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Dissecting Action Sports Studies
Past, Present, and Beyond

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Introduction

The term "action sports" broadly refers to a wide range of mostly individualized activities such as BMX, kite-surfing, skateboarding, surfing, and snowboarding that differed – at least in their early phases of development – from traditional rule-bound, competitive, regulated Western "achievement" sport cultures (Booth and Thorpe, 2007; Kusz, 2007a; Wheaton 2004, 2010). Various categorizations have been used to describe these activities, including extreme, lifestyle, and alternative sports. In this chapter, however, the term *action sports* is used as it is currently the preferred term among committed participants and industry members in North America and Australasia (many of whom reject the overly commercialized "extreme" moniker imposed upon them by transnational media and mainstream sponsors during the mid- and late 1990s).

Many action sports gained popularity during the new leisure trends of the 1960s and 1970s and increasingly attracted alternative youth, who appropriated these activities and infused them with a set of hedonistic and carefree philosophies and subcultural styles (Booth and Thorpe, 2007; Thorpe and Wheaton, 2011a; Wheaton, 2010). While each action sport has its own unique history, identity, and development patterns (Wheaton, 2004), early participants *allegedly* sought risks and thrills, touted anti-establishment and do-it-yourself philosophies, and subscribed to an "outsider identity relative to the organized sports establishment" (Kusz, 2007a: 359; Beal, 1995). Developing during a "historically unique conjuncture" of transnational mass communications and corporate sponsors, and entertainment industries, and amongst a growing affluent and young population, many action sport cultures have "diffused around the world at a phenomenal rate" (Booth and Thorpe, 2007: 187). Over the past five decades, action sports have become a highly visible feature of popular culture. Action sports athletes appear on the covers of *Rolling Stone*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *FHM* and feature in advertisements for corporate sponsors such as Nike, Mountain Dew, and American Express. Recent estimates suggest there are more than 22 million Americans currently participating annually in the four most popular action sports – skateboarding, snowboarding, BMX riding, and surfing – with many participating on a regular basis and engaging in an array of other action sports (AMG, 2007). Reliable

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international statistics are scarce, yet similar trends have been observed in many Western, and some Eastern (e.g., China, Japan, South Korea), countries (see Booth and Thorpe, 2007; Thorpe, 2008; Wheaton, 2004, 2010). As these sports continue to gain popularity, many become highly fragmented, with enthusiasts engaging in various styles of participation, demonstrating philosophical differences and various levels of skill and commitment.

Since the mid-1990s, scholars from many disciplinary backgrounds, including anthropology, cultural geography, history, philosophy, psychology, sociology, and youth studies, have employed an array of methodological and theoretical approaches in order to understand and explain the experiences of action sports cultures within local, national, global, and virtual contexts in historical and contemporary conditions. In this chapter we focus on the qualitative efforts of critical sports scholars to understand the various forms of power operating on and through action sport bodies. In so doing, we explain how trends in theoretical and conceptual approaches have revealed various forms of politics including symbolic resistance, cultural politics, identity politics, spatial politics, representational politics, and bodily and aesthetic politics, as well as action sport related social movements. This chapter consists of two parts. First, we provide an overview of some of the past and present trends in action sports research, illustrating how different theoretical approaches have informed (and limited) our understanding of power, politics, and agency during various historical junctures. Second, we offer some suggestions for constructing more nuanced social explanations of action sports cultural politics into the twenty-first century.

Understanding the Politics of Action Sports Cultures: From Symbolic Resistance to Social Movements

Since the 1970s, the stylistic practices of youth have been an important theme in sociological works emerging from Birmingham University's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) tradition. Early subcultural theorists associated with the CCCS focused on youth style as symbolic resistance to mainstream or "hegemonic" society. They examined symbolic cultural aspects of youth subcultures, such as music, language, and especially dress. Dick Hebdige (1979), for example, argued that subcultural youths engage in "semiotic guerrilla warfare" through their construction of style (p. 105). Early subcultural theorists described subcultures emerging in resistance to dominant culture, and reacting against a sense of blocked economic opportunities, lack of social mobility, alienation, adult authority, and the "banality of suburban life" (Wooden and Blazak, 2001: 20). A variety of spectacular postwar subcultures such as Teddy boys, Mods, punks and skinheads, provided CCCS theorists with evidence of youth styles challenging the dominant order. These theorists turned to Antonio Gramsci's (1971) notion of hegemony to give their evidence theoretical expression, proposing that subordinate classes operate by "winning space" through their modes of presentation and apparently antisocial behaviors.

Some of the pioneering work on action sports cultures drew inspiration from the theoretical approaches developed by the CCCS tradition, as well as methodological approaches employed by the more ethnographically oriented Chicago School (see Wheaton, 2007a). For example, in her early ethnographic work on a local skateboarding culture in Colorado, Becky Beal (1995, 1996) describes a group of young male skateboarders practicing and performing an alternative form of masculinity. According to Beal (1995), this group of skateboarders distinguished their subculture from traditional sport and hegemonic masculinity via an array of symbolic (e.g., dress, language) and physical (e.g., embracing styles of participation that deemphasized competition and embraced individual expression) practices. But she also observed contradictions within the local skateboarding culture under investigation; she explained that, while the young male skateboarders overtly resisted the hypermasculine "jock" identities of male athletes in more traditional sports (e.g., football) and embraced skateboarding as an alternative to the dominant sports culture, they simultaneously reproduced patriarchal relations via the exclusion and marginalization of female participants (Beal, 1996).

