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**Branded sports sovereignty:
A critical media approach to
Puerto Rican Olympic sports**

A Thesis in
Media Studies
by
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ABSTRACT

This work studies the concept and idea of sports sovereignty and its application for Puerto Rican Olympic sports representations. A critical mass media approach is applied to the analysis of the role of corporate communications in the construction, representation and consumption of international sports participations and Puerto Rican athletes. Textual analyses of articles, testimonies and films are combined with political economy approaches that seek to question the ways American mass media's intervention in Olympic sports undermine the possibility of political power and mobilization for symbolic sports sovereignties that operate in colonial territories like the island of Puerto Rico. This thesis work also questions those discourses that describe the island's sports sovereignty as an instrument of resistance capable of generating political power in favor of political decolonization for the territory and its citizens. The operation of Puerto Rico's sports sovereignty as a form of commodity within a neo-liberal market economy threatens its progressive politics possibilities and instead transforms it into a reactionary practice that reproduces forms of media imperialism as it also fails to question the United States dominance on the island. Four different cases are presented for the discussion of this Olympic sports issues and their relationship to what the author identifies as different expressions that result from a corporate and branded sports sovereignty.

TABLE OF CONTENT

Acknowledgements	vi
Introduction	
A Critical look at Puerto Rico’s sports sovereignty	1
The U.S.-Puerto Rico political relationship	3
Sports sovereignty: debates and struggles	7
Thesis structure and content	15
Chapter 1	
Team Puerto Rico vs. Team USA: A “victory” brought to you by NBC Universal	18
NBC and media colonialism	20
Complicit corporate sports sovereignty	27
Chapter 2	
Breaking a world record for two nations: Jesse Vassallo and the Pan American dialogic sports landscape	32
Introduction	32
Jesse Vassallo: A step away from representing his island	34
Bakhtin, dialogic communication and contested cultural landscapes	38
Sports sovereignty: A carnival for (apolitical) national celebration	41
Concluding remarks	46
Chapter 3	
Branded sovereignty in the WBC: A political economy analysis of Puerto Rican sports fans on Facebook	48
Introduction	48
The World Baseball Classic: Brief synopsis	49
Research method: An online ethnography of the WBC	52
Facebook: A political economy analysis of its WBC fans	57
Political dimensions of this sports nationalism	65
Conclusions	66
Chapter 4	
Puerto Rico Islanders: The Production of the “city-island” space	68
The Puerto Rico Islanders: Background	68
The city-island: A new (ideological) project of urbanism	72
The production of a “new” (corporate) sports space	75

Our “hometown” has been assimilated80

Conclusions

(Re)Conquering the island:

The strengthening of a corporative sports sovereignty 82

References 91

Breaking News! (Postscript)94

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Introduction

A critical look at Puerto Rico's sports sovereignty

This thesis explores the concept and practice of sports sovereignty as applied to the case of the Latin American nation of Puerto Rico. The existence of sports “sovereignty” for a non-independent territory like Puerto Rico has been the subject of debate for many decades. The lack of sovereign political powers for the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico and its territorial relationship with the United States of America makes the terrain of sports a contested one for people with different perspectives regarding the preferences for potential future political scenarios for the island. According to the American Supreme Court, Puerto Rico is currently classified as a non-incorporated territory of the United States and its political sovereignty is controlled by the American federal Congress. Critics of this situation denounce this as a form of colonialism in which the residents of this Caribbean territory have not received the opportunity to exercise their self-determination and political sovereignty.

This work will explore the role of the island's sports sovereignty within this centennial political debate. To begin with, having a separate Olympic sports representation from the United States is significant to all political sectors on the island. Those who support Puerto Rico's full integration with the United States by becoming the 51st state of the Union often argue that having an international sports representation is not incompatible with becoming a full member of the American Federation. This position is highly criticized by those sectors that support the attainment of political sovereignty for the island. Arguing that pro-unification groups seek to censor any attempt to use and see

Puerto Rico's sports sovereignty as a tool for political immobilization and complicity with the U.S. control over the island and its citizens. In this sense, they do not necessarily visualize the island's international sports representations as political instruments for altering what they identify as a colonial relationship with the United States. At the other end of the spectrum we have political sectors who strongly believe in Puerto Rico's sports sovereignty capacity to not only reaffirm a Puerto Rican nationality separate from the U.S. American identity, but to also be used as a tool for the advancement of the cause for political independence.

Historically, mass media have contributed to the diffusion of sports and have also provided a forum for the discussion of controversies and debates relevant to the understanding and analysis of athletic events and their relationship to society and culture. Traditional mass media such as radio, television, written newspaper, magazines and other media, have been joined by the Internet and mobile communication in the diffusion and analysis of major sports events and their related issues. Mass communications scholars have been part of that community of sports analysts, who use various mass media approaches to study, understand and critique sports activities, ideologies, and institutions. In order to understand how Puerto Rican sports fans and analysts interpret and relate to the island's sports sovereignty, I will use some of the mass media approaches for this research project. The data will be obtained from diverse critical sports literature, sports fans activity on online social networks, and secondary sources such as informal media interviews conducted by journalists to people who are related to the sports world in Puerto Rico and political activists who analyze or advocate for the discussion and promotion of this debate. Before presenting a historical background of the island's sports

sovereignty, the next section will provide an explanation of the current political relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico.

The U.S.-Puerto Rico political relationship

After approximately four centuries under the Spanish colonial regime, Puerto Rico was conquered by the United States on July 25th, 1898. The Caribbean island was one of the territories involved in the Hispanic-American War that started in April 1898. The United States won the military conflict and Spain gave Puerto Rico as a war plunder and reward to the victorious nation in the Treaty of Paris, December 1898. The territory became a possession of the United States national congress and a military government was established on the island.

The military government lasted until 1900. That year, the American Congress approved the Foraker Act. This congressional law established an American-controlled civilian government in Puerto Rico. However, and despite the political scope of this law, the territorial relationship between the colony and the metropolis was not defined until a year after the implementation of the Foraker Act. The U.S. Supreme Court case of *Downes v. Bidwell* (1901), made a juridical distinction between incorporated and non-incorporated territories. Puerto Rico was classified as a non-incorporated territory of the United States. According to the court's decision, the citizens of the island and other colonies owned by the United States were not fully protected by the American federal constitution; other U.S. laws could be applied to them (See *Downes vs. Bidwell*: May 1901).

The principles and rulings of the Foraker Act were kept intact until 1917. That year, the United States Congress substituted the 1900 law with the Jones Act. Now, individuals from the island had the opportunity to forgo the Puerto Rican citizenship created by the Foraker Act, and become citizens of the United States of America. Despite the political and juridical changes brought by the Jones Act, the territorial relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico was not altered in 1917. The island was still classified as a non-incorporated territory of the metropolis. That principle was supported in 1922 by the United States Supreme Court. The *Balzac v. Porto Rico* case confirmed the legal parameters established by previous insular cases, including *Downes v. Bidwell*.

The nature of the American citizenship imposed upon Puerto Ricans in 1927 was also discussed in the Balzac court case. The decision established that differences in terms of rights and protections for American citizens were not based on the condition of the subject, but on the territory in which he/she is a permanent resident. Therefore, American citizens from the island of Puerto Rico could receive differential treatment because they were part of a non-incorporated territory and not as a result of their classification as Puerto Ricans (See *Balzac v. Porto Rico*: April 1922).

The juridical and political principles from the Jones Act of 1917 were not altered until the early 1950s. In 1950, the American Congress approved the 600 Act. This law gave Puerto Ricans the opportunity to have their own local self-government through the development of a constitution. In 1952, Puerto Ricans approved their own constitution and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico (“Estado Libre Asociado de Puerto Rico”) was

officially founded. The citizens of the island were granted the right to hold local elections and have their own public officials.

Despite these “self-government” efforts promoted by the American Congress on the island of Puerto Rico, the territorial political relationship was not altered. Puerto Rico remained as a non-incorporated territory of the United States subject to the will, control and political sovereignty of the American Congress. The United States was successful in presenting the newly created “Commonwealth” as a decolonized territory. Puerto Rico was removed from the list of colonies in the United Nations (UN). However, in the 2000s, the UN decolonizing committee was still working on the island’s case. For decades, members of that committee and political figures from the island have been fighting to reaffirm Puerto Rico’s national right to self-determination and political independence. Through the first decades of the 21st century, the United States Congress and government have rejected any decolonizing efforts in favor of the island’s political self-determination.

In Puerto Rico, there have been three local plebiscites where voters have had the opportunity to express their preference regarding the political future of the territory. The first of these electoral events was held in 1967. After months of study by a special multi-sector committee authorized by the island’s government, it was decided that the best path to follow would be to celebrate a plebiscite with three political alternatives: current commonwealth, independence and statehood. In the end, the commonwealth option won the special election after obtaining a solid 60.5%. Statehood accumulated 38.9% and independence only got 1% of support from the voters (Scarano 2008: 643).

Another plebiscite was organized in 1993 during the pro-statehood administration of Governor Pedro Rosselló González. Once again, the commonwealth option won, but with a less significant margin. The winning option finished with 48.9%. Statehood had the support of 46.7% of the voters and independence finished with 4.4%. Five years later, Rosselló and his administration made another attempt to consult people about their preference and sympathy towards decolonizing options that could alter the U.S.-Puerto Rico political relationship. In the December 1998 plebiscite, the “none of the above” options won the special referendum with 50%. Statehood obtained 46.5%, independence had 2.5% and the options of free association and current commonwealth finished with less than 1% each (Scarano 2008: 727-733). Most voters used the 1998 plebiscite to punish Rosselló’s administration for holding the election less than two months after the powerful Hurricane Georges destroyed several locations on the island. Half of the voters chose the “none of the above” option and severely affected the governor’s agenda in favor of the advancement of statehood for Puerto Rico.

Despite the three attempts made by Puerto Rico’s local governments to modify the current political relationship with the United States, the Congress has not provided solutions to this centennial colonial problem. Puerto Rico and its colonial problem have never figured among the priorities of the U.S. government. While the executive branch of the American government has created Presidential Commissions to study the Puerto Rican case, their recommendations have not been properly considered by the legislative power. Such a lack of interest from the U.S. federal congress complicates all attempts to modify the territorial status of the island. As this work will discuss, this lack of political action from all the parts involved often makes different cultural expressions, including

sports nationality, complicit with colonialism instead of being active agents of socio-political change.

The next section provides a historical background to Puerto Rico's sports sovereignty, as well as some of the issues and battles that have characterized the debates, controversies and defenses of the island's opportunity to have its own international Olympic representation. Reference will be made to particular historical events in which sports organizations and the Puerto Rican and American governments collided about the scopes, meanings and interpretation of the island's sports sovereignty.

Sports sovereignty: debates and struggles

The political status of Puerto Rico is a topic of debate every time the island participates in international sports events. Although the island is a territory of the United States of America (USA) and its political sovereignty is controlled by the U.S. Congress, since 1948, Puerto Rico has had its own sports representation and nationality within the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Although there is a consensus about Puerto Rico's lack of political sovereignty, some political analysts and sports commentators argue that the island's international athletic representation constitutes an example of "sports sovereignty."

The inability of the Puerto Rican Olympic Committee to guarantee the security and participation of Cuba in the 2010 Central American and Caribbean Games (CACG) celebrated on the island motivated some political sectors to question the existence and effectiveness of this sports sovereignty. Most questions and criticisms have come from

those citizens and political sectors who favor the acquisition of Puerto Rico's political sovereignty through the island's political independence from the United States of America.

The involvement of Puerto Rico in international sports events serves as an incentive for the interested public to discuss the political status of the island and its place among both the United States of America and the community of Latin American nations. For many people, the existence of "sports sovereignty" is a form of international recognition that does not require independence or any form of political sovereignty. Through its IOC membership, Puerto Rico is seen as a nation without sundering its political relationship with the United States. Critics of political independence argue that there is no need for separation from the North American country that holds plenary powers over the island. After all, Puerto Ricans can enjoy the benefits of being American citizens and simultaneously be recognized as a particular national group with its own flag, identity and sports representation.

Such arguments have been recently questioned by promoters of Puerto Rico's political sovereignty. The island's sports sovereignty has been described as a false "sovereignty" that has not contributed to the end of American colonialism for this Caribbean territory. These arguments were stirred by a controversy between the governments of Puerto Rico, the United States and Cuba. In February 2010, the government of Cuba announced its decision to not participate in the 2010 Central American and Caribbean Games to be hosted in Puerto Rico. The Cuban Olympic Committee claimed that the American economic embargo against Cuba and the recent classification of it as a "terrorist country" under U.S. parameters influenced the decision

to not participate in the regional Olympic contest. They also expressed regret about the United States government refusal to allow a Cuban airplane to land on Puerto Rican soil. Such a decision is related to the economic embargo that the American government has had over Cuba since the early 1960s. As a colony of the U.S.A., the Puerto Rican local government has no power over the transit of people into its “own” island territory. That territorial and sovereign power is controlled by the holder of the island’s political sovereignty, the American government and its Congress. Despite the efforts of the national Olympic Committee and some sectors within the island’s government, Puerto Rico was unable to guarantee the security and demands for equal treatment demanded by the Cuban sports delegation. The United States of America remained as the sole administrator of the island’s borders.

The inability of the Puerto Rican government to fulfill the demands requested by the Cuban Olympic Committee infuriated pro-independence leaders and other sectors who favored political sovereignty for the territory and its residents. They described the sports sovereignty as deceitful. For them, the word “sovereignty” was inappropriate to describe Puerto Rico’s sports representation. Furthermore, some pro-independence activists argued that this sports sovereignty has been complicit of American colonialism and the political inertia of most Puerto Ricans who do not question the United States’ legal dominance over the island and its citizens. Based on the numerical results of the three plebiscites (1967, 1993, 1998) described above, the accusations made by pro-independence activists blame cultural expressions such as sports sovereignty as being part of the problem and not mobilizing the majority of the people to support the political liberation and independence of Puerto Rico. For them, there exists a pattern of

complicity between celebrating a cultural nationality and not considering political independence as a necessary outcome and goal for the island (Monteverde-Torres 2010). As expressed before, in none of the previous political plebiscites, independence has had more than 4.4% of the popular support.

Among those same lines, Fernando Martín, who is the President of the Puerto Rican Pro-independence Political Party (PIP), expressed that it is wrong to call the island's sports representation as an example of sovereignty. In an interview by Puerto Rican sports journalist Pablo Maldonado, Martín said that colonies lack any type of sovereignty. While he celebrates the fact that his country has an international sports representation, the member of the PIP clarifies that such an opportunity was granted by the IOC as a private entity. Therefore, Martín claims that Puerto Rico's sports sovereignty lacks any political power (*Primera Hora*: March 21, 2011).

Politicians and activist are not the only ones who have critically approached Puerto Rican cultural representations, including sports. Some Puerto Rican left-wing scholars have also critiqued this alleged power of the island's sports sovereignty. The historian Carlos Pabón (2005) argues that these types of cultural expressions (i.e. sports) made by the people of Puerto Rico represent a *light nationalism* characterized by the celebration and reproduction of a national identity that does not have the goal of changing or altering the political relationship with the United States. By not representing a menace to the U.S.-Puerto Rican political colonial relationship, this light nationalism has been recognized for its commercial and marketable possibilities. Private entities, including transnational corporations from the United States, have tried to appeal to this nationalism by integrating its symbols and different expressions into their products and campaigns.

