

# Why “Sport in the University”?

## An Introduction

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Sports are ever-present on American university campuses, but there are few departments dedicated to their humanistic study. In part, disciplinary distinctions necessitate this: sports are a subject matter, not a methodology. This lack of a defined home on campus has long prompted troubling existential questions about the field. Prompted in part by just such questions in recent commentaries on the “state of the field” in the *Journal of American History* (2014) and the *Journal of Sport History* (2016), this special issue of *American Studies* is born from the shared belief of its guest editors of this special issue that the field of sports studies is in a position of unprecedented strength. We reject the defensive posture that so many sports studies scholars have assumed in reflecting on their work over the last forty years. We don’t mean to discount previous generations of sports studies scholars in doing so—to the contrary, we hope to both realize and extend the fullest possibilities of the field whose existence they have defended for so long. Nor do we pretend that sports studies departments are going to begin popping up all over the country. Rather, we assert that sports studies’ current strength—as manifested in the Sports Studies Caucus of the American Studies Association<sup>1</sup> and elsewhere—emanates from its lack of a single discipline and its simultaneous embrace of a multitude of them. Popular sport may be a cultural goliath, but it is multifarious, not a monolith. Be it embodiment, improvisation, performance, race and racialization, labor, subjectivity, education, politics, play, sexuality, language, or citizenship, sports impact

so many aspects of human experience that no single discipline is sufficient. If we want to have an impactful conversation about what sports are, and can be, in the American university, those attending to this scholarly work shouldn't come from only one corner of campus. In grappling with a force as culturally ubiquitous and economically powerful as commercialized sport, one cannot write alone, or even from a group of like-minded historians. As the outstanding work done in multidisciplinary fields including (but not limited to) Humor Studies, Material Culture Studies, Sound Studies, and War and Peace Studies demonstrate, American Studies and the American Studies Association (ASA) provide necessary space for diverse insights and methods to interact with and interrogate one another, producing new and distinct forms of knowledge.

In this introduction, I assess the conditions of scholarship in sports studies in two parts. The first section describes the development of the ASA's Sports Studies Caucus. In tracing the social and intellectual environment that has allowed it to flourish, I assert for the Caucus a position of discursive strength born of the multidisciplinary of the ASA and of American Studies more broadly. This work involves a review of the sports studies scholarship produced for and presented at the ASA Annual Meeting, as well as my anecdotal history of the Caucus, which I founded—with assistance from many of the scholars discussed here—in 2011. Marked as much by self-reflexivity as it is by critical judgment, then, the epistemologically messy narrative that follows is in many ways emblematic of the strength of American Studies as a multidisciplinary base for considering sports from a wide range of perspectives. The second section introduces the other contributions to this issue, each of which exemplifies the depth and vitality of sports studies as well as the field's increasingly fruitful relationship with American Studies.

### **Part I: Centering Sport in American Studies**

On October 9, 2015, I chaired a well-attended panel at the American Studies Association's Annual Meeting, co-sponsored by the ASA's Critical Prison Studies Caucus and the Sports Studies Caucus: "Between Misery and Resistance: The Connections between the Carceral State and Sporting Cultures." As I introduced the presenters—hailing from the academic disciplines of History, African and African Diaspora Studies, Earth and Environmental Sciences, English, Sociology, and, yes, American Studies—I couldn't help but smile. The multidisciplinary vitality and the far-reaching critical resonance of the study of sports had never been exemplified so forcefully at ASA. Considering that Sports Studies had no formal home in the ASA before 2012, the panel and turnout was quite an accomplishment. In just four years, the Sports Studies Caucus had fostered a critical home for scholars who come to sports-centered projects out of larger questions about identity, politics, history, and narrative. Assured this generative scholarly forum, not one minute was spent in defense of the panel's existence: Studying sports needed no justification.

Even so, just 11 months before, the *LA Review of Books* printed the following exchange as part of a Q&A with then-ASA President Lisa Duggan:

**[*LA Review of Books* contributor Sarah Mesle:] When I was first thinking about disciplinary issues in the early '90s, I would have described American Studies as a department for boys who wanted to write about baseball!**

[Lisa Duggan:] Well we still have that! I'm laughing, but that does describe a part of the field. But, if you look through the conference program, you see primary contractions [*sic*] of work in black studies, ethnic studies, histories and politics of sexuality, in addition to more overtly political work on settler colonialism or on US relations with other parts of the world. And then, while I'm not sure there are panels on baseball specifically, remember that [the 2014 Annual Meeting] is a conference on “The Fun and the Fury.” So there's a lot of interest in play, and games, and leisure—there are panels on games, on drug cultures and economies, and so forth. I think American Studies is interested in pleasure, and also in political economies of pleasure. So, you know [laughs]: there are a lot of parties, and then there are panels about parties!<sup>2</sup>