The influence of the Birmingham School approach to subculture and style on the sociology

of action sports cultures has been profound, yet the hegemonic understandings of power and resistance inherent in this approach, like all concepts and theories, were a product of its time. To paraphrase Lawrence Grossberg (1997), concepts are measured, and their truth and validity judged, by their ability to give a better understanding of the context (p. 262). The early subcultural research on alternative sports developed at a time when neo-Marxist, and particularly hegemonic, understandings of power were dominant in both youth cultural studies and sport sociology. Since then, however, there have been major changes in the development of action sports, and "generational shifts" in research on youth cultural formations and understandings of power, politics and social change in sport, which call into question much of this earlier work (see Donnelly, 2008; Thorpe, 2006; Wheaton, 2007a).

Operating within a specific conjuncture (the 1970s and 1980s), the theoretical concepts developed by the CCCS (and later appropriated by some action sports scholars) were limited by the material conditions of their times. In recent years hegemony theory, as advocated by the CCCS subcultural studies theorists, has drawn substantial criticism for ignoring participants' subjectivity, failing to study subcultural groups empirically, focusing too much on Marxist/class-based explanations and grand theories, reifying the concept of subculture, overemphasizing style, and overpoliticizing youthful leisure (e.g., Haenfler, 2004; Muggleton, 2000). As Hebdige (1988) acknowledged, he may have conflated subordinance with the resistant among certain youth groups who were not overly political. Indeed, while the CCCS emphasized that subcultural style was a form of resistance to domination, ultimately the actions of subcultural members reinforced class relations because they focused on (superficial) stylistic resistance rather than political organization, employment or education (see Willis, 1978). In this sense, resistance was illusory; subcultural participation gave members a feeling of resistance while leaving existing social and political relations firmly in place.

Many accounts of postwar youth subcultures also "overlooked the dynamic quality of style" and discussed subcultures as though they are "immutably fixed phenomena, frozen statically at a particular point" (Osgerby, 1998: 76). In reality youth cultures exist in a constant state of change and flux. The dialectical relationship between dominant culture and resistance – which is implicit in the idea of subculture – is a fluid process; "resistance is contextual and many layered rather than static and uniform" (Haenfler, 2004: 409). Yet, scholars tended to overlook this relationship and portrayed subculture "as a homogenous and static system" (Fine and Kleinman, 1979: 5). In fact, work associated with the CCCS tradition ignored the *development* of subcultures, considering them "only when they were fully mediated and ripe for critical interpretation" (Thornton, 1996: 152). Members of the Centre admitted this shortcoming in their methodology: "Homological analysis of a cultural relation is synchronic. It is not equipped to account for changes over time, or to account for the creation or disintegration, of homologies: it records the complex qualitative state of a cultural relation as it is observed in *one quantum of time*" (Willis, 1978: 191, emphasis added).

Thus there is an "uncomfortable absence" in the early literature of how subcultures are "sustained, transformed, appropriated, disfigured or destroyed" and what the consequences of those processes might be (Clarke, 1982: 8). In short, CCCS subcultural analysis omitted the "whole dimension of change" (Muggleton, 2000: 22). As we have explained elsewhere, there has been a similar tendency in some ethnographic studies of action sports cultures which focus on the micropolitics within particular locations, often to the exclusion of the broader social and historical context (Thorpe, 2006; Wheaton, 2007a). Moreover, by focusing on single groups, such as skateboarders or snowboarders, in "one quantum of time" (Willis, 1978: 191), such accounts ignore dimensions of cultural change and development. Arguably, more social historical approaches are necessary for understanding contemporary action sports cultures, and explaining how cultural signs, practices, and politics change along with the cultural and social context.

The politics of incorporation: from subcultural studies to post-CCCS

Cultural incorporation was an important theme emerging from the CCCS tradition of subcultural research. Much of this research focused on the

power of commercial agents to define and co-opt youth cultures. "Authentic" youth cultures were characterized as distinct from mass-produced, commercial, or mainstream culture, that is, until the commercial sphere appropriated the alternative images of the subculture as a means of making money. For many CCCS scholars, opposition to mainstream politics and philosophies evaporated in the processes of incorporation and the appropriation of these groups who subsequently forfeited their *sub*cultural status (Barker, 2000).

While alternative or lifestyle sporting subcultures have received less attention in the mainstream sociological literature (see Wheaton, 2007a), similar debates about their commercial or mainstream inclusion, particularly the lamented shift from "alternative" to "mainstream" sports, have been prevalent in the sport sociology literature (e.g., Beal and Weidman, 2003; Beal and Wilson, 2004; Donnelly, 1993; Humphreys, 2003; Rinehart, 2005; Thorpe, 2006; Wheaton, 2007a). In one of the first in-depth investigations of the commercialization of action sports in the post-Fordist culture and economy, Duncan Humphreys (1996, 1997) examined the processes by which "alternative sports" such as skateboarding and snowboarding increasingly became controlled and defined by transnational corporations seeking to tap into the highly lucrative youth market. In his examination of youth cultural participants' symbolic and political responses to the forces and constraints of the commercialization process, Humphreys (1997) presented the much-publicized case of Norwegian snowboarder Terje Haakonsen's critique of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Undoubtedly the world's best half-pipe rider at the time, Haakonsen refused to participate in the 1998 winter Olympics because he believed that the IOC comprised a group of Mafia-like officials and that taking part in the event was tantamount to joining the army. Haakonsen publically criticized the IOC's lack of understanding of snowboarding culture, and protested against snowboarders being turned into a "uniform-wearing, flag-bearing, walking logo[s]" (Mellgren, 1998: para. 8). Other snowboarders expressed similar sentiments. Yet Humphreys (2003) concludes by lamenting that such sentiments seemed to do nothing to stem the process of incorporation.