Sports leagues are among these private corporations that have capitalized by recognizing the economic viability of using this Puerto Rican light (commercialized) nationalism. Based on this interpretation, Puerto Rico's sports sovereignty constitutes an example of "mimetic" nationalist emotions with no political agendas (Allison 2000: 351) that would seek to question the island's relationship with the United States. In this sense, sports sovereignty represents a "safety valve" from politics and the discussion of the political condition of the island of Puerto Rico. Despite all the nationalist sentiments, including those performed every time Puerto Rico defeats a national team from the United States, people of the island do not translate that support for their team into a desire to become independent and have their own national sovereign state.

Not all pro-independence public figures on the island agree with the accusation that characterizes sports sovereignty as an instrument of political immobilization. Fufi Santori, a famous Puerto Rican sports journalist and analyst, who was also an athlete and former president of the Puerto Rican Tennis Federation, supports the alleged organizational and political power of the island's sports sovereignty. According to Santori, the participation of Puerto Rico in the 1948 Summer Olympics in London represented the beginning of the island's sports sovereignty. For him, such an event allowed other nations to recognize Puerto Ricans as a collective with the right to express their own nationality. Santori strengthens his argument when he makes reference to the participation of Puerto Rico in the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow, Russia. He argues that, despite the political boycott promoted by former American President James Carter in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Puerto Rico ignored that threat from the United States and decided to participate in this international sports

event. Santori interpreted that action as an affirmation of Puerto Rico's right for a sovereign sports expression (Santori 2010: 268-269).

David Bernier, who is the current president of Puerto Rico's Olympic Committee, also highlights the value, importance and power of the island's sports sovereignty. While not identified with any pro-independence movement in the island, Bernier is not a supporter of political statehood either. He militates for the Popular Democratic Party (PDP), an organization that opposes full political integration with the United States, but still advocates for some type of relationship with it. As a strong believer in Puerto Rican nationality and the island's sports sovereignty, Bernier also praised the importance of ignoring President Carter's Olympic boycott in 1980. In a work in which he published his memories about the 2010 Central American and Caribbean Games, Bernier celebrates Puerto Rico's presence in the 1980 Summer Olympics. For him, the decision to attend the games reaffirmed Puerto Rican nationality and the power of a sports sovereignty that challenged both the island's local government and United States foreign policy. Such action provoked the local government to withdraw the financial support for the Puerto Rican Olympic Committee. Despite this lack of financial support, Bernier narrates how people still believed in the power of Puerto Rico's sports sovereignty and raised money on the streets in order to find the means to send a Puerto Rican delegation to the 1982 Central American and Caribbean Games in the Caribbean island of Cuba (Bernier 2010: 50).

The arguments made by both Santori and Bernier are based on very specific moments in which the island's sports sovereignty prevailed over attempts made by pro-statehood local administration that tried to boycott or present obstacles to steps taken by

the Puerto Rican Olympic Committee (PROC). In his journalistic column about the struggles faced by the defenders of Puerto Rico's sports sovereignty, Maldonado (2011) analyzes four historical moments as seen by some sports analysts and historians from the island. The first struggle faced by supporters of sports sovereignty happened right before the 1979 Pan American Games that were held in San Juan, the island's capital. The pro-statehood governor Carlos Romero Barceló, requested the former president of the PROC to only play the United States national anthem every time a Puerto Rican athlete won a gold medal at the games. The members of the PROC rejected that petition based on the argument that it violated the "Olympic Letter." Maldonado makes reference to how after negotiations between the PROC and representatives from the governor, Puerto Rico was allowed to display its flag and play the island's national anthem at the regional games in San Juan.

The second historical moment described in this work is that related to the already mentioned challenge to the Olympic boycott called by former American President Jimmy Carter, who asked nations to not attend the 1980 Summer Games in Moscow, Russia. Governor Romero Barceló told the PROC that because of the island's political relationship with the United States, Puerto Rico was compelled to follow Carter's call to boycott the summer games. The PROC claimed that such a demand was political and foreign to the purpose of this international sports event. Maldonado describes the moment as one in which,

against the guidelines established by the United States government, the PROC exercised its political sovereignty and Puerto Rico participated in the Olympics, but with a symbolic delegation that had boxers Alberto Mercado, José Molina and Luis Pizarro.” (<http://www.primerahora.com/lasbatallasendefensadelasoberania-485596.html>).

This Olympic boycott will be discussed with more detail in chapter three.

The third conflict between the PROC and the island’s government was a direct consequence of the decision to “disobey” President Carter’s Olympic boycott. Romero Barceló’s government retired all financial aid to the PROC and the island was unable to organize the 1982 Central American and Caribbean Games. The regional games were eventually held on the Caribbean island of Cuba and Puerto Rico was able to send a delegation despite the lack of governmental financial support. The PROC was able to send a delegation to Cuba after collecting enough money on the streets. Sympathizers of the island’s national sports representations contributed to the Olympic “fund raiser” that eventually enabled Puerto Rico to once again, succeed despite governmental attempts to affect the functioning of the PROC.

Finally, Maldonado presents the “David Ponce” case from 1984. That year, the Puerto Rican Superior Basketball League (PRSBL) dealt with a case of a player that illegally participated in the league. The Ponce Lions franchise claimed that David Ponce was adopted by a Puerto Rican and that made him eligible to play in the PRSBL. A latter investigation determined that the player’s documents were false. He was not allowed to play again and the entire Lions’ games were nullified by the league. The Lions team owner went to the Puerto Rican local American federal court. His allegation was based on the fact that no American citizen could be denied to professionally play in an

American territory. He won the case and the judge determined that Ponce's suspension was illegal and ordered the PRSBL to allow the American player to participate in the tournament. Jenaro Marchand, who was the league's director, challenged the order and decided to suspend the 1984 PRSBL season. Marchand appealed the court's decision in the Boston federal circuit of appeals. The Boston court repealed the previous decision and favored the PRSBL's ruling regarding the David Ponce case finding that Puerto Rico's athletic institutions are protected by the island's sports sovereignty and its delegated "powers."

For Marchand and other Puerto Rican Olympic figures, the Boston decision protected the island's sports sovereignty and its power to decide over sports issues without governmental intervention. Still, this decision was enabled by an American federal court. Puerto Rican tribunals were not able to solve this issue. This case will be referenced and analyzed again in the concluding section of this thesis. The next section provides a synopsis of the chapters that will be part of this thesis work.

Thesis structure and content

This work will consist of four chapters and a concluding section. Each chapter will present a specific case scenario that is relevant to the understanding of Puerto Rico's sports sovereignty. Chapter one examines the victory of the Puerto Rican men's national basketball team over Team USA in the 2004 Summer Olympics. The historical sports moment is analyzed through the referencing of how Puerto Rican sports fans consumed the game through mass media's exclusive coverage from the American network of NBC

and Telemundo of Puerto Rico. Both networks are owned by the Comcast Corporation, the largest U.S. media company in the U.S. in 2011, but then owned by General Electric (GE)

In chapter two, a political economy method is used to analyze the *World Baseball Classic* (WBC) organized by Major League Baseball (MLB) from the United States. Puerto Rican sports fans are the unit of analysis. Their use of Facebook is studied in order to discuss how their simultaneous support of the island's national baseball team and the utilization of the online social network constituted a form of "unpaid labor." This chapter discusses how the support for the national baseball team also had the consequence of providing free advertisement to both the WBC and MLB.

Chapter three discusses the case of Puerto Rican swimmer Jesse Vassallo and his international sports participation as a member of the United States national team. The chapter starts with the presentation of Vassallo's background and the reasons that led him to represent the United States instead of Puerto Rico. The work of Mikhail Bakhtin is used to analyze how those Puerto Rican fans who attended the swimming finals in the 1979 interrupted the American "Star Spangled Banner" (national anthem) and started singing the Puerto Rican national anthem while Vassallo was being awarded with the gold medal after winning the contest. Bakhtin's textual analysis is used to analyze the final scene from the Puerto Rican documentary "A Step Away."

In the fourth chapter, the case of the Puerto Rico Islanders professional soccer franchise is used to show how the territory's sports sovereignty is also used to promote and advance a pro-U.S. and pro-statehood ideological agenda. With the aid of influential

pro-statehood leaders from Puerto Rico, the Islanders professional team has been organized with the purpose of challenging the use of national symbols such as the flag as exclusive instruments for the support of a pro-independence or pro-political sovereignty national identity for the territory. The work of Marxist geographers is referenced to explain how the development of the Islanders has tried to construct an ideal city-island vernacular region that attempts to treat Puerto Rico as a hometown (for a soccer franchise) and not as a nation. The idea of having a professional team that belongs to and participates in a North American league demonstrates how a political relationship such as the one between the United States and Puerto Rico facilitates the complete integration of a cultural expression such a sports team into the U.S. American market despite the supposedly exclusive territorial control of the Puerto Rican sports sovereignty over all franchises and athletic contests that originate on the island. The case clearly demonstrates that political sovereignty imposes itself over sports sovereignty.

The work closes with a concluding section that sums up and relates the findings from the four cases presented in the different chapters. The construct of sports sovereignty is analyzed through the lens of U.S. economic influence in Puerto Rico. The employment of the term sovereignty as applied to international sports participation is highly questioned and described more as a reactionary tool against political action and mobilization. The romanticized discourse of pro-independence leaders who glorify sports sovereignty as a tool of redemption and resistance is also questioned in the context of contemporary economic integration of Puerto Rico into the American sports market.

Chapter 1

Team Puerto Rico vs. Team USA: A “victory” brought to you by NBC-Universal

August 15, 2004: It was just another sunny Sunday afternoon on the island of Puerto Rico. Sports followers knew about the Summer Olympics that were being held in Athens, Greece. The Puerto Rican basketball national team was scheduled to play against the powerful representation from the United States of America (USA). Team USA had never lost an Olympic game since it started using NBA professional players in Barcelona, Spain (1992). The hopes were low. Puerto Rico has never beaten a team with players from the sports organization that is considered to be the best basketball league in the world. Still, faithful Puerto Rican sports fans were excited about the opportunity of seeing its team on television as part of the historical mass media coverage of a Summer Olympics Games that were organized by the country that is believed to have founded these international athletic contests.

The game started. Puerto Rico took an early lead, but it was just a matter of time until Team USA would take control of the game. At least that was what most television audiences believed at the beginning of the match. Despite what would be the outcome of the game, Puerto Rican enthusiasts were already satisfy with the display of national pride represented through those twelve players who were wearing a jersey with the colors of the island’s flag. Being a territory controlled by the United States Congress and still having the opportunity to have international sports representation is always a reason to celebrate for those persons who embrace Puerto Rican nationhood and identity. Watching on television an Olympic game between Puerto Rico and the United States of

America was the ultimate symbol of national pride and a clear manifestation of the island's sports sovereignty.

At the end of the game, Puerto Rico surprised the sports world and upset by Team USA 92-73. This was the first Olympic loss for an American basketball team since they started using NBA players in 1992. The voice of Ernesto Díaz González, national basketball voice on the island finished his narration by expressing that “Puerto Rico has won!” (¡Ha Ganado Puerto Rico!). For one afternoon, Puerto Rico seemed to be a political sovereign independent nation. Judging by Díaz González's words, the island's national team won a battle against the United States. Television was the mass media forum used to proclaim such an important national victory. The power of sports sovereignty seemed to finally give Puerto Rico some power over the nation that has political sovereign powers over the Caribbean territory and its people. For Puerto Ricans, this victory was “theirs” and national television declared the outcome of an historical moment.

The moment was almost perfect until a very specific media ownership fact ruined all the celebration and the possibility for Puerto Ricans to claim the victory as completely “theirs.” The images seen on “national” Puerto Rican television were from a broadcast transmitted by the island's Telemundo affiliate station. While seen as a national television station by most Puerto Ricans, Telemundo is a Spanish-speaking television station owned by the powerful American media conglomerate of NBC-Universal, a company that is currently owned by the powerful mass media company Comcast¹. The

¹ The corporation is now known as NBCUniversal. This change happened in January 2011 after the FCC approved the company's merger with Comcast which is now the major owner of the media conglomerate.

fact that such an important game was seen on that television station was already a significant way of diminishing Puerto Rico's sports sovereignty.

NBC and media colonialism

Historically, it was the Puerto Rican National Olympic Committee (PROC), the organization in charge of giving the television coverage rights to stations from the island. For the 2004 Summer Olympics, the PROC was unable to complete that process of granting television coverage rights to the island's media stations. The NBC network received exclusive rights to cover the Athens' Games in the United States². Being Telemundo a component of the NBC network since 2002, they were part of the network's synergistic efforts to present the 2004 Olympics in all the NBC member and affiliate stations.

For this case, economic colonialism validated and legitimated the political condition of Puerto Rico as a possession of the United States of America. The territory's sports sovereignty was minimized by a powerful American mass media corporation that imposed its economic will over another country's right to have its own international sports representation. Puerto Rico's sports sovereignty was transformed into a commodity that served the interests of the mass media industry dominion exercised by

Comcast now owns 51% percent of the company. The other 49% is controlled by General Electric (GE).
Source: www.nbcuni.com

² For the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, China, NBC-Universal got the exclusive coverage rights again.

the powerful NBC-Universal conglomerate³. The PROC was unable to make any decisions regarding the television coverage of the Olympics on its national territory. Having NBC-Universal as the exclusive provider of Olympic content meant that the coverage of the games for Puerto Rican audiences did not prioritize Puerto Rican athletes, but mainly those competitors who were seen as more profitable by this American media corporation.

This case speaks about how Puerto Rico's lack of political power is still used as an instrument and facilitator of American economic dominion over the island. The mass media industries are not an exception and are currently becoming active participants of this economic and cultural imperialism. Besides the Telemundo affiliate, another television station on the island is owned by a powerful American media corporation. The local Puerto Rican channel of "Univision Puerto Rico" is owned by Univision Communications, an American media conglomerate for the Hispanic population in the United States (Vargas and Paulin 2007: 39).

These American media imperialism in Puerto Rico is facilitated by the United States government and its political sovereign control over the island. Despite not being an integral part of the United States, Puerto Rico is administered by the same American federal agencies present on the (U.S.) "mainland" in North America. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is one of those agencies with jurisdiction in the territory of Puerto Rico. Like any other major mass media mergers and purchases that

³ After completing the merger that gave Comcast the control of NBCUniversal, the company expanded its ownership of media stations and other entertainment services. The company owns ten local television stations, Telemundo network and its affiliates, more than twenty cable networks, production studios, online channels, theme park and resorts (www.nbcuni.com).

happen in the United States, the FCC is in charge of approving (or denying) those corporative transactions. Similar to other media economic negotiations in the United States, Univision's purchase of "Tele Once" (WLII) in Puerto Rico in 2002 had to go through the evaluation and consideration of the FCC. For this particular case, the American FCC was the facilitator of an economic transaction that substituted an independent Puerto Rican television station with the emergence of Univision Puerto Rico, an affiliate of an economically powerful station from the United States (i.e. Univision).

