

Jennifer Guiliano's Review of *The Athletic Crusade: Sport and American Cultural Imperialism*

Gerald R. Gems. *The Athletic Crusade: Sport and American Cultural Imperialism*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006. 233pp. Bibliographic References and Index. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN: 0-8032-2216-5.

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"Seek[ing] to find what values, if any, U.S. politics and sporting practices promoted in the already established cultures of Asia, the Pacific, and the Caribbean," Gerald R. Gems's *The Athletic Crusade: Sport and American Cultural Imperialism* surveys the geographical terrain of Texas, China, Japan, Cuba, Hawaii, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Samoa, Nicaragua, Guam, and Panama (p.16). Serving as a well-written compendium of nation-based narratives seen through the imperial gaze, Gems familiarizes readers with the relationship between sport and national identity through the lenses of education, gender, race, commercialism, and religion in order to assert the importance of sport to the U.S. imperial project and its resultant status as a global hegemonic power. In doing so, *The Athletic Crusade* welcomes scholars to the growing literatures on U.S. imperialism and sporting diaspora that are continually challenging our understandings of the scope and content of American expansion.

Gems introduces readers to the "athletic crusade" by defining it as a blend of masculinity, muscular Christianity, racialized understandings of "self" and "other," and U.S. commercial interests that stimulate the assertion or rejection of nationalism on the part of colonized nations. Opening with chapters on China and Japan, he successfully argues that "while the American imperial crusade benefited American commerce first and foremost, it did so while espousing the tenets of liberty, freedom, and democracy that colonized or subject peoples came to expect. For such groups sport became a political tool of accommodation or resistance to the dominant power or a means to greater nationalistic identity" (p.150). In China, growing nationalism in the mid-twentieth century was transferred to athletic endeavors while in Japan,

as Japanese schools inculcated Western ideologies, martial spirit and nationalism readily transferred to competitive ventures on the sports fields while also fueling patriotic, militaristic, and imperialistic aspirations... . Sport proved a useful comparative tool that allowed the Japanese to measure their worthiness to assume Asian leadership and a place among the world's powers. China's sluggish place in adopting the games relegated it to a less modern, less progressive status in Western eyes (p.31).

For these two nations, Gems argues, sport was viewed as a "progressive promise" that suggested possibilities for social, racial, and gender equality under nationalistic and governmental dictates.

In the Philippines, "the value of sport in the 1890s" was "not only for maintaining the morale of troops but...sport served as a more pleasurable form of exercise, distracted participants and spectators from less wholesome forms of entertainment, and established esprit de corps and a martial spirit" (p.49). While American troops readily participated in sport, Filipinos refused to follow dictates that prohibited sports on Sunday, determined structured rules of play, and attempted to limit participation to those deemed racially acceptable. Sport became an opportunity to challenge American authority. Hawaiians responded similarly to American missionaries and growers who encouraged the adoption of baseball. The polyglot nature of Hawaiian society stimulated a multiplicity of sporting forms including traditional Hawaiian games of surfing, canoeing, and outriggering while altering football and baseball to encompass Hawaiian forms of dress and performance. Gems suggests that it was American sport that aided in the persistence of indigenous sport.

Within the Caribbean diaspora, Gems writes, "sport, and particularly baseball, has remained the one constant in Cuban life. It has served as a ritual, a spectacle, and a carnival conducive to Cuban society and has nurtured a nationalistic spirit, reconstructed a fragmented culture, exhibited machismo in times of oppression, and restored dignity and national pride to the Cuban people" (p.98). Importantly, while Gems rightly notes Cuba's role as a central node for the dissemination of baseball into the Caribbean and South America (as well as part of a network of sports and athletic labor within the United States), he does not go far enough in developing these transnational networks or examining these bodies. Readers are tantalized with the possibilities of an examination of imperialism in motion. By locating his subjects only within their nations, Gems neglects a truly intriguing narrative of how U.S. imperialism was shaped between these nations and national contexts.

In his discussion of Puerto Rico, he notes that Puerto Ricans embraced baseball through the Cuban diaspora during Spanish colonial rule. Did Puerto Ricans actually appropriate U.S. sporting forms through its imperial project or did they, in fact, experience an American game already imbued with Spanish and Cuban meanings? More simply, when Gems suggests Puerto Rican resistance to the strictures, rules, and religion propagated by the Young Men's Christian Association officials, was this part of a trans-Caribbean resistance and insurgent nationalist movement like that being articulated concurrently in Cuba and Spain? Similarly, he notes the transnational movement of Chinese and Japanese players into Pacific Rim sports circuits of Hawaii. Did exchanges between these nations alter the success of the U.S. imperial project? How might we re-envision this circuit as articulations of knowledge about imperialism, class, race, gender, and similar concepts?

Gems is at his most confident in his examinations when gazing through western (read: American) eyes where he can locate dominant cultural meanings of commercialism, capitalism, and masculinity in the later half of the twentieth century. In the Dominican Republic, baseball formed a central discourse of individual worth, collective identity, and national belonging, Gems argues, that manifested into an understanding of global capitalism. Dominicans not only understood the capitalist system but were able to turn

their individual sporting successes into a means to further national goals and commercial subsistence. "Outposts of empire" like Samoa, Nicaragua, and Panama all utilized athletic bodies as articulations of national success within a commercial and global framework.

While Gems successfully demonstrates the masculinist and racialized nature of American sport and imperialism, he comes up short when considering the involvement of and ramifications for women within the "athletic crusade." He notes in many cases the involvement of women as athletes, consumers of sport, or sport administrators, but does not flesh out the ways in which these women transformed meanings, enacted sites of acceptance or resistance to imperialism, and challenged racial and gender norms. Perhaps a facet of Gems's upstreaming of the importance of the global capitalist model of the post-Jordan era where men dominate both the playing field and as consumers or a facet of impressive grasp of the excellent secondary work of Gail Bederman, Anthony Rotondo, Clifford Putney, and Kristin Hoganson on the masculinist dimensions of the imperial project, the role of women within the sporting imperial needs further attention.

In calling attention to this critique as well as the need to study imperialism in motion, I do not mean to discount the importance of *The Athletic Crusade* for those needing an introduction to American sporting imperialism. Instead, consider these as threads left undone that encourage new arenas of inquiry on the role of women in the sporting imperial and the relationships between colonized nations.

Biography

Jennifer Guiliano specializes in the historical intersections of culture, sport, and racial/ethnic hybridity at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the Department of History. She is currently completing her dissertation "Native Americans on the Field: Sports Mascots and the Consolidation of an American Empire, 1920-2007," under the direction of Dr. Dave Roediger and Dr. Adrian Burgos.