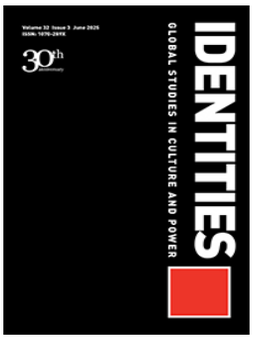

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Whose nation? The racialization of sporting heroes and the emergence of new cosmopolitan imaginaries

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ABSTRACT

The global popularity of sporting spectacles makes them fertile terrain for representing the idea of the nation. Black and ethnic minority players with multiple nationalities are often questioned in Western political and media discourse about their belonging to the 'nation'. However, these athletes increasingly embrace their multiple belongings, foregrounding cosmopolitan imaginaries that unsettle nationalistic discourses. Their message is amplified by the ability to communicate directly with vast 'audiences' of fans through social media. This article discusses the cultural and political implications of this phenomenon, stressing the need for new cosmopolitical lenses in sport and popular culture that transcend the historical constraints of nationhood.

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KEYWORDS National identity; sport; belonging; cosmopolitanism; race/racialization; media

Introduction

The silent protest by Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Olympic Games has become one of the most iconic moments in modern sports history. It marked a decisive step in recognizing the inherent political significance of international sporting events and demonstrated how athletes can use these platforms to convey messages with social and political implications (Brown and Foxx 2021). This article explores a specific, less-discussed aspect of that significant 'media event' (Dayan and Katz 1992), which has become increasingly relevant in contemporary debates on sports, national identity, and racialization. In the aftermath of the 'Black Power salute' protest, Tommie Smith emphasized the central role of race in his motivation to take a stand on the Olympic podium. He stated, 'If I win, I am an American, not a Black American. But if I did something bad, they would say "a Negro"'.[1]

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Over the last few years, several prominent association football players from various European countries have appropriated and adapted this statement to reflect their personal experiences and those of other racialized players. For example, Mesut Özil remarked, 'I am a German when we win, but an immigrant when we lose' (Van Campenhout and Van Houtum 2021). Similarly, Romelu Lukaku said, 'When things were going well (. . .) they were calling me Romelu Lukaku, the Belgian striker. When things weren't going well, they were calling me Romelu Lukaku, the Belgian striker of Congolese descent' (Lukaku 2018). Jude Bellingham, in the aftermath of England's loss to Italy in the EURO 2020 final, stated, 'We had black players in the team, players from all different backgrounds and countries. But as soon as they missed the penalty, they weren't English anymore, they were just black' (Peach 2022).

These statements highlight a transnational discourse on race and national identity that spans different eras and locations within the Global North (Gilroy 1993). Tommie Smith's message about the discrimination faced by African Americans in 1960s U.S.A. resonates with the current experiences of racism and discrimination faced by players living in Europe today, representing European countries in football. However, unlike Smith, contemporary sports personalities have access to new media platforms that allow them to directly reach large audiences of followers and fans across multiple countries. Their messages on (national) belonging and anti-racism in sport and society are amplified by social media within a deeply transformed media landscape, with the effects and reverberations of these messages being potentially wider and faster. At the same time, over the last few decades, popular sporting events such as the Olympics, the FIFA World Cup, and major competitions across multiple sports, have continued to grow into global spectacles, becoming the most popular rituals worldwide (Wenner and Billings 2017). This growth adds visibility and media penetration to the personal stories of the protagonists.

This article uses these examples, and others, to theorize the role of black and ethnic minority players as vehicles for new articulations of national belonging that reflect the evolution of diasporic identities, the globalization of sport and sports media, and generational tensions exemplified by the ways young people access and consume media content, including sports media. Drawing on cultural studies and critical discourse analysis frameworks, I will address two main questions: What do these cases tell us about contemporary discourses on race and national identity in Europe? Can racialized sports celebrities with multiple nationalities ignite a transformation of exclusive national identities and foster new forms of cosmopolitanism?

