



A Spy in the House of Rugby: Living (in) the emotional spaces of nationalism and sport



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ABSTRACT

This article creatively engages with the emotional landscapes of nationalism and belonging, attempting to bring to life nationalism's intensity, complexity and contradictory nature. It recognizes that belonging constitutes "a dynamic emotional attachment that relates individuals to the material and social worlds that they inhabit and experience" (Wood and Waite, 2011: 201). The intention is to reveal the emotional negotiations that arise for women who are marginalized from, but fully implicated in, the lived experience of their nation hosting a men's international sports event. This approach is grounded in the reality that nationalism is always gendered, and supports feminist attempts to interrogate discursive constructions of women's place in, and experiences of, national identity. The article argues for the value of creative representational approaches as powerful research tools that put "the visceral ... in touch with the social" (Wetherell, 2012: 10). An intensive period of fieldwork is thus distilled and re-presented through the voice of a fictional composite character whose blog reveals multi-layered, multi-sensorial, interactive experiences of sport and nationalism.

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1. Introduction

The intention in this article is to bring the complex emotional spaces of nationalism to life, revealing not only their nuances but also their relational, situated and shifting nature. Numerous authors acknowledge the important spatial and emotional elements of what Benedict Anderson (1991: 4) has termed "nation-ness". Michael Billig (1995: 7), for example, recognises that "having a national identity also involves being situated physically, legally, socially, as well as emotionally". The emotional implications are further highlighted by Anderson's (1991: 4) claim that nationalism commands "profound emotional legitimacy" and arouses "deep attachments". Yet, nationalism is also always highly gendered. Indeed, many feminist researchers have identified the alienation caused by nationalism's masculinist nature, and called for further investigations of the gendered nature of, and marginalised place of women in, nationalist discourses (e.g., Lake, 1997; McClintock, 1991; Woodward and Woodward, 2009). In Australia, for example, Marilyn Lake (1997: 48) has described 'women' and 'the nation' as "mutually exclusive categories". If belonging is partly about "being recognised and understood" (Wood and Waite, 2011: 201), this article interrogates what happens when groups are

neither recognised nor understood as part of dominant cultural narratives.

I begin from the position that discourses and feelings of national belonging are always relational and vary in intensity between individuals and contexts (see Wood and Waite, 2011). The starting point for exploring this complexity was Stuart Hall's (1997: 3) argument that personal and social interactions are "the most privileged, though often the most neglected" sites and processes through which meaning and culture are constructed. In addition, I draw upon Margaret Wetherell's (2012: 4) interdisciplinary sociological approach to the study of emotion as affective practice; seeing it as a form of "embodied meaning-making" grounded in the experience of everyday life. Although individuals make their own meanings, the process by which they engage in affective meaning-making is always relational. As Wetherell (2012: 74) describes it, "Emotion arises, is signified, negotiated and evaluated in the inter-subjective moment and that social relation ... carries the affect, and is intimately caught up in the translation process. Affect is pre-eminently a relational and social event".

This is not to argue that adequately representing experiences of nationalism is easy. As Wetherell (2012: 11) asks: "how can we engage with phenomena that can be read simultaneously as somatic, neural, subjective, historical, social and personal?". In this article, I propose that a potent way of moving towards such engagement is through ethnographic fiction, and my aim is to demonstrate the power of this representational practice to bring to

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life nationalism's intensities and relationalities. In making this presentation choice, I took seriously the desire outlined by the editors in the inaugural issue of *Emotion, Space & Society* to create a space for "imaginative endeavours traditionally marginalised from mainstream academic circles" (Davidson et al., 2008: 2). Adopting this approach led me to create a critical sociological narrative, based on extensive fieldwork throughout the 2011 men's Rugby World Cup in New Zealand, that attempted "to get under the skin of daily life" (Sugden and Tomlinson, 2002: 11). Working with real utterances, texts and exchanges gathered during my research, my intent was to fashion a vital text that would emotionally engage readers, eschewing abstract concepts and theoretical explanations in order to stay close to the vernacular of everyday life (Bruce, 1998; Cole, 1991; Denison and Markula, 2003; Denison and Rinehart, 2000; Denzin, 2009). At the same time, like other ethnographic fiction writers, I reserved the right to take certain liberties with my research materials, embracing the arguably artificial line between fact and fiction (Bruce, 1998; Denzin, 1997) and creating truths out of "shards of evidence" (Atkinson, 1992: 46). As a result, I present my research results as imaginative renderings that may "exaggerate, swagger, entertain, make a point without tedious documentation" (Richardson, 1994: 521), in a storied form that shows rather than tells.

