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Journal of Sport History, Volume 46, Number 2, Summer 2019, pp. 302-317
(Article)

Published by University of Illinois Press



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A Field of Dreamers on Stolen Land

Practices of Unsettling on the Recreational Softball Diamonds of Tkaronto

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The game of baseball and the diamond upon which it is played function within North American society to stabilize settler colonial identities and processes. This paper draws on ethnographic research of the Field of Dreamers Cooperative Softball Association in Toronto, Ontario, to explore how this recreational softball league attempts to create radical spaces of play within, against, and beyond the dominant power structures that govern social relations in a settler colonial context. This study describes the practices and processes by which the league works to unsettle their spaces of play from the national myths of baseball history and settler futurity. It also reflects on the Field of Dreamers' endeavors to create relationships and practices that acknowledge the territories on which they play while disrupting social relations that often exclude people from organized sports and public space.

KEYWORDS: settler colonialism, decolonization, belonging, politics of play, baseball, recreational softball, gender

The word “SkyDome” is spray-painted in bright blue on a piece of plywood attached to the backstop of diamond number one in Trinity Bellwoods Park, a nod to the former name of Toronto’s publicly funded professional baseball stadium prior to its most recent corporate rebranding as the Rogers Centre. The park is in the gentrifying neighborhood

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of West Queen West, and while the sign evokes the perhaps ironic “classy-trashy” vibe of the hipsters who have moved into this space over the last decade, it nonetheless acts as a reassertion and reimagining of place. The warm fluorescence of the ballpark lights strikes the sign at an angle on this early May evening, making visible the dew beading along its edges, signifying a new season and new beginnings.

On the field, assembled along the baselines, is a motley crew of recreational softball players wearing the jerseys of the Field of Dreamers Cooperative Softball Association (FDCSA). The jerseys share a common logo on the front but sport different colors on the sleeves, signifying the four different teams.¹ Feedback from the rented speaker awkwardly and abruptly announces the beginning of the opening ceremonies. The voice of one of the players, today’s announcer, booms across the park: “Please gather on the field of play, facing home plate. Before we embark on this season, let us take time to acknowledge the land. All players are asked to turn and face the direction of your place of birth.” A flurry of shifting, twisting, and turning takes place as players position themselves as best they can, facing the place they were born (borrowing, deconstructing, and subverting a nationalist tradition from the Japanese high school baseball tournament *Kōshien*). The announcer waits for players to turn and settle before continuing: “We gather today to play the game of ball, a very old game that asks us to reflect upon the journey of leaving and coming home. In order to recognize our relationships with the land on which we play, please take a moment to reflect upon the journeys that you and your family took to arrive upon these territories.” A crowd of spectators is drawn into the procession trying to decipher whether this is an interactive art piece or reality. It is reality. In unison, players bow their heads and begin a sincere moment of contemplation. “Please turn back and face home.”

At this point, the announcer reads the following statement:

We want to thank and honour the peoples of the Three Fires Anishinabek Confederacy, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and the Huron-Wyandot Nation for their longstanding and continued tending to relationships with this land. *Tkaronto* in Mohawk means “where there are trees standing in water” and is a phrase to describe this place we call home. We are situated near the Great Lake Ontario at the confluence of the Credit, Don, Humber, and Rouge Rivers. These are the four houses of our league and these are the four names of our teams. These names remind us of our responsibilities to these territories and to the land on which we play. While we are sorted in different houses, we are connected together through the goals, aspirations, and principles that guide our league and our relationships to this land. We put down tobacco to thank the land for gifting us this field of play.

Giibwanisi and Janine, two of the league’s Indigenous players, jog from their spot on the baseline to the batter’s box, where they thank each of the four directions and then set down a small pinch of tobacco on home plate. The ceremony ends with Michael, a local park user, calling out “Let’s Make Baseball!”

For the last ten years, the Uncertainty recreational softball team, the antecedent of the FDCSA, has engaged in political practice through resistance to gender binaries and misogynist sports cultures on the baseball diamonds of Toronto while playing in mainstream recreational leagues. In 2016, as the team succeeded in achieving its aspirations to create a league of its own, members were confronted with what Tuck and Yang refer to as



Figure 1. Field of Dreamers logo, circa 2017, L J Robinson, with permission from artist.

