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Pride of the people: Fijian rugby labour migration and collective identity

Yoko Kanemasu
University of the South Pacific, Fiji

Gyozo Molnar
University of Worcester, UK

Abstract
Rugby is a sport that has given Fiji international recognition. The professionalisation of rugby has led to a growing number of elite players emigrating from Fiji – often temporarily but sometimes permanently – to metropolitan countries, with an estimated 450 athletes currently involved in foreign competitions. Whilst Fijians have a long history of migration to metropolitan societies, the recent global dispersion of rugby players has added new dimensions and complexities. This article intends to shed light upon this migratory phenomenon by exploring what it means for these Fijians to ply their trade in foreign leagues. Based on semi-structured interviews, the article examines the experiences of Fijian players who are currently or have previously been contracted by metropolitan rugby clubs and what these experiences mean to them regarding their sense of collective identity and pride, especially in the context of politico-economic disparities between Fiji and the host countries. In doing so, particular attention is paid to the voices and agency of those athletes who claim rugby migration as a space for counter-hegemonic collective self-expression. The article thus seeks to contribute to our understanding of the dynamics of the relationship between sports labour migration and collective local identification and resistance in an increasingly globalised world.

Keywords
Counter-hegemony, Fiji, identity, migration, rugby

Introduction

When people move away from home – frequently meaning the socio-cultural milieu they grew up in – they begin an often multi-stage journey that will challenge, among many

Corresponding author:
Yoko Kanemasu, School of Social Sciences, Faculty of Arts, Law and Education, University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji
Email: kanemasu_y@usp.ac.fj

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other things, their cultural and national sense of belonging (see Sorhaindo and Pattullo, 2009). As migrants relocate to foreign lands and become exposed to local cultural practices, they deploy strategies through which they negotiate novel socio-cultural relations and identities to fit their own personal and/or collective needs (Fortier, 2000). In the web of everyday cultural exchanges, migrants are frequently required to re-visit, re-consider and re-make various aspects of their identity and their relation to their homeland. Consequently, cultural and national identity and the meaning of 'home' cannot be adequately viewed as a monolithic, established structure; rather, we must recognise that 'identity is not a stable set of characteristics attached to an individual but is hybrid, multiple and shifting' (Kosic, 2006: 246). This observation has specific resonance with migrants and migration: as Ahmed et al. (2003: 2) observe, 'although migrants often move across vast geographic distances, the greatest movement often occurs within the self'. We believe it is important to explore and interpret movement within the (cultural) self in relation to the continued significance of identification with the *home* culture/nation triggered by the particulars of migration. Such pursuit requires an investigation of the multifaceted and ever-changing interplay between migratory social structures and the migrants themselves.

In this context, Fijian rugby migration offers a case in which the relationship between sport labour migration and collective identity may be usefully explored. Fiji is an island nation in the Pacific Ocean with a population of 837,271. Of this number, 56.8% are indigenous Fijian, 37.5% are Indo-Fijian and 5.7% comprise other ethnic groups (Fiji Islands Bureau of Statistics, 2011). A British colony from 1874 to 1970, Fiji is a developing economy that depends mostly on sugar exports and tourism. The country has experienced periods of political instability due to two coups d'état in 1987, one in 2000 and another in 2006, which have had serious political and economic consequences and resulted in accelerated emigration (Fraenkel et al., 2009; Narayan and Prasad, 2007). Rugby union is widely regarded as Fiji's 'national' sport. It is the subject of much public attention and debate, and indigenous Fijian (henceforth Fijian) men and children playing rugby are a common sight in all parts of Fiji. Notably, rugby in Fiji has been deeply implicated in the interests and discourses of colonialism, ethno-nationalism, masculinity and militarism (Guinness, n.d.; Presterudstuen, 2010; Teaiwa, 2005). Guinness (n.d.: 100), for instance, discusses rugby as a 'key point of cultural difference' between the indigenous and the Indo-Fijian populations and as a central marker of indigenous, hegemonic masculinity mediated by Christian spirituality. The emergent literature thus points to the profoundly ethnicised and gendered nature of the sport. At the same time, rugby is said to hold 'a special place in the national psyche' (Cattermole, 2008: 99) and is at times mobilised as a vehicle for promoting a sense of cultural/national belonging and shared identity among the local populations, 'a symbol which draws the various islands together into a nation and allows them to project themselves to the outside world' (Guinness, n.d.: 84). The collective identity cultivated and signified by rugby is therefore grounded in multiple, and even contradictory, discourses and interests.

