

Revisiting the networked production of the 2003 Little League World Series: narrative of American innocence

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Abstract

While many (popular) cultural studies focus on the discursive construction, and dominant meanings created in and through events, shows and individuals, there has been a relative dearth of studies that examine the production practices of those who create these mediated entities. As such, this project seeks to help 'fill' the relative void left in production practice studies, by critically evaluating the 2003 Little League World Series (LLWS). We will argue that the cultivation of this event was part of a wider (un)spoken social and political project to position the United States as a country which was to be exalted as a space of widespread diversity, acceptance of difference, and to be revered for its 'inherent greatness' (Ferguson 2004). Further, through our critique of the veritable 'meaning makers' for the LLWS, this project aims to illuminate the power they have in reifying particular – in this case overwhelmingly positive – understandings of those who hold political sway at particular moments in time. This article concludes by looking back at the 2003 American socio-political moment through a 2007 lens, a time when the republic is unquestionably more wary towards the Bush Presidency, the 'War in Iraq', and the government more generally.

Keywords

US nationalism
nationalism
nationalism and sport
ethnography
corporate media
American Broadcast
Company

2003 LLWS: media, spectacle, sovereignty?

Despite Richard Johnson's (1986) treatise on the importance of understanding the relationships between the political, economic and cultural conditions of television production and the actual labour processes involved in the creation of meaning, scholarship has tended to be dominated by analysis of the components of the output: the televised product. This aberration has, in part, and with regard to our specific focus on televised sport, been addressed by a burgeoning number of scholars (see, e.g., Gruneau 1989; MacNeill 1996; Silk 2002; Silk & Amis 2000; Stoddart 1994) who have immersed themselves – through ethnographic oriented methodologies – within the practices of production. While the horrific events of September 11th may not be a teleological fault line (see Ladson-Billings, 2001), the fallout from this day has created a more complex, disordered, paradoxical, and unexpected social climate that 'involves a multidimensional

mixture of production and effects of the global economy and capitalist market system, new technologies and media, expanded judicial and legal modes of governance, and emergent modes of power, sovereignty, and resistance' (Kellner 2002a, p. 293). Among the many 'entanglements' (Sassen, 2002) brought to the fore by this day are the multiple and often competing arguments concerning the imminent demise of nation state politics, an emergent transnational or global politics (possibly guided by a hegemonic super-power) and of those institutions which mediate or bridge the gap between the emerging globalism and the traditional system of nation states (Dallmayr 2002; Johnson 2002; Kellner 2002b; Sassen 2002).

Not surprisingly, the ways in which global, national and local scenes and events intersect in the contemporary world, following September 11, 2001, have become the fodder on which the national media dine, on the menu, as it were, in news coverage (see Butler 2002, Johnson 2002) and in the more (un)expected cantinas of entertainment: the nebulous terror threat in Fox's *24*, the treatment of 'Arab' characters in WWE's Summer Slam series, the filmic version of flight United 93, and the revival of Cold War rhetoric in Disney's *Miracle* offer a few, yet poignant examples. Indeed, televised sport became what Silk & Falcous (2005) termed a particularly 'lustrous' space in which mediated sport was appropriated and mobilized as part of the affective orientation of popular-commodity-signs in regard to the organization and discipline of daily life in the service of particular political agendas. Subsequently, a number of scholars have focused on the texts of mediated sport after September 11, 2001, arguing, not surprisingly given veritable 'conditions' of cultural production, that sport coverage served US corporo-political needs and opined a myopic expression of American jingoism, militarism and geo-political domination (see among others Hogan 2003; Kusz 2006; Silk & Falcous 2005; Silk, Bracey & Falcous 2007). Yet, while the text may have been foregrounded in these analyses, far less is known about the institutional and social conditions of production and how this impacted upon the labour processes. Indeed, it would be remiss to 'isolate' (Williams 1980) the text or to treat the post-9/11 period as one in which the conditions of production have been static. We would argue the opposite and suggest that the conditions of cultural production – the economic, political and cultural tensions, and ambiguities – are very much transient and subject to change in this period as the current administration came to terms with the terror attack, offered its response, and subsequently – at the time of writing – reflects on its political and militaristic position. Thus, following Williams (1980) and through a mediated sport spectacle, a space where nationalisms, internationalisms and transnationalisms interact in complex and frequently potent and emotive ways, we offer an analysis that begins to think through how the active relationships that constitute the practice of televised sport production and the conditions of practice interact to constitute the components of the televised product. To do so, we 'rethink' (McDonald and Birrell 1999: 295) the media production of the 2003 Little League World Series (LLWS), a seemingly banal youth sporting competition, through the adoption of a methodology that aids our 'uncovering, foregrounding, and producing counter-narratives' which in turn allow us to unearth, and 'make visible,'