“incommensurabilities” between their goal to create a space for radical play in a city-run park and the settler colonial context in which such a commons is imagined.² The organizers of the league believed that they could not operate without confronting how the myths of baseball are deeply entwined in the settler colonial processes of erasure, appropriation, and naturalization.³

This paper draws on ethnographic research of the FDCSA to analyze how this league has sought to create radical spaces of play within, against, and beyond the dominant power structures that govern social relations in a settler colonial context. Our study uses an ethnographic approach to “read sport critically.” In reading sport critically, researchers focus on a particular sporting event or personality as a way to explore the complex and interrelated power relations that structure sport along the lines of ability, class, race, gender, sexuality, and so forth.⁴ Such an approach to the study of sport encourages scholars to treat sporting events and participants as cultural texts.⁵ Our paper extends this trajectory of inquiry by treating the texts associated with the FDCSA (such as city permits, rule books, batting orders, and team rosters) as ethnographic entry points to explore the social relations that structure players’ experiences in the league. As Dorothy Smith articulates, we should not study texts solely as sources of information; instead, they must be studied “as they enter into people’s local practices of writing, drawing, reading, looking and so on. They must be examined as they co-ordinate people’s activities.”⁶ Here, we investigate how texts also coordinate practices of play.

FROM THE SHORES OF LAKE OTSEGO TO THE DIAMONDS OF TKARONTO

The game of baseball as a rarefied cultural symbol in American society functions to stabilize settler identity. Through the promotion of the game as a quasi-religious practice with its own hallowed sites of pilgrimage and its storied origins in the pastoral lands of early colonial society, baseball functions within popular culture as a key signifier that the settler state is a white possession.⁷ The spread of baseball in the North American settler colonial cultural imaginary can be traced to its early play by soldiers waging “Indian wars” in the eighteenth century and as a “civilizing project” intended to remake Indigenous sociocultural spaces into colonial ones.⁸ By the start of the twentieth century, “the notion of ‘Baseball as America’ (as a recent Baseball Hall of Fame exhibit was named) had a deep resonance in

the United States. As such, baseball became a site of contestation over who belonged and who was an outsider within the American settler state.⁹ Backed by its own creation myths, the game of baseball is characterized by its proponents as a normatively white pastoral game that differentiates American settler society from both its European colonial ancestors and Others. These Others are either integrated into the naturalized domestic culture through projects of assimilation or those who are forever marked as “always other, always elsewhere, recent, unfamiliar, and impossible.”¹⁰

National sporting cultures amplify settler identities because they are loaded with cultural significance but also because spaces of play are a means for settlers to appropriate Indigenous territory. For instance, Goenpul scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues in her book *The White Possessive* that the sport of surfing and the beach are key sites where racialized and gendered transgressions, fantasies, and desires are played out through the reiteration of the Australian nation as a white possession.¹¹ Similarly, the game of baseball and the diamond act as key sites of white possession in the U.S. and Canadian settler imaginary.¹²

The struggle over history is also a critical part of the opening ceremonies for the FDCSA. The act of engaging in ceremony and territorial acknowledgment before the season begins might be read as uneventful, but, in the current political structure of Canadian society—in an era both of widespread Indigenous decolonization and resurgence and official moves toward reconciliation—the public engagement in acknowledging the land can be seen as a historical local sporting event.¹³ As activists and community organizers, the league members also have strong mnemonic capacity to articulate the significance of the event to a broader audience.¹⁴ They do so by engaging the opening ceremonies as a disruptive act. Players relate to the pregame ceremony as a means to disrupt the ongoing structure of settler colonialism, one that historically situates (shapes?) the way people interact with the park, the way Indigenous park users are surveilled and policed, and the way that the municipal government allocates permits for play.¹⁵ Given that baseball’s rituals and culture are steeped in the three pillars of settler colonialism (that is, the appropriation of territory, violence toward Indigenous peoples, and the construction of settler identity), the opening ceremony at Trinity Bellwoods Park serves as a form of disruption of what Bruyneel calls “settler practice.”¹⁶ Doing so is an attempt by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous players in the league to enact relationships of mutuality, respect, and reciprocity in a public way.

Terrance, one of the captains of the Don River team speaks to the importance of this ritual:

I think the interesting thing about people watching [the opening ceremonies], because it is still, as public as it is, some small diamond in the corner of a park where people are doing other things. Those sorts of acts are interesting, I think, in that they don’t come across as performance for an audience, because there’s no audience and no expectation of an audience. Anyone who is an audience, is like, “Well, this obviously isn’t for me.” In a hilarious way, it then becomes “Oh, my god, people are doing this in earnestness!” I can only imagine what it might mean to watch that, to watch a ritual of sorts that isn’t . . . a performance for an audience, It’s trying to create a legit ritual that matters to the participants.

