



The Olympics, footy and Aboriginal sporting heroes: Enfranchising national narratives in Australia¹

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ABSTRACT: Interviews with Australians have revealed a paradox. While the interest in and consumption of popular history is booming laypeople's interest in official and formal national narratives is limited, or totally absent. Most people consider formal national narratives as "prescribed and disconnected from their everyday lives" (Clark 2016, p. 2.). In this article, I present a narrative of sporting heroes and events that exemplifies how the national reluctance might be overcome, if one takes the use of history within the sphere of popular culture as the principal didactical outset for history education.

KEYWORDS: National narratives; Australian sporting heroes; Popular Culture; History education.

Introduction

Teaching the nation's history is an enduring and widespread formal obligation of history teachers. In different ways, national history make up the formal and narrative backbone of most history curricula and history teaching. In that regard, the Australian historian Anna Clark has uncovered an interesting paradox. Interviews with Australians revealed, that while the interest in and consumption of popular history is booming - i.e. in the shape of local history groups, genealogical societies, television programs, films and heritage tours - ordinary people's interest in official and formal national narratives is very limited, or totally absent. Most people consider formal national narratives as "prescribed and disconnected from their everyday lives" (Clark 2016, p. 2.). One respondent expressed it like this: "in an official sense – I feel totally disconnected from what it means to be an Australian" (Clark, 2016, p. 4-5). Clark concluded.

This research confirms the historical contradiction that sees intimate and personal histories generating genuine, tangible engagement (as revealed in the interviews), while official histories frequently struggle for relevance and attachment in the community more general. (Clark. 2016, p. 4)

However, Clark also added a qualification to this schism. She remarked that most people do not really engage with national historical narratives and sentiments, "unless they intersected with their own family or community histories" (Clark, 2016, p. 3). From this qualification, Clark pose a pertinent question: Can we use personal and intimate historical connections, in people's everyday life, to overcome the national historical reluctance? (Clark, 2016, p. 4). Clarks own answer to the question is this.

Political and public pressure to connect with the Australian history story does not resonate with an otherwise historically minded community unless it speaks to, and enfranchises them. These intimate historical connections should not be dismissed as unhistorical – they are *deeply* rooted in history. Historians and educators do not need to ‘overcome’ personal connections in order to facilitate historical thinking but understand that connectedness as a critical component of historical thinking. (Clark, 2016, p. 6)

Following Clark, production and use of history outside the sphere of formal history education might be a key to engagement with more official versions of national narratives inside schools. In the daily life of many laypeople and communities, consumption of, or participation in, popular culture, for instance sport, play a significant role. To varying degree, most of us have participated in sports – more or less actively and freely of course. In addition, most of us watch sport as part of our highly commercialized media-driven consumption of entertainment – on screens or as audiences at sport venues. Often, sport is an activity that foster powerful personal and collective feelings – and therefore engagement and identification – precisely those socio-cultural incitements that formal national narratives seem to lack, according to Clark. In the Australian case, this perspective seems even more important to take into account due the place of popular culture and sport in Australian society.

Australians have generally bypassed the establishment of a national identity through constitutional change (such as freeing themselves from the connections to Britain by becoming a republic, or by adopting a new flag). Instead, they have adopted popular cultural symbols as markers of nationalism. Constructing a sense of nation includes creating significant symbols both of common identity and difference from others (...) Sport is one the few arenas in which Australians display patriotic symbols such as flags and songs. (Bruce & Hallinan, 2001, 259-58)

Below I seek to answer following question: Can the use and production of history and memories within the area of sport function as a relevant source to overcome the above-mentioned national historical reluctance? My answer will be a qualified yes. To underscore my argument, I present an empirical case study, consisting of a short narrative about sporting events and sporting heroes in Australia - from the Olympic Games in Melbourne in 1956, via the Olympic Games in Sydney in 2000, to performances in two games of Australian Rules Football in 2013 and 2015. I follow Bruce & Hallinans’ theoretical clue – adopting popular culture with the aim of creating national symbols and narratives include both common identity and difference. I have chosen to structure the narrative around an Aboriginal / non-Aboriginal nexus of identity/difference. I do so because this nexus for several decades has been interpreted as one of the most complex and precarious sites of historical struggle in Australia – both inside and outside formal and official versions of national history.² As Bruce & Hallinan and other commentators below show, sport has functioned as one of the main arenas for these struggles.

