—an unprecedented (and entirely unnoticed) milestone in Fiji's rugby history. To the athletes who share common experience of systematic exclusion by hearing rugby, the ethnonationalist rhetoric held little validity.

In other words, the Deaf rugby community may have begun a process of *reconfiguring* the hegemonic rugby discourse, from which alternative meanings of physicality, uncoupled from ableism, ethnonationalism, and masculinism, may emerge. Discussing such transformative potentials of their rugby pursuit, FAD/FDRU officials observed that being on the sporting (and social) periphery not only presented barriers but also provided a space for autonomy and innovation, which enabled them to pursue unconventional actions: "It [marginalisation] has become an opportunity for us. It's easy for us to communicate with each other in our little corner. We share our ideas and experiences" (Litia) outside of the powerful forces of the rugby discourses and structures.

Second, a more nuanced perspective on resistance is necessary in understanding the complexities of the nexus between sport and power, especially in non-Western cultural and political contexts. Here, it is useful to take note of the counterhegemonic nature of Deaf rugby players' struggle. As Gramsci (1971, p. 349) explained, (counter)hegemonic struggle "presupposes the attainment of a 'cultural-social' unity through which a multiplicity of dispersed wills, with heterogeneous aims, are welded together . . . on the basis of an equal and common conception of the world": It is a process of negotiation and persuasion rather than an act of frontal assault. A (counter)hegemonic discourse indeed emanates from "a process of differentiation and change in the relative weight that the elements of the old ideologies used to possess. What was previously secondary and subordinate . . . becomes the nucleus of a new ideological and theoretical complex" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 195). The Deaf athletes have engaged in counterhegemonic struggle in the Gramscian sense wherein they have worked steadily for transformative differentiation in the hegemonic configuration of the rugby discourse with a view to ultimately securing an alternative "common conception of the world." Resistance here is not limited to direct and total negation of existing cultural complexes but entails a battle for steering their hegemonic alignment. The victories they have scored in this battle, tentative as they may be, illuminate the inherent contingency of any cultural and political hegemony.

Furthermore, (counter)hegemonic struggle often manifests itself in everyday, infrapolitical actions. It finds expression not

only in formally articulated political thoughts and actions but also in "'spontaneous philosophy' which is proper to everybody": If seemingly "fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential," it nevertheless partakes implicitly in the maintenance or transformation of existing relations of power (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 323, 419). This Gramscian formulation of (counter)hegemony parallels what contemporary writers describe as "everyday resistance"—"how people act in their everyday lives in ways that might undermine power," which is "not easily recognised like public and collective resistance . . . typically hidden or disguised, individual and not politically articulated" (Vinthagen & Johansson, 2013, p. 2). Recognizing these infrapolitical actions of subversion is important because it underscores the subtle and complex ways in which hegemonic struggle is played out in everyday social life and also because it captures the primary medium through which subordinated groups in many societies exercise their oppositional agency. Given the limited scope for formal Deaf/disability activism (which is advanced mainly by educated professionals) in Fiji, rugby provides a strategic entry point for their everyday resistance—highly strategic because of its powerful modern nationalist symbolism. Yet they do not consider rugby as the only site for resistance; it is, as Tomasi stated, simply "another platform where we can change the minds and lives of people," where they happen to locate themselves due to their love of the game. To the aforementioned question posed by the wheelchair user at the university event, Nilesh (official) responded that Deaf rugby's success was intended to serve as a stepping stone for all disabled persons' claim to sports. Waisale similarly observed: "We can participate in any sport, not just rugby . . . . It does not matter, the level of your disability. That's one of the key messages of our success." Deaf rugby, thus, needs to be situated in the context of a broader, multifaceted counterhegemonic battle, embodied here in the conventional sport of rugby, as it is in many other sports and spheres of everyday social life.

Deaf persons have greater access to (conventional) sports than many other disabled persons in societies where institutional and material costs of alternative/adaptive sports are not easily afforded. But not recognizing the transformative potential in this particular sporting space would be to disregard the power of the oppressive structures that subordinate groups in many societies must negotiate to carve out space for agency: They often do this by employing options available to them within the limits of existing conditions. "Supercrip" critiques that focus exclusively on the legitimacy of resistance may overlook the fact that sport (of all kinds) constitutes one of the diverse spaces people cultivate to resist domination. Counterhegemony is a collectivity of such varied, ongoing, infrapolitical (as well as political) actions of the subordinated.

Conclusions

This article has explored the interface of power, sport, and disability, focusing on Deaf rugby in Fiji. It has first examined Fiji's hegemonic rugby discourse to delineate the sport's sociocultural and sociopolitical underpinnings. Rugby is a sporting embodiment of the country's postcolonial social order, steeped in discourses of ethnonationalism, masculinism, and physicality, which has marginalized Indo-Fijians, women, and disabled persons, among others. Yet, rugby has also served as Fiji's primary cultural symbol of modern nationalism, underscored by a shared sense of anti-imperialist resistance. This article has argued that the Deaf athletes' success at 2018 WDR7s represents a significant moment in their counterhegemonic struggle, whereby they have asserted their claim to the game's physicality and national symbolism.

From this standpoint, the article has also revisited the debate over the politics of "supercrip" representations, which has tended to rest on Western experiences. Celebration of the Deaf athletes' success may be regarded as perpetuating the hegemonic rugby discourse and the relations of power it is anchored in. But a more nuanced picture points to an ongoing reconfiguration of the discourse wherein the athletes appropriate the potent rugby symbolism while seeking to disarticulate it from the prevailing gender, ethnoracial, and corporeal relations of power. This point has, in part, been crystallized in the two players who became the first Indo-Fijians to represent Fiji in rugby. This article has highlighted that counterhegemony, as explicated by Gramsci, entails such an ongoing process of realignment of ideological and cultural complexes. Counterhegemony is also often played out in infrapolitics manifested in sports and other everyday social practices, which, if not immediately recognized as such, nevertheless constitute a key medium of resistance in many societies wherein the scope for formal political action is limited. If resistance is understood as a counterhegemonic process, Deaf rugby emerges as one of the diverse oppositional practices daily engaged in by diverse disabled persons and communities within and beyond sports. Thus, the aim of this article has been to contribute to critical analysis of disability sport as a political practice, informed by the experiences and voices of marginalized sporting communities in marginalized societies.

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