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Sport has never been binary: fragments of a provocation

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ABSTRACT

Over the last two centuries, sports have become one of the most powerful sites for the public imposition, regulation, and maintenance of the rigid colonial binaries of men and women, as well as boys and girls. As part of this, sports have become a site of increasingly hostile debate and intervention regarding the participation of trans women and trans girls. Nonbinary athletes have received far less attention. Yet a focus on those people who are neither women nor men has the potential to radically disrupt and transform those popular sporting empires that play such a vital role in sustaining the colonial gender binary. This paper draws on history, sports studies, Indigenous studies, and autoethnography to explore: The unnatural chronology that placed the gender binary at the centre of modern sports; How nonbinary subjectivities and experiences unsettle the binary world of sports; The radical futures that are possible when sports are untethered to binary categories of gender. Our aim is not to cover every aspect nor to propose simple solutions. Instead, we offer disobedient fragments of provocation that unsettle the powerful common non-sense modern sports teach children about gender and the associated ideologies of ongoing colonialism, inevitably including those of race.

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From where we begin

We write at a time of fresh grief and heartbreak
Knowing that mourning fascism and genocides is not new,
That the present remains a time of possibility,
That life is never contained
Despite what the forces of colonialism and white supremacy attempt to dictate.

The centrality of sport to the violence of the present whitelash
Brings urgency to our work.

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

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Scholarship,
 Thinking,
 Imagining,
 Rigour,
 Creativity,
 Analysis,
 Dreaming,
 Truth-telling,
 Justice,
 and Liberation
 are as needed as ever.

But this work cannot be rushed.
 Complexity is at the heart of humanity.
 It must be attended to with care, courage, vulnerability, and love.
 There are no simple solutions.

Instead we offer a series of provocations
 Aimed at unsettling common non-sense
 To create pathways to traverse
 The boundless embodied possibilities of the
 Past, Present, Future.

The power of modern sports & what they teach

Communal toilets, prisons, sports. Over the past two centuries, all three have become central sites for the public imposition, regulation and maintenance of the rigid colonial binaries of men and women, as well as boys and girls. In the purportedly modern world, communal toilets and prisons have been positioned as necessary to civilization. Children quickly learn, however, that neither is the topic of polite conversation. Sports, on the other hand, are both a dominant form of popular culture and a subject that is taught in schools the world over. As a popular culture, sports facilitate intense visceral passions for those who play, coach and watch, but they are taught at schools to help mould growing humans into good civilians. The combination of pleasures, pains, loves, hopes, hates, dreams and ostensibly immense social value, has lent the institutions of sport extraordinary social, cultural, political and economic power. All too often, this power has been exercised to engineer, regulate and enforce dominant colonial ideologies that deploy common non-sense around white supremacist notions of fairness, competition and success, to impose an unnatural rigidly unequal gender binary (Desjardins, Ketterling, and Hepburn 2022; Klugman 2022). And at the heart of this is the common non-sense that sports reveal the natural truths of the gender binary.

The ideologies of modern sport have been weaponized against many people, including the recent systematic exclusion of many trans women and girls from a raft of sports (Fischer 2023). Nonbinary athletes (and others outside of the gender binary) have received far less attention.¹ Yet those outside the gender binary are

greatly affected by its imposition and regulation through sport. A focus on these people– who are neither women nor men– has the potential to radically disrupt and transform the popular sporting empires that play such a vital role in sustaining the colonial gender binary (e.g. Yang 2023).

This paper draws on history, sports studies, Indigenous studies, and autoethnography to explore:

- The unnatural chronology that placed the gender binary at the centre of modern sports;
- How nonbinary subjectivities and experiences unsettle the binary world of sports;
- The radical futures that are possible when sports are untethered to binary categories of gender.

Our aim is not to cover every aspect of this vast topic nor to propose simple solutions. Instead, we offer disobedient fragments of provocation that aim to unsettle the powerful common non-sense that modern sports teach children about gender and associated colonial ideologies.² In so doing, we hope to help break open the boundless possibilities around sport.

