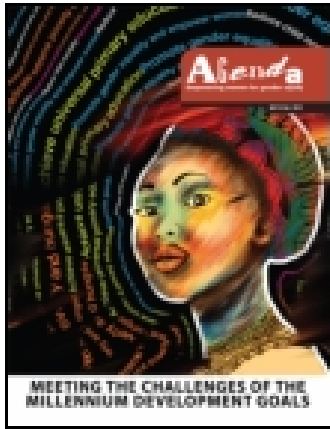


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Rugby, gender and capitalism: 'Sportocracy' up for sale?

Michelle Mordaunt-Bexiga

The Reitz Four: Popular and theoretical views about rugby in South Africa

This essay is concerned with exploring how masculinities and femininities have been configured through rugby-playing in South Africa, especially in the Western Cape. It also focuses on ways in which commodity culture, through media reporting, mass media images, advertising, clothing and digital media, complicates particular context-specific gender performances. In initiating a discussion of South African rugby and identity in the present day, it is useful to revisit the Reitz video saga. Since it occurred, this saga has been at the centre of discussion in the media and the academy as an especially spectacular and disturbing index of rugby-playing in relation to gender and racial domination.

The controversy that erupted around the 2007 Reitz Four Video¹ highlighted the ongoing role of rugby in the construction of violent (and often) militarised masculinities in South Africa. Sport, and rugby in particular, is taken as being an apparently innocent site of popular culture for reproducing and/or performing gender, with overt masculinities being emphasised. The Reitz Four video made in 2007 by white male university students from the Reitz Residence at the University of Free State to circulate among themselves, was a response to the 'threat' that their residence and rugby team would be integrated. In the grotesque and deeply demeaning footage, the initiates, workers employed by the university, are seen taking part in mock-initiation rites normally performed by students entering the residence. The mock initiation

included labouring in trials on the athletic track, being taught rugby scrumming and tackling techniques by their 'coaches', and adapting subservient, submissive behaviour to emphasise the 'lackey' system of colonialist school mentality. The headlines and reports on the video reflect that the four were alleged to have made the workers drink items into which human urine had 'apparently' been introduced (later identified as Oros orange juice during the trial) (*Times Live*, July 22 2010; *Free State Times*, 11 March 2011)

the video starkly raised the ongoing role of rugby-playing as spectacle, ritual and performance

Patterns in the video demonstrate how racial and masculine superiority is performed in the cultural context of rugby. Interpreting the video, the role of rituals in creating masculine identity is prominent in the high-school like initiation where sporting prowess and skill were filmed, timed and coached by the students. The symbolic significance of the game is here seen as an act of control and domination over a minority - particularly linking assertion of power over others - in this instance, black workers. The cultural and political significance of the video was that it starkly raised the ongoing role of rugby-playing as spectacle, ritual and performance - allowing a historically privileged group to confirm its sense of omnipotence, even at a moment when South Africa's democracy appears to be contesting this dominance.

Some responses to the video tended to see it as an *anachronistic* throwback to the actions of men with paranoid delusions

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of absolute omnipotence as well as deep fears about their eroded hegemony.² These responses tended to see the sport as an a-historical and timeless echo of performances and constructions of masculinity that were fomented in the apartheid context. Others preferred to see this as an isolated incident associated with the historically Afrikaans university where certain 'backward' individuals were resisting integration. The events were much publicised and debated in all the major daily newspapers, radio talk shows and on prime time news reporting. The high profile of the case also reached the foreign media which prompted a need for damage control to be initiated. Jonathan Jansen (the Vice Chancellor of Free State University), established a mini 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission' where unreserved apologies were issued, and later accepted by those offended (*City Press*, 26 February 2011).

teachers need to consider the ways in which dominant images and meanings of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' are unjust

Contrary to the idea that this incident was exceptional, I will go on to show that performances and constructions of hegemonic white masculinity have continued to play a major role in university rugby playing in the present, and are not a peculiar feature of the Reitz residents at a historically white university which has been especially resistant to democratic transformation and integration. In so doing, I will raise the significance of exploring changing performances of masculinities and femininities in the context of rugby-playing in the Western Cape. I argue that while the game reveals clear patterns of racial and patriarchal aggression, it also illustrates moments where racial, gendered and class identities and meanings are unsettled, contested or confused.