The X Games – the self-defined "worldwide leader" in action sports (Rinehart, 2008: 175) – was the brainchild of the cable television network ESPN (Entertainment and Sports Programming Network), and gained financial support from a range of transnational corporate sponsors. The inaugural summer Extreme Games (later renamed the X Games) held in 1995 in Rhode Island (USA) featured 27 action sport-related events in nine categories: bungee jumping, eco-challenge, in-line skating, skateboarding, sky-surfing, sport climbing, street luge, cycling, and water sports. Following the success of the summer games, ESPN staged the first winter X Games in 1997 in California, featuring events such as snowboarding and snowmobiling. With its "spectacular footage, distinctive sporting and cultural personalities, innovate representation styles and ubiquitous reach" (Thorpe and Wheaton, 2011a: 183), the X Games have played a significant role in the global diffusion and expansion of the action sports industry and culture (Rinehart, 2000). Indeed, the X Games have been integral to the institutionalization of action sports, especially cultural attitudes to formalized competitions, professionalization, and outsider regulation and control, such that it is not surprising that they attracted considerable academic interest (Beal, 1995; Beal and Wilson, 2004; Booth and Thorpe, 2007; Messner, 2002; Rinehart, 1998, 2000, 2008; Thorpe and Wheaton, 2011a, 2011b).

As action sports became popular and incorporated into the mainstream via mega-events such as the X Games and the Olympics, they appeared to assume many of the trappings of other modern sports including corporate sponsorship, large prize monies, "rationalized systems of rules," hierarchical and individualistic star systems, win-at-all costs values, and the creation of heroes, heroines and "rebel" athletes who look like "walking corporate billboards" (Messner, 2002: 82). As Wheaton (2004: 14) and others have revealed, "selling out" debates relate not just to commodification but also to the appropriation of action sports ethos and ideologies, such as attitude to risk, responsibility, freedom and regulation, repacking and selling their values and

lifestyles for mass consumption (Humphreys, 1996, 1997; Rinehart, 2000, 2003, 2008). Reflecting CCCS-inspired research on youth cultures, however, much of the early work on action sports overlooked the potential for participants to practice agency or resistance *within* the processes of commercialization, incorporation, and institutionalization. For Humphreys (1996, 1997, 2003), for example, the radical potential of snowboarding largely evaporated once the sport became incorporated into the Olympic juggernaut.

Since the late 1990s, a new generation of sociologists and cultural studies scholars has emerged that is seeking to re-evaluate the idea of subculture, including previous explanations of the processes of commercial incorporation in youth, music, and style cultures (e.g., Bennett, 2011; Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2004; Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003). A key argument put forward by proponents of "post-subcultural studies" is that scholars typically paid little systematic attention to the role of media and commerce in youths' cultural formations, and rarely provided an explanation of what occurs "after the subculture has surfaced and become publicized" (Hebdige, 1979: 122). Drawing on, and reflecting theorizations of youth subcultures influenced by the CCCS, much of the early research on the institutionalization and commercialization of action sports tended to focus on the negative effects of these processes, seeing incorporation as a process that undermined the "authentic" oppositional or resistant character of the alternative sports, and typically conceptualizing commercialization as "a top-down process of corporate exploitation and commodification" (Edwards and Corte, 2010: 1137). As Richard Giulianotti (2005) suggests, the CCCS approach is insufficient for "explaining 'resistant' subcultures that actively *embrace* commodification, to function as niche businesses within the sport industry" (p. 56).

Recognizing the complex politics involved in the commercialization and incorporation of action sports in the early twenty-first century, a number of action sports scholars are working within this post-subcultural studies framework. Wheaton and Beal (2003) explain that, while participants in contemporary action sports cultures may not resist market incorporation, many contest the discourses about commercialism, regulation, and control, and importantly, raise the question, who defines and shapes sport? Revisiting Beal's earlier research on skateboarding culture, Beal and Wilson (2004: 32) explain that "internal contradictions are more common than a clear-cut sense of social resistance" in contemporary skateboarding culture. They describe the commercialization process in skateboarding culture as a set of contingent negotiations between "youths cultural expression, the cultural industry and mass media representations" (p. 33). Similarly, Wheaton (2004) observes that contemporary action sports participants are not simply victims of commercialization but active agents who continue to "shape and 'reshape' the images and meanings circulated in and by global consumer culture" (p. 14). In his analysis of the continuing and multiple forms of contestation around the X Games, Rinehart (2008) argues that there is "no simplistic dichotomy for resistance and co-optation in the alternative sport world" and thus we need to "move beyond constraining binaries – e.g., resistance vs. co-optation, mainstream vs. emergent, traditional vs. new" (p. 192; also see Booth, 2002; Edwards and Corte, 2010; Thorpe, 2006; Wheaton, 2004).

More recently, Thorpe and Wheaton (2011a, 2011b) employed a post-subcultural theoretical approach to examine the cultural politics surrounding the incorporation of action sports into the Olympic program via case studies of windsurfing, snowboarding, and bicycle motocross (BMX). Ultimately, our analysis reveals that "the incorporation processes, and forms of (sub)cultural contestation, are in each case unique, based on a complex and shifting set of intra- and inter-politics between key agents, namely the IOC and associated sporting bodies, media conglomerates, and the action sports cultures and industries" (Thorpe and Wheaton, 2011b: 830). Drawing upon post-CCCS arguments, recent research reveals contemporary action sport cultures as highly fragmented and in a constant state of flux, such that myriad types of cultural production, consumption and contestation are occurring, often simultaneously. As Wheaton (2010) explains, in this context, "resistance is not a struggle with dominant hegemonic culture but is located at the levels of the everyday and in the body" (p. 1063).

Everyday politics in action sports cultures: identity, representation, experience, and reflexivity

Questions of identity and inequality feature strongly in contemporary research on action sports cultures. Despite recent concerns over the "usefulness of identity as a basis for scholarly analysis and political action" after the "poststructuralist turn" (King and McDonald, 2007: 1), many action sports scholars continue to work within an identity politics framework, employing an array of methodological and theoretical approaches to "discern injustices" done within and through the realm of action sports to particular social groups on the basis of their cultural identities (King and McDonald, 2007: 1). While class-based identity politics were central to subcultural studies associated with the CCCS, class and privilege often go under-analyzed in action sports scholarship. In contrast, researchers have dedicated considerable attention to gender politics in action sports cultures.