This public engagement in ritual, however, can still be limited in its ultimate goal to engage meaningfully in some form of decolonial practice, particularly when the league’s claim

to that space is predicated on a complex system of city permits that assert authority over who uses public parks and for what purposes. This contradiction is made more pressing given that members of the league are aware of the important critiques by Sto:lo author Lee Maracle and Métis scholar Chelsea Vowel (among others) that assert the limits of land acknowledgments.¹⁷

For Giibwanisi, a member of the Humber River team, the land acknowledgment that moderates the opening ceremonies is a move toward re-engaging with the long history of relationships that operate on the league's space of play:

I thought [the opening ceremony] was really humbling and well intentioned. . . . It's really hard, especially when you live in a concrete jungle, to have respect for the land. [We] were talking about the four rivers and honoring the nations that come from those territories and those rivers, and I thought that was remarkable because I think that was the ultimate gesture in being able to represent Indigenous peoples in a good way rather than the Cleveland Indians or whatever else, right?

This ritual has prompted players to question their relationship to the historical use of this space. For instance, the baseball diamond on which they play is actually built atop another important waterway. Garrison Creek runs under Trinity Bellwoods Park and was for thousands of years an important site of relationships for many Indigenous nations, including the Huron-Wyandot, the Petun, the Senecas, and the Anishinaabe.¹⁸ As Haudenosaunee historian Suzanne Methot explains, *Tkaronto* was a place of trade, travel, and commerce and played an important role in relationships guided by the Dish with One Spoon treaty.¹⁹ One key site of these relationships for the Mississauga Nation in the eighteenth century was adjacent to Garrison Creek at the corner where Queen and Shaw Streets now stand in Toronto, the site of the present-day baseball diamond. This history, this situatedness, is not irrelevant to the opening ceremonies and, as Giibwanisi argues, is central to the entire purpose of the league:

When you make those good intentions, when you put down tobacco, engage in ritual, thank those blades of grass, those little pebbles, because they all have spirit, right? . . . That's probably why the league is the way that it is, in such good shape. Those spirits recognize the intention that is being put out there; they recognize that there is something that is happening, that people are trying to make this effort. So, I think cultivating that relationship to the land is really important, even if people aren't aware of it.

This process of ceremony and thanksgiving is relational, political, spiritual, physical, and emotional all at once; it seeks both to affirm the long history of relationships that preceded the game being played and to disrupt the sense of settler belonging that permeates public space and sports traditions more generally. This settler colonial relationship is characterized by a particular form of *domination* that draws on "interrelated discursive and nondiscursive facets of economic, gendered, racial, and state power."²⁰ These mechanisms of power weave themselves into even the most mundane spaces of play (like recreational softball) where they replicate relationships that work to stabilize settler identity through the erasure and dispossession of Indigenous peoples of their lands, cultures, traditions, and systems of governance. This structure seeks only to secure settler futurity through the inherent logic of the disappearance of Indigenous presence on these territories. Conversely the opening

ceremonies work to prefigure the possibilities of relationships guided by Indigenous futurities within the league's space of play.²¹

A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN: THE POLITICS OF PLAY

Play is powerful. As a site of socialization, autonomy, practice, and mutuality, the act of playing has helped humans develop vital survival skills, has modeled cooperation, has promoted creativity, and has asserted freedom from authoritarianism.²² At the same time, rules that govern who is allowed to play and regulate the way that people play have nonetheless been enforced by the same set of interlocking structures of power that govern our material social relations. Jallicia Jolly shows, for instance, how black pleasure is a political act in an era of antiblack state-sanctioned violence.²³ Similarly, Downey and Neylan explain how Indigenous peoples used sporting events as spaces to challenge, resist, or displace colonial agendas and as opportunities to continue long-standing relationships of diplomacy and practices outlawed in other areas of life.²⁴ As Harney and Moten argue, “[W]hat’s most important about play is the interaction.”²⁵ Games provide the opportunity to move into new ways of thinking and new sets of relations, what Harney and Moten articulate as “a new way of being together, thinking together.”²⁶

Merle, a captain for the Rouge River team, echoes this:

I think about play as a way of experimenting with different ways of being in the world. I think that’s what we are doing. We’re experimenting with other ways of being. I think there are limitations in terms of not everyone can be on our teams—so the reach is pretty small. But for what we are trying to do, I think it’s amazing and it is really important for me.