Rugby and team sports in South Africa have been the subjects of extensive scholarly discussion and social commentary. Theorising of 'sportocracy', ideas about socialisation and analysis of gendered, racial and classed roles, have foregrounded the centrality of team sports in the complex enlisting of popular culture and leisure in maintaining relations of power and privilege in South Africa.

Writing several years ago for *Agenda*, Cora Burnett (citing Hargreaves, 1994:72) comments that "women lack the automatic equality and entitlement in sport that men enjoy". Burnett proffers that mainstream sport could be read as 'male-stream'; as patriarchal values are perpetuated by decision making that excludes women's participation and marginalises women's sports ie Hockey. She also invokes the concept of 'sportocracy', used by several commentators to describe the role of sports in confirming hegemonic codes of masculinity, regulating the marginalisation of 'un-sporting' masculinities, and ensuring communal affirmation of dominant codes of masculinity through, for example, spectatorship. Developing this concept in relation to the Soccer World Cup, Eric Richardson (1999) argues that teachers need to consider the ways in which dominant images and meanings of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' are unjust. Research suggests that these inequalities are perpetuated in schools (Moletsane, 2005). Richardson (1999, citing Fitzclarence & Hickey, 2001:131) continues that:

"certain people will try to argue that it is 'natural' for boys to play Soccer and Rugby; the truth is that sports were socially constructed and produced historically, and the exemplary status of sport, as a test of masculinity, which we now take for granted, is in no sense natural."

Richardson's (1999) discussion is reinforced by Fitzclarence & Hickey's (2001:119) observation that, in most instances, the agenda appears to be a racial-political one mounted on a sporting platform; a "remaking of an old narrative in dramatic new forms".

Yet a review of rugby-playing in relation to its reconfiguration by, for example, the mass media, commodity items such as sportswear and changing patterns of spectatorship resulting from technological developments under capitalism, suggests quite complex patterns in the present. Sport has seemed to remain impervious to historical change, yet in some ways it has been subject to change. It should be stressed that these changes are not always positive leading to new gender performances and more democratic (non-racial) forms of playing

and spectatorship. In fact, changes to sports sometimes reinforce and *deepen* patriarchal and other oppressive patterns in the public sphere. In present-day South Africa, we continue to confront deep socio-gender issues in public life; with the political backdrop of our nation still predominantly male and 'traditional', we confront, for example, our state president, supporting polygamy and attired in traditional war garb - taking the opportunity to demonstrate his patriarchal authority at such events.

A traditional Zulu war-cry dance and its comparable Maorian counterpart in the Haka performed by New Zealand's All Blacks before every game - as with similar Hakas used by the Tongas and Samoans - emphasise cultural and regional masculinities and war rituals. Although these performances reconfigure fairly constant expressions of aggression, they also suggest that rugby is constantly opening itself up to new performances in popular culture that resonate, at particular moments, in the wider society. Maybe sport and rugby especially, does not in fact remain as static as it appears to be. I speculate in what follows that, while rugby-playing remains an important site of violent and pseudo-militarised masculinities, its meanings and contexts are shifting in the domains of neo-liberalism, commodity culture and in the performances of gender and sexuality. I suggest that we need to take into account the distinct role of capitalism, in commodifying images of masculinity, and the role and meaning of certain sports.

The overly enthusiastic claim that rugby is now a unifying space for conciliation and integration among classes, genders and races is deemed as an 'official myth' by Burnett (2001) and the buying into of the idea of Rugby (and Soccer) in unifying the nation remains a masculine and elite project. The 'official myth' appears to engender consensus and participation of the mass of people. The hype and euphoric *gees* (spirit), while distracting and intoxicating, is also somewhat sinister. The premise of mass participation it is built on has dubious political value, and - ultimately - does not challenge fundamental gendered, racial and class relations in society.

I draw especially on the concept of sportocracy in theorising the complex and often contradictory spectacles, self-iden-

tifications and representations of a post-apartheid generation of young white men and women in relation to sport. With the absence of compulsory military conscription since 1990 the generation of young men born in the 1990s (now reaching their early twenties) have needed an alternative to assert the gender performance required to elicit respect among their parents, peers, and indeed, future partners: ensuring the continuation of the male sports culture. Parental involvement in such selection processes is noticeable at elite institutions. Class structure and privilege resonate with the perennial South African class debates on the "haves" and the "have nots", and mirrors the volatile post-apartheid political landscape.