Researchers have examined the young hypermasculinity celebrated within climbing (Robinson, 2008), snowboarding (Anderson, 1999; Thorpe, 2010), surfing (Evers, 2004; Waitt and Warren, 2008), and windsurfing (Wheaton, 2000) cultures, and the hierarchical power relations between groups of "other" men and women within them. Some have also investigated the multiple (and often contradictory) ways women negotiate space within male-dominated action sports cultures such as adventure racing (Kay and Laberge, 2002), skateboarding (Pomerantz, Currie, and Kelley, 2004; Young and Dallaire, 2008), sky-diving and snowboarding (Laurendeau and Sharara, 2008), snowboarding (Thorpe, 2006, 2008), surfing (Booth, 2002; Comer, 2010; Heywood, 2007; Knijnik, Horton, and Cruz, 2010; Spowart, Hughson, and Shaw, 2010), and windsurfing (Wheaton and Tomlinson, 1998). To facilitate their analyses of the complex gender practices, performances, and politics operating within action sports cultures, researchers have engaged an array of theoretical perspectives, including hegemonic masculinity, various strands of feminism (liberal, radical, and third-wave feminism), and, more recently, some poststructural feminist engagements with the work of Bourdieu (see Thorpe, 2009), Deleuze and Guattari (see Knijnik *et al.*, 2010), and Foucault (Crocket, 2012a; Spowart *et al.*, 2010; Thorpe, 2008). With distinct understandings of power, structure, agency, and resistance, the various theoretical perspectives have facilitated different insights into the place of action sports bodies in the "reproduction of social and sexual structures" (Shilling, 2005: 198), as, too, the various forms of agency available to some male and/or female action sports participants within existing social, economic, and cultural structures.

Despite a growing number of theoretically sophisticated and empirically nuanced studies of the gender power relations and politics within local, national, and global contexts, there is a paucity of intersectional research that engages the various forms of identity-based politics operating within and across action sports cultures. Some notable exceptions include Brayton (2005), Kusz (2003, 2004, 2007b), and Yochim's (2010) partial intersectional analyses of the youthful, privileged, white masculinity celebrated in extreme sports – and particularly skateboarding for Brayton (2005) and Yochim (2010) – in North America. Despite some efforts toward more intersectional analyses, scholarship that reveals the complexities between multiple identifiers (e.g., gender, sexuality, race, class and privilege, nationality, physical, age) in action sports cultures has yet to emerge (see Wheaton, 2009). Arguably, many of our current theoretical approaches struggle under the weight of such a task. As well as engaging with broader debates about "identity and inequality, subjectivity and agency, and materiality and discourse" (King and McDonald, 2007: 1), in order to better capture the intersecting axes of social difference and identity-based inequalities in action sports cultures, we may also need to revise fundamental assumptions underpinning dominant theoretical, methodological, and/or representational approaches.

The cultural politics between groups within action sports cultures based on cultural commitment, physical prowess, and/or styles of participation, and between "outsider" groups, have gained considerable academic attention. Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of field, capital, practice, and to a lesser extent habitus, have been particularly popular among those seeking to explain how distinctions among individuals and groups expressed as differences in embodied tastes and styles, and

uses of cultural products and commodities, are practiced, performed, and regulated, in various locations (e.g., skate-parks, waves, mountains) (see Atencio, Beal, and Wilson, 2009; Ford and Brown, 2006; Thorpe, 2011). Some scholars have explained embodied dress and language practices, as well as displays of cultural commitment, physical prowess, and risk taking, as contributing to the social construction and classification of group identities within action sports fields (e.g., Beal and Wilson, 2004; Robinson, 2008; Thorpe, 2004; Wheaton, 2003b). Others have examined the cultural politics involved in negotiating space and access to physical, social, and economic resources within hierarchically organized sporting, cultural, or industry contexts; the struggles among surfers seeking to navigate space in the "line up," and thus access to a limited number of waves, have been particularly well documented (see Ford and Brown, 2006; Olivier, 2010; Scheibel, 1995; Waitt, 2008). A few have examined the gender politics and hypermasculinity in high-risk natural environments, such as the backcountry for skiers (Stoddart, 2010) and snowboarders (Thorpe, 2011), and big waves for surfers (Booth, 2011; Stranger, 2011). Some scholars have also drawn upon highly interdisciplinary approaches (e.g., cultural geography, architecture, urban studies) to describe the spatial politics practiced by action sports participants, especially skateboarders and Parkour practitioners, in their attempts to challenge dominant meanings ascribed to public spaces in urban environments (e.g., Atkinson, 2009; Borden, 2001; Jones and Graves, 2000; Stratford, 2002).

Some critical sport scholars have also examined the politics involved in representing bodies in various forms of mass, niche, and micro action sports media. Wheaton and Beal (2003) examined the production and consumption of discourses of cultural "authenticity" in niche skateboarding and windsurfing magazines; Kusz (2006), Wheaton (2003a), and Frohlick (2005) described the young, white, hyper-masculinity celebrated in the skateboarding film *Dogtown and Z-Boys* (Peralta), niche windsurfing magazines, and big mountain films, respectively; and Henderson (2001), Rinehart (2005), and Thorpe (2005) examined the representation of female bodies in the surfing, skateboarding, and snowboarding media, respectively. Drawing upon Gramscian understandings of power (particularly hegemonic masculinity), Henderson (2001) and Rinehart (2005) focused on the ways female action sports participants and non-participants (e.g., models) are sexualized and trivialized in the niche media. In contrast, Thorpe (2008) engaged Foucault's concepts of power/knowledge, discourse, and technologies of self, to show that representations of female snowboarding bodies are not inherently oppressive; some men and women are adopting critical and reflexive interpretations of various discursive constructions of snowboarding bodies in the mass, niche, and micro media.