the contemporaneous politics of popular representation through which the viewing public was invited to formulate a normalized (yet, inveterately ideological) understanding of, and largely uncritical attitude towards, the United States, its government and its policies. Following Debord's (1994) broader polemic of a 'spectacular' society, the balance of this article focuses on the production of the 2003 LLWS media 'spectacle', offering analysis of the relationships between the singular spectacular event (Tomlinson 2002) – the LLWS – that cannot be divorced from the society of the spectacle of which it is a constituent and constituting element.

Contextualizing the LLWS

At the end of each summer in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, a group of children gather to play baseball for a two-week long tournament – the Little League World Series (LLWS). The event represents a particularly complex sporting convocation, given that baseball is still positioned as the American national pastime even in the age of *World Series of Poker*, *X-Games*, and *Dancing with the Stars*.

Building upon the growing number of critical investigations into the labor practices and processes associated with televised sport production (see Gruneau 1989; MacNeill 1996; Silk 1999, 2002; Silk, Amis & Slack 2000; Silk & Amis 2002), this study offers an ethnographically oriented account of both the labor, and indeed the laborers, responsible for the production of 2003 LLWS television broadcasts¹. More specifically, this study focuses on the micropolitics of production (the power and ability to represent the televised event emphasizing certain elements while downplaying, or even ignoring, others) and the ways in which they related to the macropolitics of the contemporary American moment (the discursive modes through which America has come to understand itself). Thus, given the wider political, economic and cultural experience of our present, it is important to locate televised sport production in the United States as a key space where nationalisms, internationalisms and transnationalisms interact in complex and frequently potent and emotive ways to inform and influence our everyday lives.

Founded in 1947 as a four-team, single-elimination event featuring four sides from within the United States, by 2003 the tournament had grown to incorporate teams from 105 countries who compete in 16,000 games over 45 days for the privilege of reaching the LLWS tournament in Williamsport. From the outset, and perhaps not unexpectedly, given the 'moral right' and 'superior' status historically bestowed upon it through proximal contamination by the seeping doctrine of American Exceptionalism (cf. Ferguson 2004; Hardt & Negri 2004; Sennet 1999), the Little League World series has historically been about inculcating Young Americans and their foreign counterparts with hyper-conservative ideals. These principles, characterized by 'family values, traditional gender roles, youthful innocence, in addition to a love of God, country and capitalism' (see Van Auken & Van Auken 2001) run distinctly against a Communist-inspired 'God-less ideology' of equality, social justice and welfare (Herbert Brownell Jr., Attorney General of the United States, 1954 Little League World Series programme, in Van Auken & Van Auken 2001: 64).

1 In addition to observations, semi-structured interviews (Fetterman, 1989) were conducted with LLCo's volunteer 'uncles', security members, media and publications departments, ABC's entire features production crew, researchers, the *Lamade* Stadium graphics team, the 'A' announcing team, as well as the *Lamade* Stadium game director, producer, and co-ordinator. Further, formal, semi-structured interviews (Amis, 2005), were conducted with key actors (Fetterman, 1989) of LLCo and ABC that centred on the dominant meanings ABC wished to advance through the production of the LLWS. Finally, following the event, and to supplement the interview and observation data, the to-air broadcast of the entire 2003 LLWS tournament was analysed using a semiotic methodology advocated by Gruneau et al. (1988).