Signaling hegemonic and heteronormative politics, “boys who wanted to write about baseball”—presumably white—pejoratively represents Mesle's prior notion, which Duggan had taken pains to dispel earlier in the interview, that the critical priorities of American Studies are dictated by an antiquated New England-based nationalist narrative of white privilege. Though Duggan deftly and easily articulates the ASA's intellectual breadth and analytical depth in studies of the disempowered and marginalized as well as the ASA's commitment to empowering scholarly voices of all races, genders, and sexual orientations, she also tacitly accepts Mesle's pejorative idea that the study of sports is a reductive, mundane exercise that doesn't reflect the ASA's larger organizational strength or diversity. And while the 2014 Annual Meeting theme, “The Fun and the Fury,” may have been particularly well-suited for those who study spectator sports, the work of Sports Studies scholars has had little trouble resonating with other ASA themes (such as “The Reproduction of Misery and the Ways of Resistance,” “Beyond the Logic of Debt,” and, in November 2016, “Home/Not Home: Centering American Studies Where We Are”). What's more, Sports Studies scholarship is almost always intersectional with “black studies, ethnic studies, histories and politics of sexuality, in addition to more overtly political work on settler colonialism or on US relations with other parts of the world.”<sup>3</sup> In fact, as I will detail later in this article, the study of sport is exceptionally well

sued to capitalize on the multidisciplinary methods and omnivorous approach to cultural materials that the ASA actively fosters.

What, then, to make of this dissonance between the growing relevance and influence of innovative work in sports studies in the ASA and President Duggan's acquiescence to the notion that "boys who want . . . to write about baseball" fairly characterizes the field (the juvenile nature of which marks it as one to be avoided)? The easiest response is to characterize Mesle and Duggan as merely the latest in a long line of intellectuals who would automatically rebuff work on sports as trivial rather than engage it. Or as Elliott J. Gorn and Michael Oriard notably put it in their 1995 *Chronicle of Higher Education* piece "Taking Sports Seriously": "despite the obvious importance of sports in American life, only a small number of American academics have made a specialty of analyzing the relationship between athletics and culture, and their work remains ghettoized."<sup>4</sup> Nearly 20 years later, in her "State of the Field" in the *Journal of American History* (June 2014), sports historian Amy Bass cited Gorn and Oriard and suggested that little has changed, endorsing fellow historian Daniel A. Nathan's notion, expressed at an ASA Sports Studies Caucus panel in 2012, that "little movement [has] taken place toward the acceptance of sports history as a legitimate and important field, demonstrating a vast disengagement between the popular and the professional."<sup>5</sup> Bass goes on to outline important and innovative recent work in sport history that, she convincingly argues, has received less attention than it deserves. Given this perception, Bass's reaffirmation of Gorn and Oriard's notion that scholarship in sports studies has been "ghettoized" is understandable. Though her article was published before the *Los Angeles Review of Books* interview with Lisa Duggan, Bass seems to anticipate and reject Mesle's disparagement of the field.<sup>6</sup> Even as she persuasively defends sports history, however, Bass also inadvertently demonstrates the particular possibilities American Studies presents as an intellectual hub of scholarship on sports.<sup>7</sup>

I attended the 2011 ASA Annual Meeting in Baltimore, Maryland, uncertain as to whether I should even be there. Ensclosed in a graduate program in English at Washington University in St. Louis, with a fellowship from the American Studies Program, I attended ASA mostly because I received travel funding. Though I was personally and professionally interested in studying sports, I was unsure whether or not a dissertation on the subject was feasible. Still, I was lucky enough to find two sports-related panels on the 2011 program. The first, "Reading the Politics of the Sport Spectacle," proved life-changing. Chaired and commented on by Jennifer Doyle, the panel featured papers by Stan Thangaraj ("Huddling Up: Ballin', Shot Callin', and Constructing South Asian America," presented in absentia by Dr. Doyle), Erica Rand ("Swans Are the New Gay, or Racialized Imaginaries and Figure Skating Masculinities"), and Degane Sougal ("Legends of Unity: Identity, Sports, Romanticism"). Bringing together scholars with appointments in English, Anthropology, Art and Visual Culture, Women and Gender Studies, and Art History, the session seamlessly and powerfully linked the sports of basketball, figure skating, and soccer to the

politics of immigration, masculinity, sexuality, and globalization. These presentations boldly demonstrated not only that sports studies speaks to the concerns of a wide range of academic disciplines, but also that, more importantly, sports are deeply intrinsic to many of those concerns.