The case study concerns three overlapping versions of Australian national history, highlighted through the Aboriginal / non- Aboriginal nexus: assimilation, national unity in diversity, and the politics of recognition and difference. My key empirical sources consist of official videos and written texts produced by Olympic authorities, and two video clips from Australian Rules Football games, all to be found on YouTube. I will analyze the material in accordance with a constructivist and interpretative approach, in line with the cultural turn (Bruner 1996, Hall 1997a, Hall 1997b). I interpret the sporting events and performances as symbolic practices through which representation, meaning and language operate, and through which national identities and communities of belonging are constructed and contested. In the course of my analysis, I will include the points of view of various Australian scholars who can help in shedding light upon the meaning and controversies, which I elicit from the material.

Even though Bruce & Hallinan point out that adopting popular cultural symbol as markers of nationalism is a particular Australian phenomenon, it is also a global phenomenon. So, even though my case study concern an Australian narrative, I believe it reveals some general

issues concerning the possible role of popular culture within history education and history didactics – a point I will shortly touch upon in my conclusion.

Forgotten history

The Australian sprinter Shirley Strickland de la Hunty convincingly won the 80 m. hurdle race at the Melbourne Olympic Games in 1956 – in 10,7 seconds, setting a new world record. However, as most sporting stars, she represented more than a champion of the tracking field. What that might be is indicated if one looks at how her victory was depicted in a film produced by the Melbourne Olympic Committee in 1956.³ As she crosses the finish line, the other runners of the race congratulate her. Following the medal award ceremony, the film shows de la Hunty's, positioned in a garden, with smiling face and lipstick, clad in a white dotted yellow dress, and matching earrings. She looks to the sky, and the voice asks – “you remember her now, waiting for her guests to arrive? The next sequence shows two white females, looking at store window in Melbourne. The voice over comments – “it's only natural for female athletes to go shopping”. At first glance, these sequences seem very prosaic, by closer look they signify more than that.

At the time, the Olympic Games in Melbourne in 1956 were by some distance the largest international sporting event in Australian history, and the first Games to be held in the southern hemisphere and outside Europe or the United States. The Games have also been called “The Friendly Games”, symbolized by the closing ceremony where the athletes walked in as one, signaling togetherness and friendship – a tradition that remains part of the scenography of Olympic Games to this day. If one watches video clips and looks at pictures from the opening ceremony the total absence of athletes of Aboriginal descent is evident.⁴

Besides a résumé of the opening and closing ceremonies and highlights from the various sporting competitions, the viewer of film mentioned above is also introduced to the city of Melbourne in the opening sequences. As the camera glides through the streets, we are told that Melbourne is just a town, spontaneously founded by an English traveler, John Batman, exactly 120 years prior to the Games. To underpin this statement, the camera focuses on some kind of an artistic constellation, seemingly showing Batman positioned in a natural environment. Just behind him are two dark-skinned figures, one of them kneeling with a spear in front of him and looking directly into the camera. As the camera re-focuses on the backdrop for this constellation, the natural landscape shifts to a modern cityscape, in a slow unfolding motion, seemingly depicting the transformation of what was once wilderness into the modern city of Melbourne. As the camera pans out, the viewer realizes that the constellation is situated above the entrance to what might be a shopping mall. The part of the film about Melbourne ends with a depiction of sunny suburban life, where it turns out that one of the white female Australian athletes lives - Shirley Strickland de la Hunty. She is filmed with two children in a well-kept front garden, looking to the sky, where flights are bringing in athletes from all over the world.

Aboriginal people were ascribed a specific role by the Melbourne Olympic Committee, not as Athletes, but represented as anonymous relics of a natural landscape that no longer exists, kneeling behind the white colonial entrepreneur and founder of Melbourne, and symbolically depicted as something rendered obsolete in the process of urbanization and modernization of Australia. Shirley Strickland de la Hunty is relegated to a double role: As a gold medalist and thus a national sporting star and as a symbolic female representation of what is often characterized as the Australian dream – the civilized and comfortable life as a housewife in middleclass suburbia (Haebich 2008)

The Department of the Interior in Canberra, likewise symbolically represented aboriginals in a publication called *Australia – Your Host: The XVIth Olympiad, Melbourne*. This publication was intended to be a kind of tourist brochure, where the city of Melbourne and other parts of Australia were presented to visitors to the Games (Australian News and Information Bureau 1956). The second half of the brochure presents a narrative centered on the carrying of the Olympic torch across the country to its final destination at the Olympic stadium in Melbourne for the opening ceremony. On this journey, the reader is introduced to natural landscapes, urban architecture, agriculture, industrial production, leisure activities, residential areas, and so forth. The brochure is richly illustrated, especially with images representing Australia as a modern, prosperous and industrialized society within which people live carefree and harmonious lives, especially in the suburbs. Australia is depicted as consisting of a jovial, apparently mono-cultural population sharing a consensual and de-politicized national identity, living without cultural and racial differences and conflicts. However, upon closer inspection, markers of racial and Aboriginal identities are ambiguously reproduced in three images: of an Aboriginal person seemingly polishing a vehicle belonging to the Darwin Firefighters Brigade; of another Aboriginal person depicted at work in a pineapple field; and, on the very last page, of a group of Aboriginal people from Kimberley. This latter image depicts an Aboriginal woman and three Aboriginal children as well as two white men, one of them a police officer. They are all gathered around a radio placed on the hood of a car, listening to a broadcast from the Olympic Games on the other side of the country. The woman and the three children are not explicitly presented as Aboriginals, but indirectly referred to as “outback people”.