Adopting a particularly innovative approach toward the politics involved in the production and consumption of mediated surfing bodies, Booth (2008) reveals the various photographic, editorial, and design techniques employed, and decisions made, by *Tracks* surfing magazine as designed primarily to evoke the affect of "stoke" among the predominantly young male readers.

Given the richness and cultural significance of the images, narratives, representations, and meanings so powerfully associated with action sports as a cultural form, it is sometimes "easy to forget that these are all epiphenomena" (Ford and Brown, 2006: 149). Participants frequently reiterate that the embodied and immediate experience is the key to the cultural practice and words cannot articulate the experience. In critical research on action sports cultures, however, the lived experience is often reduced to language or discourse or representation, or neglected in favor of politics. But affect and sensation, and power and politics, are not mutually exclusive. According to Howes (2003), "sensation is not just a matter of physiological response and personal experience. . . . Every domain of sensory experience is also an arena for structuring social roles and interactions. We learn social divisions, distinctions of gender, class and race, through our senses" (p. xi). Drawing inspiration from the recent affective and sensual turn in the social sciences and humanities, some action sports researchers are moving away from theory and toward more embodied forms of research (e.g., sensuous ethnography) in their attempts to better understand and explain experience (Evers, 2004, 2006, 2010; Ford and Brown, 2006; Laviolette, 2010; Saville, 2008; Thorpe, 2011). Some scholars

write critical auto-ethnographies and ethnographic fiction to shed light on their own and others' lived and embodied action sports experiences, and draw attention to the various forms of power operating within the culture (Evers, 2006; Thorpe, 2011).

According to Atkinson and Wilson (2002), the bodily experiences or everyday performances of action sports participants can resist constraints imposed by mainstream culture. Emphasizing the "micro level, the performative, and the everyday" (Wheaton, 2007a: 299), they contend that a creative skateboard trick or riding a wave may be thought of as a form of "free expression," a "temporary escape or sense of empowerment through movement" (Atkinson and Wilson, 2002: 386; also see Stranger, 2011). Similarly, scholars adopting more psychological approaches suggest that participation in so-called "extreme sports" can prompt transcendental experiences (Celsi, 1992) and/or "positive transformations in courage and humility" (Brymer and Oades, 2009). Elsewhere, however, Wilson (2002) warns that, while such embodied pleasures may be empowering – enabling the individual to escape the norms of discipline and conformity and thus offer a potentially subversive challenge to mainstream society – they are ultimately resistance "that makes no difference" (p. 401, cited in Wheaton, 2007a: 299).

Developing these ideas further, some scholars are examining the potential for action sports participants to develop critical reflexivity and agency within existing power relations. Thorpe (2009, 2010) has drawn upon recent feminist extensions of Pierre Bourdieu's work, particularly the concepts of field-crossing and "regulated liberties," to explain how some female and male snowboarders come to reflect critically upon their past and present cultural participation and problematic aspects of the snowboarding culture (e.g., sexism, homophobia, celebration of risk and injury) and engage in an array of embodied practices to subtly challenge dominant cultural norms and values within existing power relations. A few scholars are drawing upon Michel Foucault's later work on the technologies of self to explain how some action sports participants make meaning of various discourses and engage in ethical and/or aesthetic practices to minimize the effect of power relations on themselves and others (Crocket, 2012b; Spowart *et al.*, 2010; Thorpe, 2008). Despite many differences in their work, however, Bourdieu and Foucault both acknowledge that an individual's conscious awareness does not by itself lead to fundamental social change. Certainly, as suggested in much of the action sports literature, while some individual participants are critically aware of the problematic power relations and inequalities, and engage in various forms of everyday micro-level politics, their efforts have tended to be isolated to various dimensions of the action sports culture, sport, or industry.

Since the mid-1990s, however, some action sports participants have established non-profit organizations and movements relating to an array of social issues including health (e.g., Boarding for Breast Cancer; Surf Aid International, see Thorpe and Rinehart, 2012), education (e.g., Chill – providing underprivileged youth with opportunities to learn to snowboard, skate and surf; Skateistan – co-educational skateboarding schooling in Afghanistan, see Thorpe and Rinehart, 2012), environment (e.g., Protect Our Winters – POW; Surfers Environmental Alliance – SEA; Surfers Against Sewage – SAS; see Heywood and Montgomery, 2008; Laviolette, 2006; Wheaton, 2007b, 2008), and anti-violence (e.g., Surfers for Peace – an informal organization aimed at bridging cultural and political barriers between surfers in the Middle East). In her analysis of the complex relationships between action sports, identity, consumption, politics, and new forms of media, Wheaton (2007b) describes action sports participants as "individualistic *and* part of a collectivity: they are hedonistic *and* reflexive consumers, often politically disengaged yet environmentally aware and/or active" (p. 298, original emphasis). Building upon Wheaton's earlier thesis, we argue that, while many contemporary young physical cultural participants are politically engaged, their politics often take different shapes, and occur in different spaces and places, than in previous decades. Relying on traditional conceptions and "conventional indicators" of what constitutes politics, however, we risk being "blind" to some of the highly nuanced and variegated forms of political agency being expressed by youth in the early twenty-first century (Norris, 2002: 222).