- 2 Interestingly Little League Softball – an event usually played by girls – became a sport only after the Title IX court cases, thus preventing the intermixture of boys and girls on the baseball field. This is all the more interesting given the fact that at the ages of 11 and 12 girls are generally physiologically bigger, stronger, and faster than boys.
- 3 While records will show that a U.S. team played against a team from Seoul, South Korea, deeper research reveals that the U.S. team was actually from Mexicali, Mexico a team that currently participates in the Mexico region. Furthermore, this final was actually the first LLWS championship game that ABC presented to its viewers (Van Auken & Van Auken, 2001), lending credence to the idea that these changes were under the auspices of a mediated authority.

Over the past half century, the tournament has morphed into the ‘official’ World Championship of Little League Baseball (Musburger 2001; Van Auken & Van Auken 2001), in which the understanding of the world is prefigured on the centrality and preeminence of the United States and things ‘American’. As such the LLWS has sought to guard its masculinist, hegemonic vision of America, through initiatives which have served to: protect this sporting space from female intrusion (LLWS had to back down after several court decisions based on Title IX in 1974, allowing girls to compete²); police non-American successes (international teams were banned for one year in 1974 for, of all things, emphasizing winning, while at the time of writing, all 141 award winners found in the Little League Hall of Excellence were US citizens); ban all national anthems except the Star Spangled banner until 2002 (and still play only abbreviated versions of the anthems of international teams); and alter LLWS rules to ensure a team representing the United States would always appear in the final (following an all-International final in 1985³) (Van Auken & Van Auken 2001). The last rule change was strongly suggested by ABC (personal communication, LLC 2003) and speaks to the notion that any hope for cultural diversity and respect will necessarily be set aside when national market-value comes in direct contradistinction to it.

Despite its historical pandering to white, Christian, heterosexual patriarchy, the LLWS, a ‘product’ of the Little League Corporation (LLCo), draws well over 300,000 spectators yearly and is televised by the American Broadcast Corporation (ABC) and the Entertainment Sport Programming Networks (ESPN & ESPN2) – each of which is part of the Disney media empire. ABC has owned the rights to broadcast the LLWS in some capacity since the early 1960s, making it the longest standing relationship between a sporting event and broadcaster in US history. First aired live in 1989, coverage has expanded to include game coverage from both the United States and International brackets on ABC, ESPN and ESPN2 and forms a central part of these Disney sport media firms’ mid-August ratings – a period which is often considered American television’s down time and left for re-runs, filler shows and pilot episodes of programmes that critics deem destined to fail. Given the weak competition, by 2003, the LLWS had garnered such a popular following that 26 of the 32 games held in Williamsport were aired live, with the six games not covered being preliminary games from the International bracket; thereby becoming an important event in the minds of many Americans.

Producing the 2003 LLWS

The cultural conditions of production for the 2003 LLWS were set at the 2001 LLWS when President Bush visited Williamsport following his induction into the Little League Hall of Fame:

You know years ago when I was playing on those dusty little league fields in west Texas I never dreamed I’d be president of the United States, and I can assure you I never dreamt I’d be admitted into the Little League Hall of Excellence . . . one of the things I did dream about was making it to Williamsport, PA, for the LLWS. Little League is a family sport, I can remember

my mother sitting behind the backstop in Midland Texas, telling me what to do . . . she still tells me what to do, and my advice to all the players is listen to your mother. But for all the moms and dads who take special time out of their lives are able [sic] to play the great sport of baseball thank you from the bottom of our hearts. You prioritized your family and that's crucial for a *healthy world* to make sure our families remain strong . . . On behalf of the presidency thank you for what you do, may God bless the teams that play here, may God bless the families represented here, and may God bless the great United States of America thank you very much.

Herein Bush evoked strong family and religious values – although we are careful to note here that not all religions are ‘equal’, since he is of course referring to Christianity – utilizing the LLWS as a symbolic space in which to parade religious rhetoric as political identity and in which to direct the leadership and policies of a ‘healthy’ world.