Essential work and the difficulties of travel in the north denied most of them the opportunity of attending the Games but for that they were no less interested, and no less proud of the name of Australia is inscribed for all time in the record of Olympic hosts. (ibid., p. 60)

In contrast to the film about the Games, in *Australia: Your Host* Aboriginals are visually depicted as living persons: as black people doing ordinary jobs or as “outback people”, presumably filled with same national pride as everyone else as they listen to radio broadcasts from the Olympic Games. However, other than a photo of three Italian athletes holding a boomerang, there are no representations signifying the existence of a discrete Aboriginal culture. In *Australia: Your hosts* Aboriginal people are not represented as part of a natural landscape vanquished by the onset of Australian modernity, but as part of modern Australia. Similarly, *Australia: Your Host* does not directly project white racial supremacy in the same way as the aforementioned image of John Batman and his two unnamed Aboriginal companions, but the assimilation of Aboriginals is presented as a positive and successful aspect of Australian cultural citizenship.

According to one observer, the text could be regarded as part of a federal and state monitored propaganda campaign that took place during 1950s and 1960s (Haebich 2008). The aim of this propaganda was to promote a profound shift in Australian cultural citizenship: From racial exclusion and discrimination to images of harmonious national unity among settlers, old and new, and Aboriginals. This shift also implied “a shift from race to culture as the dominant unifying ideology, and a move from race-based laws and controls to cultural assimilation as the dominant process for managing diversity” (Haebich 2008, p. 65); or, formulated in other terms, from strategies of biological absorption to cultural assimilation (Moran 2005). The assimilative notion of cultural citizenship also involved a specific way of producing historical consciousness.

This vision turned its back on the past and proposed a new beginning in the form of an affluent, classless, mono-cultural society: the poor would forget their former privations; migrants would forget Europe; and Aborigines would forget their past. In return all would enjoy the ‘Australian

way of life' which (...) had replaced race and national type as the basis for Australian identity". (Beckett 1988, p. 201)

The strategies for the cultural assimilation of Aboriginals were complex and contradictory (Haebich 2008, Moran 2005). However, following Beckett, cultural assimilation also fostered a specific production of historical consciousness, which was predominantly oriented towards the present and future rather than the past. Aboriginals were supposed to forget their identities and cultural heritage in order to pave the way for the vision of a modern Australian mono-cultural nation in the present and in the future. In this way, the strategies of assimilation also initiated a politics of forgetting (Connerton 2008).

I now turn to the Olympic Games held in Sydney in the year 2000, where narrative of socio-cultural assimilation was turned on its head. Less than half a century after the Melbourne Games, Aboriginal people's and Torres Strait Islanders' histories and cultural heritages were to be remembered and celebrated – and, according to some observers, incorporated into a new narrative of historic healing and reconciliation. According to other interpretations, meanwhile, this narrative was more ambiguous than it first appeared.

Healing history

The stadium is packed with 110,000 expectant spectators. At the running track are eight female runners preparing for the 400 m final at the 2000 Sydney Olympics. One of the runners is clad remarkably differently from the others. She wears a green- yellow- gold colored and hooded full-body skin suit. As she moves towards the starting blocks, she puts on the hood. In the seconds before the starter's pistol, the huge crowd is almost hushed – as if, for a moment, everybody stops breathing. As the runners leave their starting blocks, the spectators erupt in an enormous roar. As they enter the home straight, the noise is staggering. The runner in the body suit gradually moves into the lead and, after a final sprint, she eventually passes the finish line in 49.11 seconds - enough to gain a convincing victory and the Olympic gold medal. The exultation of the crowd is immense.

Most athletes would immediately begin celebrating such an extraordinary victory. This champion does not. She takes off her hood, bends down, shakes her head lightly, and bites her top lip – before eventually sitting down. She looks as if she cannot comprehend what she has just accomplished. One of the other runners bends down and embraces her. The tears in the eyes of the winner, Cathy Freeman, are clear for all to see. She has since explained her reaction:

Relief was an overwhelming emotion, you know, something that I have dreamt about ever since I was ten years old. It just meant so much to me, to my family, to my people, to my country. It was always a dream of mine, not only to win an Olympic gold medal, but to do the victory lap with both flags. I hold the Aboriginal community in such a high place in my heart. I'm very proud of my indigenous roots.⁵

As Cathy Freeman regains her self-control, she starts to celebrate her victory. She runs the traditional victory lap around the stadium, a recurrent ritual at the Olympics – receiving ovations, saluting the crowd, embracing family and friends – and, not least, she drapes herself in both an Australian and an Aboriginal flag.