Seeking to further examine the innovative political practices employed by (some) contemporary action sports participants, Thorpe and

Rinehart (2010) drew upon Nigel Thrift's (2008) non-representational theory and particularly his work on the "politics of affect" and "politics of hope." In so doing, they reveal action sports-related social movements drawing heavily upon new technologies to produce new forms of passionate politics within local, regional, national, global, virtual, and imagined communities. For example, POW, a non-profit organization dedicated to educating and activating snowsport participants on issues relating to global warming (see Thorpe, 2011) and Surf Aid International (SAI) – a non-profit humanitarian organization dedicated to "improving the health and well-being of people living in isolated regions connected to us through surfing"[1] – readily employ an array of new social media to educate and activate action sports enthusiasts around the world (e.g., websites, YouTube videos, blogs, Twitter, Facebook). Discursive analyses of these various media reveal POW and SAI staff and supporters (e.g., journalists, professional athletes) taking "affect and entrancement" (Thrift, 2008) into their workings in an attempt to not only inform, but also evoke a political response from those in the snow (Thorpe, 2011) and surf (Thorpe and Rinehart, 2010) industries and cultures, respectively. A key point in these works was that the affective practices and political strategies of action sports-related social movements and organizations, such as POW and SAI, deserve further critical exploration. Arguably, a Thriftian approach can facilitate such projects by encouraging us to pay closer attention to some of the "diverse ways in which the use and abuse of various affective practices is gradually changing what we regard as the sphere of 'the political'" (Thrift, 2008: 173) in contemporary action sports cultures.

In sum, action sports research has drawn widely from trends in critical sport studies and the social sciences more broadly (e.g., anthropology, cultural studies, cultural geography, philosophy, and youth studies), to expand understandings of the various forms of symbolic, bodily, aesthetic, and cultural politics being practiced and performed by participants in various geographies. Apart from a few studies that are examining the recent trend toward action sports-related social justice movements, much of this research has focused on the micro-politics operating within particular action sports in local spaces, with little consideration given to trends across action sports cultures (for exceptions, see Booth and Thorpe, 2007; Wheaton, 2004, 2007a, 2010), or the broader political and economic context (also see Donnelly, 2008; Thorpe, 2006; Wheaton, 2007b, 2008). Arguably, the meaning of these cultural, symbolic, or embodied practices can only be understood by the way they articulate into a particular set of complex historical, economic, and political relationships (Thorpe, 2006). Acknowledging the highly complex and nuanced power relations involved in contemporary action sports, Wheaton (2007a) advocates that future studies of subcultural formations attend to both the micro-political and the macro-political contexts. The emphasis on aesthetics and micro-level cultural power relations, however, may tell us more about the politics of academic research on action sports (i.e., the theoretical and methodological choices we are making, and research questions being asked) than it does about the sporting cultures themselves. In the final part of this chapter we suggest that, to make meaning of the complexities and nuances of action sports in the twenty-first century, we may need to rethink our use of theory, method and representational styles.

A "Politics of Hope" for Action Sports Studies: Notes from the Field

Contemporary action sports cultures are complex, multidimensional, and in a constant state of change and flux. While such features are often part of the appeal for participants and researchers alike, making meaning of such dynamic and multilayered social phenomena can prove challenging for both new and experienced scholars alike. Arguably, future investigations seeking to construct nuanced social explanations of action sports cultures would do well to adopt a position of theoretical and conceptual reflexivity, and analytical dynamism and openness. In so doing, our research has the potential to become more personally and socially meaningful for the researcher(s), readers, and action sports participants. Here we draw primarily upon the first author's research on global snowboarding culture (Thorpe, 2011) to illustrate our key arguments.[3]

Methodological flexibility and researcher reflexivity

It is not our intention here to advocate a particular methodological approach for studying action sports cultures. Rather, methods should be selected based on the research questions being posed, theoretical approach(es) employed, and the resources available to the researcher. Based on our own research experiences, however, we recognize the value in adopting flexible and multi-methodological approaches (Thorpe, 2011; Wheaton, 2002). In her book *Snowboarding Bodies in Theory and Practice*, Thorpe (2011) explains that her understanding of the complexities of snowboarding bodies derived from multiple modes of data generation, a type of methodology used extensively by Bourdieu and which he describes as "discursive montage" of "*all sources*" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 66, emphasis added). Bourdieu (1992) adds that this is "the only possible attitude toward theoretical tradition" (p. 252). Similarly, Grossberg recommends using "any and every kind of empirical method, whatever seems useful to the particular project" in order to "gather more and better information, descriptions, resources," and improve one's interpretations (Wright, 2001: 145). Throughout her project she seized "all types of data, evidence, sources, and artefacts to enlighten [her] inquiry into snowboarding bodies" (Thorpe, 2011: 6). According to C.W. Mills (1959), sociologists do not study projects, rather they become tuned, or sensitive, to themes that "they see and hear everywhere in [their] experience" (p. 211). Indeed, as Thorpe became increasingly sensitive to the themes of the snowboarding body, she gathered evidence from personal observations and experiences, magazines, websites, newspapers, interviews and personal communications, videos, internet chat rooms, promotional material, television programs, press releases, public documents, reports from snowboarding's administrative bodies, and promotional material from sporting organizations and from associated industries. "Even the humblest material artefact is," as Eliot (1948) explains, "an emissary of the culture out of which it comes" (cited in Vamplew, 1998: 268). As Thorpe (2011) explains, using cultural sources in conjunction with multi-sited fieldwork and interviews, "helped deepen my understanding of snowboarding's cultural complexities and the multidimensional snowboarding body" (p. 12).

