

Australian society has long been imbued with a ‘fair go’ principle which suggests that everyone is entitled to fairness by way of shared opportunity – such as with education, health, social security, and so on. For advocates, this mantra underpins a society that, while unequal, is not characterized by vast differences in wealth and living standards (Herscovitch, 2013). To critics, though, the ‘fair go’ notion is either idealistic or completely unrealistic, as well as a distraction from entrenched differences of opportunity and power in Australian society (Lawrence, 2017).

For Indigenous Australians, the notion of a ‘fair go’ in a society in which generations of Aboriginal peoples have suffered manifestly is particularly fraught (Tatz, 2017).¹ Even the semantics of a ‘fair go’ can be construed as discriminatory by way of ‘race’:² for example, ‘fairness’ has long focused on opportunities for fair skinned (i.e. White) Australians (Fotinopoulos, 2017). Revelations that in many parts of Australia during the early to mid-late twentieth century, Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from families and placed in foster care – under the guise of welfare – prompted a report into what became known as the Stolen Generations (Murphy, 2011). In 2008, the Federal Government issued a national apology and committed to a reconciliation process. This includes ‘closing the gap’ initiatives featuring twin efforts: to help all Australians come to terms with a harrowing history of racial discrimination and conflict, and to catalyze improvements to the lives of Aboriginal peoples (Gunstone, 2017; Kowal, 2015).

In this article we are interested in the question of a ‘fair go’ for Indigenous peoples, particularly the role of Aboriginal voices in seeking to (re)shape symbols of identity, representation, and nationality. Our focus is with the professional sport of rugby league as a platform through which to stimulate community debate: it is a sport that features significant

numbers of Indigenous players, each of whom has a prominent public profile and – in principle – the potential for their voices to be carried to the wider Australian public via the media.

In keeping with that interest, the focus of this article surrounds two key episodes: (1) the decision by the Australian National Rugby League (NRL) to include an alternative anthem alongside the national anthem during the Indigenous round of matches in 2017; and (2) high-profile silent protests by Indigenous players during the playing of the national anthem at a game between the Indigenous All Stars of Australia and the Māori All Stars of New Zealand in February 2019, followed by similar actions in the three-match State of Origin series between Queensland and New South Wales in June/July 2019.

In analyzing the two episodes, the study had three primary objectives: (1) to evaluate the voices of Indigenous rugby league players, who in both scenarios engaged actively with the media, thus providing verbatim explanations for their protests; (2) to explore reactions to the players' dissent among prominent Indigenous and non-Indigenous commentators (who by virtue of their public standing garnered a media platform by which to offer voice to the debate); and (3) to ask, in light of all this, whether the Australian national anthem – a musical and lyrical representation of country – might be reformed.

By virtue of this analysis, this study adds to a wider body of literature around the (re-emerging) trend of athlete activism and, in our case, national anthem protests. Athlete activism, which draws attention to social justice issues and associated movements, has increasingly been examined from a communication perspective (see Colás, 2019; Schmidt et al., 2019; Park et al., 2019; Rugg, 2019; Yan et al., 2019). This study contributes to that body of literature by examining how symbolic protests may be communicated by a combination of silence, (lack of) gesture, and voice. As will be illustrated, the principal data

source for the study was online media articles that centered on the verbatim testimonies of Indigenous rugby league players and officials, along with reflective responses to the protests by politicians, journalists, and other public commentators in online media opinion pieces. By contrast to the norm, Indigenous voices were given prominence, with their opinions sought after at press conferences and in studio interviews.

The evaluation of data was underpinned by critical race theory (CRT), an apposite framework when endeavoring to privilege rarely heard voices (or indeed the reasons behind their silence) surrounding racial injustices and the social conditions that create and sustain ‘race’ and racism in a White-dominated society (Coram & Hallinan, 2017; Gillborn & Ladson-Billings, 2010; Hylton, 2017; Vass, 2015). **Stovall (2010) illustrates how the central tenets of CRT are to: centralize race and racism; challenge the dominant ideology of whiteness; commit to social justice; centralize the experiential knowledge of people of color.** In the case of this article, it relates to the goal of exploring reasons why several Indigenous rugby league players refused to sing the national anthem at nationally televised games. We do this by centralizing the voices of these players and analyzing their role in seeking transformative social change, which in the process exposed both **historical and contemporary inequalities for Indigenous communities in Australia.**

A CRT framework has been used previously to explore issues of ‘race’ via the media. For example, Hylton and Lawrence (2015) used *Sport* magazine to explain contingent whiteness through the example of footballer, Cristiano Ronaldo, whilst in 2016 they examined the media’s disclosure of the racist views of National Basketball Association owner, Donald Sterling, in which they deployed a CRT framework to present evidence of frontstage (public) and backstage (private) racism. The media (in their case YouTube) communicated Sterling’s words – and

therefore conveyed his attitudes – to the public. In a different, yet no less significant use of CRT and the media, Oshiro et al. (2020) examined: (1) racist posts made by members of the online community site, TexAgs.com, towards the activism of Black American footballers Michael Bennett, Mike Evans, Myles Garrett and Von Miller, all of whom were connected with Texas A&M University (where the online community was associated); and (2) the personal accounts made by Bennett regarding the racial discourse directed towards him and his peers by members of that site.