Fiji's history of sending elite rugby players to metropolitan clubs and unions began around the 1960s (Kanemasu and Molnar, in press) and an estimated 450 athletes from Fiji are currently scattered across the globe playing rugby, 249 of whom are contracted by professional clubs (Pacific Islands News Association, 2011). According to one rugby

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commentator, '[a] typical weekend of European rugby sees Fijians playing for 27 different clubs' (Duxbury, 2011). Despite such prominence of Fijian athletes in professional rugby and the social and symbolic significance of the sport in Fiji, there is a near-absence of academic literature or research on Fijian (or wider Pacific Island) rugby migration. Kanemasu and Molnar's (in press) recent review of relevant sources revealed this absence (see, for notable exceptions, Grainger, 2008; Guinness, n.d.; Zakus and Horton, 2009) and argued that whilst sport labour migration has often been put to structural analysis, using macro frameworks such as 'push/pull factors' and the 'centre-periphery model' (Block, 2005), a fruitful approach to understanding Fijian (and Pacific Island) rugby migration is to study it not only as a structural, politico-economic phenomenon, but also as a symbolic site of ongoing and dynamic identity (re)construction.

In the broader Pacific migration literature, the migratory experience of athletic labourers is similarly yet to receive close attention. Since the 1960s/70s, there has been an outflow of migrants from Fiji to more economically advanced countries (especially New Zealand, Australia, the United States and Canada) (Lee, 2009; Mohanty, 2006). Whilst the earlier emigration was dominated by Indo-Fijians and mostly permanent, the trend since the early 1990s shows an increasing number of indigenous Fijians migrating often on a temporary basis for remittance-generating and development-driven purposes, as soldiers in the British Army and the United Nations Peacekeeping forces, private security officers, health workers and sportspeople (Connell, 2006; Mohanty, 2006; Voigt-Graf, 2008). Previous research has illuminated, amongst other things, the ways in which permanent migrants cultivate diasporic networks and identities (see, e.g. Howard and Rensel, 2004; Kanemasu et al., 2005; Schubert, 2009; Voigt-Graf et al., 2007). However, this has not been extended to the experiences of a relatively small but increasing number of indigenous Fijian migrants who enter the 'muscle trade' of professional sports (as well as military/security services).

Informed by this gap in the sport-related migration literature, the aim of the present study is to explore a specific dimension of the interplay between professional rugby migration and identity construction by focusing primarily on the lived experiences and voices of rugby migrants themselves. The key research question driving this investigation is: how do Fijian emigrant players negotiate their collective sense of self and create subjective meanings of their experiences in the context of professional rugby migration? Therefore, in this article we focus specifically on some of the key meanings that rugby migrants derive from their migratory experiences in relation to their sense of connectedness with the homeland. In doing so, we employ an interpretive approach that seeks to gain an insight into the life-world and agency of human beings as they continuously and creatively negotiate and cultivate their sense of collective belonging. Whilst we acknowledge the multiple dimensions of Fijian identity and the varied socio-cultural meanings of rugby in Fiji, our analysis focuses on a particular dimension of the dynamic relationship between rugby and collective identification.

Methods

The methodological strategy employed here is qualitative and aimed at an in-depth understanding of the interplay between rugby migration and identity (re)making. Given

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our goal, we employed qualitative, semi-structured interviews in informal settings as the chief method of data collection. In doing so, we aimed to gain insight into the personal experiences and struggles of rugby migrants. To analyse rich personal accounts of migration, we adopted a thematic approach with a focus on the key research question identified above, as well as on newly emerging information (see Butt and Molnar, 2009; Molnar and Maguire, 2008).