Considering the case of Puerto Rico's sports sovereignty and its relationship to media ownership, we can express that the island's international sports representation lost its political possibilities to question the current political relationship between the territory and the United States, and instead became an instrument of validation for the political economic control exercised by the metropolis (the United States). A national symbol for Puerto Ricans (their sports sovereignty) was integrated into NBC-Universal's media content and offered a strategy to strengthen its ownership power. In order to better understand these "media imperialism" dynamics, it is important to make reference to works that use political economy's critical approach to mass media as a point of departure. The works of Sreberny and Schiller can inform our analysis.

The work of Annabelle Sreberny (2006) discusses how contemporary telenovelas promote a consumerist way of life similar to the one presented on American television shows. For Herbert Schiller, these Latino soap operas have as one of their purposes, the selling of products and goods made by the same transnational corporations that advertise television content in the United States. Schiller expressed that what was emerging "is a world where alongside the American output of cultural product are the practical identical

items marketed by competing national and transnational groups” (Schiller 2006: 304). The replication of marketing and mass media corporative practices from the United States is believed to be an example of cultural imperialism. In the case of television content such as those genres associated with Hispanic audiences, this “First World” influence is more direct when North American mass media networks such as Univision and Telemundo assume creative and production controls over these shows that in the past were only made by companies based in Latin American countries such as Mexico, Brazil and Venezuela.

For both Sreberny and Schiller, contemporary Hispanic television programming replicates the marketing and corporative practices of U.S. television networks that have the primary goal of making a profit. These observations made by the two scholars can also be applied to sports media programming that involves Hispanic athletes or teams. The famous basketball game that occurred on August 15, 2004 can be analyzed through these critical lenses. While the basketball game between Puerto Rico and the United States was broadcast on Telemundo (Puerto Rican affiliate) and narrated by two Spanish-speaking sports commentators, the television screen always showed the NBC logo on the right top corner of the televised visual image. During the approximately two hours that the game lasted, Telemundo was not different from any local American broadcast station affiliated to the NBC network.

The case of the Telemundo Network in the United States is particularly interesting. The network is owned by NBC Universal. This company also owns other major television channels like NBC, USA and SCI FI. The NBC Universal case presents a major mass media corporation that offers channels for different markets and audiences.

Telemundo is part of the offerings of a powerful American corporation that recognized the need to target the increasingly important Latino audiences in the United States. Unlike channels like NBC and USA Networks, Telemundo's content is in Spanish and tries to replicate the programming of stations from Latin America. However, this language and content differences do not erase the fact that Telemundo is based in the United States and is owned by a powerful American mass media corporation.

Despite Puerto Rico's non-incorporated territorial status, the FCC control over the island's communications makes its mass media content and industry an integral part of the United States and its federal government system. Based on this political and economic reality that allows any American media corporation to freely enter and do business on the island, technically classifies Puerto Ricans as members of the Hispanic audience group in the United States. After all, and since 1917, all persons born on the Caribbean territory of Puerto Rico are citizens of the United States of America. The political status of the island is an instrument that facilitates the entrance of a corporation like NBC-Universal. As part of that media conglomerate, Telemundo sees Puerto Ricans audiences as another potential Hispanic niche market within the United States. The FCC's control over the island's media, the American citizenship of its citizens, and the free or common market between the metropolis (USA) and its colony (PR), makes this Caribbean non-incorporated territory just another Latino/Hispanic population "pocket", not different from those big North American cities that have significant numbers of inhabitants with some ancestry or relationship to Latin America.

Some scholars would not consider Telemundo's economic influence and control as problematic as long as it provides some degree of visibility to minority groups. In her

exploration and analysis of Hispanic media in the United States, Amanda Lotz (2007) quotes the work of Arlene Davila. After analyzing her arguments, we note that Davila sees with optimism the economic transactions in which major American media corporations decide to enter niche markets with a predominant presence of people who share a past with Spanish speaking countries in the Americas. She does not see Latino-targeted advertisement as harmful to society and marginalizing to Hispanic groups that are part of American society. For her, these commercial and mass media strategies are part of a group's cultural production and recognition (social, economical, political and cultural) within a particular society (Lotz 2007: 180).

Davila's interpretation and her example of Hispanic targeted media in the United States can also be relevant to the understanding of this public/private spheres debate in relation to television. If we take Davila's argument regarding the role and importance of targeted and niche media for a group's cultural production, we can see some deliberative and political possibilities resulting from these television productions. A group's recognition within the mainstream mass media of a particular nation can create a sense of belonging to that political community and inspire mass mobilization during the conduction of practices that are believed to be oppressive or marginalizing. The private and "isolated" practice of watching a Hispanic news or talk show through i-tunes or YouTube can potentially lead to the construction of a public sense of belonging for the heterogeneous American groups who share an ancestry with a place from Latin America. The construction of an identity and the public practice of collective mobilization can result from a private practice originated in niche or targeted mass media.

While arguments such as Davila's claims regarding the political and public mobilization potentialities that could be inspired by more mass media representation for Hispanic populations in the United States can be true for some cases, we need to be careful and avoid generalization specially when applying a similar analysis to Puerto Rico. Notwithstanding the already mentioned control by the FCC and other mass media corporations from the United States, as well as the American citizenship that defines natives from Puerto Rico, it can become problematic and debatable when the residents of the island are treated as just another group that is part of the Hispanic minority in the United States rather than an exploited national group used as another source of labor and consumption. The fact that Puerto Ricans had their own language and sense of nationhood before the acquisition of the American citizenship in 1917 can start the debate about whether they should be seen as another minority in the United States, or instead be treated as a particular national group that is culturally different from the rest of the (mainland) American citizens who see the United States as their nation.

The institution of sports is one of those instruments used by many Puerto Ricans to resist cultural assimilation and claim their existence as a separate national group from the United States. However, I see problematic the application of Davila's analysis regarding the political potentials of Hispanic's media visibility in the United States. To question that possibility of applying her argument to the case under discussion, I will frame my interpretation by once again making reference to the U.S. Supreme Court's decisions (*Downes v. Bidwell*, May 1901; *Balzac v. Porto Rico*: April 1922) in terms of Puerto Rico not being an integral part of the United States. As expressed in the

introduction, the island is not the United States, but belongs to that North American nation.

Based on that judicial interpretation and without entering into the difficult cultural debate about the “construction” of the (Puerto Rican) nation, the businesses done by Telemundo on the island should not be seen as an attempt to target and provide a “voice” to a Hispanic niche market in the United States, but as a form of media imperialism legitimated by a political territorial system. As a member of the NBC-Universal conglomerate, Telemundo is using Puerto Rico’s sports sovereignty, a national symbol, as an instrument to extend their economic power and dominance outside of the mainland United States (the fifty states and the District of Columbia). The conglomerate controlled by Comcast (51%) and General Electric (49%) look to Puerto Rico as a good place to do business, precisely because of its dependency. Despite being under American political and economic jurisdiction, the island has a Gross Domestic product (GDP) of \$64.84 billion and an Income Per Capita (IPC) of \$16,300. These numbers dramatically contrast with those that correspond to the American Union (fifty states and the District of Columbia). The United State has a GDP \$14.72 trillion and an IPC of \$47,400 (CIA – The World Factbook: www.cia.gov).

Complicit corporate sports sovereignty

From a potential instrument of political resistance for those who challenge the United States dominance over Puerto Rico, the island’s sports sovereignty becomes a commodity that, far from seeking a change in status quo, strengthens the dominion of American corporations on this Caribbean territory. During the historic televised

broadcast of the Olympic basketball game between Puerto Rico and the United States as part the 2004 summer games, the island's sports sovereignty was just another instrument used by NBC-Universal to exhibit its exclusive coverage rights for the event that was taking place in Athens, Greece. In the United States, only the stations that were part of NBC were in charge of presenting the games to American national audiences. By denying the island's Olympic Committee the faculty to negotiate the broadcast of the games with Puerto Rican national television stations, NBC-Universal and its Telemundo affiliate on the Caribbean territory used the institution of sports in Puerto Rico as part of the American media industry replication discussed above through the referencing of Herbert Schiller and Annabelle Sreberny. On August 15, 2004 and during the whole duration of the 2004 Summer Olympics, Puerto Rico, through its Telemundo affiliate station, was replicating the marketing and corporative practices of Anglo-American television networks. That Sunday afternoon, it was not Puerto Rico's sports sovereignty the institution that held the power (of political resistance). Instead, the colorful NBC "turkey" logo was present on Telemundo's exhibition of the game and served as a reminder of who was in control of the mass media consumption for that event.

Telemundo's exclusive coverage of the 2004 Summer Olympics for Puerto Rican television audiences can be seen as another form of economic control from an American corporation that tries to dominate a market outside of North America. As pointed out earlier, NBC-Universal's exclusive coverage rights on the island did not allow the PROC to negotiate with national television stations for the broadcast of the games and those contests that involved athletes from Puerto Rico. For these summer games, sports were used by corporate media to strengthen an economic control

legitimated by political and cultural colonialism. In his work about the globalization of sports, John Bale (2003) discusses how the introduction and promotion of sports by colonial powers have historically been used to control the masses and stop any politically subversive motivation. For Bale,

the notion to that sport was introduced to places, both outside and inside their countries of origin, in order to divert revolutionary fervour or covertly to control potentially hostile elements in the host society is widely held. Indeed, there is some explicit evidence that in some cases sport was introduced in order to teach discipline, reduce crime and encourage teamwork. This appears to have been the case with the introduction of soccer by English factory owners to Russia in the late nineteenth century (52-53).

Similar dynamics can also be said about the United States and the rise of professional sports franchises (i.e. professional baseball teams emerging in large industrial cities). There are some parallels between the mass media case discussed in this chapter the analysis made by Bale. While we are not dealing with a case in which an athletic activity like basketball is being introduced (or imposed) by one country over another, the sports institution is nonetheless being used as a form of political, economic and cultural control, as well as a mechanism to divert any desire of political change that might be attached to Puerto Rico's sports sovereignty. In this case, the island's national sports teams are transformed into commodities that can coexist and participate in the economic system that is facilitated by the territorial relationship that the United States has in Puerto Rico. The viewing experience from August 15, 2004 was a form of control of the Puerto Rican sports fans in the sense that thousands of audiences on the island were participating of NBC-Universal's media monopoly for the coverage of Athens' Games. Within United States jurisdiction (including Puerto Rico), the only televised sources to

watch the Olympics were those networks and stations that were part of the NBC-Universal family.

This matters because mass media's exhibition of the games was not being provided by the PROC, an organization that in the past has used sports to challenge local governments from the island that are loyal and support the United States' political presence on the Caribbean territory. Instead, the broadcast was part of an agenda led by a powerful American media conglomerate that got from the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) the exclusive rights to cover the 2004 Olympic Games that were held in Athens, Greece. Puerto Rico's National Olympic Committee was unable to complete a similar negotiation regarding the coverage of the games. Any social and political possibilities for the island's sports sovereignty was negated by Telemundo's exhibition of the games. In the end, American political control over the territory prevailed through the way in which the USOC and NBC-Universal were able to impose American media flow over the island. Puerto Rico's sports sovereignty did not have any power and was unable to prevent this media industry imposition. The island's sports media lacked the freedom of expression and economic power to negotiate the coverage of the games.

The idea and practice of sports sovereignty as a cultural symbol is seen with pride by many Puerto Rican both inside and outside of the island. However, we cannot assume that cultural ideas and characteristics are autonomous entities not influenced by economic practices. For commercial organizations and corporations, the decision to use and expose a specific language will always be driven by the desire to sell their products and attract specific groups of consumers. NBC-Universal felt the need to address the Spanish speaking market in the United States and bought the Telemundo network. This big mass

media American corporations now uses a specific language (Spanish) and set of representations similar to those from Latin American television to target a growing minority group in the United States, as well as the American citizens who live in Puerto Rico. If language, Latino mass media representation and Puerto Rican national symbols are used by an American corporation for these selling purposes, we can argue that international and Olympic sports are used as mechanism for socio-economic control and instrument for American media imperialism.

The case that we have discussed in this chapter is part of those economic global movements flows characterized by transnational mass media and telecommunication companies that are increasingly involved in the production and coverage of major sports events (Bale 2003: 56). These dynamics are part of broader processes of economic globalization controlled by transnational corporations from the most powerful and economically “developed” countries. From setting the media agenda regarding international Olympic coverage, to the increased practice of hiring underpaid workers from “underdeveloped” nations to produce athletic apparel for “First World” consumption, contemporary sports are valuable instruments for economic control and containment for potential political mobilization. Puerto Rico’s sports sovereignty is part of these global trends that feature the treatment of sports, athletic contests and players as commodities used by mass media conglomerates to solidify their power, dominance and worldwide presence and de-mobilize action for change.

Chapter 2

Breaking a world record for two nations:

Jesse Vassallo and the Pan American dialogic sports landscape

Introduction

The 1979 Pan American Games were held in the city of San Juan, Puerto Rico. National teams from all the American Hemisphere came to the island and represented their countries in different sports contests. As the host country for the games, Puerto Rico also had its own national teams for different events. One of the main attractions was the internationally renowned Puerto Rican swimmer Jesse Vasallo.

Sports fans were expecting Jesse Vassallo to break the world record in the 200 meters contest and win the gold medal. The swimmer from Ponce, PR, established a new world record and won the gold medal in front of thousands of enthusiasts who gathered at the “Escambrón Natatorium” in San Juan. Vasallo had the honor of making history in front of his Puerto Rican people. As he received the gold medal and stepped on the Pan American podium, a loud crowd sang “La Borinqueña”, the official Puerto Rican national anthem.

The voice of the masses was a spontaneous performance in addition to the traditional playing of the national anthem from the country that was being represented by the gold medal winner. During any international sports contest, this would have been just another case in which a host crowd proudly completes their national anthem in response to the “30 seconds rule” that characterize most international Olympic sports events. The anthem of the winning nation is usually played for only 30 seconds. If the gold medalist

is representing the same country that hosts the games, fans on the stands often finish the song with an improvised live performance. For Puerto Rican fans, it is a tradition to complete “La Borinqueña” when the speakers stop playing it after the 30 seconds protocol.

When Jesse Vassallo won the gold medal, fans responded with a spontaneous interpretation of the island’s national anthem. People would have thought that such a performance was just another complement to the “30 seconds rule”, but that was not the case. There was a “discrepancy” between the song that was being played through the speakers and the one that was being sung by the thousands of fans who attended the swimming event. Vassallo received his medal and “The Star-Spangled Banner” was heard in San Juan. Jesse Vasallo was representing the United States of America and fans were celebrating his historical victory with the Puerto Rican national anthem.

The American national anthem was interrupted and challenged by fans who claimed the holder of a swimming world record as “their” athlete. For approximately a minute, Puerto Ricans at the Pan American Natatorium celebrated their cultural nationality and contested the United States presence on the island. However, the challenge and celebration was short and had no socio-political consequences. Jesse Vasallo’s gold medal was for the United States and his future participations were always representing that nation. What happened that summer night in 1979 created a mass nationalist expression from Puerto Ricans, but did not bring any serious political challenge to the colonial status quo of the territory.