At issue are inexorably questions of race, as well as gender, for the emergence of modern sports into dominant forms of popular culture was shaped by the purported solutions particular games offered to Anglophone anxieties around white manhood. The inevitable failures to contain athletes into gender binaries – and the concomitant harms from attempting to do so – are also the subject of this paper, for they continue to shape the subjectivities and experiences of nonbinary athletes. More broadly, this paper argues that not only is it crucial for nonbinary studies to critically engage with the binary world of popular sports, but also that nonbinary studies can also play a key role in showing how this powerful site of the gender binary can be dismantled (Jones and Travers 2023). Yet for this to occur, nonbinary studies need to foreground colonial power ‘as the underlying condition that shapes the cultural and social production of gender and sexuality across settler colonial nations (like Australia) and colonising European countries’ (Day 2024a).

We do this by exploring how sport has become a central site for the imposition and maintenance of the ‘colonial project of gender (and everything else)’ (O’Sullivan 2021). That is, the reduction of human complexity to narrow (and unequal) containers, including those of the gender binary that were artificially positioned as a natural, timeless, and inescapable part of human life. Our first fragment traces the way sport came to be a central cultural site for artificially turning white middle-class boys into strong white middle-class men who the colonial world deemed the supreme pinnacle of humanity. All other unnatural colonial containers for humans – those ‘men’ designated as not-white as well as all ‘women’ – were supposedly inferior. But that made these humans a threat if they were as good, or perhaps even better, at sport. Our second fragment outlines the way sport became a space for the policing of race and the enforcement of an ever-more rigid gender binary in order to attempt the impossible cultural task of protecting the supremacy of white men. The resulting raced, unequal, strict gender-

binary has greatly limited the possibilities for non-binary people to participate – or even imagine – themselves fully in the worlds created through sport. In our third and fourth fragments, we tell some of our own stories of wrestling with sporting worlds that excluded our full selves, as well as those which created inclusive spaces for non-binary people, and people of all genders. We conclude by reflecting on the ways such inclusion of non-binary people can radically unsettle sport and be part of the development of much-needed anti-colonial sporting futures.

Fragment 1 ~ modern sports & the moulding of an unnatural gender: manhood



“Manhood is so exclusive, and respect is so elusive”

Michael Franti & Spearhead

Groups of shouting boys ran by in ghastly magenta school blazers. “Who designed the jackets?” I wondered.

“Who designed the boys?” she [Jacqueline Rose] replied.

Parul Sehgal

‘Will our boys become men?’ This was such a pressing question in the English-speaking world in the mid-to-late 1800s that a shoe company would use it as the headline for their advertisement in the *Liverpool Weekly Courier* (Lewis 1881). Indeed, the Lewis footwear company promised that their ‘damp-proof boots’ would help allay what was ‘one of the most anxious questions that parents put to themselves and silently, to themselves’ (Lewis 1881). Looking back, the absurdity of the claim is clear. But the anxieties the advertisement touched upon were profound enough for versions to also be placed in the *Liverpool Mercury*, *Liverpool Daily Post*, and the *South Wales Echo* of Glamorgan for much of 1885.³

In the English-speaking world of the 1800s, the transition of white boys into white men seemed fraught (Tosh 2005). These boys could not be left unaided to naturally become men. Artificial means were needed. Sometimes fighting in a war was deemed necessary to turn boys into men (Terret and Mangan 2012). In the second half of the 1800s, however, the playing of particular sports was put forward as a more practical means of facilitating this unnatural transition.

In 1867, for example, an Old Etonian wrote to the *Field, The Country Gentleman's Newspaper* that the 'true use of games' was their 'power of turning boys into men' (Etonesis 1867). It was an increasingly popular sentiment, one that had been amplified by the best-selling novel about another elite English school, *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (Hughes 1857). Indeed, the notion that particular sports – such as cricket, boxing and the football codes – would make men out of boys, became a truism of the powerful movements of muscular Christianity and rational recreation (Huggins 2004). Even the modern Olympics themselves were shaped by these ideologies, with founder Baron Pierre de Coubertin hoping sports could create French men who were equal to those of England (Boykoff 2016).