The primary data was collected between May 2010 and October 2011 through 14 semi-structured interviews with 10 Fiji-born rugby union players who have migrated to play professional club rugby in England, France, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Japan, as well as four (former and current) coaches who have worked with migrant players.[1] The interviewees came from diverse personal, educational and professional backgrounds and had a wide range of migratory experiences. Of the 10 players, six were athletes at the beginning of their international rugby career, and most had played for an overseas club for at least one year at the time of the interview. Three athletes had four to six years' experience of playing for various professional clubs, sometimes in more than one country. One former veteran player and coach had a professional career extending over 16 years across various clubs in one host country, and another former player spent eight years playing for two clubs in two countries. All but three athletes (two of whom were married and one of whom was living with a partner) were single at the time of the interview. One interviewee had an undergraduate university degree, which, according to the primary data, is rare among Fijian professional rugby players; the other participants completed secondary school education or exited formal education even earlier. The interviewees were identified and recruited by the snowball sampling method (Patton, 1990), mostly via the first author's social network. All interviews, with one exception (which was conducted in the UK), were conducted in Fiji in English and audio-taped with the interviewees' permission. The interviews were then transcribed and put to thematic coding whereby a range of themes emerged, some of which form the core of our discussion. It should be noted that our sample is limited to those athletes who were born in Fiji and have subsequently been recruited by foreign rugby clubs; it does not include those who were born and grew up outside of Fiji.

In the following sections, we present a brief outline of the structural context of Fijian rugby migration before exploring what it means to the athletes themselves, not only on a socio-economic level as a livelihood strategy, but also – especially – on a symbolic level, highlighting the creative ways in which they have appropriated rugby migration as a site of alternative collective self-definition. We will subsequently delve further into the complexities of rugby migration by examining the limits and potentialities of such symbolic resistance in the face of the powerful structural forces of the global athletic system.

'For the people back home': Rugby migration as a site of collective self-definition

The structural inequality of the international rugby world has been the subject of much media discussion (see, e.g., Field, 2003, cited in Granger, 2008; Seed, 2011; Singh, 2003; The Sydney Morning Herald, 2011), as well as emerging scholarly attention (see Dewey,

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2008; Grainger, 2008; Harris, 2010; Zakus and Horton, 2009). Specific heed has been paid to the professionalisation of rugby since 1995 and its ongoing marginalising effects on the Pacific Island rugby unions. It has been noted that the historical and ongoing politico-economic disparity between the Pacific Islands and metropolitan countries has been reproduced and exacerbated in the sporting arena (see e.g., Dewey, 2008), where Fiji and the other 'minnow' countries of the Pacific have taken a decidedly subordinate position in relation to the Tier One unions sponsored by powerful multinational corporations (see Kanemasu and Molnar, in press). The Pacific Island unions share only one seat on the International Rugby Board Council amongst themselves and the other members of the Federation of Oceania Rugby Unions, and hence have only marginal power over its decision making. They have also suffered exclusion from regular international and regional competitions, such as the Super Rugby, and continue to face substantial and constant financial and organisational problems (Kanemasu and Molnar, in press). The migration of rugby players from Fiji and the other Pacific Islands to the metropolitan unions takes place in this context of disparity, and hence may be described as a case of 'brawn drain' (Bale, 1991) or 'muscle trade' (Andreff, 2006) – an exploitative global capitalist relationship in which the 'core'/'metropolitan' countries, unions and multinationals dictate the rules of, and derive (both financial and cultural) capital from, the flows of athletic labour from the 'semi-periphery' and 'periphery'/'satellites' (see Wallerstein, 2004). Fijian rugby players move through a chain of sport labour trade, from their peripheral home country either directly to the core (such as England and France) or, more often, first to the semi-periphery – especially Australia and New Zealand, which both import rugby labour from the periphery and export their own to the Northern core (Harris, 2010) – and then to the core, indicating a politico-economic marginalisation and professional underdevelopment of the periphery in the rugby world.