After the session, I enthusiastically approached the participants seeking their advice: How could I stay connected to them? Where could I access far-reaching, critically eminent sports studies work like theirs? They weren’t sure. Susan Birrell—co-editor of *Reading Sport: Critical Essays on Power and Representation* (2000), one of the most important sports studies books of the last two decades—happened to be in the audience and suggested that I join the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport (NASSS) and the North American Society for Sport History (NASSH). Though I have followed both organizations closely since then, and attended NASSH’s conference in 2014, I wasn’t satisfied with those options. For one thing, I am not trained as a sociologist or a historian (at least primarily), but as a literary scholar. For another, Doyle, Rand, and Sougal seemed just as unfamiliar with those organizations as I was. Though Birrell assured me that both organizations welcome and in fact encourage extra-disciplinary contributors (an assurance that I have subsequently observed to be true), I worried that a panel with the kind of methodological breadth and critical ambition I had just seen wouldn’t come into being in any organization with disciplinary limitations built into its nomenclature.

That afternoon, after recounting the panel’s energy and influence to a friend and fellow graduate student, I was reminded of the ASA’s system of thematically oriented caucuses. He had benefited from networking within the Early American Matters Caucus: Why, he wondered, couldn’t I reap similar rewards by establishing a caucus for sports studies? I was intrigued, but intimidated at the prospect of organizing scholars in a field that I had just discovered. Then I attended the 2011 Annual Meeting’s second sports-oriented panel, “The Labors of Leisure: Critical Perspectives on Work and Sport.” Chaired by Nancy Struna, the panel featured presentations by Theresa Runstedtler (“More than a Game: Black Labor in the Sports-Industrial Complex”), Annie Gilbert Coleman (“Working for Fun but Not Profit: Outdoor Guides at the Center and on the Margins”), Daniel Gilbert (“Bulked-Up Ballplayers: A Global Labor History of Performance Enhancement”), and Eli Jelly-Schapiro (“‘The Stands Bereft of People’: The Labor and Politics of World Cup Stadia”). Emphasizing the work of sport, the panel by its very nature deflected any notion that sports studies is “the toy department” of academia.<sup>8</sup> What’s more, “The Labors of Leisure” presentations earnestly crossed boundaries, be they national, environmental, racial, or economic. After the panel, I found myself again in discourse with the panelists and a member of the audience, David Leonard (author of the then-forthcoming *After Arttest: The NBA and the Assault on Blackness* [2012]), none of whom could give me a satisfying answer to my question: Where do I go to find dynamic multidisciplinary sports scholarship like theirs? This time, I followed up that question with another: If I were to attempt to form an ASA

Sports Studies Caucus, would you be interested? Needless to say, the response was enthusiastic. I left Baltimore with a mission, and more support than I could possibly have anticipated.

Following a flurry of e-mails, thirty-one scholars—including most of the people mentioned above—joined me in petitioning the American Studies Association to form the Sports Studies Caucus. Our proposal was approved on December 16, 2011, and we set to work organizing panels for the 2012 Annual Meeting in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Four panels proposed by caucus members were approved by the ASA program committee: “More than a Game: Global Sports, Exotic Bodies, and Contested Spaces” (David Leonard, Thabiti Lewis, Jose Manuel Alamillo, Noah Cohan), “Examining the Dimensions of Sport within the Empire of American Studies” (C. Richard King, Amy Bass, John Bloom, Daniel Nathan, Michael Oriard), “Sport and Empire: From the Caribbean to MacArthur Park” (John Nauright, Rob Ruck, Lara Putnam, Daniel Gilbert, Jennifer Doyle), and “Sports, Blackness, and the Body Politic” (Adrian Burgos, Joel Nathan Rosen, Roberta Newman, Millery Polyne, Frank A. Guridy).

All four panels expertly connected to the 2012 conference theme: “Dimensions of Empire and Resistance: Past, Present, and Future.” But the panel focused on the “Dimensions of Sport within the Empire of American Studies” was particularly compelling, especially since the panelists’ focus on reflexive historiography coincided with the Sports Studies Caucus’s debut. As Daniel A. Nathan writes in his commentary on Bass’s “State of the Field” (published in the same 2014 issue of the *Journal of American History*), the ensuing discussion was productive and sometimes tense. Nathan recalls that some in the audience suggested that work in sports is “driven by ‘naïve empiricism’ [or] ‘still dominated by too many fans with typewriters.’”<sup>9</sup> As to the former notion, cultural work on sport has long since looked beyond the “official” histories dictated by the box score and press release. For the latter, Nathan points out that while “many sports historians are, of course, also sports fans . . . just as many art historians are art aficionados and music historians are music lovers. Being passionate about a subject does not preclude one from being able to think or write critically about it.”<sup>10</sup> Refuting the old axioms about critical distance, Nathan’s *JAH* rebuttal strikes me as perhaps necessary for the discipline of history, but much less so for American Studies, especially as it has been instantiated at ASA in the twenty-first century. One of the most exciting things about attending the ASA Annual Meeting is that the members’ passion for their scholarship is as obvious (and celebrated) as their critical bona fides.