It is important to keep in mind, however, that research is a process that occurs through the medium of a person – "the researcher is always inevitably present in the research" (Stanley and Wise, 1993, cited in Wheaton, 2002: 246). This is certainly true in critical studies of action sports cultures. To date, many (though not all) action sports scholars have approached their subject with an embodied understanding of cultural norms and values developed via past or present active participation. The strengths and limitations of studying these sporting cultures from an "insider" perspective have been the subject of much debate within the field (Evers, 2006; Donnelly, 2006; Wheaton, 2002, 2004). The challenges of negotiating multiple roles (i.e., critical researcher, active participant, feminist) in the field of ethnographic inquiry also garner increasing critical reflection (Olive and Thorpe, 2011; Thorpe, 2011; Wheaton, 2004). For example, approaching her ethnographic study of windsurfing culture as a highly proficient female athlete, journalist, and partner of a male windsurfer, Wheaton (2002) notes that while this "insider knowledge" helped her develop rapport with participants and identify relevant sources and themes, it also carried potential pitfalls. She explained that one of the hardest tasks during the early phases of her research was negotiating the path that allowed her to understand and acknowledge the participants' worldviews and their subjectivities, while also gaining the "critical distance" necessary to contextualize those views and actions (Wheaton, 2002: 262; see also Carrington, 2008; Olive and Thorpe, 2011).

Upon embarking on her project on snowboarding culture, Thorpe could also have been considered a cultural insider. Prior to commencing this study, she had already held many roles in the snowboarding culture (i.e., novice, weekend-warrior, lifestyle sport migrant) and industry (i.e., semi-professional athlete, snowboard instructor, terrain-park employee, and journalist). While her physical abilities and knowledge about snowboarding initially gave her access to the culture and a head start in discerning relevant sources, her position in the culture changed over time and varied depending on

location (see Thorpe, 2011; Thorpe, Barbour, and Bruce, 2011; Olive and Thorpe, 2011). The length of her project and the dynamic nature of the snowboarding culture also meant that, as her research progressed, she became further removed in terms of age and generation (i.e., clothing styles, language) from the majority of core participants (mostly in their late teens and early twenties), which prompted her to further reflect on issues relating to cultural access and participant rapport while conducting research in the field, as well as individual participants' embodied experiences of movement into, within, and out of, the snowboarding culture. Thus, the key issue here is not whether one approaches their study as a past or present (non)active participant, or conducts interviews, focus groups, observations, or discourse analysis, but rather the reflexivity of the researcher in terms of how his or her dynamic position in the action sports culture *and* the academy, and movement between these fields, influences research questions, methodological choices, and theoretical approaches and representational styles, at various stages during the project (Olive and Thorpe, 2011; Wheaton, 2002).

Theoretical adventures in action sports studies

Sociology hosts a wide variety of theories and theoretical perspectives, each drawing on different sets of assumptions about social reality and how it should be explained. The tendency in action sports scholarship (and indeed many fields of critical sociological inquiry) has been to pick one primary theorist and regard the rest as secondary:

> There is often a sense that we should align ourselves with one theoretical school, or even one theorist. In the process of drawing from this work, the scholar defines him or herself as a particular type of researcher. Thus, using a theoretical work is not just a question of being interested in particular ideas but also how one represents him or herself to others. (Thorpe, 2011: 268)

However, we argue that action sport scholars should be cautious about confining themselves to one theory or one theoretical tradition. As Andrews (2002) reminds us, there is a very real danger of being lulled into a "false sense of conceptual security" (p. 116), in which individuals see only what fits into their preexisting schema and ignore conflicting evidence. Indeed, Barrett (1995) argues that theoretical disciplines offer a "license to ignore," since disciplinary boundaries create "an informal division of labor in which certain questions are assigned to one subject and can thus legitimately be ignored" by others (cited in McDonald and Birrell, 1999: 285). Despite each theory claiming to best interpret the facts it identifies as significant, no single theory is adequate to deal with the various forms of power operating on and through the bodies of action sports participants (Thorpe, 2011). In each of the studies discussed above, particular forms of power are foregrounded while others fade into the background; no theory has proved adequate to attend to "both the micro-political and macro-political contexts" in action sports cultures (Wheaton, 2010). Furthermore, because all "theories are created by individuals in their search for meaning" in response to concrete material conditions (Alexander, 1995: 79–80), some theories prove more suitable for explaining some aspects of the power and politics within action sports in the current historical moment than others.

All theories have strengths and shortcomings and, because they are a matter of perspective, are always open to debate. If we approach our research with the knowledge that the search for the exact theoretical fit is futile, perhaps we can begin to use social theory differently, that is, with the aim to "think differently than one thinks" and "perceive differently than one sees" (Foucault, 1985, cited in Mills, 2003: 6). Arguably, rather than employing one theoretical perspective to frame our research (as has been the dominant approach in action sports scholarship), there is much to be gained by experimenting with a range of theoretical perspectives from commensurate paradigms. In *Surfing and Social Theory*, for example, Ford and Brown (2006) employ an array of theoretical perspectives to offer an insightful multidimensional analysis of global surfing culture and the embodied, lived experience of surfing. Importantly, we are not advocating employing multiple theoretical approaches to understand the different forms of power and politics operating within action sports cultures. Rather, we are proposing that

action sport scholars need to reflexively consider how and why we are using particular theoretical approaches in our projects, and not be afraid to explore the potential of other theoretical perspectives (Thorpe, 2011). According to Fredric Jameson, we should "learn theories like languages, and explore as every good translator does the expressive gaps between them – what can be said in one theory and not another" (cited in Leane and Buchanan, 2002: 254). Indeed, sometimes those "theoretical languages" that require the most "struggling," or as Hall (1992) terms it "wrestling with the angels" (p. 280), can be the most fulfilling because they challenge us to think differently about our data, action sports cultures, and the social world around us.