This chapter explores Puerto Rico’s sports sovereignty through the reference of Jesse Vasallo’s gold medal ceremony and the spontaneous reaction made by the sports

fans who witnessed the swimming contest. The work of Mikhail Bakhtin and his analysis of carnival events will be used as the main theoretical framework for this chapter. The main source for the description of the case and event under consideration will be the Puerto Rican movie “A Step Away” (1980). Textual analysis will be employed to examine scenes from the movie that are relevant to Vasallo’s participation in the 1979 Pan American Games.

Jesse Vassallo: A step away from representing his island

Jesse Vassallo was born in 1961 on the southern city of Ponce, Puerto Rico. His gifted swimming abilities were recognized by his dad who decided to move to Misión Viejo, California. Moving to the U.S. West Coast was Jesse’s father strategy to get closer to Mark Schubert, a recognized American swimming coach who was in charge of training Vassallo before his integration into professionalism and the American national team. Despite being far away from his island, Jesse still had the desire to represent Puerto Rico in the 1976 Summer Olympics in Montreal, Canada. However, a rule from the Puerto Rican Swimming Federation required all of its athletes to live at least one year on the island prior to becoming a member of the country’s team. Giving these limitations, Vassallo opted to represent the United States of America. As any other Puerto Rican, Jesse was an American citizen. That political condition gave him the right to represent the United States like any other athlete from the fifty states or the overseas colonies (e.g. U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam, Puerto Rico, and others). Wanting to represent one country, but ending up wearing the sport jersey of another seemed to be a dilemma

for the Puerto Rican swimmer. At least that was how it was presented on the documentary “A Step Away.”

“A Step Away” is a Puerto Rican documentary produced in 1980 by Roberto Ponce. In terms of content, the film had two main purposes. First, the creators wanted to develop a historical document with interviews, scenes and performances from the 1979 Pan American Games. Second, there was a desire to motivate sports fans for the upcoming 1980 Summer Olympic in Moscow, Russia. The documentary portrayed the San Juan Games as a very important “final rehearsal” before the Moscow Games.

The production’s original title was supposed to be “Preludio Olímpico” (Olympic Prelude). After all, the documentary was originally visualized as a preamble before the Moscow Games. However, that goal was altered by Jimmy Carter’s call to boycott the 1980 Summer Olympics. Carter, who was President of the United States, asked all nations to not support that international athletic contest as a form of protest against the Soviet Union and its invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. Roberto Ponce and the rest of the production team for the documentary lamented Carter’s decision and had to come up with a new concept and marketing strategy for their film. The images and scenes were not a prelude for the summer games anymore. Several nations from the American hemisphere followed the United States in its boycott of the international sports event in the Soviet Union.⁴ In an interview made in 2010 as part of the 30 years commemoration of “A Step Away”, Roberto Ponce expresses how

⁴ Despite being a non-incorporated territory of the United States, Puerto Rico ended up sending a delegation to the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow, Russia.

The most devastating moment for all was when President Jimmy Carter declares a boycott against the Olympics in Russia. That changed everything. I thought I was going to lose all the money, all the job, all the sacrifices. One of the members of our creative team took off one of his shoes, threw it onto a table and put it above a newspaper that reported about the boycott and said “It would be called A Step Away instead of Preludio Olímpico.” We breathed deep again and were relieved to know that something else can be done (Interview with Roberto Ponce – Testimoniales 2010).

“A Step Away” was exactly that: one step away short from making it to Moscow. As a member of the United States national swimming team, Jesse Vassallo was one of the many athletes who were a step away from competing in Russia. The documentary has two scenes that involve the Puerto Rican swimmer. First, he is presented while receiving a massage and getting ready for a contest. In the second scene, Jesse competes in the finals of the 200 meters Pan American contest. That second scene that features the swimmer is also the part that closes the documentary (the last scene).

The first scene that features Vassallo describes him as “the new star on team USA” and also as the competitor who has a “conflict of loyalties.” He is described as an athlete who had to face the tension between completing his commitment to compete for the United States and representing those Puerto Ricans who claim him as one of “them” for the Pan American Games that were being held in San Juan. In that same scene, a journalist asks Jesse about which country he prefers to represent. The swimmer refuses to answer the question and limits himself to express that his “friends are the ones who know the reality” (“A Step Away” 1980).

The last scene of the documentary features Jesse Vassallo once again. Unlike the other scene, in this one, the narrator expresses that Jesse’s “conflict of loyalties has been

solved.” He based his argument on the fact that Vassallo’s family, friends and a great number of Puerto Ricans came to support the swimmer in his attempt to break the world record for the 200 meters contest. Jesse broke the world record and won the gold medal for the United States of America. During that scene, there are a few shots at Vassallo’s mom. Her gestures and personal emotions before, during and after the race were a main part of all the images shown. When the swimmer was receiving the gold medal and the “Star Spangled-Banner” was played to honor the winner, Jesse’s mom starts encouraging her family to sing “La Borinqueña”, the Puerto Rican national anthem. To her surprise, the thousands of Puerto Ricans at the Pan American natatorium were already performing the song. The island’s official anthem silenced the national anthem of the United States of America that was being played on the speakers.

In response to that spontaneous mass performance of patriotism, Jesse Vassallo reacted with a smile. Seconds later, he grabbed a small Puerto Rican flag from his pocket and displayed it during the award ceremony. There is a camera shot of an empty pool (the contest was over) presented with the sound of thousands of Puerto Ricans singing their national anthem in its totality. The scene and the documentary end with Jesse’s mom running toward her son to give him a hug and a kiss. This family encounter happens while the swimmer was holding a Puerto Rican flag and the thousands of fans were chanting with excitement and celebration.

The next section of this chapter explores Bakhtin’s theory of the carnival and the principle of dialogism. That theoretical description will be followed by a “Bakhtinian” reading of that last scene from “A Step Away”, as well as its relation to Puerto Rico’s sports sovereignty.

Bakhtin, dialogic communication and contested cultural landscapes

Mikhail Bakhtin considers all language to be dialogic. This idea regards all types of “texts” and languages as multidirectional and dynamic. The “intertextuality” proposed by the dialogic theoretical framework presents everyday “reality” as constantly being shaped and informed by distinct discourses at different spatial and temporal scales. Dialogism is characterized by the idea that anything that is said, done, portrayed and produced is dynamic and constantly evolving. Everything exists as a result of past acts and discourses, as well as those elements that would be produced in response to a particular creation. The dialogic approach is based on the idea that knowledge comes from different directions and actors. However, the development of this knowledge is not always equal among its participants. Some voices are more powerful than others.

Bakhtin’s dialogic framework is often used by textual analysts to analyze current cultural realities. The school of thought known as dialogism has parallelisms and conceptual similarities with the idea of cultural hybridism. In his work, Marwan Kraidy (2005) referred to the work of Bakhtin when he analyzed the theorist’s opinion of cultural and literary hybridization. As quoted in Kraidy (2005), Bakhtin discussed his cultural version of linguistic hybridization as “a mixture of two social languages within the limit of a single utterance, an encounter... between two different... consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor” (128). This approach views both culture and language as dynamic entities that are constantly receiving input from different sources that come from distinct “directions” (e.g., epochs, places, cultural practices, social discourses, among other elements). According to this line of thought, no cultural practice or representation can be considered as “pure.” The

intermingling of different voices, discourses and spatial-temporal scales produces a heterogeneous “text”. This interaction between different discourses is capable of creating what some contemporary scholars call a “hybrid” cultural experience.

The resulting cultural landscape is informed from different (discursive and cultural) directions and an expression of several historical periods and cultures. While making reference to the work of academic geographers and theorists from other disciplines, Robert Stam (1999) compared places with garbage piles where several layers from different wasting sources accumulate.

The ideal postmodern and postcolonial metaphor, garbage is mixed, syncretic, a radically decentered social text. It can also be seen as what Charles Jencks calls a “heteropolis” and Edward Soja, following Michel Foucault, a “heterotopia,” that is, the juxtaposition in a real place of “several sites that are themselves incompatible.” As a place of buried memories and traces, meanwhile, garbage is an example of what David Harvey calls the “time-space compression” typical of the acceleration produced by contemporary technologies of transportation, communication and information. In Foucault’s terms, garbage is heterochronic”; it concentrates time in a circumscribed space. The garbage pile can be seen as an archaeological treasure trove precisely because of its concentrated, syndechotic, compressed character. As congealed history, garbage reveals a checkered past. As time materialized in space, it is coagulated sociality, a gooey distillation of society’s contradictions. (Stam 1999, 69)

When analyzing a human or cultural landscape, I study that site as a historical artifact where several “piles” from different periods find each other and contribute to the shaping of the place. If we apply Bakhtin’s dialogical truth theoretical framework to any geographic location, the characterization of that cultural landscape as an “archaeological treasure” (by borrowing Stam’s metaphor) could be an appropriate one. One single place portrayal has a lot of stories to tell. The presentation of a single location can be the

product of contesting discourses and influences from different historical periods, as well as other geographical locations. All of this results in a place and cultural landscape created by the juxtaposition of several “sites” (e.g., other places, diverse historical periods) that have an apparent incompatibility. The identification and portrayal of a place would depend on the context (e.g., historical, political, social, cultural, and economic) and the actors involved.

Humans, as active agents of change, are an essential part of this dialogue that shapes cultural landscapes. In his analysis of the Middle Ages and Renaissance carnivals, Bakhtin discussed how popular masses appropriated dominant or official discourses and events and gave them new meanings. He commented on how people used these public spectacles sponsored by the governments and official religious sectors to satirize and subvert the messages promoted by those same institutions (state and church) in charge of organizing the carnivals. Performances such as burlesque imitations of renowned politicians and religious figures were characteristic of these medieval and renaissance events. The spaces in which carnivals were performed witnessed the coalescence of official and popular discourses. On the one hand, these locations were public spaces controlled by the government, which was the institution that had the power to convoke and authorize the celebration of the carnivals. On the other hand, popular sectors utilized these spaces to subvert official discourses and perform socio-political statements that were often in conflict with those promoted by the sponsoring institutions of the carnival. Thus, these spaces of representations did not have a single meaning or truth. They were dialogical because contesting discourses and ideas of representations shaped these public performing spaces. Carnival locations received input from different

directions. There was a constant dialogue between the different sectors that utilized the space and gave it a particular meaning. A dialectical relationship also existed between two apparently opposing groups (official power and popular sectors). In the end, a synthesized space of representation resulted from the convergence of those two competing discourses and interests.

Sports sovereignty: A carnival for (apolitical) national celebration

Puerto Rico's sports sovereignty is dialogical in many ways. First, let us consider the political groups that support Puerto Rican political independence. As noted in the introduction of this thesis, some pro-independence sectors consider the island's sports sovereignty as an instrument of resistance against American colonialism and cultural assimilation. Among these persons, the famous sports analyst Fufi Santori is one of the advocates for this notion. Santori and others believe that it was precisely that sports nationality that provided the tool that allowed Puerto Rico's Olympic Committee to challenge President Jimmy Carter's boycott and eventually send a national contingent to the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow.

Other pro-independence groups differ from this perspective. They believe that Puerto Rico's sports sovereignty has been used as a mechanism that has dissuaded any political desire to question the United States political control over the island. For them, political power does not emanate from any sports nationalities, but from political sovereignty only. These pro-independence groups use the Cuban example of the 2010 Central

American and Caribbean Games and the inability to challenge the American embargo against the biggest island on the Caribbean West Indies (Monteverde-Torres 2010).

The spectrum of dialogic conversation for the concept and practice of sports sovereignty also needs to address those Puerto Ricans who embrace other political perspectives that are not related to a desire for becoming independent from the United States of America. Their reasons for supporting the island's international sports representation are not the same as those groups that advocate full political sovereignty. Some of them cheer for the national teams as a form of recognition of a separate Puerto Rican cultural nationality. The support for that nationality is not necessarily seen as a backing for political separation from the United States. Other people might support the teams and some athletes just because they follow and feel attracted to international contests and sports in general.

As a contested term and idea, the celebration of Puerto Rico's sports sovereignty is also capable of constructing dialogic cultural landscapes. The 1979 Pan American Games held in San Juan, Puerto Rico should be read as a hybrid cultural landscape that was shaped by diverging social and political forces. First, the games were celebrated under the political administration of the pro-statehood New Progressive Party (NPP) from the island. The governor was Carlos Romero Barceló, a pro-statehood politician that later in his political career represented Puerto Rico in the United States Congress. Despite this pro-USA political ruling sector, the national Olympic committee was led by its president Germán Rickehoff Sampayo, who was a defender of Puerto Rican nationality and supporter of political independence.

At the opening ceremony of the games, Governor Romero Barceló received a spontaneous massive “booing” from the thousands of persons that were present at the Hiram Bithorn Stadium in San Juan. In Puerto Rico, it has become common for people to express their dissatisfaction with certain politicians while they deliver protocol messages at massive sports events⁵. For that opening ceremony, the Hiram Bithorn Municipal Stadium became a dialogic social, cultural and sports landscape. The booing was done by thousands of people. However, the reasons for joining the sonorous voice of disapproval for Romero Barceló were not necessarily the same for all the different persons and groups that participated in the massive expression. While some people might have done it as a form of protest for his governing style, others probably disagreed with his right wing and pro-statehood political leanings. Participating pro-independence people might have booed the governor as a form of protest against his ruling and the suspicion of him being responsible for the killing of two young activists on the “Cerro Maravilla Incident” in 1978. That heterogeneous, diverse and dialogic was the collective booing directed towards one single person.

The spontaneous singing of “La Borinqueña” during Jesse Vassallo’s gold medal ceremony can also be interpreted as an expression with different connotations that varied among the thousands of individuals who participated on the collective performance of the anthem. On an island in which pro-independence voters are a political minority, it was very unlikely that everyone who sang the national anthem on the natatorium was an advocate for the political separation of Puerto Rico from the United States. The

⁵ A similar reaction happened in 1993 during the opening ceremony of the Central American and Caribbean Games that were held in Ponce, Puerto Rico. Thousands of people at the event “booed” Governor Pedro Rosselló González, also a member of the NPP.

collective singing of “La Borinqueña” interrupted the American “Star Spangled-Banner” and seemed to momentarily challenge the United States presence on the island. However, the expression did not transcend the mere act of celebrating a Puerto Rican athlete that won a gold medal and broke a world record. Without discarding the possibility of having some pro-independence sports fans that joined the collective singing and interpreted it as a challenge to the American presence on the island, the performance did not bring any results that revealed a possible questioning of Puerto Rico’s colonial status and lack of political sovereignty. More than 30 years after that summer night in 1979, the territory continues to have the same political status and relationship to the United States.

The dialogism from this massive expression that happened during an international sports event can also be understood by making reference to Bakhtin and his analysis of the medieval and renaissance carnivals. As presented above, these celebrations were used by the masses to mock the two main power authorities of the epoch: state and church. However, and despite the subversive dimensions of these performances, these carnivals were organized and promoted by the government. In these cases, human agency was both facilitated and limited by the organizers of the carnivals: the government. When the carnivals were over, people and society in general went back to the routines and experiences that characterized those medieval and renaissance societies in Europe. The structures of power were mocked, but not altered. The challenge did not transcend the performance act. The power of the state and the church remained intact after the festive carnival days were over.