Seen from the point of view of emigrant players themselves, however, professional rugby migration assumes more complex and dynamic meanings than those indicated by unilateral core–semi-periphery–periphery relations. On the one hand, undeniably, athletes' life chances and migration-related decisions are clearly mediated by the structural forces outlined above. Many athletes, in the absence of domestic opportunities for employment and upward social mobility, are drawn to the economic and socio-cultural rewards offered by foreign club contracts. The lucrative nature of such contracts is evidenced by the fact that the average annual salary in Fiji is F$12,753 (approximately US$6,900) (Fiji Islands Bureau of Statistics, 2010) – a fraction of what is offered to professional players by metropolitan clubs, which averages NZ$200,000 or US$151,000 in New Zealand and €144,000 or US$181,000 in France (Paul, 2008). Earning such sums could sustain not only the athletes and their immediate family but often also their wider kin group. Such financial success, as well as professional prominence at the international level, accords emigrant players much prestige in their villages and wider communities, making them a personification of what Guinness (n.d.) calls the 'rugby dream'. It needs to be noted here that often, this 'rugby dream' is not one of a number of career/livelihood strategies available to them. Many athletes see plying their trade overseas as their only chance to gain financial security and socio-cultural status. As one of our interviewees expressed:

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> Some places we [rugby players] come from – we are not very well educated. Once you get educated, you can get a good job, a good life. But on the other hand, if you are not educated, you have to do other things to get a job and get successful… I just came out of Form 4. I never sat my Fiji Junior [Certificate Examination – a nation-wide examination previously taken by Form 4 (Year 10) students]. I didn't go to university. So to succeed I had to play rugby and look for contracts overseas to get more money and get a successful life.

Similarly, according to a former local club coach:

> Some of them [rugby players], the kind of food they eat, the kind of [the austere] lifestyle they live, sometimes it makes me want to cry… But the talent they have is so incredible… [So] I say to the kids: 'You have only one chance [at upward socio-economic mobility]… [M]ake use of your talent while you still have it'.

Athletes (and coaches) are thus conscious of the ways in which broader societal structures constrain their life chances and choices and the degree to which they submit themselves to the pressures of the global capitalist muscle trade for the purposes of rising out of poverty, improving the material wellbeing of their kin and communities and gaining prestige at home. Notably, they are not passive dupes of the global athletic system but rather exercise their 'sociological imagination', as it were, to 'understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of … individuals' (Mills, 1959/2000: 5). Their decision to enter the trade is conscious and rational, if also desperate and compelled.

Furthermore, whilst global and regional power dynamics clearly exert influence over their decisions and careers, these athletes are far from mere pawns of the unfolding of structural forces or helpless victims of exploitative capitalist trade. Our interview data indicates that even as they accommodate the capitalist logic of the muscle trade, migrants continue to exercise their agency within the limits of the existing conditions. Below we explore the ways in which migrant rugby players' agency is employed amidst structural 'push and shove' (Mills, 1959/2000: 6).

Social networks or migratory meso-structures are one of the key channels of Fijian rugby migration. Our participants, especially those who migrated to countries such as New Zealand and Australia with larger Fijian migrant communities, spoke of specific channels through which their contracts had been arranged by friends or relatives in those countries. Having had their contracts secured in this manner, some players also get involved in the recruitment of other Fijians by acting as intermediaries between them and their clubs. The interview participants see this as a way of returning the favour to the next generation of Fijian rugby players. Two of the interviewees explained:

> Because life here in Fiji – There's no job. So I have to help my friends and fellow rugby players. Get them to come overseas to get a better life. Some of them are staying in Fiji and always dream of playing overseas. So we have to get them there [overseas] so they can live their dream.

> We're always gonna contribute, give back to the local club by buying sports gear and help others come overseas. Of course we will. [The interviewee secured a contract because]My

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> cousin called me and asked if I was interested to come and have a trial. After a few trials, they [the club] were happy to give me a place in the club. So I'm gonna do the same for our brothers.

While the hegemonic structures of international rugby dictate the terms and conditions of the muscle trade, these athletes are also competent actors who manoeuvre and manipulate migratory processes in pursuit of their collective (and individual) interests. An arguably less direct, but certainly conscious, approach to contributing to the collective reputation of Fijian ruby migrants is playing well. Migrant Fijian athletes take great pride in their fellow players' and their own sporting achievements, which they believe pave the way for further and future Fijian migrants. As a local rugby coach explained:

> That is what I normally tell the boys. 'When you go overseas, utilise your talent, show other people the talent we have so those clubs will come and search for other boys here. So you guys go, build a foundation for others to come and follow you'.

