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Defacements/Effacements

Anti-Asian (American) Sentiment in Sport

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This article experiments with performative and dialogic techniques to trace the contours of anti-Asian American sentiments in sport. It suggests that jokes and joking behaviors are one the key things that binds Asian Americans to sport in the popular imaginary. Moreover, it outlines the ways that sporting humor works to efface and deface Asians and Asian Americans. Well-known utterances by Fuzzy Zoeller, directed at Tiger Woods, and Shaquille O'Neal, directed toward Yao Ming, center much of the discussion.

Keywords: *Asian Americans in sport; ethnic humor; Orientalism; performative ethnography; racism in sport*

Talking Back

Voice 1: It's just a joke!

Voice 2: Don't be so sensitive.

Voice 3: We're just playing.

Voice 4: Can't you take a joke?

Voice 5: Grow up.

Voice 6: Stop being so politically correct.

Voice 7: Lighten up, we are just having fun.

Voice 8: Don't be so serious.

Voice 9: Get over it.

Studying new racism the past decade, particularly as it has structured the struggle over Native American imagery in sports (King, 2002a, 2002b, 2004b, 2005), I have heard many variations of these defensive comments, intending to trivialize the harms visited on racialized groups through accepted practices. The importance, nay urgency, of once more unpacking and refuting such denial and deferrals in sporting worlds materialized for me when I learned of what is euphemistically called a hate crime on a campus in the Pacific Northwest. An Asian American woman endured repeated harassment from men on one of the athletic teams who routinely passed the office where she worked and made ugly faces at her, slanting their eyes and otherwise bodily mocking her racial difference, her Asianness. Once her allegations were made public, countless individuals questioned the veracity of the claims, doubting that such good "Christian" boys could do something so unacceptable. Soon after, the administration and the state's "independent" human rights commission affirmed

such sentiments, finding that although troubling, the players' behavior was merely "adolescent." In other words, it was not serious—a joke, youthful indiscretion; so, lighten up, get over it already.

This article works to expose and challenge the work of (anti-Asian American) racism in contexts of play. It weaves together seemingly independent projects to highlight the significance of Norman Denzin's scholarship for critical inquiry on sport and racism. Even before sport captivated my critical imagination, I understood the importance of technologies that might produce alternative engagements with social fields, encouraging the emergence of novel voices and visions (Springwood & King, 2001). Moreover, my interest in sport has always committed itself to reconfiguring the color line in sports (King, 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2006; King, Leonard, & Kusz, in press; King & Springwood, 2001a, 2001b), refusing the Black-White paradigm still so central to dialogues about race and racism in sporting worlds while seeking ways to intervene in social fields. Finally, in a manner Denzin would appreciate, an epiphanic moment brought these concerns together: an encounter with a largely forgotten controversy, efforts to change the mascot of Pekin (Illinois) High School, the Chinks. Selected for the slippage locals heard between Pekin and Peking and informed by an overt racialization that linked categorization with stratification and dehumanization, the athletic symbol survived into the 1970s before locals sought to revive it less than a decade later.

In what follows, I draw on the techniques associated with performance studies (Conquergood, 1998, 2002), dialogic anthropology (Tedlock & Mannheim, 1995), and critical pedagogy (Giroux, 1996, 2000) to craft a performative ethnography. Taking Denzin's (2003, pp. 184-212) "Redskins and Chiefs" as an exemplary text, I endeavor to pair evocative images with interpretive insights. Specifically, I highlight anti-Asian (American) racism in contemporary sports. Although limited scholarly attention in part reflects and reinforces dominant sentiments (but see Chow, 2004; Creef, 2004; Franks, 2000; Hanson, 2005; Leonard, 2003, 2005; Mayeda, 1999; Wang, 2004), here I concern myself with jokes about Asians and Asian Americans in sport and society. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to fully appreciate the play of power and the work desire central to the incidents recounted, I must remind readers that such jokes are not limited to sporting worlds. In fact, during the past decade, media sites and consumer culture have thrived on debasing Asians and Asian Americans, from sketches on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* parodying Judge Ito to the anti-Asian (American) T-shirts designed by Abercrombie and Fitch (two Wongs make it White) to the making and marketing of William Hung as a star despite his failure on *American Idol*. Laughter appears to be the preferred way in which Americans deal with the constructed threat posed by the Asian (American) other, simultaneously dominating and dehumanizing them. With this in mind, here I bring together well-publicized exchanges, including cases involving Yao Ming and Tiger Woods, and less known