A similar dynamic can be described for the event in which Jesse Vassallo won the gold medal for the United States. Sports sovereignty was celebrated by Puerto Ricans. Such celebration was performed on the moment when the island's national anthem was sung and consequently interrupted "The Star Spangled-Banner." For the thousands of fans present at the natatorium, the collective musical vocalization was their way of expressing that Jesse Vassallo was "theirs" or at least had to be shared between Puerto Rico and the United States. The American flag was being raised by the organizers of the games and Puerto Rican fans were already singing "La Borinqueña" without any concern for interrupting the protocol in which the main symbol from the country of their citizenship was being honored.

While the spontaneous performance should not necessarily be interpreted as an expression that mocked American colonialism on the island, the manifestation still reaffirmed a mass desire to be considered as a separate national group from the United States. Singing "La Borinqueña" during the Pan American presentation of "The Star Spangled-Banner" was a form of resistance against any attempt to negate Puerto Rico's own nationality despite the political dominance that the United States has over the island and its residents. However, the question and debate that remains to be discussed is whether or not, that massive musical performance from that summer evening in 1979 was an attempt to question American colonialism in Puerto Rico. On a dialogic cultural landscape as the one that was shaped after that swimming contest, there is no unique answer for that inquiry. Without discarding the possibility that some of those who sung the Puerto Rican anthem were pro-independence and used the moment to express their rejection towards American political dominion on the island, there are no further

arguments that would lead us to claim that the singing of “La Borinqueña” was a challenge to the United States colonial regime on the Caribbean territory of Puerto Rico.

Concluding remarks

The case discussed in this chapter presented an event that had thousands of people celebrating the opportunity to have their own sports sovereignty. Celebratory performances of this belonging to the international sports community are not exempt of contestation and a variety of perspectives among those persons who embrace the island’s national sports teams, but for a variety of reasons. There are individuals and groups that use sports to question a political status. However, such a perspective that mixes politics and sports is not shared by every Puerto Rican who follows and supports their national teams and athletes. A celebration of an identity different from the American nationality does not always constitute a form of political resistance and a desire to be separate from American rule and sovereignty.

Expression such as the spontaneous massive singing that happened during Jesse Vassallo’s award ceremony, have not brought any political change to Puerto Rico. The 1979 Pan American Games were a forum that was partially funded by the pro-statehood Puerto Rican government. Manifestations such as the booing of the NPP governor and the interruption of the American national anthem happened as part of a big sports event that had the island’s government as one of the sponsoring groups. Puerto Ricans seemed to momentarily perform some acts of resistance against American cultural assimilation and its local supporters like former governor Romero Barceló.

Despite this artistic form of expression, the long term political results and changes never came. Today, and more than thirty years after those 1979 games, Puerto Rico continues to be a colony of the United States. American corporations dominate the island's economy and are some of the main corporate sponsors of the country's national teams (See picture #1). Victories and accomplishments made by Puerto Rican teams and athletes are always celebrated by people on the island. National pride flourishes during these celebrations. However, at the end of the "carnival", nothing has changed. Puerto Rico continues to be a colony of the United States and the territory's political status and sports sovereignty continue to be mere contested dialogic constructs and experiences.



Picture # 1: Puerto Rican basketball player Carlos Arroyo is in action during a regional basketball qualifying tournament. His national team's jersey features a big ad from the German multinational telecommunications company "T-Mobile" (Source: www.lebasketbawl.com).

Chapter 3:

Branded sovereignty in the WBC:**A political economy analysis of Puerto Rican sports fans on Facebook***Introduction*

This following case draws on chapter 1 and its analysis that presents Puerto Rico's sports sovereignty as an apolitical commodity. This chapter analyzes how the online social network known as Facebook was used by baseball fans to follow and promote the 2009 edition of the World Baseball Classic (WBC) international tournament. More specifically, fans of the Puerto Rican national baseball team were studied. The online ethnography research method was employed to identify and analyze how these WBC followers made use of Facebook to express their opinions on how their team was performing in this world sports classic. This chapter will discuss how the use of Facebook as a forum for WBC fans represents an example of online "unpaid labor" (see the work of Cohen 2008) characterized by free advertisement produced and given by enthusiastic baseball followers. While Puerto Rican fans tried to construct a national identity and sense of belonging through their support for their national baseball team, the produced and posted content that they provided on Facebook, contributed to the development of free advertisement for the WBC organizers.

The thesis of this chapter is based on the analysis of the different online forms of expression that were used by Puerto Rican fan during the WBC event. Two modes of expression were studied. The first one consisted on the analysis of those WBC pictures

that were posted by these fans. For this stage of the research, an online political economy analysis was employed. The second mode of expression that was studied consisted on identifying how these fans joined the online (Facebook) groups and “Fan Pages” that were related or advertised the WBC. For this part of the research, online ethnography was combined with a mass media political economy analysis. Before discussing the online social network of Facebook and its political economic relationship to this sports event, the next section will provide a brief synopsis that describes the World Baseball Classic international cup, its purpose and format.

The World Baseball Classic: Brief synopsis

The World Baseball Classic is an international sports contest sponsored by the Major League Baseball (MLB) Association from the United States. Sixteen national baseball teams are invited by MLB to participate in the event. Success in past international baseball contests, the popularity of the sport in each country and the talent of individual players are among the criteria used to select the national representations that will compete in the WBC. The first classic happened in 2006. Three years later (2009), MLB decided to repeat the sports contest. The third classic will be celebrated in 2013.

The classic consists of two preliminary rounds, semifinals and finals. The first round divides the sixteen teams into four groups or pools. Each group of four teams celebrates the first round on a different location. The four locations are chosen by the MLB organization based on economic viability, popularity of the sport in the place and geographic proximity to other countries with a significant baseball fan base. The 2009

edition held its first round in the cities of Tokyo (Japan), Toronto (Canada), Mexico City (Mexico) and San Juan (Puerto Rico). For example, in Tokyo, the Asian countries of Japan, China, Taiwan and South Korea competed on the first round for Pool A. This Japanese city is considered by many as the most economically developed and most stable place in the “Far East” region of Asia.

Another example of economic, political and geographic viability was the San Juan, Puerto Rico case. For MLB, the Caribbean island has a large baseball fan base that supports local leagues. Also, people on the island have strong attachment with some MLB teams. This sense of belonging with some American franchises often responds to the participation of local players in those teams or to the presence of a significant Puerto Rican population in some cities that host baseball clubs (e.g. New York Yankees and New York Mets). Other aspects that made San Juan a viable place for the celebration of Pool D’s first round is the political stability of the island of Puerto Rico and the proximity of the territory to other nations where baseball is considered successful. For MLB, it was easy to choose a place that is a territory of the United States, uses the same currency (the American dollar) and is impacted by the same American federal laws. Geography also played a vital role in the selection of Puerto Rico. The island is close to both the Dominican Republic and Panama, two of the countries that were part of Pool D. The fourth country was the Netherlands. While this state is located in Europe, most of its baseball players are originally from the Dutch colonies in the Caribbean.

The MLB organization used this international sports cup to economically capitalize on the different national symbols representing the competing nations. National attachment to the different participating teams was used to sell the WBC product. Both

the MLB and WBC WebPages (www.mlb.com and www.worldbaseballclassic.com) presented merchandise featuring to this international tournament. Not only did consumers have the opportunity to buy memorabilia with the tournament information, but they could also acquire t-shirts, caps and jackets with the colors and flags of the sixteen participating teams. The Puerto Rican fans were among the WBC followers who bought the merchandise with the flag, colors and logo representing their nation. The Facebook online social network featured several pictures that evidenced how Puerto Rican fans wore the WBC merchandise during the 2009 Pool D's first round in the island's capital of San Juan.

For Puerto Rican fans of their national baseball team, Facebook represented a forum that allowed them to express support and excitement for the WBC. Several strategies were used for expressing their opinion and support for both the classic and the baseball team that was representing the island. From the online ethnography that I conducted, three forms of expression were evident. The first of them was the writing of "status" or updates in which Puerto Rican Facebook users analyzed or commented on their team's performance. The second was the joining that these online users made to the official WBC Facebook fan page. The third way of expression consisted on the posting of pictures taken by these fans during their visit to the 2009 WBC first rounds (Pool D) games in San Juan, Puerto Rico. For this particular research, only the last two forms of expression mentioned (joining of groups and posting of pictures) will be described and analyzed. The next section explores the qualitative research method of ethnography and its applicability to this WBC case study.

Research method: An online “ethnography” of the WBC

Ethnography is a qualitative research method. The scholars who practice this methodology often disagree on how to define that particular research experience. These methodological debates bring different perspectives and ways to define ethnography. Chesebro and Borisoff (2007) quote the work of Frey, Botan, Friedman and Kreps, who argue that

ethnography is used to study people’s behavior in specific, natural settings. Ethnographers try to capture as fully as possible, and from the research participant perspective, the ways that people use symbols within specific context. (Chesebro and Borisoff 2007: 6)

Jackson II et al. (2007) discuss and present ethnography as the

art and science of describing and interpreting cultural behavior from a close textual analytic standpoint. The typical ethnography is presented in monograph form and describes the historical events and geographic, economic, political, educational, linguistic and kinship systems that define a particular group. (Jackson et al. 2007: 24-25).

Recently, the work of the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin has been incorporated to the analysis of contemporary ethnographic approaches. More specifically, the narrations and representations of ethnographic works are described as a dialogic process where researchers, subjects or informants and receivers of content (e.g. people who read the ethnographic descriptions) contribute to the understanding and analysis of the work. D. Soyini Madison (2005) discusses and presents a technique known as “Ethnography as Performance.” In this technique, research subjects are viewed as “audiences” with the capacity to not only witness, but to also contribute to the understanding and knowledge development of those aspects “performed” by the main

researcher or ethnographer (Madison 2005: 172-178) “Ethnography as Performance” is considered to employ the dialogic method. All the parts involved contribute to the analysis and understanding of the research topic and object(s) of study. According to this method, “truth” is said to be constantly evolving and receiving input from different sectors or group of people. Thus, ethnography is an interpretation of an interpretation.

The results of an ethnographic work are described and reported by the main person or persons who conduct the research. These are subjective descriptions in which the ethnographer uses a language that responds to his/her experience (as an observer) and interests (e.g. academic, political, and ideological). The interests and agenda of the ethnographer vary in each case. These research goals would be expressed in the type of description or analytical approach that the ethnographer chose to report her/his findings. These accounts might be “culture-specific” (*emic*) or “culturally neutral” (*etic*).

In the context of mass media research, Murphy (2008) explains how ethnography often responds to the desire of providing an alternative to the quantitative approaches that characterize “media effects” studies. Ethnography is a qualitative method employed by mass media and mass communication scholars to understand audience reception and activity. Dicks et. al (2005) points to the difficulties of trying to define the “boundaries” of a research site in mass media research. The fluidity and cross-border availability of mass media content poses a challenge for those communication scholars who practice ethnography. In this sense, the researcher is always an outsider.

Any ethnographic research about mass media would be incomplete if the researcher limits him/herself to just one medium or physical site of research. In our mass

mediated and digitalized world of communication, the amount of information available in different forms of media has significantly increased in the last decades. Information and educational tools about a population, place, society, among other objects of study, can be obtained through other methods besides field observation and traditional ethnography techniques. The Internet, television, DVDs and other multimedia instruments are among these useful tools that are being used by mass media ethnographers. Mass media scholars can take advantage of these multiple forums and media and use this information for the development of (multi-sited) ethnographic research works.

Although the researcher of this work did not engage in a multi-media ethnographic analysis (the scope was just limited to the Facebook medium), future investigations should also consider the role of other forums. During the WBC, Facebook was not the only medium used to express support to this sports contest and the teams that were part of it. Newspapers, sports magazines and television also played an important role. For instance, some of the same “moments” posted on Facebook through the digital photos application could also be seen on the camera shots that the ESPN (Entertainment Sports Programming Network) cable channels presented from the stadiums’ fans section. Future research should also study the dynamics between fans’ production of a sports nationalist content, their support for the WBC and how these performances were portrayed on the WBC official television networks: MLB network and the ESPN channels (ESPN, ESPN2 and ESPN Deportes).

For this particular work, the WBC Puerto Rican Facebook fans were the objects of study. They were the persons who produced the content that was used for this analysis. The interpretation and analysis stages consisted of a dialogical process. Most

of the pictures that were posted by these WBC online fans were accompanied by a photo caption describing or interpreting the moment. My analysis also paid attention to the analyses that were already provided by the objects of study through the captions describing each digital online photo.

As an ethnography approach, dialogism was also present in the way that these fans decided to display their portrayals. In this case, the researcher is not the only subject who will produce an ethnographic “performance” of knowledge and interpretation. The objects of study will have a similar role. The practice of posting pictures on Facebook has an intended purpose of showing online friends aspects such as one person’s behavior, his/her attendance to events, lifestyles, personal tastes, among other personal characteristics. People on Facebook make the voluntary choice of posting pictures that would display parts of their personal lives. Online photos provide evidence for particular lifestyle performances. When these same images are used for academic research purposes, these objects of study are participating and being part of a form of communication where ethnography becomes a performance. As this analysis will show later, part of that fan performance was expressed through the display of flags, national symbols and merchandise associated to the Puerto Rican baseball team and the WBC in general.

The support for a team and baseball tournament, as well as the use and display of national sports symbols (i.e. flags, WBC merchandise) is a phenomenon that is common to most international athletic contest. Fans from the different national teams bought the merchandise produced, advertised and sold by the WBC organizers. It was not uncommon to see a Puerto Rican fan wearing the official WBC cap from her/his national

team and a Venezuelan follower displaying the same merchandise, but with the colors of his/her country. This characteristic could be considered *etic* or culturally neutral because it was “performed” by fans or followers of different national baseball teams that participated in the tournament. Similar findings could be reached if other fans other than Puerto Ricans are analyzed in terms of their relationship with the WBC and how they used Facebook as a sports and national identity forum.

However, the specificity of studying a stateless national group like Puerto Ricans also questions the possibility of considering this ethnographic analysis as one characterized by its cultural neutrality. As has been argued in this thesis work, Puerto Rico is not a sovereign country. The sovereignty of this Caribbean country is controlled by the United States Congress. The island is a non-incorporated territory of the United States. People born in Puerto Rico have been American citizens (from the United States of America) since 1917.

Despite this historical and political status, some Puerto Ricans see themselves as a collective entity that has a separate cultural identity from the United States. As part of this work’s introduction, it was noted that since 1948, Olympic and international sports in general have represented a cultural forum where this ethnic group has constructed a national identity and sense of belonging toward their country of origin or ancestry, as in the case of Puerto Ricans born outside of the island. After the International Olympic Committee admitted the island as one of its members, this Caribbean country has been recognized as an entity with “sports sovereignty” and full rights to participate in athletic contest with a separate representation from the United States of America. These political, cultural and historical characteristics of Puerto Rico and its people make them a unique

case to study in the context of international sports contests. Without denying the applicability that some parts of this work could have used an analysis of worldwide sports fans (etic ethnographic approach), for the purpose of this research, an *emic* or culturally specific ethnographic approach will be used. While there are other several stateless countries in the world with their own sports national representation, Puerto Rico was the only representation in the WBC with these characteristics. The case of China Taipei or Taiwan represents another case of a WBC country that is politically claimed by a different state. In this case, the People's Republic of China claims Taiwan as one of its provinces. However, unlike Puerto Rico, the Taiwanese government and around 70 percent of the population consider the country as a separate political entity from mainland China. In the Puerto Rican case, the vast majority of the population (See Introduction for information about plebiscites.) considers the island a part of the United States and does not want political independence from this North American country.