Contextual Review

Symbols and rites of nation

Australia has a civic and liturgic tradition in which symbols, signs, rituals, and songs were conceived to ‘define’ the nation via performative patriotism. These include flags, banners, anthems, anniversaries, ceremonies, and so on (Kelen, 2003; Orr, 2014). That said, it ought to be noted that the establishment of an Australian Commonwealth in 1901 did not involve a bellicose sense of nationalism. Australia remained very much part of the British Empire and its Monarch head of state, with 23 per cent of the population British-born and an overwhelming majority of the rest were of British descent (Evans et al., 1997). The Australian flag featured the Union Jack on its top left corner, while the national anthem was God Save the King. Eventually, with the passage of time and a more ethnically diverse Australian society, there were debates from the early 1970s, about whether – and indeed how – these expressions of civic loyalty might change to suit new circumstances (Curran & Ward, 2010; Orr, 2014). The anthem was a particular focus of discussion so, in 1977, a referendum was called to enable Australian voters to choose one of four options: God Save the King/Queen, Advance Australia Fair, the Song of Australia, and

Waltzing Matilda. Much like the Australian Constitution, however, there was no mention of Indigenous peoples in these renditions of collective national identity (Kelen, 2003).

Advance Australia Fair was eventually made the official anthem from 1984, with the exception of vice-regal occasions where the British equivalent was still deployed. Yet the song was hardly new: it was conceived in 1878 by a Scottish migrant at a time when there were antipodean colonies and aspiration to be a British nation. The lyrics underwent minor adjustments over the years: for example, ‘Australian sons’ was replaced simply by ‘Australians’, thus making the song more gender neutral (Institute of Australian Culture, 2012). Despite changes, there remained no effort to acknowledge Indigenous peoples: indeed, the anthem’s claim that Australians are “young and free” indicated a disregard for the long history and subjugated status (under colonialism) of Indigenous peoples. Moreover, the title Advance Australia Fair, even if not intended by its author to refer to White skin color, has (perhaps understandably) been construed that way by Indigenous critics (Welcome to Country, 2019).

While it is not surprising that a patriotic song written by a British migrant in 1878 offers, as critics have put it, “a white-washed mythic narrative” (Bond et al., 2018, p. 416), it seems more disappointing that when an opportunity arose to conceive a new anthem, the ‘best’ that Australians could come up with was a rehash of an older song. After all, the progressive Prime Minister, Labor’s Gough Whitlam, had used his Australia Day speech in 1973 to make a case for innovation:

I believe that a new National Anthem is needed...it is essential that Australians have an Anthem that fittingly embodies our national aspirations and reflects our status as an independent nation...and recalls vividly to ourselves the distinctive qualities of Australian life and the character and traditions of our nation.

Whitlam’s focus, like many of his political contemporaries, was with the nation having a greater sense of independence from Britain. Yet, there was silence on his position about Aboriginal

peoples within the nationalist narrative. This is despite an assessment by the political historian, John Warhurst (2010, p. 249), that “Whitlam’s achievements in Aboriginal affairs, especially land rights for Aborigines, are recognized as among the government’s proudest.” In fact, 1973 was more notable for the disestablishment of the White Australia Policy that began in 1901, which spoke to a diminution of the long-held view, in both and policy and custom, that Australia was a country for Whites – or at least ought to be. The reinstatement of Advance Australia Fair stood in contrast to a key tenet of Whitlam’s progressive politics, which centered on multiculturalism, Indigenous affairs, and promotion of the liberal arts.

From the perspective of this article, it is important to acknowledge that Australian professional sports have long been intimately involved in rites of patriotism and identity. They have looked to embellish their competitions with commemorations of nation: the rising importance of Anzac Day or Australia Day³ sporting fixtures meant that flag waving and anthem formalities became part and parcel of stage management on such big occasions (Brantz, 2017). Thus, sport is a particularly important site for promoting rites of nationalism, with Advance Australia Fair a showpiece at stadiums and across television broadcasts, though generally it is only played at finals or events with similar stature. However, as Southam (2019) points out, Australian sports fans are more interested in cheering their team than trumpeting the anthem that represents their country, a reaction that Spiegel and Spiegel (1998) refer to as demonstrating a rather banal sense of nationalism or a ‘redundant patriotism’. In that sense, flags and anthems are part of the fabric of the Australian nation and its sporting fixtures, but they are hardly weekly occurrences and (aside from Anzac Day) rarely provide the sense of avid patriotic engagement that is common, for example, in the United States.