This sentiment was shared by the players themselves. One of them expressed: 'Everywhere I go, for the next Fijian coming after me, I have to put a good stamp… So for me, it's not just playing good, I'm thinking of other Fijians.' Another player explained that: 'I'm opening up a doorway for those who follow me. … It's not only about me … If I could do that [secure a professional club contract and lead a successful international career], for those who come after me, the door is already open'. There are, then, migratory networks of Fijian athletes (and other emigrants) actively and collectively working to expand their transnational linkages and spread their socio-economic benefits to other Fijians. The significance of migratory networks (migratory meso-structures specifically) was detected by Tilly (1990: 83), who observed with regard to US-related immigration that migration 'did not draw on isolated individual decision makers but on clusters of people bound together by acquaintance and common fate'. In this context, migrant players are far from powerless, monadic victims, but are rather active, interconnected agents creatively negotiating and seeking to exert some degree of control over industry-led structural forces.

In addition to providing an individual and collective economic strategy, rugby migration has a significant symbolic dimension. Regardless of the length of time spent overseas, all of the participants feel securely anchored in a sense of connectedness with their homeland. In contrast to the findings of the existing migration literature, which suggest that some (especially second-generation) Pacific Island migrants in New Zealand, Australia and the United States are cultivating increasingly plural and diasporic identities (Fleras and Spoonley, 1999; Macpherson, 1999; Perez, 2002; Quanchi, 2008; Tiatia, 1998; Zemke-White, 2001), there was no ambiguity around what 'home' meant to our participants. As with other Fijian migrants documented by migration researchers (Kanemasu et al., 2005; Schubert, 2009), the athletes continue to cultivate this sense of connectedness in the host countries, by having as much contact as possible with other expatriate Fijians and actively utilising email, Skype, Facebook and telephone to stay in constant touch with their families and friends at home. Many of them wear Fiji T-shirts and display the national flag and Fijian artefacts in their rooms and houses – in one interviewee's words, 'to keep my identity in check'. One even carries a map of Fiji on his

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body in the form of a tattoo, as 'something to remind me of Fiji. … Every time I look at it, I say, "I'm going home soon." … It makes me feel like I belong.' In other words, for these athletes home (Fiji) is not something they simply leave behind; rather, for them, migration entails the (re-)creation and regrounding of home in the host environment. These 'homing' desires are consequently achieved by 'physically or symbolically (re-) constituting spaces which provide some kind of ontological security in the context of migration' (Fortier, 2003: 115).

Rugby migration enhances this sense of belonging in the athletes, especially as they consider excellence in rugby to be a key constituent of Fijian self-definition. They take great pride in the fact that Fiji's name is often automatically associated with rugby. As two of the interviewed players explained:

> Everybody knows about the rugby qualities of the people of Fiji, the place I come from – we're known for our running abilities, for our running games.

> Normally we Fijians are known as rugby players… They look at us, and it doesn't matter if we don't play rugby. They see a Fijian and say 'He's a rugby player'. … Yeah, Fiji equals rugby.

Another athlete elaborated further:

> Most clubs in Australia, they really like Fijian or [Pacific] Island boys coming into their clubs… Fijian boys, when we come [to Australia], we really show ourselves off. I'm really proud to be a Fijian amongst them.

Since rugby is regarded as a key marker of Fijian identity, playing this sport on an international stage has a special meaning to the athletes. Each of the participants stressed that their international career was not just about making a name for themselves; it was also about making a name for Fiji by asserting Fijian excellence in front of a global audience. Regardless of the country or club they are playing for, they are symbolically playing for their people. In the words of two other participants:

> That's what they write in the newspaper, 'The Fiji born Wallaby'. I'm making known to the world that, 'Hey, they [other Fijians] could well be this'. They have the ability, they have what it takes… [although] they don't have the finances or maybe the structures [of metropolitan countries].

> Even in Fiji, when you score, you're scoring for your village. You see the whole village running up and down the field. So just imagine. When you go there [overseas], when you score a try, [you'd be thinking:] 'Man, this is for the people back home, the people back home!'