Merle keenly suggests this experimentation is not without its flaws and contradictions. One central debate taking place within the FDCSA is about whether engaging in mainstream leagues or creating a league of their own might have the greater political impact. For instance, Farrah, a former player with the Uncertainty team and someone who has not yet participated in the Field of Dreamers, articulates the risk of creating a league that is more insular in its scope:

I think that the problem is that you can be very insular any time you have these spaces where you come together around all of the things that you are against with a very small group of people. What was more interesting to me in the [mainstream] league is that you come together on the basis of something very small and simple that you are interested in: baseball. Maybe your political beliefs might be different, but it isn’t the same people that you see in your [political] organizing. There’s potential in that.

Farrah touches on an important theme running through discussions within the league. Where is it most effective to intervene in spaces of play? How do you measure political impact? What are the social and political goals of the league?

Annelies, a member of the league’s coordinating committee, responds to some of these questions by trying to articulate the reasons that the Uncertainty team dissolved to form the FDCSA:

We’re not in that [corporate mainstream] league disrupting and building relationships with other teams, which sometimes we did . . . and sometimes [other teams] thought that we were, like, totally ridiculous and almost didn’t deserve to be there

because we had too many non-cis male people on the team. So, yeah, we're absolutely not as visible, not taking up that space, and that's something to bear in mind; but I think there's capacity-building happening in this league, and we're trying to take our principles to the next level. We've included people in the Field of Dreamers who don't want to play in mainstream leagues at all because of past terrible experiences of marginalization and stratification of who belongs in sports. As loving as our team can be, other teams make that experience negative. So even though we're not taking up that space, at this stage we're making huge strides in realizing the political possibilities for capacity-building. People are taking that into other sports spaces and into other political spaces. I think the payoff is really big.

Here, the tipping point for Annelies and for those invested in the FDCSA as a radical project of play is the possibility that these small acts have to promote infinite proliferation. The ways that players intentionally invest in the league's registration process, the gendered dynamics of the league, the rules and statistics that are kept, the cooperative environment that is created, and the meaningful commitment to belonging all work to push these politics and practices outward rather than keeping them insular. This investment is made especially evident by the fact that almost half of the players in the league are involved in some form of coordinating activities including being captains of teams, organizing social and political events, and participating in communications and logistics. By taking part in play as an act of resistance and prefiguration in the FDCSA, players articulate their league as part of a trajectory of radical baseball leagues that includes the radical migrant leagues in the borderlands, trans* and lesbian reclamations of baseball spaces and perhaps most famously of the vibrant and pervasive Negro Leagues that emerged as prefigurative spaces of the black radical imagination in the era of baseball's official segregation.²⁷

So, what does this politics of play look like in practice? As the Field of Dreamers work to collectively unsettle their spaces of play, they do so by imagining and enacting their league within, against, and beyond dominant power structures. These players are guided by a politics of queerness that is performative, "not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future."²⁸ As queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz suggests, this "queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world."²⁹ In the following sections, we explore how the FDCSA enacts these possibilities while trying to negotiate the contradictions of engaging with public space in a settler colonial context.

HOME SAFE: NEGOTIATING RADICAL SPACE ON STOLEN LAND

Players associated with the Field of Dreamers have participated in spaces of play in three different iterations: (1) as the Uncertainty recreational softball team within a corporate sports league; (2) as the Autonomous Baseball League (ABL) that sought to occupy/claim diamonds that were seemingly unused and refusing to seek permission; and (3) by obtaining a permit directly from the City of Toronto for the Field of Dreamers league. These strategies serve as examples of both a deviation in tactics and an evolution of a political project associated with recreational play.

One of the primary ways that recreational softball players access baseball diamonds in Toronto is by signing up with for-profit companies who organize local leagues, obtain city permits, coordinate schedules, set team rosters, and perform the regular duties of a

establishing a team. Despite this work, most of these leagues lack supports for teams beyond acquiring the permit and having an online portal to schedule games. After years of playing in these leagues, some members of the Uncertainty softball team attempted to create an alternative process whereby they would play baseball outside the confines (and high costs) associated with these leagues. Ryan, a member of the Don River team who has played with the Uncertainty and also helped organize the ABL explains:

[W]e grew frustrated with this idea that we're paying these private for-profit companies for the right to access our own public spaces. It seemed ridiculous. With the Autonomous Baseball League, we tried to adopt a park, and it wasn't the ideal space, but it kind of worked. I designed the logo for it based on the idea of a spokescouncil. It had all the bats that kind of looked like spokes, and it was based on this sort of loose federation idea that reflected the structure of [the league] well. [The ABL] was decentralized, influenced by our values but it had its challenges too.

