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Breaking Bad: The Booing of Adam Goodes and the politics of the black sports celebrity in Australia

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Introduction

It’s a Friday night at the Melbourne Cricket Ground, one of the world’s premier sporting stadiums. It’s May 24, 2013 to be precise, and the football game in progress marks the beginning of the Australian Football League’s ‘indigenous round.’ This annual event recognises and celebrates Aboriginal players and their culture. It’s late in the fourth quarter, and the result of the game is beyond dispute. After a thirteen-year drought, the Sydney Swans will finally defeat the Collingwood football club. However, the game will not be remembered for this historic footnote, for as the players go through the motions of contesting the final minutes of a one-sided game something happens that exposes a deep, divisive fissure within Australian society.

Adam Goodes, one of the League’s most decorated indigenous footballers, perfunctorily kicks the ball out of bounds, as his opponent closes in behind him. It is clear that the ‘sting’ has gone out of this game. Then, suddenly, Goodes turns around and points to someone in the crowd. He summons nearby security officers as he continues to point and gesticulate. It transpires that Goodes has identified a heckler who called him an ‘Ape.’ The perpetrator of this act is a 13-year-old girl clad in Collingwood paraphernalia. The epithet ‘Ape’ is often used as a racist taunt against black players in Europe’s football (soccer) leagues, and Goodes is in no doubt about the word’s racist connotations. Security guards evict the girl from the stadium. The police subsequently question her about the incident. The officials of the Australian Football League (AFL) go into damage
control. In the immediate aftermath of the incident, the president of the Collingwood Football Club, Eddie McGuire, goes into the Sydney Swans room, seeks out Goodes, and profusely apologises for the incident. The Collingwood coach, Nathan Buckley, also apologises and expresses disgust at the vilification of Goodes at his post-game press conference, stating that the club will support Goodes and ‘do anything we need to do to further improve the attitudes in society. Footy reflects society, and this is a situation that highlights that’ (Buckley 2013). Several prominent AFL plays watching the game on TV tweet their support for Goodes, and affirm their stand against racism. A few days later, Andrew Demetriou, the then CEO of the AFL writes an article supporting Goodes’ stand against racism:

Football has gained so much more from indigenous Australia than these players and their communities have gained from football. It is for this reason that Goodes’ actions at the MCG were courageous and timely. Vilification, in any form, is simply an act of bullying (Demetriou, 2013).

It is important to recognise that the AFL has been determined to stamp out racism within the game over the last 20 years or so. Indeed, Judd and Butcher point out that

The AFL is widely celebrated in non-Aboriginal media as a leading civil institution that has been at the forefront of Aboriginal reconciliation for the past two decades. Since moving to ban on-field racial vilification via
the formal legal mechanism of AFL Rule 30, the AFL has done much to accommodate Aboriginal people within the Australian game (2016, p 61).

The actions of Goodes’ fellow players and the official AFL response contrast markedly to the response of Australia’s conservative commentariat who deride Goodes for having ‘picked on’ a defenceless, young girl. Andrew Bolt, arguably Australia’s most vocal conservative journalist blamed the incident on the AFL’s decision to implement a ‘politically correct’ indigenous round,¹ and drew attention to the power disparity between the celebrity sportsman and the 13-year girl responsible for the offending utterance:

It encouraged commentators to see in the 13-year-old the archetypal white racist rather than a scared and sorry girl who'd been naughty but now needed her mum. It similarly encouraged them to see in Goodes the black victim, rather than a 34-year-old sports star taking outsised offence at the rudeness of a girl. (2013)

Bolt’s comments resonated with a large proportion of the general population who express their disgust at Goodes on social media and the Internet. As the responses to this event circulate through old and new media, the nation can almost feel the great Australian fault line of Race rend the country apart.

¹ Since 2007, the Australian football league has nominated round 9 of the home and away competition as ‘indigenous’ round. The fixtures for this week celebrate the achievements of the game’s Aboriginal stars.
Goodes is loudly booed at subsequent games by an alarmingly large number of football fans — he literally becomes the *bête noire* of the AFL, and acquires a reputation as one of the country's most notoriously contentious sporting celebrities. The ‘Ape’ incident marks the beginning of a saga that sees Goodes’ public image transformed into a variety of contradictory personas: some see him as an admirable social justice warrior, while others condemn him as a ‘cry baby’ bully responsible for publicly humiliating a young girl; he is also seen as an *agent provocateur* determined to politicise AFL football. In 2014, the then conservative Prime minister of Australia, Tony Abbott, announces that Goodes will be the Australian of the year. This decision attracts even more controversy, and in the 2015 indigenous round, Goodes, after scoring a goal, performs an indigenous war dance directed at the opposition crowd, which further fans the flames of intolerance and bigotry. So, who is Adam Goodes, and what can the ‘booing’ controversy tell us about race relations in contemporary Australia?