The article is divided into four parts: the first section provides a historical contextualization of the intersection of sport and nationalism, followed by a reflection on the role of mass media in the global popularization of sporting events. The third section discusses the evolution of cosmopolitanism, particularly in relation to media and popular culture. The fourth section explores how forms of

popular culture, such as spectator sports and new media, offer opportunities for articulating more fluid forms of belonging, particularly among young people.

Sport and nationhood

The men's national teams, and especially those of football, have historically assumed a special role in the representation of the nation. As exemplified by Hobsbawn (1990, 143),

> What has made sport so uniquely effective a medium for inculcating national feelings, at all events for males, is the ease with which even the least political or public individuals can identify with the nation as symbolized by young persons excelling at what practically every man wants, or at one point in his life has wanted, to be good at.

The emphasis on men's sports is not surprising, as for much of the 20th century women were formally excluded from many sports' competitions, particularly from football until the early 1970s (Williams 2016). The symbolic significance of men's sports in the articulation of nationhood has therefore remained higher in the popular imagination (Hunter 2003). However, a significant role in the restrictive representation of the 'nation' has been played by mass media, which over many decades have legitimized a narrow and exclusionary version of the nation (Rowe, McKay, and Miller 1998). It was not just women who were kept at the fringes, or entirely excluded, from the sporting 'image' of the nation. Native populations, such as the Aboriginal people in Australia, and ethnic minorities, were placed hierarchically below the male majority, reflecting broader forms of discrimination in society (Hogan 2003).

This phenomenon has been particularly visible in Western Europe, in countries whose colonial histories posed evident questions about the nature of 'nationhood'. If a country invades another country or territory to profit from its resources, including its population, do the inhabitants of such territories become part of the nation that invaded them? In fact, the status of 'colonial' players or players with roots in the colonies represented an early issue for sporting authorities when it came to selecting national teams. In 1925, Jack Leslie, born in London to a Jamaican father and an English mother, was called up to the England team but was denied an appearance after the selectors learned about the dark colour of his skin (Tiller 2023). It took more than fifty years before another black player, Viv Anderson, was finally fielded for the England senior team in 1978. In other colonialist countries, the issue was dealt with in more 'instrumental' terms. In the case of France, the inclusion of players from the colonies in the national team was seen as a testament to the 'success of its "civilizing mission"' (Alegi 2010, 81), while in the case of Portugal, 'the official propaganda of Portuguese colonialism used iconic

figures from the world of Portuguese football, especially Eusébio da Silva Ferreira (. . .) to advance its political message and provide an ideological alibi for Portuguese colonialism' (Cardão 2018, 374–375). These inclusions did arguably little to challenge racial categorizations and structural hierarchies that were instrumental to the colonial projects.

Nosal and Organista (2021, 401) stress that European national football teams have been multiracial and multicultural since the early days of international sports. However, as shown by the previous examples, the inclusion of black or ethnic minority players was most often discursively constructed to reaffirm existing forms of racialization and discrimination in society at large. This may also explain why their history has remained underdiscussed.

Over the years, starting with the decolonization process in the 1950s and 1960s, and with the growth of other migratory trends across and towards Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, the issue of ethnic diversity and national identity in relation to sport has become more prominent in public debates. The increasing relevance of international sport competitions in the popular imagination and political discourse, enabled by mass media, combined with the rise of far right and xenophobic parties across the continent, has brought more attention to the representation of 'nationhood' in and through sport. In many countries, football has been the main terrain for such tensions to unfold. For example, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the first black players were selected to represent England, far right political groups were particularly active inside football stadia (Back, Crabbe, and Solomos 2001). In 1982, on the day of his debut with England, Cyrille Regis, the third black player to be capped by the national team, was sent an envelope with a bullet inside and a threat: 'If you put your foot on our Wembley turf, you'll get one of these through your knees' (Adams 2018). When the men's France team won the World Cup in 1998, the leader of the National Front, Jean-Marie Le Pen, questioned the 'Frenchness' of the team, composed in large part of players whose roots were in different African countries, mostly former colonies. Similar comments were made twenty years later by Marine Le Pen, daughter of Jean-Marie and leader of the National Rally, the political formation born from the ashes of the National Front, when France won the World Cup again (J. Downing 2018).