By now there is a vast literature on the ways the sport was used as a mechanism to mould boys into men (building on Mangan 1981). The processes were complex and contradictory. Despite the fact that manhood, manliness, and ultimately men were explicitly spoken of as products of social engineering at school and otherwise, manhood, manliness, and men, were also still constructed as natural aspects of gender. Indeed, as Gail Bederman has noted:

Part of the way gender functions is to hide these contradictions and to camouflage the fact that gender is dynamic and always changing. Instead, gender is constructed as a fact of nature, and manhood is assumed to be an unchanging, transhistorical essence, consisting of fixed, naturally occurring traits. To study the history of manhood, I would argue, is to unmask this process and study the historical ways different ideologies about manhood develop, change, are combined, amended, contested – and gain the status of truth. (1995, 7)

The kinds of white men that sport was used to produce – athletic, strong, courageous, disciplined, obedient, selfless, rational, fair, victorious – were seen as embodying what white men naturally were: the supposed pinnacle of humanity. Sports were being used, in other words, to make a certain kind of supreme white manhood seem inevitable. And as part of this process, specifically exclusive and unequal versions of the gender binary were also being rendered as natural containers for humans as part of the colonial project of gender (O'Sullivan 2021).

Even for scholars of gender such as Bederman, this process was so powerful that the gender binary seemed an inevitable part of the world, despite it being apparent that the constructions of gender were themselves unnatural:

Because of these internal contradictions, and because ideologies come into conflict with other ideologies, men and women are able to influence the ongoing ideological processes of gender, *even though they cannot escape them*. (1995, 10, our emphasis)

So what were the effects of using sport to resolve the fraught transition of white boys into true (white) manhood whilst making this *transition* appear as a natural, timeless, and inescapable part of human life? This question is the topic of our second fragment.

Fragment 2 ~ sporting threats to white manhood



"The most unaesthetic sight human eyes could contemplate"

"Against the 'laws of nature'"

"Impractical, uninteresting, unaesthetic and improper."

Baron Pierre de Coubertin on women's sports.

(Anonymous 1985).

Cultures of purported supremacy easily become cultures of fear, anger and surveillance. Everything that might unsettle the claims to supremacy is a threat.

As our first fragment detailed, modern sports arose and were championed in the English-speaking world for the central part they played in the colonial project of gender.⁴ For the particular kind of supreme white men that they supposedly made. And the outcomes of this process were that sports came to be seen as the natural province of white men. Sports, like the distant lands that were invaded and colonized, were a prized possession (Moreton-Robinson 2015). Victories provided vital validation of white manliness. However, this meant that every contest between white men and those who were not white could threaten the investment in the supremacy of white men.

Historian Louis Moore has shown how boxing in the late 1800s and early 1900s became a site where many African-American men strove to become 'self-made men in a country that tried to deny their economic, social, and political manhood' (Moore 2017, 11). The success of these Black men could shatter 'the myth of black inferiority' (11). But victory could come at the cost of a whitelash. In 1910, when Jack Johnson annihilated the 'great white hope' Jim Jeffries in the world heavyweight bout, both the (Black) *Chicago Defender* and (white) Jeffries agreed that Johnson had established himself as 'the best man in the world' (Anonymous 1910; Bederman 1995, 2). Yet the result was met with white-hot rage, as if something had been taken from white people that was divinely theirs. The loss of perceived natural supremacy was so humiliating that many white men sought revenge, attacking Black men who dared to express joy at the result, burning Black properties and lynching one Black man deemed to look like Jack Johnson (Runstedtler 2012).

Alongside the whitelashes, similar logics started to affect the white women who began to play 'manly' sports. At issue was the inequality, rigidity, and white supremacy that the colonial gender binary was predicated on (Fischer 2023; Schultz 2022). Middle-class white

women were supposed to be not only weak, but also eternally fragile possessions in need of protection from white men. White men should strive for greatness in the public sphere, whilst women ensured the continuation of the white 'race' by remaining in the private sphere where they would have, and then raise, white children.

Doctors, scientists, the men running sports, and many censorious women joined together to decry those 'females' who sought to breach the strict divide between genders and participate in this manly sphere. Moral panics were fanned over the deleterious physical, mental and moral effects of women cycling (*it might render them infertile!*), swimming competitively (*their bathing costumes were scandalously immoral!*) and even running (*the ensuing exhaustion would cut their lives tragically short!*) (Vertinsky 1994).