Rugby and masculinities in the Western Cape

Rugby in South Africa has long been a site for the battle between contending masculinities. Configured around 'Ikeys', the rugby team at the 'English' University of Cape Town and 'Maties', players at the Afrikaans University of Stellenbosch, I go on to raise the significance of new technologies and social and economic forces in South Africa's current sportocracy.

we need to take into account the distinct role of capitalism, in commodifying images of masculinity, and the role and meaning of certain sports

These include social networking, the growing competitiveness of Rugby paying in the context of advertising and commodity capitalism, the impact of mass media in selling and glamourising sport as spectacle, and the pivotal role of spectatorship in shaping the complex gendered performances of young men and women.

The Varsity Cup was conceptualised by 1995 World Cup captain Francois Pienaar, First National Bank and (Afrikaans business giant) Steinhoff as a vehicle to encourage rugby competition at post high school (university) level: a niche in between adolescent and adult levels of play (see Matieland, 2008; Du Plessis, 2011).

As with The Currie Cup, Super 15 Rugby series and Tri-Nations occupy the rugby

calendar for 11 out of 12 months of the year (memorialising Rugby as a permanent fixture on national sporting psyche). But an added level of competition was needed to capture the elite future leaders and supporters of the institution of sportocracy. Not only do universities and colleges compete for a title, they compete for their university and college identity: bringing language and culture, and indeed privilege and the notion of cultural superiority, back into the equation. As winners of The Varsity Cup for the first three years, Stellenbosch's Maties crystallised the notion of Afrikaans domination of the game, although 2011 saw the keys of the University of Cape Town taking the trophy and realigning the domination for culture/language superiority (Claasens, 2011).

As fascinating as the revisiting of history and imbalance of advantage is, the observer cannot deny the influence of technology, social and economic forces in the notion of *sportocracy*. With the advent of the global village culture facilitated by the World Wide Web and social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, many obstacles to creating a platform for social comment are removed (see *Article* by Tanya Bosch in this issue). Privilege and access via mass-media entitlement and connection no longer impose restrictions on offering social commentary. Such forums have changed the profile of sport tremendously.

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In many ways, sport *appears* no longer to be an elitist privilege in which a small minority participate as players and viewers. Current forms of spectatorship and public talk about games include different races, classes and age groups. Thus, the inclusive global culture associated in South Africa with the Rugby World Cup today differs totally from the exclusionary world of, for example, New Zealand's 'whites only' Springbok tour in 1981 under sanctions and political isolation (Claasens, 2011).

There are complex and contradictory spectacles, self-identifications and representations of the post-apartheid generation

in relation to sport and commodity culture. This is vividly conveyed in rugby culture. Young female students at university are deemed socially viable and accessible if they are seen to be promoting and participating in the Varsity Cup culture, both as spectators and part of the general campus campaign (ie wearing a themed jersey on a specific day).

The Miss Varsity Cup beauty competition holds much prestige and beauty is judged as representation of the university in question. To 'date' a member of the Rugby team holds much social prestige and is rewarded by the student and parent community alike. The exceptions aside, ordinarily beautiful, intelligent and autonomous young women revert to a subservient, 'cheerleader' mentality to appear to be supportive of their men as they go into battle against the other teams. It is reminiscent of a revisiting of "*laager*" (retreat into a position of self-defence) mentality that is unique to the South African cultural and political landscape.

Girls have never been more 'equal' in a university setting, yet they choose to 'dumb down' their liberation and group together as cheerleading, coquettish and (often) flirtatious spectators. At provincial level it is considered extremely prestigious to feature as one of the Sharkettes or Stormers Girls in skimpy, sexy cheerleading outfits, introducing and capturing the requisite 'male gaze' of spectators, players and cameramen alike. Auditions for such positions involve much competition and professionalism. Facebook and university websites are active and highly visible outlets for the participation and promotion of such culture: from a singular and collective viewpoint. Young women feel pressurised to know the score, to know the team, and to know the culture in order to fit into campus life. Interestingly, this is no different to their mothers and grandmothers who, a generation or two ago, went to university to find a husband or establish social connection and familial respectability. Sporting commodity culture promotes participation, with the mothers of young women actively promoting and enjoying the event both on the websites and in the rugby stands.