incidents that unfolded in sports arenas, media spectacles, classrooms, and chat-rooms. I center attention on humor precisely because it has proven so central to (dis)figuring Asians and Asian Americans in sport, simultaneously effacing and defacing them. Significantly, jokes about Asians and Asian Americans in sports not only reinforce dominant ideas about Asian (American) masculinity but also encourage the perpetuation of Black-White understandings of male-centered sporting worlds. This article seeks to counter such misrepresentations and misreadings. The performative approach employed here is ideal to capture and critically expose the force and flow of racist jokes—their telling, reception, and reverberations. It sets social fields into motion, putting multiple voices in dialogue while connecting and holding in tension a number of sites and trajectories.

Palpable Incongruities

Cultural politics of sport, Todd Hall, Washington State University, September 2005:

Dr. King: Why are there so few Black hockey players?

Student 1: There are not many ice rinks in the Black neighborhoods.

Student 2: Yeah, they don't have access the resources.

Student 3: Plus, they are not encouraged to play hockey. The media, schools, peers, all push them to play basketball and football.

Dr. King: Are these the same reasons there are so few Asian American linebackers or quarterbacks in the NFL?

The students sit silently, some awestruck, others smirking. In either case, their faces say: You must be joking. As if the suggestion is so incongruent with their expectations that they cannot even speak. Their discomfort is the obverse of pleasure elicited (for some) on hearing, “You might be Chinese American if you never went out for the football or basketball team.”

One way to look at a joke is commonly termed “incongruity theory,” an idea put forth as early as the eighteenth century by James Beattiesm, who wrote that “laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances as united in one complex object.” . . . A joke is just a joke except in the respect that it reveals common cultural knowledge A good joke, by its very nature, collapses if it requires any such explanation to the humorless. (Manning, 1998, pp. 2-3)

Cats and Dogs

Anthropology class, College Hall, Washington State University, late August 2005:

Dr. A: Some cultures eat dog. My favorite is poodle.

After class, a student (an Asian American woman) approaches the professor.

Concerned Student: I am certain you are capable and competent, but the content of today's lecture was offensive to me.

Dr. A: I am sorry if you found my discussion offensive, but my lectures are based on fact and meant to encourage students to identify with the material.

Unsatisfied, the student turns to leave.

Dr. A [stopping her]: Have you ever eaten dog?

Dog-eating becomes an excuse to make Asians the butt of jokes. Dog-eating is leveraged to disrespect complete cultures as primitive. Reducing the inhabitants of the Asian continent to dog eaters, defining them by a minor aspect of their multifaceted ways of life, becomes absurd. That characterization forms the basis for believing that Asians are inferior: The dogs are cute, the people are despicable. It is a circular trap. Only by assuming that American culture is superior can its vantage point be used to judge Asian culture in this regard. (Wu, 2002, p. 224)

Fuzzy Thinking

Of course, racist humor need not pivot around hypervisibility or the hyperbolic assertions of the privileges and preoccupations that make such utterances possible. In fact, it frequently renders its objects invisible, erasing the other as they affirm hegemonic arrangements.