While far right politicians are particularly keen to use football and popular sports as means to spread nationalistic and racist messages, a broader discourse around (national) belonging comes to the fore, which links 'whiteness' with national identity (Carrington 2002; Hylton 2009, 89–90). Such a discourse implies the construction of hierarchies of belonging (Back, Sinha, and Bryan 2012) or conditional belonging (de Waal 2020). Players with certain racial or ethnic characteristics, despite being

born and raised in the country, are still portrayed as other to the 'national outlook' (Beck 2006). In a study conducted in the Netherlands to explore discourses surrounding race and ethnicity in football among multi-ethnic football media audiences, it emerged that ethnic minority players are expected to 'express their loyalty to the Dutch nation to be accepted as "properly Dutch"', while the majority white Dutch remains 'unspoken, invisible, and normative' (Van Sterkenburg, Peeters, and Van Amsterdam 2019, 208).

Over the last fifteen years, several authors have paid close attention to the evolving boundaries of 'sporting citizenship' and the phenomenon of players/athletes choosing to represent countries different from those in which they were born or grew up (for example, Cao and Pu 2022; Han 2022; Holmes and Storey 2011; Jansen, Oonk, and Engbersen 2018; Oonk 2020, 2022). Understandably, this may happen for a variety of reasons, with different implications for the cultural dimensions of national identity (Oonk 2022). In an early discussion of the topic, Poli (2007) defined the evolving landscape of international sports as one of 'de-nationalization' and 'de-ethnicization'. Taking a particularistic view of the nation, he worried about the 'tendency in modern sport competitions to include in the "national body" sportsmen who, because of their origins, do not correspond to the historical ethnic composition of the citizens of the state for which they compete' (Poli 2007, 653). Storey (2020, 130) argues that 'these choices by players, facilitated by the regulations governing the practice of sporting citizenship, create potential tensions surrounding ideas of the nation'. Van Campenhout, Van Sterkenburg, and Oonk (2018, 1083) acknowledge that the definition of 'migrant footballer' is, from a historical perspective, problematic. In attempting to map the presence of migrant footballers in national football teams at the World Cup, they introduce, beside the concept of citizenship, that of 'contextual nationality', which accounts for the historical changes of territorial boundaries and the influence of colonialism on nationality and citizenship. In their model, players born abroad may count as 'nationals' based on historical contextual factors (see also Van Campenhout and Van Sterkenburg 2021).

For the purposes of this article, it is not essential to understand the multifarious trajectories by which players are included in the national team. Rather, the aim is to comprehend to what extent notable examples of multiple belongings may foreground more universalistic and cosmopolitan sensibilities. Popular sport events and competitions can be an opportunity for static, crystallized ideas of the nation to be challenged and potentially transformed (Mauro 2020). Back, Crabbe, and Solomos (2001, 270) note that while football 'offers the possibility for nationhood to be represented through (. . .) fixed archetypes', it can also be considered a platform 'from which the

circumscriptions of the national body politic – particularly in terms of race – can be breached'.

The role of sports media

As noted, mass media have been instrumental in the global promotion of international sports events such as the Olympics and the FIFA World Cup. By doing so, they have also contributed to the popularization of an 'inter-state worldview' (Levermore 2004) – the idea that human communities are necessarily defined and circumscribed by the nation-state. At first glance, it may seem that these two phenomena, international sports events and mass media, were a perfect match from the start, as both based their functions and development on nationally bounded communities (Boyle and Haynes 2009; Rowe 2013). However, in the early days of international sports competitions, at the turn of the 20th century, sports authorities viewed this primarily as a practical organizational necessity. During the first editions of the modern Olympics, individual athletes could register and participate as 'private entries'. It was only from the fifth edition that National Olympic Committees were exclusively delegated this task, effectively initiating a set of processes that involved state policies to support national teams and athletes, and the use of sports as 'soft power' in international relations (Goldblatt 2016). Yet, to this day, reflecting the original cosmopolitan spirit of the organization, Article 6 of the Olympic Charter states that 'The Olympic Games are competitions between athletes in individual or team events and not between countries' (International Olympic Committee-IOC (2021, 18). For its first sixty years, FIFA, the governing body of football, did not have specific rules prohibiting the selection of players who had already played for another national team. It was only in the early 1960s that they stipulated a player with dual nationality could not play for more than one national team at the senior level (Lanfranchi and Taylor 2001).