Organizers with the ABL scouted baseball diamonds that were centrally located in Toronto but seemed to be seldom used. This intricate, albeit informal, process of searching for spaces to play developed out of an ethos of resistance to the neoliberal privatization and corporate creep that was occurring in a number of public spaces in the city. The ABL, instead, sought to negotiate with other park users to find spaces to play in a more informal way, reminiscent of sandlot baseball. This enabled the ABL to organize independently from the bureaucratic structure of the city, but there were important limitations. Most notably, players explained that not having a diamond where they could consistently organize games meant there was limited capacity to think through the collective aspirations of the league.

The ABL struggled with the tension between those who saw the space as friendly and informal and those who saw the space as a place of catharsis and competition. This tension between cooperation and competition was central to conflicts that arose within the ABL. Eventually, the instability of accessing the diamond on a regular basis and the uncertainty of whether the game could be disrupted by another team or other park users who held a permit, resulted in the dissolution of the league. Reflecting on this, Ryan notes, "There is a balance. The Autonomous Baseball League was more of a blue-sky, let's-rethink-the-whole-game approach, but people pushed back and were like, 'I don't want to play in a league where no one's keeping score.'"

After the dissolution of the ABL, players interested in continuing the project regrouped and returned to the mainstream corporate leagues under the moniker of the Uncertainty but with a renewed desire to form a league of their own.

Once it was decided to abandon the project of autonomously claiming space, the Uncertainty team members realized that they needed to work through the city to gain a permit for play. Over a period of three years, organizers of the FDCSA studied the city-permit structure, engaged in a petition drive to collect the signatures of seventy Toronto residents needed to apply for a permit, and then underwent the application process for acquiring the permit. In their application, the league organizers described their group as a "self-organized, community-run, volunteer and not-for-profit collective . . . organized around a collective effort to correct for the barriers that too often keep people from playing and enjoying baseball." The group made clear that the league they hoped to create would be more than a space to play each week; it would also be a commons, a political space that

foregrounds issues of equity and accessibility: “our league centers the experiences of players who identify as trans*, genderqueer, non-binary, and gender non-conforming. We seek to be socially conscious on the diamond, body-affirming, and in touch with the emotional, psychological, spiritual, experiences of playing ball,” the statement continues.

The initial proposal for a permit was rejected by the City of Toronto despite the fact that the city circulates institutional language of “inclusion” and states that it prioritizes community groups, particularly those that focus on “underserved groups.”³⁰ Ryan describes how players responded to this roadblock:

[T]he Field of Dreamers . . . it’s a grassroots initiative trying to very diligently follow the rules that were laid out by the city, and, when it became clear that, even though [the City of Toronto] said they were prioritizing community groups, that they weren’t, there was a quick political mobilization that happened that was actually pretty effective. It was able to find allies inside city hall, and those people applied leverage from within the city to accommodate the needs of the league.

Within hours of having their parks’ application rejected by the city, players and their allies mobilized a letter-writing campaign to voice their frustration. LJ describes how the city responded to the league’s pushback:

I was really upset, and [Craig] wrote a really solid and clear email which I forwarded to [Toronto City Councillor] Mike Layton. I think I got a response back in twenty minutes from him, and it was very, like, “Whoa, we’re going to get on this and figure out what’s going on!” It was maybe the only interaction I’ve had with city officials where I’ve felt like, “I’m on the good side of it.” They were so nice to us, and they pushed the right people to find [a diamond for us]. So I think our application and our commitment to making space for queer and trans* folks to play really spoke to somebody.

LJ’s reflection on how the Field of Dreamers were able to effectively leverage their experiences as activists to obtain a city permit brings into view the complex tensions that are inherent in obtaining municipal permits. In this instance, players were able to work within the system to secure a baseball diamond, but they are cognizant that many communities don’t have this organizing capacity. It was also a reminder that access to public space is controlled through state sovereignty. The FDCSA accesses public space to play softball in a way that resists power relations in mainstream sports culture, but they are also aware that this reliance on city permits is predicated on the settler state erasing Indigenous sovereignty and presence on these very same “public” spaces. In this way, their project may be understood as what Alexis Shotwell describes as “attempting to live ethically in compromised times.” Shotwell argues that “[p]ractices of colonialism are written into the infrastructure of the states founded through expropriation, and in this sense, they ascent from the past as the infrastructure of the present.”³¹ Such a position resonates with the many contradictions that the FDCSA faced in their negotiations to access a permit.