To be sure, Nathan and Bass, like Gorn and Oriard (the latter of whom was also present on the panel), are influential sports scholars who broke ground for all of the insightful work being done in sports history. They have also been kind, generous, and eager mentors to young humanities scholars doing work on sport. But, as neither they nor I realized in San Juan in 2012, the ASA Sports Studies Caucus represented something more than a continuation of sports history’s

disciplinary paradigm and its scholars’ struggle for recognition. It augured an expansion and transformation of that paradigm.

Still, there were hard lessons to be learned. Most notably, in 2013 one of the Sports Studies Caucus’s sponsored panels (as determined by a popular vote of caucus members) was rejected by the ASA Program Committee. “Home Teams: The Imagined Spaces and Collective Identities of American Sport,” featuring Bass and Nathan along with Michael Ezra and Carlo Rotella—all scholars of note—had a solid foundation in the then-forthcoming volume *Rooting for the Home Team* (2013), edited by Nathan and featuring essays from all four panelists. The panel’s rejection was a disappointment to many Sports Studies Caucus members and was taken as another example of a broader academic disregard for scholarship on sports. Another affiliated panel, “Beyond the Logic of Box Scores: Sports Media, Cultural Debt, and the Construction of Narrative” (Lori Amber Roessner, Annie Gilbert Coleman, Josh Roiland, Noah Cohan, Jack Obringer), was also rejected, while two panels were approved. Based on this news—especially the rejection of a sponsored panel with such distinguished scholars—I personally wondered about the caucus’s future in ASA. The two panels that were approved were more representative of the ASA and its commitment to liberatory pedagogy and resistance against global capital, however, and they demonstrated the epistemological means by which the Sports Studies Caucus would come to thrive.

The first, “Penalties, Sanctions, and Fines: Discourses of American Sports Gone Afoul,” was chaired by Lucia Trimbur and featured presentations by John Bloom (“No Taint of Professionalism: Bicycle Racing, Scandal, and Social Privilege in Early 20th-Century Washington, DC”), Jennifer Doyle (“Title IX and Its Peculiar Institutions: The Administration of Harassment”), and Simon J. Bronner (“Football First: The Discourse of Culture and Athletics in the Jerry Sandusky Scandal at Penn State”). It featured genuine disagreement about the possibilities for athletics on campus, centered on football exceptionalism and gender segregation, and left panelists and audience alike buzzing long after the room was cleared. The second sports studies panel on the 2013 program, “Sport and the Geography of Debt,” featured Roberta Newman (“Jumping through Hoops: Class, Race, Conflict and Brooklyn’s Barclay Center”), Frank Guridy (“‘A Sound Economic Revitalization’: The Yankee Stadium Renovation Project in the Era of New York’s Fiscal Crisis”), Daniel A. Gilbert (“Managing Fantasy Football: The Pleasures of Debt and the New Geography of Spectatorship”), and Adrian Burgos, Jr. as chair. The three papers incisively critiqued the logics of debt assumed by municipalities, local residents, athletes, and fans alike, all fueling sporting enterprises that serve the interests of global capital above all else. In tandem, these two deeply impressive panels set a new direction for the Sports Studies Caucus—a direction that epitomizes the organization’s burgeoning potential as an intellectual hub for scholarship on sports. In short, they demonstrated that the boundary-crossing ethos of American Studies (as a field and an organization) must extend beyond methods to the subject matter of the



work in question. Work that settled on a static notion of what sports are, or can be, wouldn't pass muster.<sup>11</sup> The question "What is sport?," much like "What is American Studies?," shouldn't be definitively answerable. Instead, sports studies' "negative capability," to use John Keats's term for productive uncertainty, should itself be an impetus to scholarly innovation.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the Sports Studies Caucus and its members affirm the notion that sports are always political: pushing our scholarship to shed light on the production of power and inequality in these massively popular enterprises.