Understandably, since the beginning of the 20th century, first newspapers and later radio and television broadcasters have viewed international sports events as key opportunities to widen and deepen their connection with audiences, generally defined by the cultural boundaries of the 'imagined communities' interpreted as nations (Anderson 1983; Waisbord 2004). As shown by Anderson and Waisbord, these same media have historically made a crucial contribution to constructing these imagined communities. In a sense, throughout the 20th century, international sports events have fed into an established pattern of representation that sees popular culture as fertile ground for imagining culturally bounded large human groups.

This process has been amplified by the special role played by sports events in the experimentation and industrial application of new media technologies. The 1936 Olympics heralded television broadcasting and innovative filming

techniques, such as underwater filming and the use of musical scores in documentaries (T. Downing 2012). In the 1960s, the first images transmitted over the ocean via satellite were those of a baseball game. In the following years, the Olympics, the FIFA World Cup, and boxing matches like the 1964 heavyweight title fight between Cassius Clay and Sonny Liston became key opportunities to further test and improve this new technology (Johnes 2019). More recently, the 2012 Olympic Games were defined as 'an industry game-changer' for their use of live streaming and multiplatform content delivery (Dachman 2012).

Over the last thirty years, the media system has undergone profound transformation due to the emergence of the Internet, the evolution of digital technologies, and the rise of social media (Carah and Louw 2015). The mass media, which for much of the 20th century controlled the representation of sports events and contributed to the representation of the 'nation', now find themselves in a less dominant position. Moreover, the media industry, including private corporations, public broadcasters, and new media outlets, operates in a rapidly evolving context characterized by a high degree of uncertainty (Deuze and Prenger 2019). In recent years, major newspapers and magazines have ceased print publications, becoming entirely digital. Others have ceased publication altogether or drastically reduced their staff numbers. To what extent has this process affected the role of mass media as gatekeepers of the idea of the nation? (Elgenius and Garner 2021).

Despite undergoing critical changes, traditional media are still influential in setting the agenda for political discourse (Chadwick, Vaccari, and O'Loughlin 2018). They continue to operate along established patterns, framing events and stories in particular ways to cater to their audiences, which have historically been defined along the lines of the nation-state. When it comes to international sports events involving national men's football teams, newspapers and national and private broadcasters remain active in creating narratives that explicitly define the boundaries of national identity (Gibbons 2010). For example, a comparison of the coverage of Euro 2020 by two popular newspapers in the UK and Italy showed that they construct discourses that articulate hierarchies of belonging between black and white players (in the case of the *Daily Mail*) or project static versions of nationhood based on *jus sanguinis*, the right of blood (in the case of *Corriere della Sera*) (Mauro 2024). A study on the media discourse around German footballer Mesut Özil, who is of Turkish descent, found that the newspapers, 'by constructing and reinforcing migrant identities, contributed to a growing sense of crisis in identities that are still posited as being related to alterity and difference' (Möllering and Schmidt 2022, 341).

In an evolving media environment, the analysis of media discourse should arguably pay close attention to the articulation of discourse online and especially in combination with social media, as most readers access and

read news primarily online, and young people primarily via social media (Newman et al. 2023). Bouvier and Machin (2020, 181) contend that 'news organizations will need to ensure they are favoured by the kinds of algorithms used at any time by dominant social media platforms, such as Facebook'. To some extent, algorithms themselves could become shapers of discourse. Furthermore, if digital media and social media appear to challenge the hegemonic role of legacy media, we should consider the way social media platforms can also be used to create content and articulate identities, not simply to select and consume messages produced by mass media.