Players are aware that their city parks permit hooks them into a process in which their claim to city space is negotiated through a state apparatus. For instance, LJ refuses to characterize their ability to gain a permit as a clear victory:

I still think we got the space [from the city] because we’re nice and it is baseball [it’s not a hot button issue]. We’re good at writing letters and articulating for ourselves about

how this is a community-building project and those things that are really appealing to a city councillor like Mike Layton. I don't really know what else to say. I'm not like, "Yay! A win for the city." Yeah, no, I feel like we were kind of lucky and I'll take it.

At the same time, the league is an ongoing process of relationality that seeks to defy a logic or worldview that dictates that such a relationship to state-run bureaucratic structures is the only possible way to relate to land or to each other. One way that this occurs is through language that instructs permit holders to see public space as inherently under control of the state. For example, the permit stipulates, "[T]he General Manager, *at his or her sole discretion*, may cancel the Permit at any time and for any reason" and that the league's continued access to the space is dependent upon participants "abiding by all Federal, Provincial, and Municipal laws" (emphasis added).³² While the document does acknowledge that permit holders ought to attend to issues of safety and protect against discrimination, it does so in connection to government legislation such as the Ontario Human Rights Code, the Criminal Code of Canada, and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, with no territorial acknowledgment included in the permit. Linking public access to space with government legislation and state sovereignty is premised upon Indigenous dispossession.³³ While there are complicated contradictions wrapped up in how the Field of Dreamers access public space, players intend to utilize the softball diamond as a site to cultivate relationships that disrupt the forms of exclusion and marginalization that too often structure recreational sports.

THE INTIMACY OF A DOUBLE PLAY: RELATIONSHIPS AS CENTRAL TO UNSETTLING SPORTS

As a social and political project, the FDSCA is organized in a way that intentionally forefronts relationship-building, conflict resolution, and the affirmation of belonging. This relationality originates from the various social movement groups from which many of the players in the league participate. This relationality is exemplified primarily through the land-based practices of the opening ceremonies, the emphasis on creating a space of play for those who are often shut out from organized sports and public space, and most centrally on working through the forms of social exclusion and toxic masculinity that permeate recreational sports culture.

As Johann recounts, "For me, it was definitely key in the way I immigrated to Canada. When I arrived, I spent the first two months in jail, and the person who got me out was Saeed, a friend of a friend who played on the softball team." Johann became connected to a range of political organizations shortly after he arrived in Toronto because of his political affiliations in Mexico, but he still struggled to find a sense of community. The softball team provided him opportunities to develop meaningful relationships outside political organizations. Ryan, one of the members of the team when they supported Johann's release from detention, explains:

There's a lot of posturing in activist circles, but sometimes the most radical thing is actually how people treat and behave with each other. Sometimes you can be political just by how you relate to each other and take care of each other. That's something sports doesn't get credit for. It has all these legitimate drawbacks, but actually when you put people on a team together and ask them to sacrifice for each other or look

out for each other and you practice those relationships . . . it allows you to build more fulsome relationships.

Despite these feelings of belonging, Johann also spoke about the challenges he faced in trying to adapt to the changing culture of the team as the Uncertainty players tried to push back against the toxic masculinity that permeated both the mainstream league and their own team:

I'm constantly learning from my teammates, but it's tough because I have that level of consciousness that tells me, "Hey, Johann, we're not all the same, and things that you say might affect this and that." We have to play in a way that is not bullying, but . . . I felt bad. I never got discouraged to leave the team, even though I knew [the culture of] the team was changing. So, I felt like I needed to [make amends] and do what needs to be done because I respect what we've been doing, but I also wanted to make sure people [knew that I belong here].