Implementing these updated priorities in constructing panel proposals, the Sports Studies Caucus had four affiliated panels approved for ASA's 2014 Annual Meeting in Los Angeles: "To Protest or Not to Protest: Athletic Resistance and/or the Pleasure of Fans" (David J. Leonard, Sarah Jackson, Ben Carrington, Harry Edwards, Jennifer Doyle, Yago Colás), "Examining the Somatic Pleasure and Pain of Mixed Martial Arts Fighting" (Kyle Green, D. Travers Scott, Jennifer McClearen, Alexander Antonopoulos, Matthew A. Masucci), "Our City, Our Stadium: The Cultural Politics of Sports Landscapes In Los Angeles" (Frank Guridy, Priscilla Leiva, Leland Saito, Luis Alvarez), and "Views on the Peanut Gallery: An Open Forum on What It Means to Study Sports Fans" (Dan Gilbert, John Bloom, Noah Cohan, Pellom McDaniels III, Dan Nathan, Samuel O. Regalado). As then-ASA President Lisa Duggan remarked in her *LA Review of Books* interview, the 2014 Annual Meeting theme, "The Fun and the Fury: New Dialectics of Pleasure and Pain in the Post-American Century," seemed tailor-made for sports studies research. Yet the four panels did much more than exhibit a scholarly interest in the "fun" and "fury" that constitute sporting endeavors; each panel notably emphasized the connections between sports' far-reaching popular appeal and their eminent, though often ignored, political valences. With sessions considering the historical place and growing relevance of athletic protest movements,<sup>13</sup> the gendering of martial bodies in pain, the race and class boundaries of stadiums as structures of power and dislocation, and the possibilities of fandom as a mode of critical thinking—among other topics of urgency and intricacy—"boys who wanted to write about baseball" were nowhere to be found. Far from an unwelcome outlier, in 2014 the Sports Studies Caucus proved itself distinctly well-situated to capitalize on the radical possibilities of American Studies-based research and pedagogy.

Sarah Mesle's interview with Lisa Duggan made the rounds on the final day of the 2014 Annual Meeting in Los Angeles. Some Sports Studies Caucus members were rightly quite upset, and at least two written responses were disseminated within a few weeks of the event's conclusion.<sup>14</sup> But the broader reaction among our members was, to me, more interesting: an expression of confidence in the value and position of sports studies, both in the American Studies Association and in the academy at large. Rather than feeling "ghettoized," as Gorn and Oriard put it in 1995, many members expressed to me that they weren't at all threatened by those who would disparage or disregard work on sports. The best response, more than one person told me, was none at all.



The scholarly bona fides of our members bear out this confidence. Try as some academics might to stick their fingers in their ears and pretend commercialized athletics don't impact their lives, sports are tremendously influential in American culture and—especially—on American university campuses.

Propelled by this confidence in the increasing importance and relevance of our work, the Sports Studies Caucus and its members assembled another impressive slate of panels at ASA 2015 in Toronto (Theme: “The Reproduction of Misery and the Ways of Resistance”). The aforementioned “Between Misery and Resistance: The Connections between the Carceral State and Sporting Cultures” (Noah Cohan, Frank Gurdy, Jack Norton, Theresa Runstedtler, Lucia Trimbur, David Stein), cosponsored by the Critical Prison Studies Caucus, had the highest profile, but the entire docket proved invigorating. Four additional affiliated panels were selected: “The (Re)production of Sexual Violence in Sports and the Ways of Resistance” (Susan Birrell, Maryam Aziz, Cathy van Ingen, Jay Johnson, Mary McDonald), “Sports on Screen: Visual Economies of Representation in Film, Television, and Digital Media” (John Gennari, Aaron Baker, Rachael Joo, Samantha Sheppard, Travis Vogan), “Troubling a Racial Slur: Researching and Resisting the use of R\*dskins in Sport” (C. Richard King, James Fenelon, Jennifer Guiliano, Ellen Staurowsky), and “Asian American Sporting Cultures: Playing through Sporting Pleasures, Resisting Racialized Exclusions” (Pawan Dhingra, Chia Youyee Vang, Christina Chin, Rachel Ida Buff). Addressing some of the most critical issues in the contemporary American sports-industrial complex—and doing so with a keen eye to their intersectional relationship to broader scholarly discourses surrounding incarceration, violence, race, gender, sexuality, and screen cultures—the panels brought numerous new faces to the dais and into the audience. As it turned out, the quiet confidence of most caucus members proved well warranted.