If we want to understand how sports personalities could influence political discourse on (national) belonging, we cannot therefore avoid looking at the workings of social media (Manning et al. 2017). Sports celebrities can use social media to directly communicate with large, globally dispersed 'audiences' of fans and followers (Butterworth 2014). They can use social media to build their own brands (Su et al. 2020), but they can also counter negative, racializing framing by mass media (Cable 2021). Increasingly, their audiences consist of millions of people. For example, Mesut Özil, despite having recently retired, has 28 million followers on Instagram. France's captain Kylian Mbappé has 122 million followers on Instagram and 14.4 million on Twitter. Although the term 'audience' should be used cautiously in relation to social media followers, these numbers testify to a wide outreach (Giles 2017). As said, some prominent athletes and players use social media to address social and political issues. Drawing on the case of Raheem Sterling, Cable (2021, 169) argues that social media 'is a political platform where the athlete leads the agenda, and the legacy media are left to react'.

Cultures in a cosmopolitan world

The idea that racialized sports personalities can positively contribute to reconfiguring notions of national belonging should be examined through the lens of cosmopolitanism. Over the last few decades, 'cosmopolitanism' has been interpreted and used in many different contexts and disciplines. The concept of a person identifying as a citizen of the world (from the Greek 'cosmos', meaning world, and 'polites', meaning citizen) originates in ancient Greece and was later adopted by modern philosophers such as Kant. However, it gained new momentum with the end of the Cold War and the rise of globalization, amid technological, cultural, and social transformations that have made the planet more connected and 'smaller'. Central to the debate are often issues of citizenship, belonging, multiple homelands, identity, and hybridity (Acharya 2016). Glick Schiller (2014, 2) reminds us that 'the term "cosmopolitan" is routinely used both as a description of the contemporary world and as an argument for transforming it into a better one'.

Post-colonial theorists invite us to consider the fusion of the particular and the universal in the lives of migrants and diasporic communities, in the form of 'vernacular cosmopolitanism' (Bhabha 2017) or 'rooted cosmopolitanism' (Appiah 2006). In the same vein, Glick Schiller (2014, 103) views 'critical cosmopolitanism' as a rejection of the universalizing narrative of cosmopolitanism, which reproduces the racializing binary logic and boundary-making of nation-state building. Harvey (2000, 534) advocates for 'cosmopolitics' as 'a political project of transformation of living, being, and becoming in the world'. For him, cosmopolitanism must be meaningful and 'cannot entail some passive contemplation of global citizenship'. Gilroy (2014, 243) emphasizes the contradictions of the West, which, while exalting a system of universal human rights, has fostered global inequality and racial categorization.

The attention these theorists pay to issues of global inequality, forced migration, and processes of racialization sheds light on the realities of 'new cosmopolitanisms' (Luczak, Pochmara, and Dayal 2019). In the Global North, particularly in Europe, a significant portion of the population shares family and personal histories of voluntary or forced displacement. In certain countries, such as Italy and Ireland, long histories of emigration intersect with more recent experiences of immigration. Robbins and Lemos Horta (2017, 1) invite us to reflect on the fact that 'wherever and whenever history has set peoples in transnational motion, sometimes very forcibly, it is to be expected that many of them and their descendants will show signs of hybrid identity and interestingly divided loyalty'.

Can these intertwined histories engender new cosmopolitan imaginaries? Drawing on the work of Deleuze and Guattari (2013) Braidotti (2012, 8) offers a perspective that can comprise and reflect multiple tensions at play (global migration, diasporic identities, racialization processes, climate change). She contends that 'cosmopolitanism needs to "become-world", i.e. embrace diversity and the immanence of structural relationality so as to account also for the atrocities and structural injustices, as well as for the many benefits, of pan-human perspectives today'. Becoming-world is a vision and a project that encourages to embrace diversity while acknowledging the interdependence of all subjects. The ethno-national state strives for homogeneity and aims at reducing difference. In this context, alternative mediated articulations of nationhood by racialized subjects, empowered by their celebrity status, have transformative potential. They bring to the fore tentative forms of global citizenship, which may help expose what Malesevic (2011) defines as the 'chimera of national identity'.