Master's golf tournament, August National, Georgia, 1997:

Fuzzy Zoeller: That little boy is driving well, and he's putting well. He's doing everything it takes to win. So, you know what you guys do when he gets in here? You pat him on the back and say congratulations and enjoy it and tell him not to serve fried chicken next year . . . or collard greens or whatever they serve. ("Woods, Zoeller Meet for First Time Since Racial Remarks," 1997)

Fred Couples: Off-the-wall comments are made all the time. There was nothing racist about it. We don't have any problems like that out here on tour. (Thrill, 1997)

Fuzzy Zoeller [a few weeks later, following a conciliatory lunch with Woods]: I did do apologies. I told him I meant no harm by it . . . I'm relieved, it's over. I thought it was over 3 weeks ago. The only thing I'm upset about is that I had to buy his lunch.

The fuzzy logic of Fuzzy Zoeller makes sense to every American, whether s/he wants it to or not. It is the whiny complaint of white privilege being dismantled, but it is equally a confusion of signification. Previous essentialist concretizations like "white" and "black" have given way to fuzzier inferences like "cablinasian" and "multiracial," these third terms that screw with one's comfy binarisms. Most racial classifications of blackness have their roots in slavery, anyway: they were used to

determine whether or not black children could be sold if their parents were slaves or free people. But for some reason, usually having to do with the safeguarding of privilege and/or material possessions, people find it hard to function without the power of non-fuzzy, that is, classical logics. They cannot live in a world where definitions are not absent, but fuzzy, fluctuating. They need the One True Logic or the One True Classification so they can keep that which gave them all they ever had: their power. (Thill, 1997)

Erasure

Brigham Young University:

Norman Chow: I'm sitting here, this guy's [a new White vice president at the university] standing 3 feet away from me talking about this, that, and the other. And he says, "We're going to build this new facility, and we got all the Chinamen lined up, ready to go."

Later, after Chow expressed his anger to the athletic director, yet another unapology:

The new White vice president: I didn't know Norm was Chinese.

The absence of Asian American coaches (and players) embodies the long-standing feminization of all things "Asian," which, in turn, reserves desired athletic and leadership qualities for white coaches . . . This racialized definition of Asian men as weak exists as a guiding obstacle to Asian advancement in the collegiate ranks. Similarly, white supremacist discourses that position black men as purely physical, without the mental capabilities of their white counterparts, contribute to a scarcity of black coaches. The exclusion of Chow and so many black coaches is the effect of the same racist system and hegemony of ideologies. The failure to investigate the links between Chow and, for example, Tyrone Willingham (the recently fired black head coach at Notre Dame), limits the discussion to individual prejudice and to a black/white binary. Ultimately, this is also the failure to unsettle the dominant discourse. (Leonard, 2005)

Insults

Shaquille O'Neal [during an interview]: Tell, Yao Ming, Ching-ching-yang-wah-ah-soh.

Later Shaq goes on the *Best Damn Sports Show* and talks in what he thinks is a Chinese accent and enacts what he thinks are kung fu moves.

Tony Bruno: No one can understand what Yao says anyway.

Fans call into his show with various anti-Asian (American) diatribes. One in response to the NBA's distribution of 8,000 fortune cookies at the first game Yao

Ming played in Miami suggests that, in the future, coupons for discount dry cleaning should be given out at games.

Tony Bruno: No tickee, no washee.

ESPN SportsCenter: Yao Ming speaks Chinese, English, and Smack (Tang, 2003).

Jokes are masked assaults against real individuals and groups in society, socially sanctioned because they serve aggressive emotions in a safe way, one that does not embarrass or offend the particular audience that is the joke's recipient. (Manring, 1998, p. 3)

Outrage

David Chu (2003): People who make racist remarks seldom realize that jokes based on racial biases may be funny to some but that does not make these jokes any less racist or any less offensive to those on the receiving end of the so-called "jokes." They often attack the media for pointing out that their remarks were racist.

Taro O'Sullivan (2003): There is a long tradition of racism against the API community, from the exclusion acts of the 1880s and the interment of people of Japanese ancestry during WWII to the more modern "Buy American" slogans that in essence said "don't buy Japanese." The recent Abercrombie and Fitch T-shirt fiasco illustrates the point What makes the API experience unique is that our turn never ends. We are constantly challenged by the "other" Americans every time we are asked "where are you from?" (p. 6).