While, as suggested by the latter participant, identification with specific localities such as the village and their family and kin is of great importance to them, all believed that their international success had a crucial symbolic meaning for Fiji as a whole. Another participant, a former international rugby star, illustrated this when he explained that his professional success had:

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> Lots of meanings – for myself, my country. Because back then, the team I was playing for was the best team in New Zealand. I was playing with lots of famous All Blacks. There I was, representing my family, my country, the Fiji Rugby Union, everything. When I was playing for that team, I was thinking of Fiji. Because people in Fiji, my family, the people who knew me, they were gonna watch me on TV. So when I played, I thought about it in my mind and ran as fast as I could.

Thus, wherever they play, these athletes feel that they are representing their homeland and showcasing to the world what Fijians can do. As one of the players simply stated: 'I represent two countries'.

The significance and complexity of this symbolic meaning becomes even more evident when it is placed in the context of the relations of power between Fijians and the Western world since the late 19th century. Fiji is a postcolonial society that underwent almost a century of colonial domination, and to this day, Fiji and the other Pacific Island countries are subjected to a dominant development discourse that defines them as 'much too small, too poorly endowed with resources, and too isolated from the centres of economic growth for their inhabitants ever to be able to rise above their present condition of dependence on the largesse of wealthy nations' (Hau'ofa, 1993: 3). The prevailing notion in Western academic, political and popular thought is that Fiji is a tiny island nation somewhere in the corner of the Pacific Ocean, isolated and without resources, completely dependent on benevolent protection by the West – a 'peripheral' country in every sense of the term. But Pacific Islanders have challenged this definition by various means (Hereniko, 1999; Van Meijl and Miedema, 2004; Waddell et al., 1993) and have presented alternative self-definitions through dances, songs, poems, novels, carvings and paintings (see Hau'ofa, 1996, 2005; Hereniko, 1980; Hereniko and Wilson, 1999; Wendt, 1976). They have also reconstructed their cultural traditions and practices as symbols of anti-colonial resistance (see Keesing, 1978, 1982a, 1982b, 1989; Keesing and Tonkinson, 1982; Linnekin, 1990). In this context, rugby constitutes another medium of resistance to the politico-economic and socio-cultural marginalisation that Fijians have experienced as a postcolonial people. One of the participants aptly summarised this point of view:

> To me, it [rugby]'s not just a game; it's promoting my country. It may be seen as one of the small islands. But if given the opportunity to excel, they [Fiji] could be in the level as other rugby nations – not only that, be known around the world for rugby. Even in sevens [rugby], you've seen that we're world champions, among all the developed countries. To me it was … a statement … that: 'Hey, I can be the best. Not only me, there are many more where I come from!'

Showcasing their excellence on the international rugby field becomes a powerful statement of challenge to the conventional (Western) definition of the Islanders. Hence, on one level, Fijian rugby migration is an instance of relations of power in which Fijians are clearly subordinated as athletic labourers; yet even as they submit themselves to the logic of the global muscle trade, they claim it as a space for asserting a counter-hegemonic self-definition. It is this counter-hegemonic symbolism of Fijian rugby migration to which we now turn our attention.

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Sport as a form of symbolic resistance: Recapturing the process of collective representation

In his discussion of representational (as against recreational) sports, Bale (2000) argues that unlike other cultural forms of representation such as literature, drama and dance which provide colonised peoples with a medium of resistance, the ossified protocols of achievement sport impede the rise of analogous forms of resistance. Examining examples of sporting success and kudos that have been regarded as forms of anti-colonial resistance, such as West Indies cricket (James, 1969), Dominican baseball (Klein, 1994), and Kenyan middle and long distance running, Bale argues that these are cases of 'transgressions' rather than 'resistance'. Following Cresswell's (1996: 22) definition of resistance as an 'action against some disliked entity with the intention of changing or lessening its effects', Bale states that 'it cannot be seriously argued that the intention of the Kenyan runners was to resist the hegemonic structures of either neo-colonialism or global sport' (2000: 156). These cases rather constitute 'transgression', an act of entering and dominating the 'space' of the dominant group, which, in his opinion, falls short of oppositional agency. Furthermore, he points out that these athletes' international success is contingent upon its taking place within the neo-colonial structures of global sport. Hence, although the athletes 'may appear to resist the traditional dominance of both western athletes and the governing bureaucracies of the sports business … they do so within the confines of those very organisations' (Bale, 2000: 157). In his view, then, it is the very structural context within which achievement sports take place that precludes their oppositional potential.