The scenes I have just described are part of an official video about the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, produced by the International Olympic Committee.⁶ This video was part of a carefully orchestrated narrative about cultural citizenship in Australia, exhibited and acted out as a globalized spectacle (MacAloon 2006). Contrary to the Melbourne Games,

Aboriginal and Torres Strait peoples and cultures were given a central role in the manuscript. Moreover, Cathy Freeman was the main act, which reached its climax as she draped herself in the two flags.

However, the act was already inscribed in the scenography of the Sydney Games before they had even started. This can be seen in the opening scene of the video, which depicts a sunrise over Uluru, accompanied by a soundtrack of melodic and dramatic strings and didgeridoos. The camera then pans through grandiose landscapes and pastoral sceneries, the soundtrack now supplemented by a male and a female voice reciting the poem *My Country*, written by Dorothea Mackellar, first published in 1908. The poem is a romantic celebration of, or rather an emotive declaration of love for Australia – in a romantic spirit personified as ‘her’ or ‘she’. At the end of this opening sequence, we see a piece of traditional Aboriginal art, followed by body painted Aboriginals dancing around a fire, depicted in slow motion, in dim and mysterious yellow and red tinted images.

As the recital of *My Country* ends, we see another Aboriginal Olympic athlete, Nova Peris-Kneebone, who runs bearing the burning Olympic torch – with Uluru and the clear blue sky in the background. This scene signals the transition to the next part of the video - the carrying of the Olympic torch through Australia, a narrative similar to the film about the Melbourne Games. The first to follow Peris-Kneeborn, still at the foot of Uluru, is an Aboriginal man; the third torchbearer is transported in a canoe, doubtless illustrating the contribution of Torres Strait Islanders to the ritual. All of this is a build-up to the lighting of the Olympic cauldron; the finish and climax of the official opening ceremony. A number of female Australian Olympic medalists are celebrated as they carry the torch on the final legs of its journey to the cauldron. One of them is Shirley Strickland de la Hunty. The last one is Cathy Freeman. She ignites the Olympic cauldron, accompanied by grandiose choral music.

Draped in both Australian and Aboriginal flags, Cathy Freeman interpreted her post-victory lap at the Olympic Stadium as a way of expressing pride in her Aboriginal descent and identity; a symbolic gesture she also made when winning gold at the 1994 Commonwealth Games (Elder et al. 2006, p. 191). But according to some observers, Freeman’s Olympic victory, and her role in the opening ceremony, signified more than that.

The Olympic events contributed to the awakening of a new identity for many Australians, by providing an arena for multiple voices to speak of history, of dreams, of rights, and of wrongs. The fantasy of a nation that values the knowledge of its indigenous people, and who sees them as part of – not marginal – to its history (...) has the capacity to provide an uplifting experience. For many Australians, it provided an opportunity to shed the shame of racism and bigotry in a burst of euphoria. It also gave political activists a forum to communicate with the indigenous people, fellow white Australians, and the rest of the world about their views of the sort of identity that the Australian nation should take into the new millennium (...) As a site of democratic engagement, it can be argued that these events have more power than the ballot box (...) The narratives built during the games provided positive and productive images of the place of indigenous people in the Australian nation, by bringing them to center stage, in the most forthright, wide-reaching, and articulate rewriting of Australian history that has been voiced since Australians landed on *Terra Nullus* (McCarthy & Hatcher, 2001, p. 56-57).⁷

Freeman had become the embodiment of national reconciliation - “the joining of two key parts of Australia’s psyche: the first inhabitants and the white settlers / invaders”, which cemented Freeman as “the most potent symbol of Australia’s desire for reconciliation between Indigenous and non-indigenous peoples” (Bruce & Hallinan 2001, p. 257-258). Cathy Freeman herself further contributed to her position as the prime symbol of national reconciliation. A few months before the Sydney Games, she publicly connected her personal life story and family history to one of most controversial and debated issues of reconciliation and of Australian history in general (Attwood 2009, Attwood 2011, Manne 2000, Windschuttle 2009). Freeman’s grandmother, Alice Sibley, was part of the stolen generation –

one of an estimated 100,000 Aboriginal children taken from their mothers as a consequence of state and federal assimilation initiatives (Gordon, 2003, p. 223).