On that note, unchallenged Christian (moral-familial) authority at the LLWS is not exclusive to Bush’s rhetorical speeches. Prior to every sanctioned Little League Baseball game – no matter where it is played throughout the world – the young participants are expected to recite the *Little League Pledge* which states: ‘I trust in God/I love my Country, and will respect its laws/I will play fair, and strive to win/but win or lose, I will always do my best’ (Van Auken & Van Auken 2001: 42). While the use of God in the recitation of the *Little League Pledge* has been questioned in the recent past (see Kemsley 2003), the complaints have been viewed as nothing more than the ‘liberal attack on right-wing Christianity, morality and tradition’ – bearing in mind this tradition is steeped in the demonization of youth as well as unequal relations of race, class, gender and sexuality (Giroux 2003; Grossberg 2005).

It is through this lens of understanding that we seek to position our understanding of the 2003 LLWS in that it at once claimed international innocence and served to provide a space whereby the United States – and only the United States – could host such a benevolent social event for children all around the world. Spectacles such as this therefore act to reinforce the notion that America is ‘a morally superior, righteous’ place and that any critical attacks toward it are misguided at best and criminally unsubstantiated at worst.

Straddling sovereignties

Initially formulated by the Vice President of Advertising and Promotion at ABC, the ‘meaning’ of 2003 LLWS was discursively established by a series of commercial campaigns that promoted an ‘*international pastime*’ narrative (ESPN Radio 2003; field notes 2003; ABC, personal communication, 2004) and a promise of cultural diversity. Indeed, somewhat critiquing American Exceptionalism – and the storied roots of baseball therein (see, e.g. Dyerson 1999; Rader 2005; Riess 1995) – and espousing a looser displacement of national sovereignty, these promotions suggested that LLWS was the real ‘World Series’, given participation from teams representing nations from across the globe (ESPNRadio 2003). Prior to and throughout the mediated event, both in-game producers and ‘features’ producers (as

4 Disney owns ABC/ESPN/ESPN2, each of which is used to broadcast the LLWS.

well as their teams consisting of announcers, researchers, graphics creators and camera-operators) were instructed to 'to put (their) ears to the ground' (ABC, personal communication, 2004) to give the viewers 'what they wanted' (ABC, personal communication, 2004) through the creation of pre-game 'teases', in-game stories and information about the teams, players and Williamsport (field notes 2003; Gowdy Jr. 2003). Based on post-production research from the 2002 LLWS and pre-production meetings before the event, the producers of the 2003 LLWS decided that 'what the viewer wanted' to see were four interrelated narrative storylines: '[great] moments', 'kids having fun', 'a day in the life of a Little Leaguer', and, importantly for this article, the 'international pastime' (ABC, personal communications, 2003). Within the context of 2003 America, this could be seen as part of American mediated 'healing' through the creation of an event that used a children's sport tournament to position the United States as a space of safety, international friendship and innocence. Indeed, given that the LLWS formed part of the supposedly innocent, ahistorical and mythical Disney⁴ spectacle – a relentless tide and diversity of Disney products and services colonizing many aspects of social life, affecting consumers' emotions and desires in the manner of a tautological system designed to enhance the Disney aura (Andrews, 2006; Giroux, 2005) – the viewing public would be forgiven for reading the LLWS as nothing more than a banal, neutral, auxiliary of the Magic Kingdom. Indeed, it is through these spectacular machinations, Giroux (2005) surmises that the tools of language, sound and image are being 'increasingly appropriated in an effort to diminish the capacity of the American public to think critically . . . to engage in critical debates, translate private considerations into public concerns and recognize the distortion and lies that underlie many of the current government politics' (22–23). Thus the intended LLWS narrative was quite easily connected to other forms of media, mentioned previously, which essentially served as internal and external propaganda that made it difficult to position the United States as a source of evil – for the United States was a place where children from all around the world could gather, play baseball and have fun. Indeed, a producer for ABC concurred with this argument through his statement that the LLWS:

is about appointment family television in a lot of ways. The goals are so right for what goes on elsewhere in the world where there's violence and drugs and everything else. This is what's good about a lot of things in life not just sport (ABC Production Crew 2003).