Sport and cosmopolitanism

International sports events such as the Olympics have been seen as contested terrains for the promotion and articulation of cosmopolitan values (Scholz 2012). However, even acknowledging the particularity of Olympism as a universalistic project, there is an evident contradiction in seeking examples of cosmopolitanism in events that are represented and celebrated primarily as competitions between nations (Levermore 2004). The obsessive attention paid to the medal table by media and political actors highlights the nationalistic use of these events by countries in both the Global North and Global South. More relevant to our discussion is the role of sports stars as resources of popular culture that individuals and collectives can use to develop their own identities.

Considering the various processes of globalization, Appadurai (1996) highlights the struggle of the nation-state to maintain a 'sense of locality' amid the global flows of people, media, ideas, finance, and technology. For Buck-Morss (2002, X), one of the outcomes of the hegemonic rise of global capitalism and neoliberalism is the demise of 'dreams of mass collective identity'. Carah and Louw (2015, 171) extend this point, arguing that 'we are no longer addressed as members of a collective national public, but also as consumers, global citizens, and niche lifestyle groups connected to a global network'. Traditional (legacy) media, which have historically functioned as one of the main gatekeepers of the nation, are now challenged by new ways of accessing and using media by their national audiences, particularly among younger generations. The Reuters Digital News Report highlights that 18–24-year-olds exhibit very different habits in accessing and consuming news compared to older generations, with the authors of the study claiming that 'the problems publishers face in engaging young audiences are only going to get harder over time' (Newman et al. 2023, 12).

Sports like football are often seen as one of the most tangible examples of 'global culture'. For Regev (2020, 29), football is an expression of cultural cosmopolitanism, which refers to 'a situation in which national, ethnic, and local cultures retain features of a sense of singularity rooted in indigenous traditions but are fully engaged in one world culture'. Players are celebrated and followed passionately across the world, beyond the countries where they were born, where they represent, or where they play. Their followers – their contested audiences – are transnational and global in nature (Rowe and Hutchins 2014).

Depending on their status and stages in their careers, they have the potential to forge personal identities that become resources for multitudes to create their own. Their media personas function as cultural artefacts whose circulation through global networks 'creates spaces, images, and practices that help bring about a potential cosmopolitan

consciousness' (Cicchelli, Octobre, and Viviane Riegel 2020). Understandably, these processes are multidirectional, taking place in a 'mediapolis' (Silverstone 2007) fractured by unequal power relations and constantly in flux. Nonetheless, they are tangible and productive of multiplicities and possibilities (Deleuze and Guattari 2013). This is what sport celebrities like Lukaku, Zidane, Balotelli, Kompany, and others possibly represent, perhaps unconsciously. Their family trajectories, marked by migration, racialization, and discrimination in the Global North, epitomize the 'cosmopolitanism of the poor' (Santiago 2017) that many can relate to. At the same time, their celebrity status positions them within the realm of social imagination, where 'new cosmopolitanisms' can be shared.

Youth and the makings of identities

I contend that effective forms of cultural cosmopolitanism are already emerging in urban environments where children and young people are allowed to live and grow up together, crossing different ethnic backgrounds and, at times, social classes. Sport serves as a powerful resource in the construction of cosmopolitan imaginaries. During my long-term ethnographic research with male adolescents playing football in Dublin, Ireland, I collected numerous examples of 'transcultural exchanges' that unfolded spontaneously and repeatedly within the football team, often facilitated by social media (Mauro 2019). Youth can engage with their origins playfully, as demonstrated by the following conversation taking place before a game. Patrick, a Black boy of African descent, was questioned by a new white Irish teammate (Shane) about his country of birth, with another white Irish teammate (Keith) joining in on the exchange.[2] That day, Patrick had arrived at the pitch sporting a smaller version of the 'Afro' hairstyle. This did not go unnoticed, and he was called 'Bob Marley' by an adult member of the club. Shane asked him if he was from Jamaica, the country of origin of the reggae star.