Indigenous identity and popular culture

By the late twentieth century there were portents of change in Australian cultural identity, with Indigenous performers influencing the nation's popular culture. For example, rock bands like Yothu Yindi produced strong-selling albums, with their single 'Treaty' something of an Indigenous 'anthem' – all the more important in a country where the national song did not mention Aboriginal peoples (Dunbar-Hall & Gibson, 2000). Just as impressively, Aboriginal art had become “arguably Australia's most significant cultural export” (Ryan et al., 2008, p. 284). In short, Indigenous voices and cultural expressions were on the rise, even if the personal circumstances of many Aboriginal Australians were dire. Those who 'made it' by virtue of their skills and talents had to negotiate their place as Indigenous people both in and outside a White-dominated society; coming to terms with fame while staying true to traditional culture, family, and community (Gibson, 1998).

A very important example of this hybridity and dualism can be found in professional sport, where Indigenous athletes rose spectacularly to be household names in rugby union, rugby league and Australian Rules football during the late twentieth century. In both rugby league and Australian Rules they are now over-represented statistically by comparison to their total population across Australia – with around 10% of contracted players being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (Ferrer & Turner, 2017).⁴ The involvement of First Nations' athletes in these codes is celebrated by a dedicated Indigenous Round of matches every season, and more recently by a special pre-season rugby league match featuring the 'Indigenous All Stars' against either the (non-Indigenous) 'NRL All Stars' or the (Indigenous New Zealand) 'Māori All Stars' (Philpott, 2017). At these events, Aboriginal elders provide a Welcome to Country featuring Indigenous dance and music, while the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags – conceived by

Indigenous artists and endorsed as official by the Commonwealth in 1995 and 2008 respectively – are given prominence (Orr, 2014).

However, this does not mean that racial discrimination is absent – on or off-the-field, past or present (Cleland et al., 2019; Gorman et al., 2016). Indeed, it is important to emphasize that the widespread adulation afforded to Aboriginal sportsmen and women has, on well-known occasions, been confounded by a lack of sympathy – even hostility – towards Indigenous athletes. **First, there has been antipathy towards sportspeople who have celebrated their identity with Aboriginal iconography. The best-known example is sprinter Cathy Freeman. She lit the cauldron at the opening ceremony of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, and then won a historic 400 meters race that inspired patriotic fervor among both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (White, 2008). For bigoted Australians, though, Freeman’s Aboriginal heritage remained problematic, especially in light of her frank commentary about the Stolen Generations, of which her grandmother was a victim. In a period before social media, letters to editors provided a range of insights into Freeman; among the detractors was a theme that – in the lead up to the Games – she was “not one of us” (Bruce & Wensing, 2009, p. 94). This antipathy was likely exacerbated by a prior act of (accidental) activism by Freeman, which many critics deemed to be un-Australian. In 1994, during her victory lap after winning the Commonwealth Games 400 meters race, Freeman raised the (unofficial) Australian Aboriginal flag before finding, and subsequently sporting, the (official) Australian national flag (Tatz, 1995). She later denied intending to be inflammatory. However, Freeman’s actions were questioned by conservative figures in the Australian Parliament, and she was criticized by Arthur Tunstall, head of the Australian Commonwealth Games team (Given, 1995).**

Second, there has been antagonism towards Indigenous athletes who have stood up against racism. A well-known example of this hostility was the sustained campaign of crowd booing that preceded and triggered the retirement of Indigenous Australian Rules player, Adam Goodes, who had ‘dared’ to conduct his very own Aboriginal war dance during the 2015 Indigenous Round, after having previously called out racism directed towards him at another match that year (Souza, 2018). As Coram and Hallinan (2017) argue, the prolific booing that followed Goodes whenever he touched the football – game after game – effectively shielded individuals from personal responsibility for their actions, which amounted to a collective effort to humiliate and disempower this Indigenous activist.

Conceptual Framework

Applebaum (2010) aptly describes how ‘race’ is not a scientific concept, but rather a social construction that, over time, created a system of privilege and oppression. Through this, she explains how racism has the potential to operate on three mutually supporting levels: (1) *individual* (the personal attitudes and behaviors of people that reproduce racial difference and discrimination); (2) *cultural* (the beliefs, symbols and ideas that construct whiteness and differentiate between Whites and non-Whites); and (3) *institutional* (the networks of structures and policies benefitting some groups, most notably Whites, whilst disadvantaging others, most notably those who are non-Whites).