When Florence Madeline 'Madge' Syers became the first woman to enter the world championships in figure skating in 1902, and then finished second, the International Skating Union responded by banning women from competing due to the purported advantage created by the long skirts obscuring their feet (Kestnbaum 2003). Syers subsequently shortened her skirts to show her feet, but the International Skating Union never again allowed women to compete against men for the world championship. In 1921, after women playing Association football (soccer) started to draw bigger crowds than many men's games, the (English) Football Association effectively banned the women's game for 50 years (Williams 2003). Neither action was inevitable, but the threat to men and manhood was used as justification in these and similar cases.

Many cis-gendered women continued to push against the unequal narrow container of gender that they were supposed to conform to. Sporting organizations, however, continued to limit what women were 'allowed' to do as athletes, purportedly for their own good. The supposed fragility and physical inferiority of women have meant they were not allowed to run as far, swim as far, or cycle as far in the Olympics and other major competitions. Sports like baseball and basketball were modified for women, resulting in softball and netball. Women are still required to play with smaller balls in basketball and Australian Rules football, despite the fact that 'women' and 'men' have increased greatly in body size over the last 50 years, without the balls for men being made bigger (Klugman et al. 2022).

Even when women were 'allowed' to compete against other women, they were often subjected to fierce scrutiny and censure. Those women who demonstrated that they were neither weak nor fragile, were condemned as being too manly. So rigid was the colonial gender binary, that any signs of apparent manliness aroused deep suspicion. To have strong muscles, a deep voice, or shave facial hair was seen as evidence that someone was not a 'true' woman (Waters 2024). Frequently it was other women who tried to enforce these absurdly narrow gender norms. After the 1934 Women's World Games, the coach of the Canadian women's track and field team – Alexendrine Gibb – complained that 'mannish' girls were making the 'frail lilies' of Canada weep in despair (Waters 2024, 170). Amidst a rise in explicit fascism intertwined with white supremacy, American Olympics official Avery Brundage and members of the NAZI party pushed for the 1936 Berlin Olympics to adopt a sex-testing policy aimed at stopping women who were 'too manly' from competing at the games.

The result was that sport – through the modern Olympics – soon became a site that acted as if it could codify the artificial categories of woman and man, 'reinforcing the myth that sex distinctions were natural' (Waters 2024, 261). And reinforcing the myth that there

were no humans outside of the colonial gender binary – that is, that nonbinary people (and athletes) did not exist. It was an act of symbolic annihilation (O’Sullivan 2022; Schultz 2022). The by now globally powerful ‘stature of the Olympics’ became:

the ideal vector for this kind of fiction. If the biggest sports event in the world decided that it needed to create a stringent definition of ‘female’, then why shouldn’t other regulatory bodies, or societies, do the same? (Waters 2024, 262; also see Travers 2024)

It is notable that the ideology of fairness and meritocracy emerged out of colonial white supremacy and took on a specific scientific, medical, and biological dimension through fascism and especially eugenics (Fischer 2023; Schultz 2022). Being too manly – and thus holding an unfair advantage over ‘fragile’ feminine competitors – has remained a criticism levelled at strong athletic women, especially those who were not heterosexual or white, such as tennis stars Martina Navratilova and Serena Williams (Burke and Klugman 2025). Even the white Australian swimming champion Dawn Fraser was accused of being too manly (Booth and Tatz 2000). The effect of such intense critical colonial gender scrutiny has led many elite women athletes to become highly defensive, and to turn the criticism they received for their strength onto athletic trans women. Both Navratilova and Fraser, for example, have been outspoken about what they deem to be an unfair advantage in strength for trans women. But this regressive turn just reinforces the harm directed at those cis-women who are currently deemed ‘too manly’ (like Imane Khalif) as Navratilova and Fraser once were themselves, as well as harming trans women (Burke and Klugman 2025).

The negative effects of the imposition, enforcement, regulation, and maintenance of this colonial gender binary through sport go beyond the non-white men and women who are harmed by it. There is no place within the colonial project of gender for nonbinary people who have faced systemic exclusion from sport, often with devastating effects (Travers 2018). At the same time, this also means that the athletic experiences and activism of nonbinary people existing in the borderlands of sport (Lorber 2018) provide vital pathways to ‘to unravel the seams of a hierarchized athletic gender binary’ (Jones and Travers 2023, 95). We approach these experiences with some autoethnographic reflections woven through the next two fragments.