Shane: How come you are not from Jamaica?

Patrick: I am from Jamaica.

Shane: Naa, I am from Jamaica . . . change all things. Where are you from?

Keith: Congo.

Patrick: Same country as Kevin, same country as Junior.

Keith: Kevin is from Nigeria.

Patrick: . . . same country as Kevin.

Shane (turning to Kevin): Kevin, where are you from?

Patrick: My country, Congo!

Keith: Jamaica.

Shane: Congo.

Patrick: Do you know LuaLua?

Shane: Who?

Patrick: The fella who used to play for Newcastle.

Keith: LuaLua, who played for Newcastle.

Patrick: Yeah, him. He is from Congo as well. We are Congolese, man . . . we are the best (ibid. 86).

These exchanges exemplify the transcultural dialogue that a global sport like football can foster among young people. In the same conversation, Patrick emphasized that he loved Ireland and would like to play for the country, thereby normalizing his multiple identities. Hoerder, Hebert, and Schmitt (2005, 15) argue that it is particularly young people living in metropolises with diverse populations who give rise to the 'transcultural': 'Encounters among youth from different cultural, ethnic, and social contexts produce diasporic public spheres that are neither predominantly emancipatory nor fully controlled, but emerging and therefore contested'. A similar pattern emerged in a study on belonging that I conducted among youth with immigrant backgrounds in Italy (Mauro 2016, 149). One of the participants, aged 19, told me: 'I grew up in three different countries and I carry all of them in my heart, it is difficult for me to choose'. A fluid sense of place is developed and shared among peers in spaces such as those provided by sport, either practiced, watched or followed on social media.

Back (1996, 245) defines as 'Cultural Intermezzo' a time and a setting at which 'young people interact within multicultural peer groups'. He concurs that a transformation in meaning can take place in such spaces, but the significance and the potential ramifications of these exchanges are dependent on the social and political contexts. His view echoes Müller's (2011, 3429) idea that 'urban cosmopolitanism needs to be understood as a situated, temporal, and contingent performance'. In contemporary times, these

dynamics are amplified and transformed by the central role that digital technologies and social media play in the lives of young people. In my fieldwork in Ireland, I observed that football and music are the main cultural elements in transcultural exchanges among male teenagers, increasingly involving the use of messaging apps and social media. For example, two Romanian boys would share hip-hop tunes sung in Romanian with their African teammates, while the African boys would share tunes from Angola and Nigeria, sometimes produced in Europe (Mauro 2019). In their study of the mediatization of sport among adolescents, Skey et al. (2018, 602) found that 'mediated knowledge, circulating through a range of platforms, settings, and content, becomes a normal part of many people's experiential worlds and a common reference point for further deliberation and evaluation'.

As noted, culture is the main terrain in which cosmopolitan imaginaries unfold, and this is particularly the case among young people, whose interests and tastes are influenced and shaped by global cultural resources (Rodriguez 2020). Given the multicultural environments of many global cities and the availability of global cultural resources, it is not surprising that young people may express more cosmopolitan identities. Based on a longitudinal study conducted in Antwerp, Belgium, Kostet (2023, 3) questions the relevance of national and ethnic identifications in urban children's everyday lives. She argues 'that it is not even clear whether a collective national or ethnic identity is always crucial for children's sense of belonging, as they seem to construct cosmopolitan identities that transcend ethnic or national boundaries'. These findings resonate with similar studies conducted in other European countries, such as Sweden, Italy, and the Netherlands (Povrzanović Frykman 2016; Raffaetà, Baldassar, and Harris 2016; Tzaninis 2020), which, despite differences and contextual specificities, overall highlight the importance of various levels of belonging among children and young people, but not necessarily to a 'nation'.