One theoretical approach to address this is critical race theory (CRT). Initially, it focused on legal studies at a time when civil rights legislation to tackle racial disadvantage and injustice was being formulated (Vass, 2015). Since then, **its interdisciplinary nature has been** applied to other social contexts, including education and sport, with the goal of understanding, critiquing, and challenging racial inequality and prejudice, with an emphasis on transformative social

change (Howard & Navarro, 2016). **There have also been emergent adaptations of CRT, the most salient being Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit), which has focused on the relationship between American Indians and the federal government of the United States (Brayboy, 2005). In the case of the current article, TribalCrit reminds us of the importance of the colonial project and its legacy of whiteness to studies of racism.**

In terms of research practice, CRT is not a universal approach to addressing problems of racism; rather, it was conceived to address racism in the context of White-dominated societies within which a colonial legacy is manifest. In that respect, CRT is a “multi-disciplinary approach that combines social activism with a critique of the fundamental role played by White racism in shaping contemporary [Western] societies” (Gillborn & Ladson-Billings, 2010, p. 341). In a similar vein, Vass (2015, p. 377) asserts:

CRT is an approach that focuses on exploring the social (re)construction of race in ways that have material impacts on the lives of people. Race helps with explaining how and why power and influence are distributed in ways that privilege White interests, while concurrently and relationally discriminating against non-White interests.

In doing so, it examines the manifestations of ‘race’ and racism in society where whiteness is privileged, whilst marginalizing Others on the grounds of their ‘race’. Hylton (2005, p. 85) advocates employing CRT for sociological investigations of ‘race’ and sport, as it “challenges traditional dominant ideologies around objectivity, meritocracy, colour-blindness, race neutrality and equal opportunity.” Just as importantly, in the context of this article, Hylton (2017, p. 332) emphasizes that scholars employing a CRT approach have a fundamental responsibility “to represent what is happening from the point of view of racialized actors”, which is done by “privileging the Black voice through a plethora of techniques...especially storytelling and counter-storytelling methods as ways to ‘hear and understand the voices’ that are rarely heard.”

As noted earlier, marginalized voices can sometimes be reported in the mass media (Coram & Hallinan, 2017; Hylton & Lawrence, 2015, 2016), though – surprisingly – that resource has rarely been utilized in CRT research. In this article, therefore, we are advocating for greater listening to the voices of marginalized groups given scenarios where they are represented (i.e. verbatim interviews) in the media. That is consistent with the position of Dreher (2009, p. 446), who emphasizes that “much has been and will continue to be achieved through strategies of speaking up and measures for giving voice to marginalized groups and individuals.”

Too often, racism in sport is reduced by policy makers to the vagaries of ‘ignorant’ individuals, which plays into discourses of denial about the likelihood of a more substantive underlying problem. As Hylton (2008, p. 6) has deftly put it, racial inequality in sport is “often seen as exceptional and irregular rather than routinely ubiquitous and deeply ingrained.” In this way, whiteness becomes a determinant of social power that helps marginalize racialized Others. Like ‘race’, whiteness is generally understood as a socially constructed concept, with King (2005, p. 399) describing it as “a complex, often contradictory, construction: ubiquitous, yet invisible; normalized and normative; universal, but always localized; unmarked, yet privileged.”

To understand White privilege in a sporting context, Hylton and Lawrence (2015) emphasize that it is important to consider the notion of White supremacy. Gillborn and Ladson-Billings (2010) illustrate how White supremacy is central to CRT, not by the common understanding of it being carried out by individuals and groups who engage in crude and hostile acts of racial hatred (such as far-right nationalists and neo-Nazi sympathizers), but how it operates in more subtle, hidden, yet pervasive forms. Indeed, Newman’s (2007, p. 317) suggestion that whiteness emerged as a “conservative reaction to political and cultural threats to White male hegemony” is, as we will outline, prescient in respect

of the colonialist anthem, Advance Australia Fair, as its lyrics do not recognize the country's Indigenous heritage or the diverse nature of contemporary Australian society. When framed that way, there is a logical impetus for Indigenous people to seek reforms to an anthem that, by its very nature, excludes them. In this article, we are particularly interested in the role of Indigenous rugby league players in that political process.

Method

To address our research objectives we undertook an online search via our respective university library catalogues of relevant “national anthem” material covering the period from the creation of the Recognition in Anthem Project in 2017 through to the high-profile national anthem protests that took place during 2019 – specifically, the Indigenous All Stars game and the State of Origin series. Through these key word searches, a total of 74 distinct **online media reports, drawn from a variety of regional, national and international media organizations, alongside the NRL's media department and the National Indigenous Television service,** were identified for further analysis. In doing so, we adopted a textual analysis method because, as recommended by Sparkes and Smith (2014), it allows researchers to explore and interpret both implicit and explicit meanings in textual data. In our case, we wanted to foreground the reasons why the protests took place via the voices of the key individuals who led them, as per their verbatim testimony communicated to the public via the media. We were also interested in how the media reported on this period, not only through interviews with Indigenous rugby league players, but also with other well-known Indigenous and non-Indigenous stakeholders – namely, athletes, the NRL, politicians, and public commentators – as well as through the journalist's own columns published online. This approach allowed us to explore a range of views – among the activists and public opinion makers – about the anthem protests.