Ambiguous history

As I indicated above, according to some observers, on closer inspection the narrative of historic healing and reconciliation was more ambiguous than it otherwise appeared. To some extent, Greg Gardiner (2003) regards Cathy Freeman's performances as unique acts of historic healing and national unification. He adds that the appeal of Freeman's personae were their symbolic capacity to be stretched in multiple directions - "to connect audiences to both past and present and to symbolize the future" (ibid., p. 252). Thus, Freeman's victory pointed towards a multiracial future, with Freeman herself an exemplary representation of Australian diversity and modernity. However – Gardiner claims - this symbolic status was not without conditions.

At Sydney, Cathy Freeman's circling of the national stadium after her victory was greeted as a turning point in history, making it whole and complete where it had been divided and incomplete, providing a kind of quasi-absolution for the wrongs of the past. In this discourse, then, Aboriginality - its difference – is defined as a service to the nation, a healing running force that unites the country, and the issue of Aboriginality as a source or state of sovereignty in its own right is either downplayed or obscured (ibid., p. 251)

Aboriginality as a source of sovereignty was obscured, Gardiner remarks. The healed and reconciled history was subsumed to an agenda of nationalization, within which the historically asymmetrical power relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples still prevailed. As Gardiner notes, Aboriginals performed the reconciliation while "whites" sat comfortably, watching and applauding. He concludes, in stark contrast to McCarthy & Hatcher, that the intentions of reconciliation were primarily symbolic, and thus superficial, rather than real. A point also made by Catriona Elder, Angela Pratt and Cath Ellis (2006). The Sydney Games were a way to discipline Indigenous people to fit a conservative understanding of reconciliation, which did not challenge the power imbalances between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples.

Tony Bruce and Emma Wensing (2009) also point to the fact that not everyone interpreted Cathy Freeman's performances as acts of historic healing and national unity. On the contrary, their analyses of newspaper letters show that, for some, Freeman's embrace of her Aboriginal culture was seen as divisive and un-Australian, rather than as an act of reconciliation (p. 95). Three years later, Bruce and Wensing (2012) performed another analysis of media texts, which pointed in different directions. On the one hand - they stressed - we should not underestimate the fact that Freeman's elevation to a national sporting hero would once have been inconceivable. On the other hand, the overall embrace of Freeman by the media was an expression of what they term "enlightened racism".

The apparent desire of many white Australians to symbolically absolve themselves of their racist history without necessarily giving up the privileges they have gained from it is most evident in the way media coverage revolved around a fantasy of the future, rather than the more common nostalgia for the past (ibid. 493).

The same ambiguous interpretation of the Games and of Freeman's role is present in a recent study by Leanne White, seen from the perspective of heritage studies (White 2013). On one hand, White also concludes that Freeman became part of Australia's heritage iconography, and as such the personification of the hope of a reconciled nation – a "microcosm for nationalism in Australia" and an "infinite promise and potential of what a reconciled nation might look like" (p. 167). On the other hand, she also concludes that Freeman's lighting of the Olympic cauldron and the staging of Aboriginal culture throughout the Games was gestures

made by event organizers to appease the world's media and a global audience - a smokescreen to cover the reality of the continuing marginalization and sidelining of Aboriginal peoples.

Recently, Christine O'Bonsawin continues the critical line of interpretations, but in an even more deconstructive and pessimistic tone (O'Bonsawin 2015). Cathy Freeman's performances – she claims - symbolized an apolitical vision of a reconciled and conflict-free nation, and as such exemplified the liberal democratic illusion that sport can function as the great equalizer. Freeman provided white audiences with relief from responsibility, because her performances illustrated that Aboriginals, like all Australians, have opportunities for success if they are only willing to take them (ibid, 210). So, in O'Bonsawin's interpretation, Freeman as the symbolic embodiment of reconciliation and of the nation's history and heritage turned out to be a deception.

(...) the selection of Freeman to light the cauldron proves to be a well-calculated and decisively tokenistic strategy used to censor truths of on-going political oppression and racial tyranny directed toward Indigenous people in Australia (O'Bonsawin 2015, 211).

However, O'Bonsawin also positions Freeman within a wider historical context of political activism within sport. At the Olympic Games in 2012 in London, the Australian boxer of Aboriginal descent, Damien Hooper, entered the ring wearing a T-shirt inscribed with the Aboriginal flag. Like Freeman, Hooper wished to honor his culture and Indigeneity. However, in contrast to Freeman, Hooper was accused of violating the Olympic Charter, which prohibits political, religious or racial propaganda (O'Bonsawin 2015, p. 212). Consequently, Hooper refrained from wearing the T-shirt during the rest of Games. O'Bonsawin compares the threat to exclude Hooper to the harsh condemnations of the notorious podium demonstration at the 1968 Olympics by the two African-American sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos, and by the Mohawk, Alwyn Morris, who represented Canada at the Olympics games in 1984. These incidents have proved – O'Bonsawin asserts – that the Olympic Games are caught up in a precarious political ambiguity: According to official discourse, they are a “non-political space”, but in reality a space where

(...) the political interests of the colonial nations such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States are sustained and upheld (...) The Olympic movement lacks the capacity and desire to engage in meaningful humanizing and decolonizing efforts (...) Indigenous athletes such as Morris, Freeman and Hooper have to accept the identity of a colonizing settler citizenry, thereby further validating the political authority of illegally imposed governing structures (O'Bonsawin, 2015, p. 215).