According to the European Commission (2020), about 75% of European populations live in urban centres, and the level of urbanization is expected to increase to approximately 83.7% by 2050. For young people growing up in multi-ethnic environments, it is significant to see public personalities acknowledging their complex identities. For example, Zinedine Zidane, one of the most celebrated players of the last thirty years, when asked about his sense of identity, said: 'Every day I think about where I come from, and I am still proud to be who I am: first, a Kabyle from La Castellane, then an Algerian from Marseille, and then a Frenchman' (Hussey 2004). Vincent Kompany stated: 'I have a very strong relationship with Congo. I'm not half Belgian and half Congolese; I'm 100% Belgian and 100% Congolese. It's a wealth to me to have those two cultural backgrounds' (Storey 2020, 135). In 2014, when someone on social media questioned his 'Italianness' following the poor performance of the Italian team at the World Cup, Mario Balotelli posted

a series of messages on Instagram acknowledging his multiple identities. In one of these posts, he appears wearing a t-shirt saying, 'Not only am I Italian, I'm Ghanaian too!' (Mauro 2020, 941).

With a growing number of black and racialized players representing European national teams, such messages are becoming more common. While representing a sporting nation, these players offer a counter-narrative to restrictive, exclusionary versions of national identity. More importantly, they also normalize the idea that national identities are not fixed and that multiple forms of belonging are acceptable and normal. Understandably, their stances are often 'forced' by racists who question their belonging to the nation; they are not always spontaneous. However, their impact on popular imagination – 'imagination as a social practice', in the words of Appadurai (1996, 31) – cannot be underestimated. They function as an alternative discourse, which runs parallel to and sometimes intersects with dominant discourses about the nation. The prominence of sports content in the contemporary media industry, coupled with its popularity among young people, further amplifies these cosmopolitan expressions of identity.

For Stuart Hall (2018, 63) identities are never fully settled; they are made of continuous additions and diversions. He argues: 'identity, in the singular, is never achieved with any finality. Identities, in the plural, are the means for becoming'. Linking back to the concept of 'becoming-world' articulated by Braidotti (2012), we could argue that multiethnic and multinational sporting stars, through the process of mass mediation, foreground forms of 'becoming-world' that can counter pervasive nationalism and racism in Western societies.

Conclusion

International sporting events and elite competitions represent the most visible global rituals, and sports stars are among the most revered celebrities of contemporary times. Viewed through the lens of mass media, national teams – especially men's football teams – have historically held special significance in the popular imagination of 'nationhood'. However, the imagined communities constructed by media coverage of international sporting events have often served to legitimize structural inequalities in society, privileging white males over women, ethnic minorities, and indigenous populations. In recent decades, across various European countries, an increasing number of racialized footballers, members of ethnic minorities and players with immigrant backgrounds, have become national sporting heroes. Some of them have been vocal in denouncing the racism and discrimination they have personally experienced while publicly affirming the importance of their multiple identities, which include local (city), regional, and pluri-national affiliations.

In the face of growing nationalism and xenophobia across Europe, which exacerbate the racialization of Black and ethnic minority populations, the voices of prominent sports stars can offer a significant counter-narrative. They can contribute to the dissemination of alternative discourses that express new forms of cosmopolitanism. This is amplified by their millions of global fans and social media followers, but perhaps even more so by the generational dissonance that is becoming increasingly evident worldwide. Younger generations, who are less inclined to use or access legacy media or do so in ways distinct from older generations, are arguably less influenced by traditional media narratives and more open to alternative perspectives.

At the same time, the prominent role of social media and messaging apps in the lives of digital natives and young people in general also brings critical challenges. These 'social' spaces offer a more accessible and independent platform for sharing and creating content, for being seen, and for staying connected with celebrities who are perceived as more authentic than politicians and intellectuals. They also encourage the expression of multiple identities across various channels. However, within the framework of digital capitalism, these identities may merely represent new markets to exploit – forms of cultural innovation for the corporations running the platforms or advertising on them. This aspect merits further investigation, alongside the rise of racialized women's sports stars, such as Naomi Osaka and Paola Egonu, who present opportunities for more intersectional analysis of this phenomenon.

Notes

1. BBC (2010) 1968: Black athletes make silent protest, 23 July. http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/october/17/newsid_3535000/3535348.stm.
2. All names are fictional. Kevin and Junior were two other players of African descent in the team.

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