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“Playing Out of Bounds”: Identity and community-building on and off the court

“Oh yeah . . . I play in a racist volleyball league.” It was these words and their casual delivery that immediately piqued my interest in the North American Chinese Invitational Volleyball Tournament (NACIVT), a tournament that began in the early 1930s in Manhattan’s Chinatown and has since been hosted in various cities in the US and Canada. The three-day event takes place on Labour Day Weekend and has attracted over 1,200 volleyball players in recent years. It is most well-known for nine-man volleyball, where there are nine rather than six players and is played in the men’s division. Six-player volleyball is played in the women’s division. The tournament takes place outside in memory of the struggles of earlier players who were forced to play on the streets of Chinatown because they were denied access to physical activity spaces or were not given permits to organize tournaments in gyms. In contrast to this history of being oppressed, the NACIVT in recent times is regularly described by its participants, either in jest or seriously, as racist.

The allegation and reputation of racism stems from its rule on player eligibility that states that at least two-thirds of each team must be “100% Chinese,” with the remainder comprised of players of ‘Asian’ descent. Asian is defined in the tournament booklets as having origins from East and Southeast Asia. This rule, its history, how it is enforced, upheld, ignored and resisted serve as points of entry into examining how racism frames and shapes the way in which Asians in Canada and the US understand themselves and their racialized (sporting) bodies. Players draw on discourses of biological racism to create narrow criteria of who counts as Chinese and who as Asian resulting in a racial hierarchy, with “100% Chinese” bodies (or those who could pass as such) being most valued, followed by “100% Asian” and “halfies,” to use the vernacular of NACIVT players, and at the bottom, those who are seen to have dubious status because, as some interviewees stated, the players look “white as me” or “black, black, black.”

This racial hierarchy is enacted through reading and racializing of bodies, and subsequent policing of boundaries of who may play and when. During the annual Labour Day Tournament, which was seen as more important than the other competitions, this examination scrutinizes whether team lineups follow eligibility rules (i.e., that there were not in excess of one-third of ‘non-100%’ Chinese players) and questions the level of ‘Asian’ background if players were of mixed race. As one player put it, “you’re always looking like ‘oh is that person Chinese? Are they Chinese? Are they cheating?’”

This hierarchy is also set within and shaped by a broader context where Asianness and athleticism are constructed in relation to Whiteness and Blackness. Whereas Blackness is frequently stereotyped as naturally athletic, in the realm of volleyball and the NACIVT, Whiteness is deemed far more threatening. This is in part because the history of volleyball specifically.



Walter Low photograph

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Volleyball is a sport that was used within the project of US imperialism and missionary work to civilize foreign men in the Philippines, China, Japan and Burma, for example. While this imperative is less explicit now, the view of mainstream volleyball as a 'White space' prevails among the participants. This is in part due to individual lived experiences of being the only Chinese or Asian player on majority White volleyball teams, clubs or leagues outside the NACIVT, being excluded from mainstream volleyball teams and clubs, and the stereotyping of Asian players as only being proficient at defence, a stereotype that is internalized. Indeed, in contrast to the clear distinctions between who is Chinese and who is not, within mainstream leagues, the players are regularly assigned to an amorphous and homogeneous group of Asian via stereotypes. In light of the Whiteness of volleyball and its subsequent experiences of marginalization and exclusion, the lure of NACIVT, even for those who are not at the top of its racial hierarchy, becomes understandable.

For the women, their gender, race and culture intersect in the creation of the stereotype that sees them as unathletic and disinterested in sport. Add to this the specific context of the NACIVT where the men's game enjoys a higher status and the women's game and women players are taken less seriously by NACIVT players and fans. This results in the women having a tenuous sense of belonging within



Rosanna U photograph

this community. If they are not players, then they occupy gendered and secondary roles as mothers, wives and girlfriends. The threat of White athleticism operates through the lens of gender, in this instance, not as a threat to traditional femininity (as is the case for the men with masculinity), but as a threat to their belonging within the NACIVT as sporting women. For if eligibility to play in the NACIVT was opened to all volleyball players, with the increasing competitiveness of the game and the desire to win at all costs, Asian women athletes would be read as less athletic and able than their White counterparts, presumably have fewer opportunities to play and ultimately get pushed out of the NACIVT.

Playing out of Bounds: 'Belonging' and the North American Chinese Invitational Volleyball

Tournament is the first scholarly book that investigates the NACIVT and offers ethnographic detail of the lived experiences of participants, including mixed race athletes and sporting Asian women, who continue to be understudied and underrepresented areas of study. This book adds to the burgeoning area of research on sporting diasporic Asians in Canada and the US. The focus of the book is to examine how one's identity and sense of belonging within the NACIVT are constructed through drawing on intersecting ideas about race, gender and culture. In doing so, the sense of community that is formed through participation in the tournament, involves continuous policing of boundaries and membership. Membership is determined based on codified rules about player eligibility; nonetheless, many participants question, reject and even ignore these requirements of membership and therefore are resisting boundaries of belonging and critiquing assumptions that 'home' and 'feeling at home' are natural and common sense.

The NACIVT has also been featured in an award-winning, independent feature documentary, [9-man](#), for which Nakamura served as consultant, and has been distributed by the National Film Board of Canada, shown regularly on TVO, and can be found in York Library holdings.