Editorial voice: O'Neal's comments weren't directed only to Yao. They were aimed at all Asians, whom he mocked for lacking English skills and athletic prowess ("Asians Aren't," 2003, p. 2).

Gil Asakawa (2003b): I've felt the hot flush of shame and rage when someone has used them [racially disparaging words] toward me. I've been called a Jap, a Nip, a Chink, a Gook . . . and I've been told in obnoxious sing-song cadence "ching-ching Chinaman" and "go home," as if the United States of America were not my home. And, I have been told more times than I can count, "ah so," as if this were some ancient ritual greeting of Japanese, usually spoken with eyes shut to slits and overbite bared in yellowface buckteeth (p. 4).

Asians' experiences exist in the penumbra of actionable racial affronts. Our cultural, linguistic, religious, national and other differences do not as one might imagine, form the basis for a modified of racism; rather they exist on the periphery of offensiveness. The racial insults we suffer are usually trivialized; our reactions are dismissed as hypersensitivity or regarded as a source of amusement. (Sethi, 1994, pp. 235-236)

Apologies

Shaq: I said it jokingly, so this guy was just trying to stir something up that's not there. He's just somebody who doesn't have a sense of humor, like I do. I don't have to have a response to that (the charges of racism) because the people who know me know I'm

not . . . I mean, if I was the first one to do it, and the only one to do it, I could see what they're talking about. But if I offended anybody, I apologize.

Shaq [to Irwin Tang]: I said it jokingly, so this guy was just trying to stir something up that was not there. He's just somebody who doesn't have a sense of humor, like I do. I don't have a response because the people who know me know I'm not a racist (quoted in Pagnotta, 2004 p. 19).

Tom Tolbert: I think we all need to learn to laugh at ourselves a little more (quoted in Guillermo, 2003a).

Phil Jackson: I don't think it bothers him in the least. He understands fully the NBA has put out four forms of [ballots in] Mandarin, Cantonese, Pekingese and also Hong Kongese to allow the Chinese voters to vote on the All-Star ballot, which probably skews it a little bit (Jackson).

Yao Ming: There are a lot of difficulties in two different cultures understanding each other. Especially two large countries. The world is getting smaller and it's important to have great understanding of other cultures. I believe Shaquille O'Neal was joking but I think that a lot Asian people don't understand that kind of joke (quoted in Pagnotta, 2004 p. 19).

Gil Asakawa (2003a): Minimizing his motives for making the remark, and then blaming the Asian writer who was offended enough to write about it, Shaq was dismissing the impact of the remark itself. I for one don't believe Shaq is a racist in the white-sheet-and-hood, cross-burning type. But I do believe his comment was prejudiced and inappropriate, and that any Asian American who has grown up being called a "ching-ching Chinaman" would recognize it as so (p. 4).

If today there are taboos against the outward expression of racism, then the racist joke becomes a way of saying the unsayable. Teller and recipient can deny that they are racist; they can protect their own sense of their non-racist selves by claiming that they are "just joking." (Billig, 2001, p. 285)

Hatemail to [Angryasian.com](http://angryasian.com)

Hater 1: Get a life. He's a minority, too. Lighten up. Save a life in China, you fool.

Hater 2: Listen to yourselves complain about Shaq. Your own website makes fun of the Asian community with the toy man on the first page! You people still eat cats and dogs, and it's the 21st century! You're dirty, devious and ignorant of American ways. You treat your fellow man like crap and then expect the whole world to fawn over you for a simple joke! The real joke is in your pants and between your ears, nothing in either place. We will watch Shaq kick your sweet and sour ass in the up coming game! It's you liberal cat eaters that need to get a life and apologize to the American people for the atrocities committed against our soldiers in the war with Japan. Which by the way we kicked your ass there too. Quit eating cats and popping kids out like a change machine. Start treating your own people with a little dignity and you may find that American Caucasians and African Americans will treat you with respect!