As this methodological approach relied on subjective interpretation, each author independently analyzed the media texts **manually rather than via computer-assisted software (such as NVivo)**. We used inductive levels of open coding across first and second-order phases to start identifying thematic patterns and commonalities within the narrative of the online media articles chosen for further analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The purpose of this approach was to start breaking down the multiple layers of data we were faced with at the start of the analytical process in order to begin drawing out the main thematic categories (Cleland et al., 2020). Once that process had been completed by each author, **we employed peer debriefing and talked through our individually identified themes to arrive at consensus**. We then worked in collaboration by interpreting and verifying the data to optimize both the validity of the findings and the trustworthiness of the results. That process resulted in two dominant themes: (1) a racially exclusive national anthem; and (2) responses to the player-led protests. Taken together, they catalyzed the following evaluation.

A Racially Exclusive National Anthem

To put into context the protests that took place in 2019, it is important to appreciate that, two years earlier, there were two significant efforts to create an alternative to the national anthem, including suggestions for re-wording the lyrics.⁵ The first major initiative, in April 2017, was the creation of the Recognition in Anthem Project (RAP), which has sought to introduce new lyrics that recognize – and therefore convey respect to – the original custodians of the land (RAP, n.d.). Although the national anthem has been in place for over 30 years, these reformists argue that the social and demographic nature of the country have changed. Since the 1970s, Australia has evolved into a multicultural nation, while the end of the White Australia Policy has been followed – more recently – by a growing emphasis on reconciliation between Aboriginal and

non-Aboriginal peoples. In terms of the latter, RAP involves advocates across both Indigenous and non-Indigenous walks of life who share a desire for a national anthem that is inclusive, properly representing the ancient history of Australia and the diversity of contemporary cultural life (Power, 2019).

The second major development took place at the NRL's Indigenous round in May 2017 where, alongside Advance Australia Fair, an alternative pre-recorded version of the national anthem was shown on big screens inside the stadiums. This was presented in verse form by Judith Durham the (non-Indigenous) lead singer of the iconic Australian pop music band the Seekers, with the words "young and free" supplanted by "peace and harmony", whilst the words "our land abounds in nature's gifts of beauty rich and rare" were changed to "our land abounds in nature's gifts to love, respect and share" (Hytner, 2017). Reflecting on this initiative by the NRL, Chris Sarra, the sole Indigenous Australian Rugby League Commissioner, explained:

We want to show there is an alternative future within an anthem that is more inclusive than the current one. The NRL takes pride in its inclusivity and we take that seriously. We want to reach out Indigenous Australians and new Australians and unite all of us so that we can stand together. We're not out to upset people. We just want to start a conversation. (Hytner, 2017)

Despite praise for this initiative from many Indigenous commentators, as well as progressive non-Indigenous observers, there were also skeptics or opponents across the 'racial' spectrum. Perhaps surprisingly, one of Australia's most high-profile, widely respected Indigenous intellectuals and media commentators, Stan Grant (2017), complained that "the NRL has opted to play politics, to dabble in social engineering." Grant argued that by including an anthem with alternative words during the Indigenous Round "it seems the NRL is apologizing for Advance Australia Fair." He insisted that "a nation should not apologize or feel ashamed of playing its anthem." Grant concluded that the "right" anthem be played or "nothing at all." He was not

against a discussion about reforms to the anthem; instead, his view was that unilaterally changing it was not appropriate and, by inference, a sporting event was not the place for such actions.

Elsewhere, in another opinion piece, the non-Indigenous rugby league journalist, Andrew Webster (2017), contended that “The NRL's Indigenous Round threatens to turn into a messy, politicized circus.” This was particularly so, he argued, because of nervousness by rugby league broadcasters: “Channel 9 and Fox Sports have strongly advised the NRL against it, forecasting its divisive nature.” He also challenged the timing of the alternative anthem: “Even more mystifying is that the NRL only plays the anthem before club matches on very special occasions, yet it has chosen to do so over a round of games when it can offend the most.” Webster does not countenance an alternative view that the NRL, by showcasing an alternative anthem, was not setting out to offend, but rather had provided the most appropriate time and space – the Indigenous Round – for discussion about what an inclusive national anthem might look like.

These 2017 developments catalyzed public debate about the nature of lyrics within the national anthem. But it became a bigger story in 2019. This stemmed from high-profile silent protests by key Indigenous rugby league players who, in media interviews beforehand, openly stated their refusal to sing the official Australian anthem. While silence by athletes during this song is not unusual given the often-lackluster commitment by many Australians to musical demonstrations of patriotism (Southam, 2019), it was the open refusal that proved controversial. Yet there were explanations for the players’ position. One of the most prominent figures in both protests was Cody Walker. Speaking after the All Stars game in February 2019, Walker reflected on the reasons behind his silent protest:

It just brings back so many memories from what’s happened [in Australia’s past]...I think everyone in Australia needs to get together and work something out [about the national anthem]...It doesn’t represent myself and my family. (ABC News, 2019)