To be effective, ethnographic fiction must achieve two aims: "contribute to our understanding of social life while also being artistically shaped and satisfying" (Denison and Rinehart, 2000: 3). Therefore, while not necessarily claiming to be true, ethnographic fiction must meet the criteria of verisimilitude, by convincing readers that the elements in the story either happened or could have happened (Denzin, 1997). This does not mean that it lacks analytical or intellectual rigour. The contrast to traditional social science research, however, is that the theoretical orientation, themes and evidence are revealed through the physical, metaphorical and imaginative spaces and places inhabited by the characters, along with their actions, emotions, conversations and thoughts (Barone, 1992; Richardson, 2000; Vertinsky and Bale, 2004). As Wetherell (2012: 90) explains, "as people talk and emote, they routinely demonstrate their implicit or explicit understanding of what is going on in the piece of social life in which they are engaged". Indeed, it is here that I want to argue that ethnographic fiction comes into its own, enabling researchers to engage readers on multiple levels while representing 'truths' that cannot always be articulated by research participants no matter how their views are captured. I subscribe to Richardson's (2000: 10) argument that such re-presentations are "in and of themselves valid and desirable representations of the social" that allow us to "learn ... that which was unknowable and unimaginable using conventional analytical procedures, metaphors, and writing formats". Sparkes (1997: 38) agrees, suggesting the ability to "condense, exemplify and evoke a world" makes ethnographic fiction "as valid a device for transmitting cultural understanding ... as any other researcher-produced device". Ethnographic fiction creates the space to "say what might be unsayable in other circumstances" (Richardson, 1994: 521). This is particularly true for groups, such as New Zealanders who are ambivalent about or resist rugby union's centrality in national life, who are constituted as Other within dominant cultural narratives. Indeed, bell hooks (1990: 126) has cogently argued that when Others are not allowed to speak, whether in public, media or academic writing, they become "an absent presence without voice". For Barone (1992: 145), the "power to persuade emerges not from within a rhetoric of theory, whether scientific, philosophical or critical. It emanates from a careful and committed empiricism that is made manifest through such features of writing as powerfully 'thick' description and invented but convincing dialogue. The text thereby invites and

enables the reader to locate the beating and, yes, the aching of other human hearts ... within a debilitating socio-political milieu".

And it is the beating and aching of human hearts that ethnographic fiction allows us to re-present in ways that fully engage readers. Ethnographic fiction and other creative practices connect with our minds *and* our hearts. Through engaging multiple senses, they create the opportunity for deeper levels of understanding and empathy for Others, reflection on the entanglement of our own practices and beliefs in broader social and political processes, and can act as spurs to action (Denzin, 1997; Mills, 1959; Sparkes, 1997).

2. Methodological approach

Ethnographic fiction thus emerged as a potent theoretical and practical methodological choice through which I could meet multiple research aims, including the feminist commitment to honour the experiences of those "absent presence[s] without voice" (hooks, 1990: 126), through creating a narrative that revealed the emotional landscapes inhabited by women who are marginalized from and silenced within the dominant discourses of rugby fandom and men's rugby as New Zealand's national sport.

The narrative was constructed out of materials gathered during a four-month ethnographic study of New Zealand's hosting of the 2011 Rugby World Cup (see Bruce, 2013). I conducted observations, conversations and interviews in two cities and a small coastal town, in physical spaces as diverse as bars, restaurants, private homes, fan trails, fan zones, businesses, sports clubs, buses, taxis, the streets around stadia and at the eventual victory parade. Members of four families acted as in-depth informants. I recruited 267 people to complete a voluntary online survey, via radio interviews, face-to-face conversations, electronic mail-outs and media releases. In addition, I analysed news coverage on television and web-based news aggregators, and in the nation's highest circulation newspaper. The ethnographic fiction that follows represents a creative weaving of the data sources, incorporating experiences and views from participants of different genders, classes, ages, ethnicities, levels of interest in rugby, and lengths of individual or family connections to New Zealand. Although much of original research material is incorporated, often word-for-word, into the narrative, it is unavoidably and unashamedly filtered through my imagination and decades of involvement in rugby as a fan and critical sport sociologist. Despite this filtering, it is not auto-ethnographic. The diversity of influences means that the story, although told through the eyes of a composite female character, embodies Wetherell's (2012: 117) proposition that affective practices are never neatly attributable to demographic categories but "routinely effloresce over" them.

The ongoing challenge for those committed to imaginative endeavours is resolving the tension between providing sufficient theoretical argument to demonstrate academic rigour and remaining true to the creative process and product. The balance here leans towards the creative, privileging the voice of the fictional protagonist as she lives the emotional landscapes of nationalism and (not) belonging, while the theoretical and empirical voices of academics jostle for attention in an unaccustomed position in the footnotes. This choice supports the argument that if academic research in the form of stories is to reach maturity, "then some of them must be left, at least momentarily, unaccompanied by critique or theory" (Barone 1995, cited in Sparkes, 1997: 37). Readers are encouraged to first engage with the ethnographic fiction on its own merits, reading their own way into the experience, before turning to the footnotes for the accompanying contextualisation. The narrative engages directly with Wetherell's (2012: 17) challenge to consider "who gets to do what when, and what relations does an affective practice make, enact, disrupt and reinforce? Who is

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