Dividing history

The interpretations of Cathy Freeman's performances at the 2000 Sydney Olympics point in very different directions. At one end of the spectrum, they are seen as a representation of a reconciled and healed national narrative, and as such as invoking a promise of a new democratized and post-racial national narrative. At the other end, we find almost the opposite set of interpretations: the healed history was a smokescreen for the continuation of postcolonial racism and nationalism. As such, the same events are interpreted as both a history of cultural reconciliation and unification, and as a reinvention or reproduction of deep cultural and racial divisions. Both perspectives are also present as we turn our attention to performances by another sporting star in the year 2015.

In a YouTube video, it is possible to watch another remarkable example of sporting celebration⁸. An Australian Football League (AFL) player is celebrating a goal and runs towards the stand behind the goal of the opposing team. Or rather, he is sidestepping, while alternately slapping a hand on the opposite forearm, or clapping his hands. It is impossible to hear exactly what he is shouting while doing this, but it is presumably directed towards the

spectators behind the goal. As he gets close to the crowd, he suddenly makes a rotating movement with his right arm, then lifts it above his head and makes a gesture that looks as if he is throwing an imaginary spear towards the crowd. Some of the spectators cheer him, some just looked astonished. As the player turns around and starts to run back onto the pitch, he is met by a teammate, who embraces him.

The player shown in the YouTube video is Adam Goodes, the most decorated Aboriginal man to have played at the highest level of the game (Judd & Butcher, 2016, p. 75). Goodes even received the Australian of the Year award in 2014. However, what was Goodes communicating as he celebrated his goal? The title of the YouTube video gives a hint: *Adam Goodes war cry celebration*. The war dance could be interpreted as an entertaining way of incorporating a more or less archaic residue of Aboriginal heritage into the contemporary popular culture of sport. According to this interpretation, the war dance was an innocent historical and folkloristic re-enactment of a ritual stemming from a pre-colonial Aboriginal culture. However, there was something about the way Goodes performed the war dance, as if he was trying to express something else.

Adam Goodes' war dance contained an implicit reference to an incident in 2013. In another YouTube video, Adam Goodes, clad in his red and white Sydney Swans kit, is filmed as he slowly passes the opposing home crowd of Collingwood behind the goal.⁹ He stops abruptly and immediately points his finger at a young girl among the Collingwood supporters. It is impossible to hear Goodes' exact words as he shouts at her. At the same time, he is communicating with security officials. After some time, the security officials enter the stands and escort the girl out of the arena. It turned out that Adam Goodes had taken offense. The 13-year-old girl had shouted 'ape' at Goodes. He met the press the day after the incident. He interpreted the girl's cry as an act of racism. Following this incident, he was booed during games. The booing continued throughout 2014, into the 2015 season, the same year Goodes received the honor as *Australian of the Year*. As a consequence of the persistent booing and harassment, Goodes chose to retire from his footy career in 2015.

Adam Goodes' performances have also been interpreted as different expressions of cultural citizenship. In 2016 the journalist Stan Grant published his book *Talking to my country* in which Grant, himself of Aboriginal descent, and his youngest son drive through New South Wales. Grant wants to revisit and tell his son about the places and towns where Grant himself grew up as a child and young man. It was time – Grants remarks – that this son “learned the truth about our history”. It is a deeply ambiguous narrative. On the one hand it is a narrative about Grant's affection for Australia, and particularly his sense of belonging and deep socio-cultural ties to his family and kin – and to Aboriginal land, culture and people as a whole, or “my people” as he refers to them. However, it is also a narrative of continuing and severe hardship among Aboriginals, which forced Grant's own family to live a kind of nomadic life at the lowest socio-economic level of Australian society. As such, *Talking to my country* also presents a harsh indictment of what Stan Grant considers to be the socio-economic deprivation, racism and cultural exclusion of Aboriginal people that remains prevalent even today. This marginalized reality – Grant underlines – stands in stark contrast to the promises of the opposite from prosperous white Australia, even if he himself has been able to realize some of these promises as a cosmopolitan and successful journalist and intellectual. Grant uses the histories of Cathy Freeman and Adam Goodes to pinpoint his analyses.