The next section explains the Facebook website. A political economy analysis will be used to better understand how Puerto Rican WBC fans used this online social network to produce cultural nationalistic content and express their support for this international baseball tournament.

Facebook: A political economy analysis of its WBC fans

Facebook is an online social network that connects people throughout the world. This social website originally started at Harvard University. The medium had the purpose of connecting people that were part of the same social network (Harvard

University, in this case). Facebook rapidly spread into other colleges in the United States. The site was originally seen as a forum where college students could join their school's network, only if they possessed a valid dot-edu e-mail account from their academic institution (Tufekci 2008: 22). This online social network, which was launched in 2004, is now open to any person who has access to the Internet and possesses an e-mail address. People now do not need to be part of a university to join Facebook. Users can now join more than one network based on certain elements such as school affiliation, place of work, country of origin or residence, geographic region, towns, cities, among other potential criteria for online interaction.

This social website allows its members to connect to other people both within and outside their networks. Members can share pictures, status updates, messages and other personal information with friends and other members from their same network. Joining Facebook does not involve any type of monetary subscription. For this reason, people consider the website as one characterized by free membership (no monetary payment involved). Facebook, which claims to add 250,000 new members every day, was the sixth most trafficked website in the United States in 2008 (Cohen 2008: 6).

In her work, Nicole Cohen (2008) conducts a political economic analysis of the Facebook social network. She expresses that rather than being a "free" (no paid subscription) website for members, Facebook represents an example of "unpaid labor" where the site's users produce the content that would eventually be used by the network's administrators to attract advertisers and money. While discussing the content produced by Facebook users and how that information is used for commercial purposes, Cohen explains that

By uploading photos, posting links, and inputting detailed information about social and cultural tastes, producer-consumers provide content that is used to generate traffic, which is then leveraged into advertising sales. By providing a constant stream of content about the online activities and thoughts of people in one's social networks, Facebook taps into members' productivity through the act of surveillance. In this model, rather than employing workers to create content, Web 2.0 companies or large media firms that own them profit from the unpaid labour time that producer-consumers spend working on their online identities and keeping track of friends (Cohen 2008: 7).

Unlike classical political economy analyses of the mass media such as Horkheimer and Adorno of the Frankfurt School, who emphasized the suppression of audience expression, Cohen catalogues Facebook users as active producers of content. She recognizes how the sharing of information as well as the use of the site's applications can encourage the creativity of its members and often facilitate political action through communication produced by social movements and other interest groups (e.g. protests in Egypt against President Hosni Mubarak). Despite this potential for creation, individual creativity and collective political involvement, Facebook owns all its users' produced content and can use that information for their private lucrative purposes. They take away authorship rights like most media firms do. Cohen is aware of this website's characteristic when she expresses that

the deepening reliance on general intellect and free or immaterial labour for the purpose of capital accumulation does represent a move away from the more passive audience commodity, yet it also demonstrates the continuous march of capitalism into cyberspace under post-Fordist conditions. (Cohen 2008: 18)

These post-Fordist conditions are characterized by flexible economy models in which capital is transnational and does not depend on one sole location (See the work of Harvey 1990). Economic power is still concentrated in the hands of a few individuals and groups that can be geographically established at certain regions, but their influence is diffused globally. Cyberspace represents an instrument used by the ruling classes to reach and exploit consumers globally. As an online forum, Facebook constitutes an example of a flexible economy mode used by global capital to reach and profit from scattered consumers worldwide.

Facebook users also exercise “unpaid labor” through the belonging of groups or “fan pages” that advertise products, organizations or private corporations. Fan pages are considered part of the increasing number of applications provided by Facebook. The site started to create and offer these applications in 2004. Some of them directly advertise merchandise and private commercial interests. Singers, Hollywood artists, fast food chains, among other commercial interests are all represented on the Facebook fan page (also known as “I-like”) application. Sports franchises, leagues and tournaments have also their own online groups and forums available to their followers.

The World Baseball Classic also participates of this online application. In April 2009, its “fan page” (“I like” page today) had more than 30,000 members (www.facebook.com). Like other fan pages, the WBC group provides its members with updates and general information about this international sports contest. Fans also have the opportunity to write comments and post pictures related to the event and all its participating baseball national teams.

Puerto Rican followers of the island's national baseball team massively used Facebook as a forum of expression and information during the 2009 WBC event. People joined the WBC fan page; posted pictures from the first round (Pool D) held in San Juan, Puerto Rico and used their Facebook "status" application to express their support or concern regarding their team's performance. For Puerto Rican fans, the WBC was used to construct an identity and sense of belonging based on supporting and rooting for the team that was representing their country. Their identity was constructed by identifying both their national sports representation and those "other" teams that were playing for a different country.

From this online activity, it could be argued that Facebook provided a forum of expression for these WBC followers. People used this online social site to support a team, express pride for their nationality and maintain a sense of belonging that would differentiate them from other ethnic or national groups. However, these constructed nationalities during the baseball contest were possible because of the content and merchandise previously provided by the WBC and its producer, the U.S. American MLB organization. National teams' enthusiasts supported a team that through invitation, was made possible by the antitrust exempt MLB private American corporation. The performance of this cultural nationality was complemented by the display of all the merchandise sold by the WBC on their official webpage.

In the case of Puerto Rican baseball followers, their use of Facebook as a forum of expression and support for their national team was not necessarily a political statement. The expressions and content produced by Puerto Rican Facebook users did not represent a pro-independence or separatist discourse. Even the online celebrations

that followed the victory of Puerto Rico over team USA on the second round of the classic should not be interpreted as a desire for political independence from the United States. Most of the island's population does not support independence and wishes to continue having some type of formal political relationship with the United States of America.

As the Puerto Rican historian Carlos Pabón (2005) argues, these types of expressions made by the people of Puerto Rico represent a *light nationalism* characterized by the celebration and reproduction of a national identity that does not have the goal of changing or altering the political relationship with the United States. By not representing a menace to the U.S.-Puerto Rico political association, this light nationalism has been recognized for its commercial and marketable possibilities. Private entities, including transnational corporations from the United States have tried to appeal to this nationalism by integrating its symbols and different expressions into their products and campaigns as have most global corporations around the world. Sports leagues are among these private corporations that have capitalized by recognizing the economic viability of using this Puerto Rican light (commercialized) nationalism. The WBC webpage provided followers of the Puerto Rican team to express this "light" nationalism through the acquisition and display of merchandise reflecting the island's baseball national representation.

The use of Facebook by Puerto Rican fans was always centered on the expression of a light nationalism that promoted the WBC tournament, including its games and related merchandise. By expressing an identity and sense of belonging through an international baseball cup, these sports followers participated in a type of "unpaid labor"

for the WBC production and its public relations campaign. Besides giving free advertisement to the WBC by joining the Facebook fan page, fans also posted digital online pictures that were taken during the first round phase celebrated in San Juan. In addition to presenting images of these first round games, the Facebook pictures posted by online users showed Puerto Rican fans wearing some of the official WBC merchandise (see pictures #2 and #3). One of the pictures presents a woman with a temporary tattoo of “Best Buy”, a sponsor of the event and a transnational corporation at work in Puerto Rico.

The display of “nationalist oriented” merchandise (e.g. official hats from every national baseball team) provides an additional form of “unpaid labor” that these baseball fans made for the WBC production and its organizer, the American MLB organization. This “free” advertisement of official WBC t-shirts and caps was also seen on the televised camera shots that both ESPN and the MLB network provided from the stadiums’ fans section. A multimedia ethnographic analysis that would include forums such as the Internet and television should be studied in a future research about the WBC, international sports and commercial nationalism.



Picture #2: This picture was taken during the 2009 Pool's D WBC first round in San Juan, Puerto Rico. The woman on the left side of the picture is wearing an official Puerto Rico WBC cap and two temporary tattoos; one with the logo of a the Puerto Rican team advertiser (Best Buy), and another with the WBC logo (Source: www.facebook.com).



Picture #3: Puerto Rican baseball fans display their WBC and MLB official caps during a 2009 first round game (Source: www.facebook.com).

Political dimensions of this sports nationalism

The involvement of Puerto Rico in international sports events serves as an incentive for the discussion of the political status of the island and its place among both the United States of America and the community of Latin American nations. For many people, the existence of “sports sovereignty” is a form of international recognition that does require independence or any form of political sovereignty. Through its IOC membership, Puerto Rico is seen as a nation without surrendering its political relationship with the United States. Detractors of political independence argue that there is no need for separation from the North American country that holds plenary powers over the island. After all, Puerto Ricans can simultaneously “enjoy” the benefits (e.g. same minimum salary as in the United States) of being American citizens and still be recognized as a particular national group with its own flag, identity and sports representation.

The WBC case and its relationship to Facebook demonstrate how a massive popular support for Puerto Rico’s sports representations should not always be interpreted as an expression in favor of political independence. The ways in which Facebook and the Major League Baseball organization capitalized on the collective excitement brought by the Puerto Rico’s national team during the WBC, represented an example of using and transforming the island’s sports sovereignty into a commodity. The WBC case is not unique. In the past, American corporations such as Burger King and T-Mobile have been main sponsors of the Puerto Rican national basketball team. The team’s uniforms are fully decorated with the logos of these companies. Like the sports sovereignty that

“facilitates” their existence, these national representations have become forms of branded commodities that are extended through Facebook as a site of fandom, but not freedom.

Conclusions

Puerto Rican fans expressions and online activity during the WBC represents an example of how international and transnational sports contests are capable of shaping the global sports-fans consumer behavior (Sage 2000: 270). The content produced by the followers of Puerto Rico’s team consisted on a light nationalism that was already a part of the marketing strategies used by the WBC organizers. Their use of the Facebook website produced a specific content that could also be considered as a type of “unpaid labor.” The members from this online social website provided its administrators and the MLB organization with “free” advertisement for the WBC event and its official merchandise. This case study shows how an international contest was used to express “mimetic” nationalist emotions with no political agendas (Allison 2000: 351). The WBC sports tournament represented a “safety valve” from politics and the discussion of the political condition of the island of Puerto Rico. Despite all the nationalist sentiments, including those performed during Puerto Rico’s victory over the United States national baseball team (See Chapter 1), people on the island did not translate this support for their team into a desire to become independent and have an own national sovereign state.

Fans “paid” for their “free” Facebook subscription by developing a national identity and sense of belonging based on the promotion of ideas and merchandise previously provided by the WBC producers. The online social network was used as an

instrument for continuing the corporative tradition of transforming Puerto Rico's international sports representations into forms of commodities that respond to a branded and apolitical (sports) "sovereignty." The development of these apolitical light nationalism expressions will continue to provide content that can be easily commercialized by both the Facebook administration and the different private corporations (including the WBC) that advertise on this online social network site and all other media that do business in Puerto Rico and use the power of advertising. While people will continue to actively produce content for Facebook in the form of group identification, personal comments and digital pictures, the administrators of the website will keep using this information to attract potential advertisers and money sources. Contemporary online social networks such as Facebook and Twitter will continue to appropriate content for the purpose of profiting from selling target audiences to potential advertisers. These "active" audiences are constantly making and unconscious and "unpaid" type of "market research" with information that would eventually be facilitated (by the Facebook administrators) by private corporations and companies that advertise on this increasingly popular Internet medium. The branding of Puerto Rico's sports sovereignty is not the exception in this "neo-liberal" world where national symbols and identities are constantly transformed into mere commodities for consumption. Neo-liberalism both homogenizes global culture while tweaking their goods to enter foreign markets (e.g. McDonald's sells beer in Germany).

Chapter 4:

Puerto Rico Islanders: The Production of the “city-island” space

The preceding chapters presented cases that showed the connections between sports, politics, economy and ideologies. As previously discussed, sports and its related institutions are seen, experienced and used differently by every political group or movement in Puerto Rico. This chapter presents a case in which the idea and practice of sports sovereignty as the holder of the island’s monopoly over athletic national organizations is challenged by the existence of a professional soccer team. The “Puerto Rico Islanders” franchise represents the island, but is affiliated to the North American Soccer League (NASL), the second division circuit of professional soccer in the United States.

The Puerto Rico Islanders: Background

The Puerto Rico Islanders soccer team was founded in 2003. In 2004, the franchise debuted in the North American soccer circuit known as United Soccer Leagues (USL). The team’s official colors are orange and white and its main symbol is the Puerto Rican national flag. The new franchise chose the Juan Ramón Loubriel Stadium in the northern city of Bayamón to host its home games (Puerto Rico Islanders website – www.prislandersfc.com). Previously known just for the enormous success of its basketball team “Los Vaqueros” (The Cowboys), Bayamón also started to be known as the Puerto Rican city where the most popular sport in the world (soccer) was introduced to the rest of the island and its citizens.

The Islanders immediately generated curiosity among Puerto Rican sports followers. For the first time, the island had a professional soccer team. Unlike most of Latin America, the sport was not the most popular on the island. Basketball, baseball, volleyball and boxing were the most favored events by fans and sports media. The excitement that resulted from the creation of the Islanders motivated the pro-statehood Bayamón municipal government to start projects geared toward the promotion of soccer among kids and youngsters from the whole country. Soccer camps and festivals started to be celebrated every year in Bayamón. The organization of these educational and athletic events was in charge of both the city's government and the administration of the Islanders team.

The owner of the Islanders is Andrés Guillemard-Noble, a Puerto Rican attorney, who is also known for his support to the pro-statehood New Progressive Party (NPP). Guillemard-Noble is affiliated to the Democratic Party in the United States and was one of the coordinators of Barack Obama's campaign during the 2008 presidential primaries that were held in Puerto Rico.⁶ His political involvement with Puerto Rican pro-statehood political figures was present during the 2008 general elections on the island. For that electoral event, Guillemard-Noble was actively involved with his half-brother's (Pedro Pierluisi) political campaign for the "Resident Commissioner of Puerto Rico"⁷ position in the American federal congress.

⁶ The Democratic presidential primaries between Barrack Obama and Hillary Clinton included the non-incorporated territory of Puerto Rico as one of the places that participated in that political race. While Puerto Ricans cannot vote in presidential elections from the United States, the two principal American political parties (Democratic and Republican) have the faculty to decide if the territories can be part of primary political races.

⁷ In 2011 Puerto Rican Resident Commissioner in the American Congress is Pedro Pierluisi, a member of the NPP on the island and the Democratic Party in the United States. The Resident Commissioner is the official representative of the territory in the United States House of Representatives. He has voice in congress, but cannot vote.