Balancing theory and empirical research – or "wrestling with the angels" – is a prime goal of sociology, yet its practice is "all too rare" (Waters, 2000: 4). Concerned that many intellectual products have lost their analytical dynamism and openness, and remain bent on "illustrating the applicability of *their* framework" (Baert, 2004: 362, emphasis added), philosopher Richard Rorty (1980) pleads for a critical approach that challenges "accepted taxonomies and lenses rather than merely reiterating them" (cited in Ford and Brown, 2006: 146). With Rorty, Baert (2004) is concerned by the contemporary trend that measures theory-inspired research by the "extent to which a theory . . . neatly . . . fits the data . . . and to which the various components of the theory . . . weave easily into the myriad of empirical experiences" (p. 367). Rather than employing one theoretical perspective (often late in the analysis) to frame our empirical investigations, scholars should seek to make theoretical ideas "live" through "empirical discussions" (Alexander, 2003: 7–8) with the action sports culture under investigation. In other words, we should aim to "move back and forth between theorizing and researching, between interpretations and explanations, between cultural logics and pragmatics" (Alexander, 2003: 6) throughout our projects. In her book, Thorpe (2011) argues that action sports scholars should be more willing to "play" with theoretical concepts; "pushing, pulling and stretching theories and concepts in relation to our empirical evidence can help us identify their strengths and limitations for explaining particular aspects of contemporary society" (p. 269) and action sports cultures.

Making a difference: Towards a political action sports studies

Theory is the heart and soul of sociology and central to the discipline's contribution to "the development of self-knowledge *and* the guidance of human society" (Waters, 2000: 1, emphasis added). While scholars of action sports cultures have employed various theoretical approaches with the goal of developing new ways of knowing and identifying the multiple forms of power, politics, and inequality operating within and across local and global contexts, it is also important to consider the social responsibility and/or ethics of our scholarship. Here we might recall Karl Marx's observation that "philosophers have interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it" (McLellan, 1977: 158). Yet few action sports scholars appear to be invested in transforming the inequitable power relations they identify, thus raising the long-debated question: What constitutes socially responsible sociology? Perhaps the answer lies not in how much change scholars can personally initiate, but rather our ability to explain and present our critical analyses in an accessible manner so that readers can use them to make sense of their own (and others') embodied and bodily experiences and inform their involvement in related practical and political issues.

In our efforts to "strategically disseminate" potentially empowering forms of knowledge to wider audiences (Andrews, 2008), we might draw some salient lessons from action sports participants themselves in terms of their creative and savvy use of new social media (e.g., niche magazines, websites, and blogs) for sharing information, engaging in local, national and transnational conversations, and inspiring individual and collective political action. Some action sports scholars are using or creating niche and/or micro-media to share their work and raise critical issues among their peers and participants (e.g., blogs, see Olive, 2013). A particularly good example is *Kurangabaa*, a highly creative and thought-provoking not-for-profit "journal of literature, history and ideas from the sea" co-produced by an international board of

critical scholars and educated surfers.[2] In *Notes for a Young Surfer* (2010), Clifton Evers – an Australian cultural studies scholar and key member of the *Kurangabaa* board – offers an accessible and engaging commentary on the various forms of power operating within surfing culture. Written primarily for young male surfers, Evers raises critical issues, such as homophobia, sexism, and misogyny, via beautifully crafted, thought-provoking, and deeply affective narratives based on his own experiences and observations from a lifetime immersed in the practice and culture of surfing. Interestingly (and perhaps somewhat surprisingly), despite exposing and challenging some of the fratriarchal practices at the core of the surfing culture, *Notes for a Young Surfer* has received some positive reviews from within the surfing culture; his position as a highly committed and proficient surfer, and his willingness to position himself in his narratives, seem to help him find space to raise these critical issues among his surfing peers. It is worth noting here that, at various stages in our sporting and academic careers, we have also both worked to address gender politics in the snowboarding and windsurfing cultures, respectively, through engaging with, and working in, action sport media (particularly niche magazines) – see, for example, Thorpe (2012). As these examples suggest, alternative styles of representation may further enhance the accessibility of our theoretically informed research and help us raise critical social issues about various dimensions of action sports cultures (e.g., reflexivity, power, ethics, identity, pleasure, pain, risk, performance, and gender) among wider audiences (see Laurendeau, 2011, 2012).

Conclusion

Since the foundational work of a select group of critical sociohistorical scholars of sport during the mid- and late 1990s (e.g., Becky Beal, Douglas Booth, Peter Donnelly, Duncan Humphreys, Nancy Midol, Robert Rinehart, and Belinda Wheaton), the sub-field of action sports studies has continued to flourish. Today, researchers – particularly graduate students and emerging scholars – from various disciplinary backgrounds are examining a plethora of action sports-related topics in an array of local, national, global, and virtual contexts, and publishing across the social science and humanities. But, for scholarship to continue developing in new and important ways, we need to reflect critically upon some of the methodological and theoretical assumptions underpinning our work. Rather than asking familiar questions in different contexts, or drawing upon common theoretical and methodological approaches to reveal somewhat predictable findings, we should seek to approach our work with a new "sociological imagination" (C.W. Mills, 1959) with the aim to (re)imagine more meaningful action sports research in the early twenty-first century. In sum, action sports scholarship that embraces more transdisciplinary, multi-methodological and theoretical, contextual, and political approaches could go a long way toward helping us "identify and analyze how dominant power structures become expressed in, and through, [the] socially and historically contingent embodied experiences, meanings, and subjectivities" (Andrews, 2008: 53) of action sports participants in local, national, and global contexts.

Notes

1 *Annual Report: Surf Aid International 2006/2007*, www.surfaidinternational.org/LiteratureRetrieve.aspx?ID=86872, accessed January 21, 2013. See also Thorpe and Rinehart (2010, 2012).

2 See http://kurungabaa.net/, accessed December 20, 2012.

3 The authors are grateful for permission from Palgrave Macmillan to reprint parts of Thorpe's (2011) chapter "Body politics, social change and the future of physical cultural studies" here.

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