This paper is primarily about the political significance of Goodes’ status as a black sporting celebrity in Australia. It will identify the specific discourses that frame the controversies generated by the incident described above and analyse the arguments used to defend and denigrate Goodes. These operations will enable us to understand the cultural and ideological work performed by the various polemics generated by the racial vilification of Goodes. The paper will be divided into two sections. The first will examine the unique status of the sports celebrity with respect to race, and the second will interrogate the discourses mobilised by the primary stakeholders in the ‘Ape’ controversy in order to better apprehend the racial fault line in Australian society.
Race and the Sports Celebrity

David Giles argues that sport is ‘one of the few areas of public life that is truly meritocratic’ since sporting celebrities ‘can prove they are the best’ (2000, p. 107). Adam Goodes is demonstrably one of the best AFL footballers of his generation. He is the recipient of several prestigious awards, including two AFL premierships (roughly equivalent to a combination of the English Premier League Title and the FA Cup), two Brownlow Medals for the best and fairest individual player in the league in 2003 and 2006. He was named as a member of the All-Australian team four times, represented Australia in the International Rules Series in Ireland, and was a member of the Indigenous Team of the Century. In addition, he holds the record for having played the most games for an Aboriginal player—Goodes played 372 games between 1999 and 2015. In addition to his accomplishments on the field, Goodes is also known as a community activist, and former Prime Minister Tony Abbot cited Goodes’ work with various anti-racism organisations and Aboriginal youth as prominent factors in Goodes’ being named Australian of the year in 2014 (the year after he was first booed by football crowds). The salient point here is that Goodes is known for his athletic prowess as well as his political activism, and it is the latter activity, as we shall see, that is largely responsible for his reputation as a provocative sporting celebrity.

In his seminal work, Celebrity and Power, P. David Marshall argues that celebrity culture is not homogeneous since different discourses are mobilised to revere different kinds of celebrities. So, while the discourse of individuality plays a crucial role in the veneration of a movie star other discourses are more germane to the consolidation of the sports celebrity (1997, p. 20). Indeed, the
Sports celebrity is unique in several ways. Graeme Turner provides a cogent summary of these distinctions:

Unlike their counterparts in the entertainment industries, the sports star (particularly the male sports star) is asked to personify what signifies as the heroic in this society at this time. Their efforts to meet this request help to satisfy the media’s thirst for scrutinising the spectacle of the performance of celebrity. Focusing overwhelmingly on how men should behave, sports celebrity plays its part in facilitating what McGuigan described earlier as the ‘popular deliberation on the conduct of life’ (2013, p. 118).

The crucial question in the context of this paper is how should the black sports celebrity behave? I will defer responding to this question until I have provided more details about Goodes’ various celebrity personas. There is little doubt that for most of his career most AFL fans venerated Goodes as the embodiment of various ‘heroic’ masculine traits: he was known as a fiercely competitive, tough player. The Australian Football website (an unofficial Internet page devoted to celebrating Australia’s national game) describes Goodes as an outstanding footballer over seventeen seasons with the Sydney Swans. Durable, consistent, and versatile, not to mention supremely talented with the ability to produce the seemingly impossible when most required, Goodes was an ornament to the game, and served (on and off the field) as
a role model and inspiration to indigenous Australians throughout the country (2016).

So, this conception of Goodes as a ‘heroic’ athlete is consistent with Turner’s account of the male sports celebrity. Goodes, for the anonymous author of the above quote is a ‘good’ role model and an ‘ornament of the game’. However, there is another school of thought about Goodes’ on-field conduct, and the way this might tarnish his heroic status. Martin Blake, a renowned AFL journalist, declared that,

Sydney superstar Adam Goodes has won two Brownlow Medals, but he has not been immune to angry moments on the field. He was reported twice inside three weeks in both 2007 and 2008, commentators believing he was a "protected species" after he escaped with a total of one week’s suspension and two reprimands from the four charges. In April this year he was suspended for a week for rough conduct after sliding into Port Adelaide’s Jacob Surjan, a form of unorthodox contact Goodes had pioneered (2012).