We watched her [Cathy Freeman] through different eyes as she took her place in the starting line. To Australians victory for this Aboriginal woman on this night would tell the world we had buried old enmities. The stain of settlement could be wiped clean. We – my people, Cathy's people - saw her as a symbol of survival. She told the world we were still here. For the woman herself this was a race like so many others – a track starter's gun and a finish line – but then it was unlike any other. When she crossed that line there was just the earth and she sank into it. She stared into space

seemingly oblivious to the crowd – unburdened. Then she rose to her feet and here was the moment when the flag of our people was unfurled. Red, black and yellow flew in this stadium and its image was beamed around the world. I thought back to the opening ceremony and how I felt alone and now how proud I was. I felt transformed that night in the Olympic stadium. Our people had been on the losing end of history but Cathy made us feel like winners. But this was a myth and myths can crumble at the touch. The myth of Cathy Freeman could never truly sustain us. She was a runner who became a champion but *'cos I'm free* does not mean her people are. Gold – even this most precious and dazzling gold – ultimately dims. Cathy's glory is frozen in time but as the memories fade of that stunning night our people are still a nation without an anthem or a flag that can fly at the Olympic Games (Grant, 2016, p. 171-172).

For Stan Grant, Cathy Freeman's victory had also symbolized a narrative of national unity, racial reconciliation and historic healing. But it failed and turned out to be a myth. This point is revealed in Grant's own language. The "we" who watched the race are divided in two – Australians and "we, "our people", presumably not Australians. Grant highlights this interpretation by recounting Adam Goodes' personal life story and AFL career, which resembles his own successful life story (Grant 2016, p. 195-205). But Goodes' destiny is also, Grant claims, a symbolic signification of the failure of healed national cultural citizenship in Australia that Cathy Freeman represented. The booing of Goodes in 2013 was not just another expression of the widespread racism within the limited confines of AFL culture. It was an expression of the deep racist foundation of Australian society and history at a more general level.

In the winter of 2015 we turned to face ourselves. It happened in the place most sacred to us: the sporting field. Adam Goodes, an indigenous footballer, one of the greatest players of his generation, was abused and humiliated until he could take it no more. As this man retreated from the field we were forced to confront the darkest parts of this country – black and white we are all formed by it. This wasn't about sport; this was about our shared history and our failure to reconcile it. Some sought to deny this, others to excuse it, but when thousands of voices booed Adam Goodes, my people knew where that came from (Grant, 2016, p. 5).

The sport historians Barry Judd & Tim Butcher (2016) likewise interpret the Goodes controversy as an expression of prevailing racism, but add other perspectives. The central historical reference among Aboriginal sporting heroes is not the performances of Cathy Freeman, but the Aboriginal ALF - player Nicky Winmar. In a game played 17 April 1993, Winmar and his St. Kilda team played against Collingwood. Throughout the game, Winmar was exposed to continuous racial vilification. The day after the game, a newspaper published a photo showing Winmar lifting his St. Kilda jersey and pointing to his chest, symbolically declaring "I'm black and I'm proud" (Klugman & Osmond 2013). The photo has gained a somewhat iconic status, including a reference to the aforementioned iconic sporting photo showing the black power salute of Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Mexico Games (Judd & Butcher, 2016, p. 72; see also Klugman & Osmond 2013). Goodes' and Winmar's gestures signified Aboriginal struggle against racism and to be treated equally to their non-Aboriginal teammates. However, according to Judd and Butcher, Goodes' performances also signified an even more wide-reaching attempt to further a Aboriginal cultural citizenship.

(...) whereas previous bounded and highly targeted struggles to end racism sought to assert the right of Aboriginal peoples to participate in football as though they were Anglo-Australians according to a principle of civil equality, contemporary struggles seek to assert the right of Aboriginal people to be recognized as culturally distinct groups within the Australian game according to the principle of political difference (Judd & Butcher 2016, p. 70) (...) The negative public reaction to Goodes is not based on his personality but rather is based in insistence that Aboriginal culture be recognized and acknowledged as having a place in both the national game and the Australian nation (Judd & Butcher, 2016, p. 82).

Judd & Butcher suggest that Goodes' performances indicate a paradigmatic shift in the ways sport, and in particularly football, and Aboriginality have been related to the struggle

surrounding cultural citizenship in Australia: from anti-racism and racial equality to the politics of cultural recognition and difference. And further – Goodes’ insistence on the right to be culturally different can be seen as part of general Aboriginal political struggle for Indigenous nation building; struggles – Judd & Butcher suggest – which also include Aboriginal claims to sovereignty as a prerequisite for any treaty process. Goodes’ war dance reminded non-Aboriginal Australia that the right to be culturally different “is based on the irrefutable historical fact that their occupation of the continent pre-dates the contemporary Australian state by thousands of years” (Judd & Butcher, 2016, p. 82).