Fragment 3 ~ bounded & boundless possibilities

“Since gender and heterosexuality are products of Western epistemology, which is imposed by force as colonial power, the conditions of possibility before and beyond this are endless.”

Madi Day, 2024b

Sandy

Like many teenagers in the 1970s, skateboarding dominated my time and imagination. I was influenced by American films and the cheap skateboards my friends all got for Christmas in 1978, the same year the movie *Skateboard* hit the big screen. Mirroring the

movie, much of the public imaginary of my childhood was framed by a willingness to do dangerous and risky things for the sake of skateboarding and glory. Skateboarding was visible across the popular culture of the late 1970s, from film to TV to teen magazines, demonstrating a carefree American teenagerhood (Dinces 2011) and an emerging liminal space between childhood and adulthood, as long as you were male, white, privileged and, of course, American (Brayton 2005). But I grew up genderqueer and Aboriginal in North Queensland, and we barely had paved roads out in Kirwan, then a new suburb of Townsville. I didn't know anyone who skated even though my brothers knew big boys who would take over the concrete informal skatepark of the town. Through an inherent social conditioning, I knew I couldn't join them. I knew they would see me as a little girl, and later as a potential girlfriend. But I never imagined the future they planned for me, or any future where I was not blurry. I would later learn that this is a common experience for transgender kids as they traverse a shape of belonging (Durham Greey 2023; Priest 2019) and for Aboriginal people as they challenge the colonial project of gender (O'Sullivan 2021). What I was restricted from imagining was a body that was robust, not dainty. Female puberty was regarded at the time as adding to this fragility, which was at odds with the marked increase in womens' participation in sport and insinuations that challenged these limitations (Luther 2019; Spencer 2000). Against this backdrop, exploring gender outside of the binary was not only impossible but also operated, for someone assigned female at birth, at odds with a project that argued for women to be taken seriously in the sporting arena.

If skateboarding was unavailable to the little transgender body that never gave me comfort, it was still a fantasy wrapped up in the desire to belong and flex the aspirational gender I knew I was. Skateboarding felt immediate, and rather than a barrier, it offered my body liberation; I got to play out what I would later learn was a form of gender resistance (Halberstam, Labar, and Bigé 2021). So along with my childhood friend we found ourselves visiting our very new school on the weekend and after hours, skating on every concrete surface and ringing off the rails. The principal warned us kids on the first day the school opened that it was riddled with King Brown snakes. With a bite that could kill a kid in 10 minutes, he reminded us that our bush school was 20 minutes from the nearest ambulance. But I persisted because who cares about killer snakes when after-hours school was the only place I could skate my gender. Skateboarding made me feel less like the not-quite-girl they saw, and more like me. It allowed a gender expression focused on my body and reflected the complex representation of tomboys that was taking over the American small screen in the late 1970s (Hardie & Villarejo 2023).

It was one of these representations that transformed my life: white and American, but they were also a little 'girl', one who dressed and acted like I imagined a boy would, including the way they rode their skateboard. I was mesmerized and saw all the opportunities to break my gender trap when I first saw the character of Buddy 'Letitia' Lawrence from the TV show *Family*. The character was played by Kristy McNichol, who decades later would come out as queer after being outed in the tabloid press (Hatch 2011). McNichol's tomboy was a rare occurrence at the time in a major weekly TV drama, demonstrating a slim possibility of binary gender transgression (Hardie & Villarejo 2023). Imagining myself into tomboy characters afforded a cover for the gender I couldn't successfully perform, and skateboarding gave me a temporary persona that would slip away when I started the wrong puberty (Priest 2019).

Fifty years later, I would read Geckle and Shaw as they articulated a queer skateboarding aesthetic and queer liberation, shaped by Halberstam's ideas of a queer failure to conform, in body and affect, in movement and community (2022; Halberstam, Labar, and Bigé 2021). They write of skateboarding as a recent site of queer liberation across the sport, making space outside of the misogyny that dominated, acknowledging it was born in the form of counter-culture decades ago. For those of us who were skating in resistance, there may not have been a community that encompassed gender and race resistances, but on reflection I realize I wouldn't have been the Blak genderqueer adult I am without the outsider play it afforded.⁵