Later in 2019, in the lead up to the first State of Origin game, Walker publicly explained that he would, yet again, not be singing the national anthem: “I’m not pushing my views on anyone, it’s just how me and my family have grown up and how I feel...I’ve already voiced my opinion, and I want to reiterate it’s just my opinion” (Guardian Sport, 2019). Walker’s stance found support from fellow Indigenous player, Josh Addo-Carr, who opined:

We’re Australians too, Indigenous people. We were the first people here...I have full support of Cody’s decision and I’ll be behind him all the way. The anthem doesn’t represent us Indigenous people and I think we’ve got to change it. (Brunsdon, 2019)

According to Gillborn and Ladson-Billings (2010) and Howard and Navarro (2016), in societies dominated by notions of whiteness, CRT allows the voices of non-Whites to become advertent or inadvertent forms of social activism in raising issues of racial prejudice and discrimination. In centralizing ‘race’ and racism in the context of the national anthem, the social justice tenets of CRT are pertinent here. Rather than editorializing, these (and other) verbatim media accounts gave voice to the experiences and arguments of the Indigenous rugby players. Too often, marginalized people of color are talked *about*; now they were *doing* the talking. What was more, the Indigenous rugby players were advocating change to the national status quo, something that the mainstream (non-Indigenous) media has often been nervous about. Crucially, it requires Indigenous spokespersons to have a public profile, as it draws the attention of the media. That is so even if, as in this case, the advocates are making statements about how they perceive the anthem in relation to themselves and their families. In doing so, they were being subtle social activists.

Indeed, even Australia’s national rugby league coach, the South Sea Islander Mal Meninga, entered the debate:

We expect them [the players] to sing the national anthem, but I'm also in favour of the fact, if it is offensive to Indigenous Australians, let's have a discussion about it. We're a multicultural society, so all of Australia should decide on what our anthem should be. The majority of us are third- and fourth-generation Australians now. What does contemporary Australia want? If it's important to people, why not call for a referendum? (Nicolussi & Phillips, 2019)

In his personal column on the NRL website, Meninga (2019) pointed out that Australia had previously voted on the national anthem, but that was over forty years ago:

...while the Indigenous population has been talking about Advance Australia Fair for a long time, I cannot see why there can't debate about it again now...Times have changed since the last decision was made. We've had major decisions around Indigenous Australia, such as native title recognition and cultural heritage being revived. We've had the national Sorry Day so Australians — all Australians — are very aware of our national history, maybe more aware than they were before. So we can have a national debate and let the people of Australia have their say. If we have a national anthem that offends our Indigenous people, let's see what all of Australia thinks.

In fact, it was not just Indigenous voices who felt that the anthem did not represent all Australian citizens. For example, an article by Channel Nine (2019) quoted New South Wales coach, Brad Fittler (a non-Indigenous Australian), wherein he indicated support for the player protests, stating that the national anthem “definitely needs work...you go to any venue around the country and three-quarters of the people aren't singing.”

Responses to the Player-Led Protests

The public stance against the anthem by Walker, Addo-Carr, and several other Indigenous players did lead – not surprisingly – to negative public responses via social media commentary. For example, a poll on the news.com.au website revealed that 60% of rugby league fans (out of over 14,000 that were surveyed) did not agree with the decision to protest. It is important to acknowledge that opposition to the anthem dissent was also voiced by a small number of Indigenous athletes, led most vocally by rugby union player, Kurtley Beale, who believed that

the most appropriate steps towards reconciliation – which is an ongoing process – was to sing the national anthem (Doran, 2019). Within rugby league, former Indigenous Queensland player, Justin Hodges, took the view that the national anthem was about military sacrifice, so he sang the anthem “for the soldiers and those guys that have given us the freedom to play rugby league” (Fox Sports, 2019).

There was, nonetheless, plenty of support for the anthem dissent from within the wider sporting community. For example, the Indigenous female rugby league players competing in the women’s State of Origin in June 2019 also refused to sing the anthem (Duff, 2019), whilst the Indigenous track and field Olympic silver medalist, John Steffensen, stated:

It’s a contentious issue, but we’re a lot more educated about this issue than we were 20, 15, or even 10 years ago. Athletes know they have mediums and forums to express their views, and they have the right to express who they are...the national anthem doesn’t make sense, and it doesn’t represent all of us. (Koha, 2019)

Another view was that the Indigenous players, along with the NRL, were providing a progressive voice for First Nations people. For example, the Indigenous intellectual, Jack Latimore (2019), offered his support to the protesting players:

Each one should be applauded and recognized as genuine ambassadors for Reconciliation in this nation...The aim [of Reconciliation week] is to encourage large sections of the Australian public to reconcile itself with uncomfortable truths about the Australian nation’s relationship with the continent’s First Nations peoples. Cody Walker’s right to refuse to sing a so-called anthem should be the first acknowledgement of truth along that path.