In their short time of existence, the Islanders football club has been successful both in the USL tournament and internationally. In 2010, the team won the championship in the United States Soccer Federation (USSF) Division 2 tournament. The USSF Division 2 was a one-year league that was created during a time of dispute between the USL and the NASL. Two years before claiming that North American national title for Division 2 soccer, the Islanders were the runner-up team in the 2008 USL season. In 2010, the club finished as runner-up in the “Super Copa DirecTV” tournament organized by the Puerto Rico Soccer League (PRSL). This was the first time the Islanders were part of an event organized by the national football (soccer) federation of Puerto Rico.

The franchise’s success has also been recognized outside of the island and the North American continent. The Islanders have also participated in regional and continental tournaments hosted by the Confederation of North, Central America and Caribbean Football Association Football (CONCACAF) and the Caribbean Football Union (CFU)⁸. In 2010, the team won the CFU Club Championship title. After seven years of affiliation with the USL, the team abandoned that organization in 2010 and decided to join the NASL. The 2011 season represents the Islanders’ debut in an official NASL season.

Despite the Islanders participation in the PRSL-sponsored “2010 Super Copa DirecTV”, the team is not part of most tournaments organized by the Puerto Rican professional soccer league. As mentioned above, they are a franchise that represents the island in a league from North America (NASL). However, it is still affiliated to the

⁸ Despite being part of the NASL, the Islanders are still affiliated to the “Federación Puertorriqueña de Fútbol” (Puerto Rican Football Federation) and can represent the island at regional Caribbean tournaments.

“Federación Puertorriqueña de Fútbol” or Puerto Rican Football Federation (PRFF)⁹. The PRFF is the organization that administers soccer activity on the island. To gain legitimacy and recognition, every soccer organization, club or franchise that operates in Puerto Rico is required to be affiliated to the PRFF. The Islanders are no exception and their participation in the NASL cannot be above the fact that they are still located in Bayamón, PR.

As a member of the Puerto Rican Olympic Committee (PROC), the PRFF is considered to be an institution that is legitimated through the island’s sports sovereignty. Since the PROC claims monopoly over the island’s administrations of sports, the PRFF, an affiliated member of the national Olympic committee, is expected to protect and control the sports sovereignty for soccer events and organizations.¹⁰ This delegated faculty gives the PRFF, the power to demand affiliation from all soccer teams, leagues and clubs that operate in Puerto Rico.

For the Puerto Rico Islanders, their federative affiliation is double. They play in a league (NASL) that is one of the official Division 2 circuits of the USSF. For this reason, they always represent the American federation in every NASL game. However, their geographic location in Puerto Rico requires them to also belong to the PRFF. This second affiliation enables the team to represent Puerto Rico in CFU club tournaments.

⁹ Not all countries and parts of the world use the term soccer to describe that sport. Football is the term employed in most countries, including Puerto Rico. The United States uses the word “soccer” in order to differentiate this practice from the popular sport known as “American Football” (i.e. NFL football).

¹⁰ In an interview that sports journalist Pablo Maldonado made with former President of the Puerto Rican Basketball Federation, Jenaro Marchand, the “rule of national sports exclusivity” was explained. Marchand comments on the requirement that was made to all Puerto Rican sports federations in the 1950s. Before that decade, some sports federations from the island were affiliated to organizations from the United States. The formation of the PROC demanded that all sports federations from Puerto Rico became affiliated to only the national Olympic committee from the island (Interview to Jenaro Marchand – *Primera Hora*: March 19, 2011).

Therefore, the Islanders can simultaneously represent the United States in CONCACAF events, but also their island of geographic location during CFU contests.

The city-island: A new (ideological) project of urbanism

To understand the Islanders phenomenon, it is important to be familiarized with the “city-island” concept promoted by a former governor of Puerto Rico during his incumbency in the 1990s decade. Dr. Pedro Rosselló González was the governor of Puerto Rico from 1993 until 2000. He was elected for two consecutive four-year terms.¹¹ Rosselló González is a member of the pro-statehood NPP. His political affiliation in the United States is with the Democratic Party.

As governor, Rosselló González’s public policy included a strong agenda that revolved around the development of urban projects on most of the island. One of the trademark projects of his administration was the development of an urban train that connected the metropolitan cities of San Juan, Guaynabo and Bayamón¹². Rosselló González’s personal philosophy about the territory that he governed was based on the idea that Puerto Rico was a city-island instead of a mere island. While he tried to defend his position, the former governor never provided any academic theoretical approach to sustain his position. References to the fields of planning, urban geography and planning were never made by this NPP political figure.

¹¹ Rosselló González won the 1992 and 1996 general elections in Puerto Rico.

¹² Puerto Rico’s urban train started was started during Pedro Rosselló’s administration. However, the project was finished and began operating in December 2004 during Sila Calderón’s political administration.

No urban or planning project in Puerto Rico was emblematic enough to justify the classification of the territory under the “city-island” label. Interestingly, the foundation of a sports franchise started to give some degree of coherence and concrete validity to the idea of the city-island. Like former governor Rosselló González, one of the founders and current owner of the Puerto Rico Islanders is a member and monetary collector for both the NPP and the American Democratic Party. As mentioned above, the team was created with the purpose of joining an American national professional league. Thus, the Islanders became the first and only Puerto Rican sports franchise to be active in an American professional athletic organization.

First as part of the USL, and now as member of the NASL, the Islanders compete under equal terms with franchises from different North American (United States and Canadian) cities. This Caribbean team represents Puerto Rico, uses its flag and name, but is not the island’s representative in international contests that feature national contingents from different countries. For this reason, we need to differentiate between the two distinct ways of representing Puerto Rico in the sport of soccer. First, we have the island’s national team. This is the only group recognized by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the PROC with the authority to play for the island in contests in which whole nations (and not just cities or regions) are represented. For this national team, only players who were born or naturalized in Puerto Rico are admitted as members. In some cases, athletes who were born and raised outside of the island, but have Puerto Rican ancestry (i.e. parents or grandparents), can also be eligible to represent this Caribbean nation.

The dynamics of the national soccer team contrast with those of the other representative of Puerto Rico: the Islanders. As members of a professional league, the team management is free to hire players from any part of the world.¹³ Thus, they are not limited to any particular “nationality rule” regarding the hiring of athletes. This characteristic makes the NASL an open league in terms of the precedence or place of origin of each team’s players. The fact that men from diverse nationalities can join this soccer club disqualifies the Islanders from becoming Puerto Rico’s international representation as recognized and sanctioned by both the IOC and PROC. However, it is important to point out that both “representatives” of the island use the name of “Puerto Rico”, display the same flag and start every game with the ritual of listening to the country’s national anthem.

This particular case presents some serious challenges for those who use the idea of sports sovereignty as a site of resistance against cultural assimilation and complete political integration with the United States. The Puerto Rico Islanders ended the island’s Olympic Committee and national teams’ monopoly over the use of the flag and other national symbols for sports events. In this sense, the Islanders should be seen as everyone’s hometown team for the “city-island” of Puerto Rico. This case speaks to the ability of some to transform the island’s sports sovereignty into an entertainment commodity that is not incompatible with the ideas of those who advocate for the territory’s complete political integration to the North American country of the United States of America. In other words, visualizing the sports sovereignty as a pro-independence instrument becomes problematic when a professional soccer franchise with

¹³ According to the Islanders official webpage, the 2011 edition of the team has players from the United States, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Trinidad and Tobago, Costa Rica and England (www.prislandersfc.com).

mostly foreign players and that is part of a North American professional league sells the idea of a sports national pride that does not promote Puerto Rico as a nation, but as a mere region (or city-island) for the establishment of a team.

Through a specific sports franchise, the island's flag can potentially be identified as the main symbol of just another member of the American Union and not as representative of a Latin American nation. In this sense, the management of the Puerto Rico Islanders has been able to depoliticize the country's national symbols and their potential of instruments of cultural assimilation and complete political integration to the United States of America. Despite the requirement that demands this NASL team be affiliated to the PRFF, the Islanders and its pro-statehood administrators prioritize their belonging to a North American soccer circuit and the characterization of the franchise as the "hometown" representative of the city-island (and not the nation) of Puerto Rico. The Islanders' compliance with the island's sports sovereignty through the team's affiliation to the PRFF is used in this case as an instrument that "authorizes" and gives legitimacy to a group of NPP sympathizers to use Puerto Rico's (sports) soil to advance a pro-American ideological political agenda. Sports nationality is substituted by a sports regionalism not different from those hometown teams that are part of any major professional league in the United States (e.g. NBA, MLB, NFL, NHL and MLS).

The production of a "new" (corporate) sports space

If the development of Puerto Rico's "city-island" was not accomplished through any urban "development" sponsored by pro-statehood former governor Pedro Rosselló

González, the Islanders soccer team can certainly claim some degree of success in the production of this ideological and economic space. Through the “conquering” of different public spaces around the whole territory of Puerto Rico, the franchise has become a hometown team for the whole (city) island. As already expressed, the Islanders use the Juan Ramón Loubriel Stadium in Bayamón as their official place for home games. The northern city of Bayamón is located west of the capital (San Juan). Having the small town of Cataño to its north makes Bayamón a non-coastal city.

However, and despite its location in Bayamón, the Islanders’ presence (and marketing) has “conquered” other spaces in other towns and cities from the island. For example, a franchise of the American restaurant chain Chili’s located in the northern town of Barceloneta featured a neon sign of the Puerto Rico Islanders in the bar area of the place. There are more than 90 kilometers of distance between Barceloneta and Bayamón. Similarly, an outdoor sidewalk advertisement was found in the northern coastal city of Aguadilla (more than 170 kilometers west of Bayamón). For this case, the outdoor advertisement was a visual representation financed by Puerto Rico’s national beer: “Medalla.” The picture featured a player from the Islanders and the Medalla logo. This beer is one of the official sponsors of the team; its name and logo are featured on the team’s official jersey (See picture #4).

These sports marketing dynamics are not different from those teams that represent cities or universities in the United States. For instance, the support received by the Baltimore Orioles professional baseball club goes beyond the political borders of the city that has the stadium where this franchise plays. More than 40 miles north of Baltimore, the small town of Manchester, Maryland presents a landscape with bars, stores and

houses that display memorabilia from the popular Orioles baseball team. These spatial representations of sports are not limited to professional teams. College sports also represent whole regions that transcend the cities or small towns in which the main campuses are located. For that reason, it is not uncommon that big universities with strong athletic programs have the capacity to construct big fan bases that even include people who do not have any type of relationship with the institution. For example, the Penn State Nittany Lions have one of the most popular college football programs in the United States. Penn State's main campus is located in a small town of central Pennsylvania named State College. More than 40 miles southwest of State College, the city of Altoona has stores, houses and gas stations with Nittany Lions souvenirs. Altoona not only is part of that sports region that support Penn State's college teams, but also is the site for one the smaller campuses that are part of this higher education institution.

The construction of these regional and city sports landscapes through marketing and visual merchandise should not be seen as a phenomenon that is isolated from other expressions that characterize contemporary capitalist practices. In his work, the Marxist cultural geographer Don Mitchell (2000) argues that capitalism is in a constant process of conquering space through the development of (visual) representations that associate products and companies with specific images. In this sense, space is "spectacularized" with the display and bombardment of images from commercial entities. The forces of capitalism (i.e. corporations and other powerful commercial entities) are responsible for producing space. In his influential work, *The Production of Space* (1991), Lefebvre discussed the idea of representational space. He defined it as the idea of

space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’, but also of some artists and perhaps of those, such as a few writers and philosophers, who *describe* and aspire to do no more than describe. This is the dominated – and hence passively experienced – which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects. Thus representational spaces may be said, though again with certain exceptions, to tend towards more or less coherent systems of non-verbal symbols and signs. (39)

If space is directly lived (and produced) through its associated images and symbols, Puerto Rico’s transition from a country into a city-island has been possible through the ways and strategies that have been used by a commercial team to conquer the sports territory of the island. Sports capital has shaped the landscape of a whole territory that is claimed by a local franchise from an American professional league. The production of such a (sports) space also needs the creation of a “profitable labor force, and then organizing an audience – a market – for the images and representations it wants to sell” (Mitchell 2000: 88). For the Islanders case, that audience will be created through marketing campaigns that will present the team as representatives of Puerto Rico and its flag. The development of advertisement and commercial representation on the island’s space will seek to ultimately conquer those who inhabit that space: the audiences or potential fans that will be part of the Islanders’ fan base. These audiences represent the team’s target market.

The reasons that these audiences have for supporting the Puerto Rico Islanders can be diverse and should not be seen as uniform among all the individuals and families who attend the games in Bayamón. While some of them do it as a result of their love for soccer and sports in general, others decide to support the team for reasons (e.g. political, economical and ideological) that transcend the mere desire to be enjoy the athletic

experience of sports. A group of fans can participate in a “hegemonic” “reading” of the franchise and embrace the idea that the Puerto Rico Islanders are valuable to the island because they represent the first sports franchise to be part of a professional league from the United States. Such a (hegemonic) reading visualizes Puerto Rico as an equal in comparison to the fifty states of the American Union, and therefore, it is compatible with the political agenda that promotes the island’s full political integration into the United States. A more “counter-hegemonic” reading of the team is also possible. Soccer fans who advocate for political sovereignty can interpret the use and display of the Puerto Rican flag as an expression of a nation that is different from (and not a member of) the United States. Along these lines, the fact that the Islanders have participated in regional club tournaments (i.e. CFU and CONCACAF) makes them representatives of Puerto Rican national sports.

In terms of content and interpretations of symbols, these diversity of “readings” that result from how fans are related to the Islanders team, can work as an argument to classify and identify sports followers as an example of active audiences. People from different social, economic and ideological backgrounds can construct diverse meanings regarding the possible way or ways for the team to “represent” Puerto Rico. However, and despite this “liberty” to interpret or consume the Islanders experience, audiences still lack the power to subvert the fact that this professional team is a commercial entity that participates in the development of contemporary practices characteristic of corporate sports. Following and supporting the team will not stop the organization’s role as an instrument that is aiding capitalism to conquer and produce space. The Puerto Rico Islanders is a sports organization seeking profits. Sports are one of many cultural

expressions that societies have to offer. As a commodity, culture is an instrument for the reproduction of (economic) power. When analyzing the role of culture in society, Don Mitchell (2000) expresses that it

works in through social relations of production and reproduction (including consumption). We can see who performs the ideological work of reifying culture at any given moment, in any given place, and we can see who those reifications benefit. We can see how audiences (for products, for resistance) are organized and activated... In doing so, we will see that geography – spatiality, the production of spaces and places, and the global doings of the economy – is front and center in the processes of cultural production, and hence in systems of social reproduction. (88)

Our “hometown” has been assimilated (concluding remarks)

Beyond the idea of identifying the Islanders as the spatial “architects” of a Puerto Rico based on the “island-city” idea, their impact on the territory has been vital for the reproduction of corporate sports practices similar to the ones embraced by professional leagues in the United States. Without denying the importance and significance of using this soccer franchise to advance the political cause of statehood, the immediate result was the insertion of Puerto Rico into the powerful national sports market from the United States. The NASL, an affiliated of the USSF, saw the inclusion of the Islanders in its tournament as an opportunity to expand its market to the Caribbean and target the passionate and active Puerto Rican sports fans.