It would be that same 50-year span of time before I witnessed a Blak non-binary figure as the central character in their own story. In Ellen van Neerven's [EvN] Van Neerven (2024) play, *Swim*, the character of E tells us that their Blak non-binary body is sovereign and cannot be contained by others. Through events that reduce participation in sport to competition and compliance, E reminds us that the colonial project of gender can be resisted and refused, through an assertion of sovereignty that is an ongoing project of its own. We see E's refusal to participate after experiencing the pain of betrayal, and by witnessing the portrayal of an abject white swimming character who cannot stop competing for the very sake of it (O'Sullivan and Reardon-Smith 2025). They call out the need to make swimming not competitive but cooperative, with the body, not against it (also see Cauldwell 2021). To succeed and swim through desire to bring others along.

In 2019, I co-presented alongside Indigo Willing on a panel focused on gender and participation in sports. Attended by a range of sports industry professionals, we pondered the future of participation across competitive sports that intentionally exclude non-binary trans people. In exploring the history of sporting practices that at least bust the gender binary at community level, skateboarding was front and centre. Willing writes about – and practices – skateboarding at a community level. She challenges the problems of the early days of skateboarding that encouraged toxic masculinity and the subsequent strategies employed by those who regarded this as counter to the counterculture and resistances found in the sport (Geckle and Shaw 2022). Willing, alongside fellow skater, Evie Ryder, co-founded *Girls Skate Brisbane*, that, as a part of their ongoing work to be inclusive of non-binary people, became *We Skate QLD* (Willing and Pappalardo 2023).

I left skateboarding in the 1970s as my traitorous body betrayed me. By the time I revisited the sport in the 90s as a youth worker, I had a secret that the kids couldn't comprehend. A million years before I had been a skateboarder, but to them I was an old, fat Blak person in my late twenties and it felt like the echo of things past, the rendering of my gender still blurry, my belonging questioned. If the colonial project of gender attempts to reductively contain us in ways that deny the rich breadth and depth of who we are (O'Sullivan 2021), it is not only skateboarding but also an acknowledgement of our broken yet whole and complex bodies, our sovereign selves, and our ability to centre our complexities, including in gender, that will deliver our futures. It is the story of progress that delivers a better outcome for the next generation. But this 'progress' and these stories from Willing and EvN that would have delivered teenage Sandy a model where race, gender, and diverse bodies and abilities are placed at the very centre of skateboarding culture, remain elusive.

Participation in sports for non-binary trans people is a site of exclusion that should not exist. Participatory sports continue to invoke excluding measures that make wrong our

bodies and genders, push us to the margins, and grows as the policing of the binary genders becomes an active policy across formerly resistant sports. There is bravery in stepping out of the expected path. I recognize the bravery in my 13-year-old self, who risked a deadly snake bite to have even deadlier skate-time and an affirmation, even if only to myself, of who I am. This bravery is enacted by the refusals of gender that were demonstrated in *Swim*, it is there in the title and work of *We Skate*. Past and present struggles teach us that young people will find ways to ride out dissent and to locate a place for themselves. Where could we be if the sporting establishment championed that agency?

Fragment 4 ~ unravelling the colonial gender binary

“We’re talking about practice?”

Allen Iverson

Matthew

Sport is a place of embodied passions. Of pleasure, pain, joy, misery, love, hate, hope, disappointment, dreams, nightmares, desires and loss, among so many other multi-layered, complicated elements. I’ve studied such things for much of the past 20 years. But recently, at the age of 49, I was shocked to not only find myself joining an Australian Rules football team for the first time, but also by how much the training sessions with the rest of the team have come to mean to me.

I grew up playing and following many sports. The one that gripped me the most was Australian Rules football. I played this form of football in the street, local backyards, and school grounds, and followed men’s football with great devotion, frequently crying when my team lost. But the idea of actually joining a team repelled me. I had no wish to experience the manly aggression and violence that feature regularly in the men’s game. I enjoyed a few summers playing touch Australian Rules football in mixed gender competitions, but it was a very different game. The impossibility I had imagining a form of the winter game that I could play was such that I never even realized that I was missing out on something.