What would I do if my little girl came home crying because some Shaq-worshipping kid on the playground—as a joke—pulled up his eyes at her and chanted, "Ching-chong Chinaman?"

“You still don’t get it,” my husband, Steven, said. “The thing is, she wouldn’t tell you. She’d just absorb it and it would eat away a little piece her soul.” What I wasn’t understanding, he explained, was that it’s not the egregious instances of racism that are so corrosive. “It’s the everyday ignorance that seems designed to keep you in your place. It’s being constantly made to feel like the ‘other.’” (Orenstein, 2003, p. M6)

From the NBA

We are responding to your recent e-mail to the National Basketball Association.

Shaquille O’Neal’s remarks toward Yao Ming were in poor taste and insensitive, though not mean-spirited. Upon learning of the comments, we contacted the Lakers and O’Neal, and he has issued an apology to Yao, which was accepted. We believe that O’Neal and all NBA players have learned important lessons, emerging from this experience with heightened sensitivity. We have decided that no further action needs to be taken by the league.

As we continue to attract the best players (and fans) from around the world, the NBA will continue to educate and enlighten our players, coaches and staff about all the different cultures and races represented in the league.

Thank you for your interest in the NBA.

Ethnic jokes, with their use of unflattering stereotypes, tend to dehumanize by mocking their targets (Boskin, 1987). It is abstract Scotsmen, Jews or Poles who are ridiculed. It makes no sense for the hearer of such jokes to ask which Scotsman, Jew or Pole is involved, nor to show pity for the mythic character, who is presented in order to be laughed at But then the joke becomes more than a joke, slipping into serious language There is the possibility that pitilessness and humour are more generally linked. As Freud suggested, the joke provides a setting in which one can be freed from the demands of pity. (Billig, 2001, p. 279)

Extremis

Stormfront White Nationalist Community:

electric: Is Shaquille O’Neal racist?

Malleus: Yes, but what was the response from Yao?

England’s Hammer: I believe his response was, “Ching hoi chong wah ho mong wing!”

Skeleton Key: Which translates as “At least i’m not a stinking nigger.”

Blodynd: That’s the funniest thing I’ve heard all day!:D

Mr. Wilson: My opinion is simply: what more do you expect from a stupid nigger?

Ivory_Tower: I wonder what the media response would have been had a white player said something like—’ooga booga eatem’ up’ while refering to this brainless black brute?

Forrester: I say let the Asians and the black chimps fight it out. Whites can sit out this one for a change.

Longbow: i study kungfu myself, i don’t hate asians alot, compared to other cultures, theyve done alot for the world as far as trade and cultural contributions are concerned.

being that we whites are good organizers, builders and earners, i think that it is acceptable that we take only the best aspects of other cultures and learn from them if we havent already. any people with anything important to add to the world would have done it by now. blacks obviously havent had crap to add, asians atleast have martial arts, honor and a very detailed and proud history in their opinion. im ok with that (<http://www.stormfront.org/forum/showthread.php?t=51292>).

On these pages, the extreme racist can be brave without acting. They can be murderers in their imaginations. There is no need for conscience: these are jokes and the targets deserve their fate. The contradiction between the two justifications does not matter. Thus, racists are invited to join the fun of the lynch mob without moving from their computer. They can have blood on their hands, but the blood will not drip messily onto the keyboards. Far from saying to themselves that it is only a joke, they can assert that this is not just a joke. And if they do say this, then they will, at last, have said something that is accurate. (Billig, 2001, pp. 286-287)

Shaq Redux

Van Ness Avenue between O'Farrell and Ellis Streets, San Francisco, January 2003:
The Gonzaga University basketball team saunters down the street, encountering an Asian American school counselor and his wife who have just left the cineplex. One of the players talks to the couple—or, better said, verbally assaults them.

Tyler Amaya: Ching chong, ying yong, ying ya.
Kenneth Lee: Don't you know how to speak English?