The Sports Studies Caucus thus benefits not only from the multidisciplinary forum provided by the field of American Studies, but from the American Studies Association's liberatory ethos and commitment to interrogating neoliberalism in all its forms. At a time when adjunct faculty are unionizing across the country, the similarities between the unjust labor practices impoverishing instructors without tenure and those affecting “student-athletes” are too powerful to be ignored. Both emanate from the corporatization of the nonprofit university, and both are accompanied by an ever-increasing number of administrators with burgeoning salaries. Adjunct faculty are often thought to receive nonmonetary compensation insofar as they get to do something they “love,” just as high-profile college football and basketball players are supposedly sufficiently compensated for their labor by the “free” education they receive—while their on-field exploits and images are nakedly monetized to make hundreds of millions of dollars for others. And, in both cases, de facto normative restrictions on race, gender, and sexuality are leveraged against the diversity of the labor pool: manipulated to perpetuate the monetary advantage of the university's hegemonic power brokers. The Sports Studies Caucus, like the ASA itself, doesn't

shy away from critiquing neoliberal policies and oppressive social norms wherever they appear. And the world of sports, especially that of the most popular men's sports in which hypermasculine dictates are still very much the norm, needs critique from academics trained in humanistic inquiry and inclined to social justice.

This isn't to say that sporting enterprises are necessarily oppressive, unchanging, or always operated in service of predatory capitalism. To the contrary: My affirmation of the strength of sports studies as a multidisciplinary field rests not merely on the current prominence of sports but on the promise of their future. Per Gerald Early's insightful metaphor regarding Jackie Robinson in *A Level Playing Field* (2011), we can best characterize high-profile instances of social progress in sports as "the glorious fanfare of uncertain trumpets": No athlete, no matter how influential, can single-handedly bring about sweeping social change.<sup>15</sup> Even so, recent athlete activism and political expression give reason to hope that the often autocratic and conservative structures of sports enterprise are weakening. In 2014, LeBron James, Derrick Rose, and several other NBA stars wore "I Can't Breathe" shirts in solidarity with those protesting the killing of Eric Garner by New York police. In the summer of 2015, most of the world's best women's soccer players sued FIFA for fair and equal playing conditions. And in the fall of 2015, in an act of collective protest unprecedented since 1968 and the Olympic Project for Human Rights, the University of Missouri football team joined in solidarity with protestors decrying racism on their campus, refusing to play football until the university system's president resigned. With many millions of corporate dollars tied to the (largely African American) players' unpaid exploits, their involvement meant the protestors' demands were quickly met, despite the objections of many of the state's power brokers. As many have noted, the Mizzou players effectively demonstrated that the massive monetization of sports has amplified the power and potential of athlete protest.<sup>16</sup>

Beyond the research of sports studies scholars, the games' mass cultural relevance also matters for our teaching. While certainly not unique to sports studies, pop cultural appeal is especially significant given the prominent social role sports play on many campuses. And, in light of the purported "decline" of the humanities, it is worth capitalizing on that prominence for practical purposes as well. As Amy Bass puts it, sports get "more students through the door of a history class because they might be interested in a particular team, but [they leave] that class with heads filled to the brim with ideas about politics, culture, social structures, and—yes—the whole world. Thus, perhaps this is the most important point regarding sports history: it does not need the broader field, nor its approval, as much as the broader field might need it."<sup>17</sup> Bass's consideration of the "broader field" in this case references history, but the breadth of insight the students can gain from studying sport—"politics, culture, social structures, and—yes—the whole world"—evokes insights that reach even farther afield.<sup>18</sup> In her concluding response to Nathan and her other interlocutors in *JAH*, Bass

recognizes that perhaps “there is no such thing as sports history. . . . The study of sports does require its own sphere of knowledge, but does it have a method and a unifying framework?”<sup>19</sup> The answer, as demonstrated by the ASA Sports Studies Caucus, is no—and that’s a good thing.

## Part II: Exemplifying Multidisciplinarity

Embracing the multidisciplinary paradigm for sports studies realized at the conference panels recounted here, the other four articles in this special issue of *American Studies* expertly demonstrate the productive intellectual connectivity that methodological diversity offers. Each of them engages a different subject in a different formal manner, reflecting the authors’ distinct knowledges as well as the distinct scholarly traditions of sociology, history, labor studies, and, of course, American Studies. But the four pieces are nevertheless connected by much more than a common topical attention to a sport. Each is concerned with pressing against the boundaries of our understanding of athleticism’s epistemological potential, using the study of sport to tell us about much more than the games, athletes, and fans themselves. Rather than an ancillary offshoot of broader human experience, all four demonstrate that sports can provide the opposite: a primary avenue toward an examination of the urgent concerns of people throughout the modern era.