Assigned male at birth, I was privileged with the kind of relatively able body, class and presumed whiteness that made it quite easy for me to play other sports. I enjoyed playing field hockey, indoor cricket, tennis and futsal, and, at times, adored basketball, badminton, table tennis, and ultimate frisbee, whilst disliking golf. A couple of years before the pandemic I started to find some meaning in medium distance running. But after the Covid19 pandemic faded from public view, the medication I was taking for a chronic health condition made running much harder. I tried to restart, pushed myself a little too hard and felt physically knocked out for months. I had lost the privilege of the kind of able body needed to participate in this sport. In contrast, somehow even with chronic ill-health, in the presence of live music I could somehow dance for hours, exhausting myself, but in a way that I could still physically recover from.

When I first heard of a nearby Australian Rules football team – the East Brunswick Eye Gougers – that was not only predominantly queer, but in which trans people had always

played a central role, I knew that I wanted to play with them. The colonial project of gender was broken open in a new way for me, and I realized that this is what I wanted. Perhaps what I had wanted for a long time, even though I had not been able to imagine it. Training drills in other sports had always bored me. I liked to practice on my own and to play with others. Now, though, footy training became a thing I longed to do. Amidst the profusion of (still relatively able) bodies, genders, abilities and pronouns, wearing the trans coloured pride top of the women's team I support, my being loses some of the tension that I carry every day in a colonial nation whose constraints and containments I have to resist despite all my privileges. During training with my teammates, the world somehow seems a bit less oppressive, as if our time together outside of the gender binary provides partial liberation on stolen lands.

The games still scare me. I have no wish to be physically broken by a foe or misguided friend. Even at training I am still careful. Almost everyone is much younger. I avoid putting myself in possible harm's way as much as I can. Still, there is something to this game that connects with my body, mind, soul, and spirit. It feels like dancing. Exhausting yes, but unlike running after no ball, it does not knock me out.

I write about this not to suggest that I have 'successfully' found a way of defanging the gender binary, like an individual ignoring ongoing genocides in pursuit of the colonial nirvana of happiness. Rather, I want to note the conditions, collective work and solidarity which make such experiences possible for some relatively able-bodied nonbinary people. The team I play with is openly queer and has been shaped by many trans people. They have remained so, despite acts of violence against them by some cis-men they have played against. Another team in the same league that shares a similar ethos with us frequently joins us for shared training sessions. The league our teams play in strives to be a place where adults of all ages, genders and abilities can play. Games are umpired with safety, as well as the official rules, in mind. There are regulations in place to facilitate opportunities for players whose gender has been the site of intense violence and scrutiny. And although the games are scored, there is no ladder, no end-of-season hierarchy. Victory is ephemeral. The song is sung, but there is no quest to be the champion. The incentives to win at all costs are greatly reduced.

Many sports and sporting competitions, outside of equestrian events, do not provide such opportunities for nonbinary people, especially at an elite level. The way so many sporting 'facilities, programmes, activities and uniforms' tend to be segregated around the unnatural colonial gender binary entails an erasure of identity that makes many nonbinary people (among others) deeply uncomfortable (Travers 2018, 651; also see; Monro 2019). It can be understood as a form of continuing symbolic annihilation (O'Sullivan 2022; Schultz 2022). Those nonbinary athletes who do compete in sporting competitions limited to one side of the fictional binary, struggle with the way these competitions are named (as women's or men's) in a way that excludes them (de la Cretaz 2021). As EvN asks, 'Are non-binary people seen as cis by association for playing in gendered competitions' (Van Neerven 2023, 273)?

Gendering sport is not necessarily an improvement if it does not transform the colonial nature of categorization. Indeed, new forms of hierarchical categorization can emerge between 'natural' cis men and women and 'constructed' trans men and women, and then between binary trans and nonbinary trans (Risman, Myers, and Sin 2018). As Monro explains, "... once fluidity is named, it becomes a space which people can inhabit ... and is therefore arguably no longer a non-category' (2005, 37). Instead, forms

of gender pluralism that facilitate the affirmation of all genders offer more promise, such as the models provided by *WeSkate* and *ParkRun* (also see for example Bekker et al. 2023).

Conclusion

The games designated as sports hold immense power as forms of popular culture and esteemed pedagogy in the purported modern world. Sports are considered a public good (Elsey and Nadel 2019). They are still put forward as solutions to ostensible crises such as those around obesity and mental health. Yet a core part of their power resides in the way that modern sports have come to regulate, as well as maintain and sustain, a rigidly unequal gender binary. At the heart of this is the common non-sense that sports reveal the natural truths of the gender binary.