Working in synergy [with their supposed foreignness], the idea of fungibility transmogrifies Asian Americans into a faceless, deindividualized horde. With the psychological comfort afforded by these two stereotypes, the hate criminal can sufficiently dehumanize the victim class in order to dampen empathetic impulse and to remove or repress those social constraints that ordinarily inhibit violence. Perversely, the very act of violence reaffirms the victim's subhuman nature. (Kang, 1993, p. 1936)

We're Not Racists

San Francisco and Spokane:

Amaya: I feel bad that he took whatever I was talking about as a racial slur. It would be hard to participate in college basketball if I was a racist ("Another Shaq," 2003).
Mark Few, men's basketball coach: I have good kids. They in no way, shape or form said any of those statements made. I don't doubt something was inferred, but as far as [my players] are concerned, nothing along those lines was said (quoted in Guillermo, 2003b).
Amaya: I am very aware of the sensitivity to race in this country and I would never want to include myself with racist people. I feel very badly that he feels the way he does because of something I said ("Zags Players Sorry," 2003).

Zach Gourde and Winston Brooks, captains of the men's basketball team: We sympathize with Mr. Lee and the plight of a great number of Asian-Americans in the ethnic minority. The Gonzaga men's basketball team, the University and the Gonzaga community do not accept racial intolerance. Our team, composed of an ethnic, racial, social and cultural *mélange*, understands the cultural mix in America and embraces it. Intolerance is not, has not been and never will be accepted within our program. We offer our most sincere apologies to Mr. Lee and his wife for any harm caused by our actions, regardless of the intent ("Another Shaq," 2003).

Rev. Robert J. Spitzer, SJ, President of Gonzaga University: Gonzaga continues to champion racial justice and the dignity of all people as core values. In fact, our very mission statement demands it. Bigotry is abhorrent to everything for which this university stands. So, one could imagine my shock when I received a report detailing a chance encounter Jan. 19 on a San Francisco sidewalk between Mr. Ken Lee and his wife, and a group of Gonzaga basketball players from which allegations of a racist comment ensued. I took this very seriously. Obviously, whatever Mr. Lee heard was hurtful to him and his wife. It appears that this was a painful misunderstanding. I am deeply sorry for the pain suffered by the Lees I thank Mr. Lee for his thoughtfulness in bringing this incident to our attention ("Another Shaq," 2003).

Lee: All I wanted was an acknowledgement and some kind of education. My feeling is he really didn't fess up to what he did.

Racism is about much more than a lack of maturity or even a lack of education. It is a set of attitudes and arrangements, dispositions and discourses, and ideologies and institutions that together structure rights, responsibilities, opportunities, and identities. To be sure, education is vitally necessary, but if we believe that education alone will suffice to eradicate racism, then we are forgetting just how ingrained racism is within our social and cultural systems. To make individuals the locus of anti-racism activities is to neglect the myriad ways in which societal structures, at every level, are steeped in racist premises and principles. In other words, in expending all our efforts to erase racist attitudes within individuals, we overlook the debilitating and endemic racist features of economic and political life. (King, 2004a, p. 4)

No End

Bus, Pullman, Washington, January 24, 2003:

Napoleon Chynamite (yellowforum): Our school has Gonzaga beat in the boonie department. Spokane is about 2 hours north of us here at Washington State University, which is located in Pullman, a town with a population of 25,000; 20,000 college kids and hick population 5,000. The people on campus are fairly diverse and open but one time I was riding the bus into town and a couple high school kids kept staring at me and finally one of them was like, "Damn there are too many Koreans going to school here. Watashi wa coochie coo?" I looked at him like he was more retarded than my rottweiler in heat probably shoulda said something too but I was already having a bad day because i just blew \$500 on textbooks, but yea . . . anyways.

Americans are constantly convincing themselves that the United States has already become a place where race does not matter, and they are simply wrong . . . Asians are still exotic, still bearers of an authentic otherness they cannot shake. Like other non-whites, Asian Americans remain both Americans and examples through their existence of non-America. (Yu, 2001, p. 203)

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