Glamourising Rugby for the nation

As illustrated in the concept of the Varsity Cup and the Currie Cup, together with prestigious schoolboy selection competitions such as the Danie Craven Week, commodity capitalism is contingent on the success of such specifically targeted campaigns. Sports commentators have engaged in much debate about how the players are exhausted after a year on the field with (only) a 3-week break over Christmas and New Year, due to such commodity culture. Sport is big business and entire TV channels (such as M-Net's Supersport 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5) are dedicated to the commercialism and promotion of such events.

Games and advertising are placed at specific times to capture specific audiences and maximise advertising gains. The impact of mass media in selling and *glamourising sport as spectacle* - as well as the pivotal role of spectatorship in shaping (complex) gendered performance of young men and women - is crucial to the successful promotion of Rugby. Audiences in stadiums generate profit from ticket sales, food and beverages and, of course, merchandise sold in support of the team, its mascot and players.

Spectatorship is no longer confined to white, male, beer-drinking minorities but adverts and pan-shots of the spectator stands feature the new demographics of young, old, and a multi-coloured fan culture that includes increasingly female audiences.

'*Lady Rugga*', a recent success on Super-sport 1, is a further sign of Rugby's interest in attracting women viewers. Elma Smit, the young 25 year-old white, Afrikaans, Stellenbosch-educated lawyer, was chosen as the new Rugby commentator in the rundown to the World Cup. She is married to a rugby addict and comes from a family of rugby playing men from Stellenbosch and the Cape (Varsity Cup, 2011). She, together with ten finalists of varying colour and competence, vied for the title based on their knowledge of the game, and = tacitly = their beauty, and the ability to generate female viewership figures. The winner is beauty-pageant worthy and will enjoy a male following based solely on her looks. Without realising, the notion of 'sportocracy' is reconfirmed as a gender-

based issue, once again. Most female commentators and news readers have to be attractive to capture their audience, yet their male counterparts are selected purely on their knowledge or family/sporting name (many are ex-Springboks or originate with moneyed sporting families) (Du Plessis, 2011).

In some ways, the class, colour and race issues appear to have been erased in many forums that promote and celebrate rugby. The E-TV generation of reality shows and 24 hour Music Television has also impacted on the culture, lifestyle and social imitation of modern sportocracy's youth.

the spectator stands feature the new demographics of young, old, and a multi-coloured fan culture

In short, then, the opening up of spectatorship to include, formally, all races and classes, and the inclusion of black players in prestigious teams, especially the national team, are only two of the numerous ways in which rugby-playing has been commodified and packaged in the interests of nation-building. A range of symbols, personalities, consumer items and pop culture icons now work to market and popularise rugby, and to establish its centrality in various form of national discourse. This clearly reveals the extent to which South African citizens have been persuaded that a sport which has been deeply connected to the brutality, violence and power of particular groups can be embraced as a highly glamorous and compelling national event. At the same time, the new relations, identities and performances associated with the game constantly may also suggest ways in which old patterns of dominance in rugby - within the context of commodity capitalism - have become increasingly uneven, gradual and ambiguous. In his analysis of soccer and the manufacturer of South African national identity, Torgeir Fjeld connects the marketing coordinated by the SABC to sport and the making of national identity in 1998. He argues (2000:403):

"It should come as no surprise that the SABC used the Soccer World Cup to disseminate a version of the new South African nation. Common myths and

traditions are central to imagined and national communities, and the World Cup was a possible moment in a line of national victories. The national broadcaster used epic elements in an attempt to fix the meaning of the nation's recent past as leading inevitably to the birth of the multicultural nation."

Yet the 'excess' which commodity capitalism unleashes (proliferating symbols, multiple voices and commentary, young women and men negotiating identities in the context of struggles for changed gender relations and sexual rights; spectators and viewers confronting the sport in the context of many other social challenges) might mean that today the fabrication of a unified nation through sport may be far less of a seamless web than was the case just over a decade ago.

Notes

1. The video can be viewed at www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4jq_sucA3410 min - 5 Mar 2008.
2. Many responses on U-tube express disgust over the video. Soudien (2010) argues that deeper analysis of university integration, the initiation rituals and institutional changes at universities could ask "Who holds responsibility for the Reitz Four?" as opinions veer between white defensiveness and black outrage.

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