Likewise, the (non-Indigenous) media columnist and author, Peter FitzSimons (2019), asked:

So how did the same game that has been so backward for so long in so many areas of social progress now find itself at the prow of progressive politics in Australia? I have no clue. But good on the lot of them.

Several articles in the mainstream media reflected on the social activism by Walker and other players in speaking on behalf of the Indigenous community. This passage from the *Independent* newspaper (2019) is a typical illustration:

Walker's stance comes during a renewed push for Aboriginal Australians to be given recognition in the Constitution, the nation's founding law. The Australian Rugby League Commission, (ARLC) the sport's national governing body, said on Wednesday it had pledged its support for the "Uluru Statement," a 2017 manifesto drafted by Indigenous leaders to establish a "First Nations Voice" in the Constitution.

There was, in essence, plenty of goodwill towards the notion that the national anthem is in need of reform and that the Indigenous rugby players had a point, even if some were uncomfortable about protests impinging on sport. However, despite the attention the protests gained in sections of the media, there did not appear to be a momentum shift – in a policy sense – in terms of changing the national anthem. The former NRL star, Jonathan Thurston, an Indigenous icon in rugby league, lamented a lack of impact after the All Stars game in February 2019: “it was like it was just brushed over...there wasn’t really any discussion to come out of that, even though it was a stand they took for themselves and their family” (Elbra, 2019). In the build-up to the State of Origin competition in mid 2019, the (non-Indigenous) journalist, Hayley Sorensen (2019), also lamented an opportunity lost:

...they [the players] were probably bracing for an onslaught of public criticism...But it never came. The lukewarm public debate that followed the NRL players’ decision was almost as half-hearted as most Australians’ efforts to mumble the few lines they can remember of our national anthem before kick-off.

In a similar vein, the (non-Indigenous) journalist, Richard Hinds (2019), argued:

While the silent protest has gained inevitable media traction, the more remarkable outcome is the absence of the kind of rancour that could usually have been expected had an Indigenous Australian player engaged in what would once have been portrayed as "un-Australian" and, yes, "divisive" behaviour...their demonstration is less confronting because it comes with the tacit support of the NRL at a time when the game is demonstrating genuine leadership in the often contentious realm of Indigenous affairs.

The Indigenous players had couched their criticisms of the anthem in individual terms – how it was their ‘personal’ view. This soft power approach, while diplomatic, avoided the prospect of turning the protest into a fully-fledged campaign. As Cody Walker himself explained ahead of the first State of Origin game, it was “just his opinion” and there was no personal motivation to “spark a wider movement” (Guardian Sport, 2019). However, a wider collective movement was already in play given the NRL’s efforts to offer an alternative anthem in 2017, as well as the creation of the Recognition in Anthem Project. Ostensibly, there was an opportunity during 2019 for both of those organizations to explicitly connect with the anthem protestors, but they remained independent of each other.

The protests had, however, given oxygen to wider discussions about the appropriateness of the anthem as representative of Australia. For example, the (non-Indigenous) journalist, Rhianna Mitchell (2019), argued that the silent protest had re-generated discussion about changing the anthem, particularly given that the activists had found examples of support from across the party-political divide, including Labor MP, Tanya Plibersek, and Liberal MP, Craig Kelly, who both said that changing the word ‘young’ in the opening verse containing the lyrics “for we are young and free” would encourage a more inclusive Australia by acknowledging the aforementioned history of Aboriginal people. Adding to this view was an article by the (non-Indigenous) journalist, Julie Power (2019), who reminded readers that over the past two years the RAP had worked with Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups to create a new version of the national anthem, in part by focusing on changing the lyric “we are young and free” to “we are one and free” to reflect the history of Aboriginal people in Australia. Indeed, the RAP was particularly active during 2019, advocating for a substantially revised national song. In September, for example, it organized a special ceremony in the Northern Territory, where “the

new anthem was performed by local and international choirs, including the Central Australian Aboriginal Women's Choir, who performed one verse in Pitjantjara” (Jonscher, 2019).

In terms of anthemic activism in rugby league, this is not the end of the matter. Following a meeting of the Australian Rugby League Indigenous Council (ARLIC) in December 2019, it was suggested that the national anthem should not be played at the forthcoming 2020 Indigenous All Stars game (Read, 2019). This recommendation, which was ratified by the ARL Commission in February 2020, led to the raising of concerns by two leading Aboriginal politicians. Linda Burney, the Shadow Minister for Indigenous Australians, conceded that “it is a very high-profile game and all high-profile games do have the anthem. It has been part of the All Stars since its inception” (Read, 2019). Burney accepted that the views of the ARLIC need to be listened to but hoped that a “happy medium” might be found. However, Burney’s opposition colleague, the Minister for Indigenous Australians, Ken Wyatt, had a more definitive view:

I do not support calls not to play the Australian national anthem. Any such move would be divisive and would detract from the significance and importance of celebrating indigenous Australians’ place in the world of rugby league. (Taylor & Read, 2019)

Despite these concerns, the ARLIC recommendation did action change as the 2020 Indigenous All Stars game contained no national anthem and was instead replaced by traditional war dances and a minute of silence to remember the Stolen Generations (Lackey, 2020). What this change highlights is how the collective social activism by the Indigenous rugby players had tapped into a wider public debate about the appropriateness of the national anthem, along with respectful recognition of the Indigenous community in that rendition of Australian society.