The city-island space produced through the development of campaigns that promoted a professional soccer team gave a message that equaled political integration (statehood) to full economic integration into the United States (sports) market, along with the corporate practices performed during athletic events in this North American country.

The success of the Islanders experience tried to show the territory of Puerto Rico as willing to accept full admission into the American Union and being prepared to be treated as “equal” in comparison to the fifty members of the United States. Space continues to play a key role in the development of these political, ideological and economic agendas. Representational spaces are constantly being produced by a corporate sports organization with intentions of resembling those cities, towns and regions in the United States that host teams or have fan bases for a professional sports franchise. Capitalism conquers space through the spreading of marketing and visual representations allusive to a commercial sports organization like the Puerto Rico Islanders. The ecologically diverse island of Puerto Rico was economically homogenized through the different promotional campaigns organized by the Islanders administration. From Bayamón in the north, to Aguadilla in the northeast and Ponce in the south, a new space was produced; the city-island was created and the Islanders became “everyone’s” hometown soccer team.



Picture #4: Puerto Rico Islanders captain Nicholas Addlery celebrates after scoring a goal during a 2011 NASL match against the Montreal Impact. That night, the orange shirt was substituted for a branded yellow jersey that promoted the local beer “Medalla” (Source: www.prislandersfc.com).

Conclusions

(Re)Conquering the island: The strengthening of a corporate sports sovereignty

The German political philosopher Max Weber defined sovereignty as the power of the state to have full control over a territory and the design of its laws. Those two important faculties give a political entity the capacity to have the final word regarding every decision that involves the administration of the territory and the social relationships among its citizens and inhabitants. Based on this Modern political framework and on all the judicial decisions referenced in the introductory sections of this work, Puerto Rico's political condition does not even come close to the internationally shared understandings about what constitutes a sovereign country. The island's local government does not have control over a territory that is subject to the power that emanates from the United States federal congress. This political condition also enables the governing state (The Republic of the United States of America) to contest and invalidate all Puerto Rican laws. All judicial decisions on the island can be appealed on any American federal court. Colonialism persists in Puerto Rico.

The term "sovereignty" is semantically charged with political will and the power to decide. Applying the term to the ability of a country to have its own international sports representation constitutes a historical flaw that negates diverse forms of political relationships and the ways in which those same institutional associations are capable of resisting politico-economic imperialism in some instances. The four cases discussed in this work demonstrate how the proclaimed sports "sovereignty" in Puerto Rico has facilitated the strengthening of U.S. political dominance and corporate economic control over the island. A sports "sovereignty" that lacks political power continually participates

in the development of a more powerful “sports corporate sovereignty” responsible for increasing the U.S. American economic control in Puerto Rico.

The integration of the island into the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 1948 has not brought any progress toward the development of a legitimate process of decolonization and economic self-sustenance for Puerto Rico. As shown in the last political plebiscite organized on the island in 1998 (See Introduction), the two pro-sovereign options combined (i.e. independence and free association) did not obtain more than 3% from the voters. The territory remains a non-incorporated territory of the United States subject to the political will of Congress. The insular judicial cases decided by the U.S. Supreme Court between the end of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth century remain current when legal experts attempt to define the political relationship between the island and the metropolis.

Powerful U.S. media corporations such as Comcast (NBC-Universal) continue to “conquer” and increase its influence on the island’s mass communications systems. Sports have been instrumental as both an economic enabler and an ideological apparatus that have facilitated the increased domination of these companies in Puerto Rico and over its audiences. The symbolic sports “sovereignty” did not stop U.S. media and U.S. Olympic interests from having the exclusive television coverage of the 2004 Summer Olympic Games (See Chapter 1). On the contrary, for those international summer games, NBC-Universal took advantage of not only the political relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico, but also capitalized on the Puerto Rican taste and strong culturally nationalist support toward all of their athletes and Olympic representations. The island’s sports sovereignty was unable to exercise its “power” to stop a North

American media mogul from taking over the television broadcast of the Puerto Rican athletes' participation in the games. The U.S. Congress controlled political sovereignty prevailed over the Puerto Rican Olympic Committee (PROC) previously exercised power to get exclusive coverage rights of Olympic contests that involved national athletes from the island.

NBC-Universal, then owned by General Electric, one of the world's largest corporate conglomerates, also had the exclusive television coverage for the U.S. and its colonies (e.g. Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin islands) of the 2008 Olympic Summer Games in Beijing, China. Whichever big media corporation with broadcast functions in the United States (e.g. NBC-Universal, Disney, Viacom and News Corporation) gets exclusive coverage of the 2012 Summer Games from London, UK, can also claim to become the only mass media transmitter of Puerto Rican athletes. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) scope over the island is plenary (and truly sovereign) and more powerful than any symbolic sports sovereign "power" that emanates from the PROC. U.S. Federal agencies like the FCC have the institutional political power to prevail over the agenda of non-governmental organizations from the island such as the PROC. The principle that gives the United States constitution a role as the "supreme law of the land" is extended to its colonies or non-incorporated territories abroad. In mass media business issues, the FCC has fully applied this principle to extend its pro-corporate and deregulatory public policy to colonial jurisdictions like Puerto Rico.

This corporate media power is not limited to broadcast television companies such as NBC and its Telemundo affiliate in Puerto Rico. As the third chapter demonstrated, online communications media have also been active in this mass communications

corporative colonialism on the island. Online social networks such as Facebook has benefited from those users who support Puerto Rican national teams and sports in general. Once again, the territory's sports sovereignty has been successfully capitalized by a corporation like Facebook that benefitted from all the "unpaid labor" and free advertisement done by fans during a major scale athletic event such as Major League Baseball's "World Baseball Classic" (WBC). The possibility of extending the corporate television media colonialism to online communications is a result of the different strategies in which contemporary capitalism works. More economically flexible ways are employed to perpetuate and reproduce borderless and less evident forms of capital, along with processes that bring spatial economic inequalities.

As expressed before, the use of the term "sovereignty" to define a nation's Olympic participation could be problematic and deceiving. What some pro-independence activists and sports analysts like Fufi Santori see as a way of giving more "political symbolic capital" to Puerto Rican nationality and a sense of cultural difference (and cultural resistance) from the United States, ends up being an instrument of complicity in the process of increasing the economic and corporate (sports) media domination of the United States over the Caribbean territory of Puerto Rico. All recent activities of U.S. corporate media moguls in Puerto Rican Olympic coverage constitute a progressive strengthening of North American presence on the island and an upsurge of both political colonialism and economic imperialism. Media imperialism has increased in power, while progressive grassroots movements and decolonizing political mobilization keep deteriorating and moving backward in the territory of Puerto Rico. As sports cultural nationalism becomes more marketable and increasingly used as a

commodity, the U.S. economic domination has become more influential on the island at the beginning of the second decade of the twenty first century.

While sports sovereignty continues to be romanticized by many pro-independence activists, who catalogue it as a symbol of reaffirmation of Puerto Rican national resistance against U.S. colonialism, the different ways Olympic athletes and teams are marketed represent a proven successful source of revenue for corporate capital and media moguls. Sports sovereignty and its economic consequences continue to transform Puerto Rican cultural nationalism into a comfort zone that does not represent a threat to political colonialism and prevent progressive socio-economic change and resistance. Olympic sports are now part of the problem and political issue in Puerto Rico. The island's sports sovereignty has become a reactionary performance for the enjoyment of audiences, and more importantly, for the benefit of corporate capital that does business in this Caribbean territory.

Despite the claims made by defenders of the PROC, who argue that sports sovereignty allowed the island's national athletic representations to defy President Jimmy Carter's Olympic boycott in 1980, we cannot measure its true "power" based on an isolated event that only had a symbolic political relevance rather than a concrete compromising juridical force. If desired by the United States federal government, it could have legally prohibited all the American citizens of Puerto Rico from entering the Soviet Union and participating in the 1980 Summer Olympic Games in Moscow. That sovereign U.S. federal control over the movement of people into and outside of Puerto Rico was confirmed with the Cuban controversy in the 2011 Central American and Caribbean Games held in Mayagüez. The fact that no legal challenge took place as the

PROC challenged Carter's Olympic boycott speaks to the minimal relevance that the island's participation in Moscow had in both political and legal terms. While the PROC challenge to Carter is still remembered as a symbolic act of courage, the political consequences for the United States-Puerto Rico relationship was null. Such symbolical challenge belonged to a series of identity performances that attempted to mock authority without subverting the political and economic structures that were the legitimate sources of societal power. The precedents of that specific Olympic "disobedience" to President Carter were set less than a year before when Puerto Rican sports fans used an international athletic stage (1979 Pan American Games discussed in Chapter 2) to express their rejection toward U.S. American intervention on the island's sports and its athletes (i.e. Jesse Vassallo), but within a comfort zone that did not challenge political colonialism and interventionism.

Even the celebrated "David Ponce Case" mentioned in the introduction represented a victory for the PROC only after the U.S. Federal Second Circuit of Appeals in Boston ruled in favor of the institution that administers the proclaimed sports sovereignty on the island. The "victory" was pyrrhic for pro-independence supporters of sports. In this case, a U.S. federal court had the last word and revoked a decision from a territorial U.S. federal Puerto Rican lower court. Thus, the preservation of (sports) "sovereignty" resulted from the full exercise of political sovereign powers that an outside entity has over an overseas territory. As counterintuitive as it may sound, political colonialism was key in the preservation of a cultural nationalist instrument such as sports sovereignty. The outcome of the case constituted again a pyrrhic victory that favored

sports-based cultural resistance and identity politics, but was more reactionary than progressive for political change and decolonization.

These cases demonstrate how identity politics could have results that are completely different from their intended purposes. Any revolutionary connotation given to the use sports nationalism as a form of resistance against a cultural assimilation that is not isolated from political colonialism could potentially end up becoming reactionary when it is used as a tool for the strengthening of corporate media power and imperialism. Due to its centric geographic position, its political relationship with the United States and its cultural “proximity” to Latin America, Puerto Rico continues to increase its value as an economic bridge between two American (North and South) continents. The island is also a corporate mass media lab for powerful U.S. communications moguls that are constantly seeking for ways to expand their power and influence with Hispanic audiences in North America and different Latin American markets in Central, South America and the Caribbean. Media coverage and involvement with Olympic sports events and Puerto Rican national teams have facilitated the entrance and economic “conquering” of the island by powerful mass communications companies from the United States.

If Puerto Rico’s sports sovereignty ever had any political possibilities to resist colonialism and advance a process of national self-determination for its citizens, the contemporary economic and corporate dynamics that revolve around the marketability of insular Olympic representations are bringing completely opposite results to such a transcendental goal. For economic forces and powerful mass media corporations, seeing Puerto Rico as just another market within U.S. jurisdiction has an impact on different cultural constructions, including sports “nationalism.” As demonstrated by the Puerto

Rico Islanders experience (See Chapter 4), the marketability and consumption of sports on the island can be completely exempt from political connotations and instead revolve around a pure commercial significance that could be applied to national symbols such the flag. The Islanders soccer experience clearly shows how the exclusive interpretation of international sports as an act of cultural resistance that opens the possibility for a nation to keep pondering its political sovereignty and decolonization is not an accurate and current narrative anymore.

A continuous process that trivializes the decolonizing political possibilities of sports in Puerto Rico dominates the dynamics among the representations of athletes, the role of media corporations, as well as the participation of fans and consumer audiences on the island. The replication of U.S. commercial media corporate practices has been a key component in the construction of a Puerto Rican market niche not different from other sports cities, towns or regions in any of the fifty states of the United States of America. The way corporate sports media continue to “re-conquer” the U.S. colony of Puerto Rico and its consumer or fans demonstrates how contemporary understandings and performances of the island’s sports sovereignty are increasingly facilitating an economic, ideological, political and cultural rapprochement to the United States and its power institutions. Economic and cultural assimilation of the colony to the metropolis are now closer than ever.

These dynamics work in favor of those who support statehood or complete political integration of the territory to the United States Federal Union of fifty member states. The significant influence of corporate media business (e.g. Comcast and Facebook) on the island’s sports followers and the success of the Puerto Rico Islanders

experiment speak to the viability of continuing a performance of nationalist pride without questioning or affecting the comfort zone represented by the current U.S.-P.R. political relationship. In the twenty first century, independence is a much more difficult political project within the production of what could be classified as a type of colonial and imperial sports national representation. As applied to international sports, the term sovereignty is full of flaws and is problematic when employed to describe these athletic dynamics. While some analysts argue that “sports nationality” is a more accurate term to describe the representations that Puerto Rico has in Olympic sports, I will argue that “corporate sports sovereignty” would also be an appropriate construct for these socio-political and economic relations. Since Max Weber defined political sovereignty as the power to control a territory and determine its laws, corporate sports sovereignty can also become a framework for the explanation and understanding of the economic control that mass media corporations legally aided by Congress and governmental agencies (e.g. FCC) have over the sports city-island of Puerto Rico and its political institutions.

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Breaking News! (Postscript)

J. J. Barea: A “messiah” for a hurt Puerto Rico

Wednesday, June 22, 2011

By Rafael R. Díaz-Torres

Special to Penn State’s College of Communications

At the closing of this edition, Puerto Rican sports media was being monopolized by the coverage of José Juan Barea and his 2011 NBA championship with the Dallas Mavericks. Barea became the second Puerto Rican to win an NBA title ring and the first one from all players who were developed in youth basketball programs from the island.

While his team was being awarded with the championship trophy by NBA commissioner David Stern, J.J. Barea displayed a big Puerto Rican flag on the court of the American Airlines Arena in Miami, Florida. The picture of the player holding the trophy while being covered by his country’s flag made cover pages in all the main newspaper from the island.

Barea arrived in Puerto Rico via American Airlines, the same corporation that sponsored the two arenas that hosted the respective home games for the Dallas Mavericks and Miami Heat during the 2011 NBA Finals.

Thousands of Puerto Ricans are now celebrating his arrival to the island. A big parade and party are being hosted in front of the Puerto Rican Olympic Committee (PROC).

A festive environment in San Juan features people with national flags and performances from some of the top tropical music bands in the Caribbean.

The sports press from the island describes the moment as a necessary parenthesis within all the rampant social problems in the country. For them, Barea is the balsam that renovates the spirit of a hurt Puerto Rico.

José Juan has become the new national hero. Corporations such as T-mobile and Gillette have hired him as spokesperson for their media ad campaigns.

Even President Barrack Obama challenged him to play some basketball hoops. Obama’s sport announcement took place last week in front of an enthusiast crowd that gathered to celebrate his four-hour visit to Puerto Rico.

Barea is the man of the hour because he won a title in the best basketball league in the world. He is a “World Champ!” God bless the NBA and its sponsors.

Meanwhile, the Puerto Rican Superior Basketball League (PRSBL) will start its playoffs series this upcoming weekend. Is the PRSBL still relevant for the sports city-island of Puerto Rico? Probably, as long as the sports sovereignty continues to be a marketable commodity for companies and other power sectors both inside and outside of one of the oldest colonies in the world.



Picture #5: José Juan Barea holds the 2011 NBA championship trophy. The Dallas Mavericks point-guard also displays the Puerto Rican flag during the celebration (Source: <http://twitter.com/#!/JJBAREAPR>).