In “Studying Sport in the University: Some Problematics and Problems,” sociologist Lucia Trimbur uses the Mesle-Duggan interview as a prompt to provide a literary review of sorts: “snapshots” of compelling work done in sports studies since 2010. Aligning these interventions with the “core axes” of American Studies, Trimbur constructs “problematics,” a disciplinary convention of sociology, under the subfield headings of “Critical and Literary Theory,” “Critical Prison Studies,” “Gender and Sexuality Studies,” “Performance and Visual Studies,” “Slavery and Abolition Studies,” and “Transnational and Diasporic Studies.” In doing so, Trimbur outlines a thriving field of sports studies, one in which the “spaces for intellectual collaboration . . . are inversely proportional to the contention of marginalization.” She further emphasizes the ways in which these recent works “denaturalize . . . assumptions,” “break the routine of the everyday,” “challenge and reimagine the boundaries of masculinity and sexuality,” and examine the “deep politics” of sporting bodies as they impact the larger world. Trimbur closes with her own assessment of sports studies’s progressive future, built on her assertion that the field “can both denaturalize commonsensical ideas and constitute a crucial site of knowledge production.” In all facets, then—including its own recognition by others as a coherent field—sports studies is for Trimbur a boundary-breaking intellectual enterprise.

Historian Theresa Runstedtler pushes at the limits of our understanding of race, drug policy, and the carceral state in the second contribution to this special issue: “Racial Bias: The Black Athlete, the War on Drugs, and Big-Time Sports Reform.” Disrupting the commonplace notion that the cocaine overdose of col-

lege basketball star Len Bias was “a catalyst for the increasingly punitive turn in drug policy” worthy only of “a line or two in most histories of President Ronald Reagan’s war on drugs,” Runstedtler demonstrates that Bias is rather a primary episteme to an understanding that “the broader war on drugs and the exploitation of black ‘student athlete’ are not two separate phenomena, but rather two sides of the same neoliberal, carceral coin.” Leveraging archival research into the reactions of the national media, the African American press, politicians of both parties, and reports commissioned by the University of Maryland’s campus administration, Runstedtler makes a convincing historical argument about the ramifications of Bias’s highly visible, yet mostly mischaracterized, life and death. But she is not content to rest on the historical significance of her argument; rather, Runstedtler further positions her piece as both endemic to, and necessary for, American Studies, especially given the discipline’s attention to the “increasing criminalization of students and militarization of college campuses.” “Racial Bias” is that, and more: Runstedtler’s piece is a clarion call for scholars of all disciplines to recognize the prominent role athletic departments play in influencing campus politics regarding race and criminalization across the country.

Corporatized universities’ manipulation of labor is Dan Gilbert’s concern in “Not (Just) about the Money: Contextualizing the Labor Activism of College Football Players,” the third piece in this special issue. Coming from a labor studies department, Gilbert is naturally attuned to matters of compensation, but in examining the labor actions carried out by football players at Northwestern University (in 2013) and the University of Missouri (2015), he argues that “it would be a mistake to limit critical scrutiny of the labor politics of collegiate athletics to narrow questions of financial distribution.” Rather, as he ably demonstrates, “college athletes have become key figures in workplace struggles over the very nature of the university itself.” Highlighting the Northwestern players’ concern for their futures with regard to medical benefits and education in light of the game’s toll on their bodies, their time, and their educational possibilities, Gilbert provides a detailed history of the National Labor Relations Board and the mixed results of its initial ruling, and subsequent refusal to rule, regarding the Wildcats’ attempts to unionize. Citing the precedent set by the 2003 NLRB ruling regarding graduate students at Brown University, as well as the complications presented by the Big Ten Conference’s mix of public and private university membership, Gilbert effectively situates the players’ fight as inextricable from the larger ethos of austerity endemic to corporatized university management. Similarly, Gilbert’s consideration of the Missouri football team’s 2015 decision to withdraw their labor in solidarity with #Concerned-Students1950 and other campus protestors not only centers on the primacy of their concern for racial justice over their own financial exploitation, but also situates that concern as imbricated within a university system corporatized such that its former-business-executive president Tim Wolfe could be toppled only

by the enormity of the television contracts surrounding the team’s upcoming football games. Disliked as high-profile football programs may be among many academics, the game and its players also bear a radical potential. Closing with a consideration of football’s potential future abolition, Gilbert wonders whether “football players have become indispensable contributors to the growing movement to transform the neoliberal university.”