Johann's reflections help illuminate some of the ways that the FDCSA struggles to facilitate feelings of belonging that are collective and intimate when people come from different experiences and cultures and have different relationships to the hegemonic cis-hetero-masculinity of sports culture. Indeed, baseball in the North American context has been a particular site in which colonial values, particularly hegemonic masculinity, continue to proliferate. Nick Trujillo's analysis of how hegemonic masculinity is represented in Major League Baseball shows that depictions of the ideal baseball player are closely tied to whiteness, as popular imagery of baseball heroes are often wrapped up in portrayals of the "rural cowboy who symbolizes the frontiersmen of American history."³⁴ In such a context, the supposed superiority of white cis-men and the subsequent subordination of cis-women, trans* folks, gender nonbinary/nonconforming people, and racialized communities becomes "naturalized." While Trujillo's study calls attention to the ways that sports operate to reproduce systemic power relations, others foreground how players challenge, resist, and even reappropriate sporting cultures.³⁵ For instance, Downey and Neylan note that, despite colonial agents' attempts to utilize sports to eliminate Indigenous people's traditions and practices, Indigenous participants used these spaces to subvert the colonial agenda and to exist on their own terms and periphery, including resisting settler colonial gender norms.³⁶ The FDCSA attempts to articulate these contradictions in their discussions during games, in league planning meetings, and in moments of conflict. As such, the league uses this space of play as a site to practice subverting and resisting dominant social relations such as misogyny, white supremacy, and toxic masculinity. Annelies argues that formalizing and institutionalizing practices that disrupt these dominant relations is vital to the success of the league:

To prioritize what makes nonexperienced and beginner players feel like this league is for them, not that they're a burden on the league, is a really huge thing that I haven't seen done well or done as thoroughly as what we're doing. I've seen it tried, but it's really working here. Part of that is . . . being conscious that's what we want to do and living it, living it every time we come out to the diamond, and every time we're talking about our games.

While baseball diamonds are often spaces in which participants value power, speed, agility, and mental toughness, the Field of Dreamers subverts such social relations by

intentionally working as a collective to balance competition with cooperation. Such a balance can be complex and is certainly not always straightforward.

Hegemonic masculinity is reproduced and resisted within the rulebooks and principles of recreational softball leagues. Rules can often reinforce a rigid gender binary that erases the presence and experiences of players who identify as trans* or gender nonconforming. They also set players up to anticipate that male-identified players are more highly skilled than female-identified players. For example, the rulebook of one mainstream recreational softball league in Toronto states, “The golden rule when making a batting order is that at no time should 3 men bat in a row. . . . If the male:female ratio is greater than 2:1, then the batting order is two (2) men followed by one (1) woman. The male order and female order must always stay the same.”³⁷ The assumption underlying such a batting order is that male-identified players are superior hitters and dispersing “less-skilled” female hitters throughout the lineup is supposed to protect against a team having an unfair advantage. LJ, a captain of the Credit River team, articulates how these rules, despite their intention of creating parity, served instead to objectify and diminish non-cis-male players:

The league was set up to create some . . . you know . . . theoretical parity. They would just yell, “We need a girl!” And so, these women were interchangeable, and they wouldn’t cheer for them. I remember a couple of us from our team started chatting with these women, and we would cheer for them. So, I felt like as a group we were going into these spaces and demonstrating a different way of being.

LJ’s experience of witnessing how gendered batting orders contribute to the exclusion and objectification of women/gender nonbinary folks and the practice of resistance performed by players on the Uncertainty illustrates the tension that underlies mainstream “co-ed” leagues.

In contrast to these rules, the FDSCA foregrounds the collective, relational, and cooperative aspects of playing baseball as constitutive of the way in which rosters are constructed. For them, it means creating a draft process and rosters where teams are balanced through equal dispersion of players based on self-identified skill rather than players identifying as “male” or “female.” These skill categories (Beginner, Intermediate, Experienced, Mentor) speak not only to one’s skill level but to one’s familiarity with the game and ability to take a leadership and mentorship role in the league. Annelies explains, “Organizing by self-identified skill level as opposed to this arbitrary gender binary makes so much more sense. It enables us to look to who can be mentors, look to people who are in that skill-building process, and then look to those who want to learn new skills.” The benefits of prioritizing the relational, cooperative aspects of playing flow in multiple directions. For instance, experienced softball players described that they were heartened by opportunities to take on mentorship roles and also to learn from other players. Giibwanisi describes his work to mentor and reflects on misogynist norms in the following way:

So being able to consistently challenge myself, because I have that competitive nature, but competitive is good as long as it’s, you know, as long as it doesn’t come out in a negative way, putting people down and stuff. For me, it was about being competitive, but being able to harness it where it’s not, just like, fully testosterone-charged, you know? Just being, not about me, but about the team, and about other players who may be just be learning and really trying to create this positive culture of being able to raise these people up. . . . I love being in a position like that.