While not denying the capacity of Bale's argument (2000) to convince and the observation that 'one of the ways to colonise people is to control their ability to represent themselves' (Rigney, 2003: 45), we suggest that Bale's assessment does not fully encapsulate the subtleties and dynamics of resistance that can be achieved through sport in postcolonial cultures – in this case, Fijian rugby migration. In fact, we would note it as particularly interesting that Bale gives credit to, for instance, literature through which postcolonial resistance may take shape. While this observation regarding the use of literary work as a means of cultural resistance is undeniably correct, we must point out that literature, like sport, has its own structure that is predominantly framed by language. Therefore, in essence, resistance through/with literature may still take place within a set of structures, which may have been established by people from Western cultures. For example, to use one of the sources referred to by Bale (2000), James's (1969) assessment of West Indian culture, cricket and colonial conditions is written in the language of the colonisers. Moreover, one of the examples detailed by James (1969) demonstrates one of the ways in which indigenous people deployed social structures (like sport) which were implemented by the colonisers to reinforce national pride and, in turn, symbolically resist Western domination:

> Periodically one of our island boys would be placed third in mathematics or eleventh in Latin among the thousands who took the Cambridge examinations all over the world, and there was applause and satisfaction that, backward colonials though we were, we could produce scholars as good as any (James, 1969: 55–56).

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In a similar vein, as we have shown above, many Fijian emigrant players consciously attach oppositional meanings to their athletic prominence, which takes place within the Westernised structures of representational sports. Bale assumes that intentionality is only present in athletes' 'desire to compete (and to seek victory) but not, … in any desire to overthrow the status quo' (Bale, 2000: 161), yet our participants recognise a collective political significance in their sporting success, even as they officially represent – and therefore have their success appropriated by – metropolitan nations/institutions. One of the players interviewed stated: 'I scored a try for the club, but I did it for my country [Fiji]'. Another similarly noted that whilst he represented Japan in international competitions, in his mind 'I played for my country [Fiji]'. These are statements not only of nationalism but of counter-hegemonic resistance, in that the athletes are consciously exercising their freedom to symbolically transcend national borders and formal allegiance – that is, to symbolically 'break free' from the hegemonic structures that control and circumscribe their actions. Such acts may not displace or destabilise the 'global athletic system' (Bale and Sang, 1996) in any direct manner, but they enable the athletes to express their critique of imbalances in power structures while trying to protect their livelihood and interests. As Rigney (2003: 54) observes, 'one of the ways to subvert colonisation is to retain or recapture the process of representation, to set the scene for counter-hegemonic anti-colonial narratives'.

Indeed, oppositional intentionality need not be limited to an explicit 'desire to overthrow the status quo' in the form of an articulate political rhetoric. In exploring the counter-hegemonic voices and agency of athletes, we draw insights from Antonio Gramsci's analysis of the creative and reflexive capacity of a human being, whom he describes as a 'philosopher' in that he/she 'participates in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it, that is, to bring into being new modes of thought' (Gramsci, 1971: 9). The voices and actions of the subordinate may appear uneven, mixed or not to be immediately endangering the existing hegemonic order, yet insofar as they exercise their reflexive capacity to pierce through the entanglements between their biographies and social processes, they partake implicitly in counter-hegemonic practices. It is in this sense that Gramsci considers counter-hegemony to be a process of 'renovating and making "critical" an already existing activity' within each individual (Gramsci, 1971: 331). Fijian rugby players' symbolic acts, even if they seem fragmentary or inconsequential, nevertheless provide critical entry points for social criticism and creation of a transformative space, within which their counter-establishment agency may be exercised.