Nonbinary studies need to take into account sport because of the immense sway popular sports have over the modern ideologies of gender. The expansive disobedient fragments of our paper unsettle this non-sense by outlining the roles that sport has played in shaping, promoting, and attempting to fix the unnatural colonial gender binary that has been imposed on much of the world. Through this process, sport has become a central public site for not only the exclusion of nonbinary people but also for their symbolic annihilation. Moreover, our fragments reveal the importance of focusing on nonbinary people to both highlight the flaws of the artificial rigid gender binaries maintained and regulated through modern sports, and to showcase the as yet largely untold possibilities for what sports might enable for nonbinary people (and so many others!) in the present and future. The general absence of nonbinary people in sport and the broader paucity of gender inclusive sporting competitions/activities have been felt deeply by both Sandy and Matthew. For to be unwillingly excluded from sport, and sports, is also to be limited from access to the dreams, fantasies, joys, suffering and rich embodied meaning provided by a formidable living popular culture. Which makes contesting sport – and the common falsehoods which circulate through it – all the more important.

Yet for nonbinary studies to reckon with the might of sports, it is essential to grapple with the way modern sports are a central part of the colonial project of gender, and thus of ongoing colonialism itself. Sports remain a fulcrum for the imposition of white supremacist falsehoods around race as well as gender. Indeed, the public good of sports is still a prized possession of white men that aids in the claimed possession of stolen lands. And as the Murri Indigenous scholar Madi Day and Christy E. Newman note, 'Race and gender are cooperative in this system because they are European measures of who is human and, thus, who is productive of the settler colonial state and who is harmed or erased in the process of reproducing the nuclear family system and securing land for white settlers' (Day and Newman 2024).

We conclude then, by returning to EvN's play *Swim* where a speech E gives outlines a vision of sport that is not only beyond the artificial binaries of gender but also rejects the impossible quest for genocidal superiority that is at the heart of the colonial project:

I used to think that winning is everything
But winning is thin
winning is temporary
ultra-white competition doesn't do it for me
cos what do I lose
when I push water to its limits?

the whitefella way – winning at all costs
 Winning against country
 Tearing up the banks of the river with speedboats
 Killing the mangroves – the lifeforce
 Making a billion-dollar harbour
 Mining our springs for minerals
 Killing Wardam because they want to claim the ocean
 And make it theirs
 No – that's not our way

What is more important than winning?
 Aunty taught me
 Connection
 Feeling
 Country
 Respect
 Knowledge.

Notes

1. In this paper, we use definitions from Monro's (2019) overview of the field of non-binary and gender queer studies, and treat 'non-binary' as 'an umbrella term' for those who do not identify as always a woman/girl or man/boy (126).
2. Our 'disobedient' methodology is informed by McKittrick (2021, 44), who draws on the work of Sylvia Wynter to theorize forms of 'method-making' that focus on the 'questioning and overturning of normative systems of knowledge, and thus what it means to be human'. Such "Method-making compulsively moves with curiosity (even in frustration) rather than applying a set of techniques to an object of study and generating unsurprising findings and outcomes". As opposed to normative frameworks where 'Discipline is empire', this methodology is unsettling, 'disobedient (rogue, rebellious, black)', and in our case also Blak. Our thanks to Madi Day for drawing our attention to the work of McKittrick.
3. The <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/> shows that at least 32 versions of this ad were placed in the *South Wales Echo* in 1885 alone. (Accessed on 03/07/2025).
4. The recent paper by da Silva (2026) makes a similar point. This work is an important intervention into sports philosophy in particular, which has been a bastion for defences of the rigid unequal colonial gender binary. However, in not referring to more of the considerable work of Indigenous scholars (beyond the work of the *Mestiza* scholar Gloria Anzaldúa) on gender and the colonial gender binary, the paper remains grounded in the discipline of philosophy's ongoing symbolic annihilation of Indigenous knowledges, despite the paper's decolonial intentions.
5. For more on the use of Blak and other language referring to Indigenous People in so-called Australia see: https://research-management.mq.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/161911416/Publisher_version.pdf.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Matthew Klugman:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Sandy O'Sullivan:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Michael Burke:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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