Conclusion

The high-profile nature of professional sport in Australia lends itself to regular media focus and commentary. Both the sport industry and sport media – whether broadcast, digital, or

news – are overwhelmingly controlled by non-Indigenous people. Within the playing ranks, Indigenous athletes have been particularly prominent in the NRL, but they are rarely in positions like coaching, administration, and media commentary. Yet, despite this, sport remains one of the very few places where resistance can be demonstrated at a national level by people of the Indigenous community. By orchestrating a silent protest, the Indigenous rugby players commanded the attention of the national media, who felt compelled to ask the players why they intended to make this gesture. In doing so, they provided verbatim statements from the players: they were *doing* the talking, not just being talked *about*.

It remains a key question whether Indigenous athletes, even with their elevated social status, are adequately heard and truly empowered when they do protest. As the players involved in the anthem protest intimated, their protests were their own opinions and they did not seek to start – or become part of – a wider anthem reform movement. Nevertheless, their actions fit into a tapestry of protests and calls for action that started in 2017, surprisingly enough, with the NRL deciding to showcase an alternative national anthem. This appears to have emboldened the Indigenous rugby players: with the NRL expected by broadcasters to showcase the official anthem, silent protests proved just the ticket to move the debate back into the limelight.

In drawing upon the **central tenets of CRT**, this article has demonstrated that the actions – whether combined or separate – of the NRL, Indigenous rugby league players, journalists and politicians have been instrumental in re-generating public discourse about the suitability or otherwise of the national anthem. As Crossley (2011, p. 206) states, although these connections might not be visible, such “connections matter”. Through networks of interactions by various actors linked to a single or broad theme of collective interest – in this case by recognizing racial

injustices faced by the Indigenous community – discussion can be generated with a view to change, and even manifesting in change itself.

Delgado and Stefanic (2017) remind us that failures to recognize subtle yet insidious ways in which ‘race’ can be social constructed means a risk that only the most extreme, overt forms of racism are recognized. The anthem protests clearly meant a lot to the activists: songs and lyrics are profound parts of Aboriginal cultures, but this anthem did not speak to them – instead it ignored both the historical and contemporary significance of Indigenous communities to Australia. These First Nations rugby players decided to make a stand, by vocalizing their concerns, then remained determinedly silent when the words of the colonialist anthem were sung. Their actions did not invoke quite the backlash that American footballer, Colin Kaepernick, experienced when, in a very different context, he chose to kneel during the American anthem in order to highlight violence against African Americans and subsequently became a symbol of the #blacklivesmatter movement (Coombs et al., 2019). But there was still considerable risk to the Indigenous rugby players by protesting at such a sporting event as the State of Origin.

In summary, the anthem protests were examples of a wider, loosely organized campaign to modify the national song so that its lyrics better represent Indigenous Australians, as well as the diverse demographic and cultural nature of this post-colonial nation. It is unrealistic to expect that the activism of a handful of Indigenous rugby players could produce transformational change through their symbolic actions. Yet they were able to (re)generate debate about the appropriateness or otherwise of the national anthem, which – after all – was devised many years ago under a colonial paradigm. As the original custodians of the land, Aboriginal Australians rightly ask for a ‘fair go’ in a society that, according to legend, embodies this principle. If that

motto has any salience, the activism by Indigenous rugby players, RAP and their supporters ought to be heeded, not ignored.

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Notes

¹ Across this article, Indigenous is our default term because it incorporates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, but we also use Aboriginal and First Nations when referring to the sovereign people of Australia.

² We place ‘race’ in quotation marks throughout this article to reflect how it remains a contested concept that has no objective reality, but one that can motivate discriminatory verbal and non-verbal thoughts and behavior in people based on the perception that there are natural biological differences between certain groups.

³ Anzac Day is a national day of remembrance for Australians and New Zealanders who have served and died during conflicts. Australia Day is a national day of celebrating Australianness but its date, marking the arrival of the First Fleet of convict ships from the United Kingdom, is historically insensitive to the country’s Aboriginal community (some of whom refer to it as Invasion Day or Survival Day).

⁴ The Australian Census in 2016 highlighted that out of a population of 25 million, the number of Indigenous people totals just under 650,000 (a figure totaling 2.6%).⁵

⁵ Carvalho (2017) notes how 2017 was a notable year as it was 50 years since the 1967 referendum that enabled the Commonwealth to implement laws supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including their inclusion in the national census, and 25 years since a High Court decision that recognized a native title for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in Australia.

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