By this, we do not claim that rugby migrants exercise such agency in an uncontested, unproblematic way. On the contrary, as discussed by Kanemasu and Molnar (in press), emigrant players' symbolic freedom to transcend national borders is constrained, most evidently at times of international competitions, by pressure to make a formal and conspicuous commitment to one nation. Furthermore, such commitment is shaped by the institutional structures of international rugby (such as the International Rugby Board eligibility rules) and the politico-economic disparity between the Fiji Rugby Union and metropolitan clubs and unions, all of which limit the players' capacity to make an autonomous decision (Dewey, 2008). Emigrant players' symbolic resistance thus comes into conflict with, and is curtailed by, the powerful structural forces of international rugby.

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However, our argument remains that an exclusive focus on structural dynamics conceals the significance of the subjective meanings of athletes' migratory experiences, with which they construct an empowering, alternative self-definition and challenge the totality of the power of hegemonic structures.

Conclusions

In the foregoing sections, we have shed light on the complex interplay between rugby migration and collective identity. We have noted the multifaceted nature of rugby migration and highlighted its significance as a context for collective identification. What emerges from our interview data is the creative manner in which rugby migrants exercise their agency even in the face of powerful pressures induced by the global athletic system. First, far from being powerless and passive victims, these athletes actively negotiate and seek to exert control over migration processes by cultivating and mobilising an effective migratory network – that is, by collectively facilitating each other's migration and spreading its socio-economic benefits to many fellow Fijians and, in turn, to Fiji in general. Second, and more importantly, rugby as a symbolic marker of collective identity provides emigrant players with a vehicle for cultivating a sense of collective belonging and pride in their island home. We have observed that this symbolic dimension of rugby migration has a notable oppositional nature: that emigrant players have claimed rugby migration as a medium to challenge the dominant Western discourse that defines Fiji and the other Pacific Islands as the ultimate 'periphery' – small, remote, poorly resourced and dependent on Western largess for survival. In the face of such marginalisation, the international prominence and success of emigrant players serves to give expression to the oppositional voices of a postcolonial people. These counter-hegemonic voices are indeed reminiscent of many other ways in which Pacific Islanders have resisted the dominant Western definition of the Pacific. In a seminal text, the Tongan anthropologist Epeli Hau'ofa counterposed an affirmative self-definition of the 'ordinary people' of the Pacific to the official development discourse by pointing out that contemporary migration has not only intensified the official economic dependency of the Pacific but also 'had liberating effect on the lives of ordinary people in Oceania …[by] enabling the people to shake off their confinement and they have since moved, by the tens of thousands, doing what their ancestors had done before them: enlarging their world as they go' (Hau'ofa, 1993: 10, 16). Emigrant rugby players similarly present a counter-hegemonic inversion (and, perhaps, invasion) of the dominant discourse and space which re-defines the Islands as far from small, isolated or poorly resourced victims of global capitalism, but instead competent and resourceful agents actively enlarging their transnational presence and asserting an alternative self-definition. It is notable that Pacific Islanders have historically incorporated foreign practices and symbols as a medium of opposition (Hereniko, 1999; Mageo, 2001). Here Fijians have appropriated Western sport structures and used them to create a space to exercise their agency.

Highlighting the counter-hegemonic potential of sport labour migration may be seen as tantamount to downplaying the structural injustice of the global athletic system, especially if such potential is ultimately contained and does not immediately threaten the

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existing system. Yet neglecting the agency of the subordinate is equally problematic, in that assumption of the uncontested power of neo-colonialism unwittingly participates in and perpetuates the act of silencing the subordinate (Thomas, 1994). As Hau'ofa (1993: 14) pointed out, preoccupation with structural analysis is ultimately disabling because it denies 'just about all our potentials for autonomy'. While it is clear that most cases of rugby migration, as indicated by our participants, are immediately motivated by economic and pragmatic needs, rugby migration has a multiplicity of dimensions and meanings from the point of view of emigrant players; we think it is important to acknowledge these to illuminate the inherent dynamism and open-endedness of migration – sport interconnectedness in the mesh of geopolitical power balances.

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Note

1. The present study is part of an on-going research project and is linked to a previously published article (Kanemasu and Molnar, in press). Accordingly, the two articles are based on different segments of the same data set.

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