The FDCSA tracks the score of each game, ranks teams according to wins and losses, and even keeps individual statistics such as batting average, slugging percentage, and the number of hits each player has. However, as Gibwanisi illustrates, the league also works to disrupt competitive relations that often structure sport by accentuating individual growth, skill development, and collective accomplishments. Merle affirms this is not a coincidence, suggesting it emerges from the feminist and queer political organizing with which many of the players in the league are involved:

I think we do both. We're doing solidarity work, so we have to center our relationships with the communities we are in relationship to. Because of that, it ends up being a lot of queer women who come from spaces that are really good at caring for each other, and we've all built skills around caring for each other and around conflict too. I think that's been really important, seeing conflict as something that isn't inherently bad, but as a way of growing.

Here, Merle's description reflects players' relationships of solidarity and commitment to engage with conflict rather than avoiding or ignoring it. These relationships are central to ongoing efforts to subvert aspects of baseball culture that reproduce broader power structures.

CONCLUSION

This ethnographic study reflects on the experiences and knowledges developed through the act of play within the FDCSA and its antecedents. As a process that seeks to disrupt the gendered transgressions, fantasies, and desires that play out in the game of baseball and its spaces of play as a white possession, the league seeks both to disrupt the settler colonial context and reimagine cultural symbols through a decolonizing lens that grapples with questions of land, belonging, cooperation, and gender nonbinary forms of being in place.

Khasnabish and Haiven argue that, while social movements typically measure "success" and "failure" through analyses of movements' outcomes, social movements most often dwell in the space between "not-success" and "not-failure."³⁸ Rather than reducing notions of social movements to strict criteria that determine success or failure, they focus on relationality, encounter, and dialogue within movements. For players within the FDSCA, success and failure are not measured by their ability to achieve a utopian ideal but rather measured through their ability to get better at practicing new ways of being. As LJ explains,

I think play or the way we organize it in the Uncertainty and in Field of Dreamers even more so, just allows you to try things out. We can try out ways of being with each other, ways of supporting each other, ways of being in community. It just feels like a constant experiment that is super rich. Oh, you can be like, "We're just playing baseball." But all the micro-interactions that happen by virtue of being bodies sharing space on a field like that and being active, that's political. It allows us to try something. We fail a lot. Not just in terms of winning or losing games, but we can mess up with each other in little ways and check back in and figure out, "Oh, that interaction felt weird for a variety of reasons." It provides a safer context for figuring out that stuff together.

LJ's reflections offer an important reminder that the league is a continuous collective exercise in carefully organizing an inclusive space to push forward social and political

objectives. And much like baseball, the social and political project of the Field of Dreamers is a process of failing better.³⁹



NOTES

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4. Mary G. McDonald and Susan Birell, “Reading Sport Critically: A Methodology for Interrogating Power,” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 16.4 (1999): 284.
5. Ann Travers, “Thinking the Unthinkable: Imagining an ‘Un-American,’ Girl-Friendly, Women- and Trans-Inclusive Alternative for Baseball,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 37.1 (2013): 84.
6. Dorothy E. Smith, “Texts and the Ontology of Organizations and Institutions,” *Studies in Cultures, Organizations and Societies* 7.2 (2001): 160.
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8. See David Block, *Baseball before We Knew It: A Search for the Roots of the Game* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), for the historical references to the playing of baseball during “Indian” wars in the eighteenth century; Allan Downey and Susan Neylan, “Raven Plays Ball: Situating ‘Indian Sports Days’ within Indigenous and Colonial Spaces in the Twentieth-Century Coastal British Columbia,” *Canadian Journal of History/Annales canadiennes d’histoire* 50.3 (2015): 442–68, for a discussion on the “civilizing” mission of baseball intended to remake Indigenous sociocultural-spaces.
9. Fortier, “Stealing Home,” 15–16.
10. See Seelochan Beharry, *The Prehistories of Baseball* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishing, 2005), for a discussion on baseball’s normative whiteness; Phillip J. Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Paces* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004); Jeffery Powers-Beck, “‘Chief’: The American Indian Integration of Baseball, 1897–1945,” *American Indian Quarterly* 25.4 (2001): 508–38, for a discussion of baseball as a mechanism of assimilation. See Katherine McKittrick, ed., *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Anthony Burgos Jr., “Left Out: Afro-Latinos, Black Baseball, and the Revision of Baseball’s Racial History,” *Social Text* 98 27.1 (2009): 37–58; and David J. Laliberte, “Foul Lines: Teaching Race in Jim Crow American through Baseball History,” *The History Teacher* 46.3 (2013): 329–53, for examples of the erasures of Others in baseball’s history.
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