Finally, Tyran Steward provides a powerful history of institutional discrimination at the University of Michigan in “At the University but Not of the University.” Detailing the particular manifestation of the “gentleman’s agreement”—preventing black players from participation in football games against southern schools—that led university administrators to bar Wolverine star wingback Willis Ward from a game against Georgia Tech in 1934, Steward condemns “Michigan’s own Jim Crow tradition.” Relating the particular bigotry of Michigan athletic director (and former football coach) Fielding Yost, Steward also recognizes the broader insidiousness of the customs by which “northern institutions maintained separate and unequal practices without the legal underpinnings that existed in southern states.” And the discrimination didn’t end at the doors to the locker room: Black athletes, like Ward, who managed to make the team could earn respect only if they played to the standard of a so-called “superspade[:]” compelled to outperform whites and outrun racial violence.” Despite the encouraging recent history of athlete activism that Gilbert details, Steward’s piece reminds us that while “athletics have been characterized historically as avenues of both racial integration and social mobility,” each labor movement is premised on, and complicated by, institutionally specific people, practices, and prejudices. If we in sports studies are to contribute to the transformation of athletics on college campuses, we cannot forget these institutionalized games’ many complicated pasts.

Altogether, the four contributions to the field of sports studies found in this special issue of *American Studies* make up a tiny sample of the incredibly diverse, ground-breaking work happening in the field. They are especially significant, however, insofar as each manifests the guest editors’ fervent belief in the surging strength and relevance of the field as a multidisciplinary intellectual space of urgent concern for all of us struggling with the machinations of the neoliberal university.

## Notes

1. An organization of which the five guest editors are all members, and through which the idea for this special issue coalesced.

2. Sarah Mesle, “Sarah Mesle Interviews Lisa Duggan: Fun, Fury, and the American Studies Association,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, November 6, 2014. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/interview/fun-fury-american-studies-association>.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Elliott J. Gorn and Michael Oriard, “Taking Sports Seriously,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 24, 1995. <http://chronicle.com/article/Taking-Sports-Seriously/83703/>.

5. Amy Bass, “State of the Field: Sports History and the ‘Cultural Turn,’” *Journal of American History* 101, no. 1 (2014): 148.

6. Far from a “boy . . . who wanted to write about baseball,” Bass is herself author of the tremendously influential book *Not the Triumph but the Struggle: 1968 Olympics and the Making of the Black Athlete* (2004).

7. The spring 2016 issue of the *Journal of Sport History* featured a “Forum [on] Academic Identities, Historiography, and Methodologies in Sport History,” which included three essays addressing the *JAH* special issue, and Dr. Bass’s comments in particular. In “Sport Studies: A Model for the Twenty-first-Century University,” Sarah K. Fields argues that the *JAH* issue contributors “presumed that the study of sport is, should, or could be incorporated into traditional history departments. That premise is flawed” (57). She concludes that sports studies scholars should “recognize how lucky we are and transgress as many boundaries as we can, to be evangelical about our interdisciplinarity” (63). Fields, whose PhD is in American Studies, thus effectively makes an argument for the embrace of multidisciplinary similar to the one made here.

8. “Serious” newspaper journalists have long referred to sports as “the toy department.” For example, see David Rowe, “Sports Journalism: Still the ‘Toy Department’ of the News Media?” *Journalism* 8, no. 4 (2007): 385.

9. Daniel A. Nathan, “Sports History and Roberto Clemente: A Morality Tale and a Way Forward,” *Journal of American History* 101, no. 1 (2014): 186.

10. *Ibid.*

11. To be clear, I don’t mean to suggest that the rejected 2013 panels (one of which I was involved with) exhibited such static notions of sport and its political import. I do think, however, that both panels could have done a better job signaling their dynamic critical commitments.

12. John Keats, “Selections from Keats’s Letters (1817),” *Poetry Foundation*, October 13, 2009. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/essay/237836?page=2>.

13. “To Protest or Not to Protest: Athletic Resistance and/or the Pleasure of Fans” notably featured remarks by Harry Edwards, founder of the Olympic Project for Human Rights and author of *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (1968).

14. See John Bloom, “‘Boys Who Wanted to Write About Baseball’: Some Brief Thoughts about the American Studies Association Meetings in Los Angeles,” *Life Imitating Sports* (blog), November 12, 2014 (12:20 P.M.) <http://johndouglasbloom.blogspot.com/2014/11/who-wanted-to-write-about-baseball-some.html>, and Samuel Regalado, “‘Boys Who Wanted to Write about Baseball’: Sam Regalado Responds,” *Life Imitating Sports* (blog), November 17, 2014 (11:23 A.M.) <http://johndouglasbloom.blogspot.com/2014/11/boys-who-wanted-to-write-about-baseball.html>.

15. Gerald Early, *A Level Playing Field: African American Athletes and the Republic of Sports*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 184.

16. The most recent example comes from Donald H. Yee, “College Sports Exploits Unpaid Black Athletes. But They Could Force a Change,” *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), January 8, 2016.

17. Amy Bass, “The Last Word on the State of Sports History,” *Journal of American History* 101, no. 1 (2014): 197.

18. See note 6.

19. *Ibid.*