Conclusion

The analysis above showed three interconnected narrative threads of Australian identity, seen from the perspective of the chosen Aboriginal – non- Aboriginal nexus: assimilation, national unity in diversity, and the politics of recognition and difference. All three – and their metamorphoses – concern a narrative of national identity and belonging in Australia. Performances and interpretation of sporting events and heroes represent an ambiguous and contested national narrative of both national unity and consensus, and cultural differences and political struggles.

The same dynamic can be revealed in more formal and official national narratives. However, following Anna Clarks (2016) analysis, most ordinary people – or laypeople - find themselves alienated from these narratives. Laypeople find that these narratives are disconnected from their everyday lives, and eventually from what it means to be an Australian. Hence, an advantage comes to fore, if one take performances of sport heroes and sport events, and the narratives and the myths told about them, as the didactical outset. Sport heroes and their performances function as some of the cultural stuff and the symbolic idioms, out of which national histories and identities are constructed, renewed and struggled about in late modern popular culture. A narrative of sport heroes and events can function as points of collective identification and national history and myth telling, which are unmatched to other kinds of consumption of popular culture. Moreover, a narrative of sport heroes and performances, and popular culture in general, connect to the use of history within the life-worlds of laypeople.

Taken sport and popular culture in peoples’ everyday life as a didactical outset, and as a central narrative component of history teaching does not ignore or erode national narratives. It makes them more complex, multi-stranded and ambiguous – and of course also more subjective and situational. Just a few clicks away on YouTube, or media platforms, alternative narratives are available. Other narratives about the Aboriginal/ non-Aboriginal identity nexus are already circulating within our globalized media networks. In that sense, the realm for production of historical consciousness within popular culture is radically decentralized. A situation that some probably fear will leave history educators – and eventually the students – without a well-structured, scholarly-based understanding of official national history.

However, this situation might also function as a productive didactical advantage. It does offer what Anna Clark mentioned as the need for enfranchisement “of otherwise historically-minded communities” (Clark, 2016, p. 6). It invites people to be participators, to be active producers of historical consciousness and national narratives, when related directly to daily life cultural consumption and identity construction. Potentially, the situation also open up for a radical democratization of production and use of history, where official national narratives – or scholarly-based history for that sake – play a subordinate role, if any role at all. However, it has to be underlined – a state of democratization and enfranchisement, which is highly ambiguous. As I have exemplified above, the use of history within medialisied sport and

popular cultures are regulated by economic, socio-cultural and commercial forces far beyond any popular or democratic control.

My argument is not that history educators should ignore or debunk official national narratives, or scholarly-based history research, in favor of popular culture and lifeworld experiences of laypeople. I argue – in accordance with Anna Clark - that somehow these dimensions have to come into interplay with each other. Above, I have tried to contribute to that endeavor. If it does not happen, I doubt that history educators will be able to overcome the national reluctance that Anna Clark has revealed as the dominating approach among Australians. From the perspective of history education, the critical didactical challenge is to reflect upon these and related question. (i) Do laypeople’s use of popular culture and history, and official national narratives, work together and consequently interfere with each other? (ii) If not, how and why do these two dimensions exist without any notable contact with each other? (iii) Do the two dimensions operate in a more or less concealed conflict with each other?

In order to answer these questions, history educators have to take the use and production of history by laypeople and popular cultures into account. Not as an appendix to formal or scholarly-based national narratives, but - as I see it – as the principal outset for history education.

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Video links

Melbourne 1956 Olympic Games. Official Olympic Film

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDA5BvvtDsM>

The Sydney 2000 Olympics: The complete film.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xHMsL6sSLQ>

Adam Goodes' War Cry Celebration

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kBljMnLw9-4>

Girl Makes Racist Comment to Footballer; He Calls Her Out.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L6Sq62YPnsU>

Notes

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² See for instance, Beckett (1988), Attwood (2009), Attwood (2011), Windschuttle (2009), Rowse (2016), Harris et al. (2013), Carlson (2016), Manne (2001), Moran (2005), Donnelly & Parke (2014), Parke & Sharp (2014), Macintyre & Clark (2003), Clark (2008).

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDA5BvvtDsM>

⁴ The first Athlete of Aboriginal descent to compete in the Olympics was in 1964, with Michael Ah Matt representing in Basketball, and Adrian Blair and Francis Roberts in boxing
<http://corporate.olympics.com.au/olympic-feature/indigenous-stars>

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xHMsL6sSLQ>

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xHMsL6sSLQ>

⁷ See also Hay (2003, p. 23), and Gordon (2003, p. 221ff) for the same point.

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kBljMnLw9-4>

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L6Sq62YPnsU>