It is clear that for an AFL star like Goodes, it is important for his on-field conduct to match his ‘heroic’ persona. As his athletic prowess diminished with Age, Goodes had to modify his game, which may have given him the reputation as a ‘dirty player.’ AFL players must live up to impossible ideals — they are expected to be role models while engaging in one of the roughest football codes in the world. So, Goodes has to be tough, competitive, and fair (qualities, which are
supposedly essential for the recipient of the coveted Brownlow medal, which Goodes won twice). Turner observes that

Perhaps as a legacy of high-minded ideals deriving from late nineteenth century constructions of sporting competitions as the ideal location for the display of masculine heroism, it is common for sports stars to be reminded of their responsibilities as role models for their fans. This is not something that tends to be required of celebrities from other industries (of Ozzy Ozbourne, for instance, or Jack Nicholson). It should be admitted, though, that the expectation that sports stars should serve such a function seems more firmly grounded in the attitudes of sports administrators and the sports media, than in the sports fan (2004, p. 105).

This pressure to function as a heroic, masculine role model is complicated and magnified for black sports celebrities such as Goodes. This is especially true of those black sports icons, such as Muhammad Ali, who take an oppositional political stand (see Marqusee, 1999; Saeed, 2002; Ezra, 2009).

The Goodes Debate: Old and New Media Discourse

Before identifying the discourses mobilised by Goodes’ defenders and detractors it is worth noting, with Sarah Jackson, that 'black celebrities—with their bodies, personas, and expressive forms—have unique potential to challenge dominant definitions of race and nation even as they are limited by them’ (2014, p. 3). Indeed, it is the political possibility of expressing dissent that dominates media commentary on the black sports celebrity who 'breaks bad'. Goodes has certainly
used his celebrity status to contribute to national conversations about race and national identity in the public sphere, often to his detriment, for the status of the black celebrity is dependent on both the endorsement of the dominant white culture, and the political neutering of the black celebrity. Ezra Edelman’s celebrated documentary, *OJ: Made in America*, makes this very point in showing the ways in which OJ Simpson’s television commercials for Herz in the 1970s cleverly allayed white anxieties about Simpson’s race by representing him being endorsed by white people (2016). During the film, Professor Harry Edwards observes that

> O.J. was the first to demonstrate that white folks would buy stuff based on a black endorsement -- as long as it was not pressed as a black endorsement … The way they did that was to remove black people totally from any scene that O.J. was in. … They bought the notion that you could erase the black character, the culture. This is what made O.J. marketable (Edelman, 2016).

While these caveats may no longer apply to contemporary black celebrities, Simpson’s willingness to play along with the ‘Herz’ strategy contrasts strongly with Goodes’ decision to speak up about his personal experience of racism (on and off the football field) and the plight of indigenous Australians. Judd and Butcher, among others, argue that ‘Goodes is booed by significant sections of the Australian Football public not because his play is unduly rough or unfair but, rather, because he points to a national history of Aboriginal oppression and its
contemporary consequences in a way that makes many non-Aboriginal people extremely uneasy (2016, p. 63).

The conservative commentariat have a different view (Rita Panahi, 2015; Andrew Bolt, 2015). They claim that booing Goodes is not a racist act since, in the words of Panahi, ‘there are 71 Aboriginal players in the AFL; only one is routinely booed and it has nothing to do with the colour of his skin’ (2015). This argument, which is cited with minor variations by a variety of conservative pundits, claims that AFL crowds boo Goodes because he is a ‘dirty player’ and a bully. Miranda Divine writes, ‘Adam Goodes is a terrible choice as Australian of the Year. A respected sports celebrity, he is being rewarded for victimising a powerless 13-year-old girl from a disadvantaged background’ (2014). It should be apparent that the commentary generated by the incident described at the outset of this paper is voluminous, and it is impossible to provide a comprehensive analysis of all the commentary generated by this incident (Google lists over 25 000 references to this affair, which is an index of its significance for the national conversation about race). Nevertheless, it is possible to make a few preliminary observations about the debate generated by what happened at the MCG on May 24, 2013.

First and foremost, it is impossible to overstate the significance of the Goodes affair for understanding the fault line of race that runs through the Australia's political landscape. By 2015, the year of his retirement, Goodes had been persistently booed at almost every subsequent game he played. The sheer volume of abuse directed at Goodes exacted a heavy personal toll. He suffered from stress-related depression and was forced to take a break from the game (Herald Sun, 2015). Clearly a large percentage of Australia’s population felt
sympathetic towards the superstar, and an impressive array of Australia’s most celebrated celebrities, politicians and media personalities promoted the Twitter hashtag ‘#istandwithadam’ in order to publicly condemn the hostile AFL crowds that refused to cease their abuse of Goodes. Newspapers, owned by the Fairfax Corporation, the major competitors of the Murdoch press, *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* published editorials supporting Goodes. Film stars such as Cate Blanchett, Hugo Weaving and Richard Roxburgh also stood with Adam Goodes. He also received the support of politicians like the opposition leader, Bill Shorten, and the Australian Greens. The Australian Human Rights Commission (2015) produced a statement exhorting the Australian public to respect Goodes, yet the booing did not abate, and Goodes did not appear in the customary lap of honour for retiring players on Grand Final day in 2015.

Second, the persistent booing of Goodes confirms Burdsey and Gorman’s view that right wing ideologues believe that it is ‘the responsibility of the player who receives racism to just “get on with it” . . . [and] that talking about racism makes the problem worse: “If only you’d just be quiet, then the problem would go away” (2015, p. 580). Furthermore, these same ideologues find any expression of dissent intolerable. In short, the celebration and veneration of black sports celebrities is conditional and provisional. The passage of time may erase the threat of political dissidence. The ‘rehabilitation’ of Muhammad Ali as an American hero is the most obvious example of how dissent may be retrospectively seen as an admirable quality (Ezra, 2009 p. 137).

Finally, it is important to observe how the discourse of political correctness functions within the Goodes Affair. In response to Waleed Aly’s analysis of the ‘booing’ controversy (broadcast on ABC TV’s cerebral sports
program, *The Offsiders*, but remediated on YouTube), one ‘John the Baptist Bones’ writes:

Adam Goodes was booed because Australians are sick and tired of being told what to do. The booing was a one fingered salute to the establishment. The booing was the crowds [sic] speaking "we are sick of political correctness and this us how we are going to show it!" (2015)

Another respondent writes:

Adam Goodes was Australian of the year! Supposed to represent ALL AUSTRALIANS. So you think its ok to do a war dance? Also single out a 13 year old that doesn’t know any better? There are plenty of AFL players get booed [sic]. Do they whinge and whine? They just get on with it and thank god they are playing the great game (2015).

These remarks are obviously not wholly representative of the commentary generated by Aly’s analysis (which articulates the ‘political dissent’ thesis to explain the unpopularity of Goodes), a large number of respondents contest the claims articulated by Goodes’ detractors. The quotations cited above nevertheless expose the tensions that exist between those official institutions (such as the AFL, the Australian Human Rights Commission, the Fairfax Press and so on) that support Goodes, and those people, the conservative commentariat and large numbers of AFL fans that see Goodes as a whiney troublemaker who does not know his ‘proper place’.
Writing in 1999 Ghassan Hage reminds us that we cannot simply dismiss the public expressions of anger cited above as instances of racism. Rather, we need to situate them within the discourse of what he calls ‘Anglo-Decline’ (1999, 180). That is, a discourse that asserts that Australia’s dominant ethno-cultural population (white Anglo-Australia) is under siege (1999, 181). From this perspective we can see that the vilification of Goodes is motivated by the belief that political correctness is a threat to Anglo-Australian identity. Moreover, the discourse of Anglo-Decline often identifies cultural elites as perpetrators of a cosmopolitanism that threatens the natural order of things (Hage, 1999, 205). In an especially prescient passage given the state of the world in the wake of Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as the President of the United States) Hage points out that we should not dismiss ‘the actual loss and disempowerment’ that generates such vehement expressions of dissent on the part of those who feel marginalised by cosmopolitan intellectuals such as those journalists who defended Goodes. Thus, the view that the booing of Adam Goodes constitutes a ‘one-fingered salute’ to the establishment’ that has disempowered Anglo-Australia. To engage with the Goodes debate, then, is to wrestle with the discourses of race, class, human rights, politics, masculinity, and political correctness, and venture into a fractured and agonistic public sphere that exposes the ugly underbelly of contemporary Australia.
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