Framing the aforementioned narratives through youthful, MTV 'reality'-based filming techniques (ABC, personal communication, 2003), the pre-production of the 2003 LLWS explicitly set out to distance itself from any form of overtly Americo-centric narrative in favour of a storyline that spoke to the supposed cultural diversity found at the event. As one of the marketing personnel for ABC explained:

Aside from it being an angle we've never taken, we figured that since it's the Little League World Series, we could highlight that in the promotion. More

often than not, a 'World' championship in any major sport is actually just a US Championship. This one is different, and since it's a US team vs. a team from another country in the finals, we wanted to bring that element to the fore. Furthermore, since there are so many Spanish speakers in the US, we thought we'd have fun with 'Take me out to the ballgame' (Sung in Spanish) in one of our executions (personal interview, 2003).

- 5 A tease at the LLWS could be defined as the short 1–3 minute, highly emotive, introduction to each game aired on ABC.

The smaller, six-person 'features' team followed the same narrative themes throughout the duration of the 2003 LLWS. For example, one of the features producers informed us that their:

main goal is basically [to] tell great stories about the kids who come from all over the world to Little League World Series. You know you can have these great transitions and great flashes but if you don't have a story, which you can tell throughout Little League, you pretty much have nothing (personal interview, 2003).

As we might expect, the manufacture of such affectively anchoring segments designed to connect the broadcast and the audience are an integral part in forwarding specific narrative stories during sporting spectacles (Andrews 1998; Gruneau 1989; Silk 1999, 2001, 2002). At the LLWS, these segments played an early role in 'creating meaning' (Hall 1980; Tomlinson 2002), offering a narrative through which to understand, and consume, the 2003 productions. By using the following, and oft-repeated, professional strategies: scripting a storyline that was read during each opening *tease*⁵, creating several short transition elements to be shown prior to, or during, innings and forming short baseball fundamental teaching pieces, the features producers felt they were able to forward the four interconnected narratives. Generally features were underscored by 'emotive' music, and highlights from previous games, to 'inform the viewer about the game's participants and excite them about the impending contest' (ABC, personal communications, 2003; field notes 2003). Thus the ultimate goal of the features crew was to get viewers to invest themselves enough to watch the event by making the 'contest itself . . . the climax which resolves the curiosity and excitement built up over the day' (Gruneau et al. 1988: 272). Indeed, the features crew, who given their mandate by the in-game producers to 'treat each game differently' (ABC, personal communication, 2003) and provide a different script with a different angle 'on a game-by-game basis' (ABC, personal communication, 2003), had near-total control over whom, or what, they were and were not taping.

In their efforts to construct and maintain a coherent narrative with the features producers, the in-game production crew – through filming, interviewing and editing techniques – attempted to build an 'instant relationship' (field notes, 2003) between the home-viewer and the athletes. To gather information on the domestic and international players, coaches and participant's immediate family-members, ABC production workers asked the same set of 20–25 questions to each player, while probing for 'unique and engaging stories' (ABC, personal communication, 2004) that would capture their intended audience in 'team-by-team' fashion during

- 6 The current-game's score, inning, base runners, outs, and miles-per-hour the last pitch was thrown at.
- 7 Prior to the LLWS the regional championship games played in each of the eight United States Bracket regions aired on ESPN and ESPN2. There was no broadcast of any International Bracket regional finals.
- 8 In accordance with Kellner (2001), due to the differences in the many translations of *The Society of the Spectacle*, when referencing Debord we use numbered paragraphs from the text.

the days leading up to the 2003 LLWS broadcast (ABC, personal communications, 2003). Additionally, the in-game graphics creators built visual effects for use on game-specific information⁶ and several on-field camera workers set up their locations around both the fields at the LLWS in such a way as to give a 'professional', yet 'youthful' feel to the spectacle (field notes 2003; ABC, personal communication, 2003). Finally, the in-game production team was in charge of providing the announcers with information that they had gathered throughout the week and conducted meetings helping to ensure that in conjunction with pre-production strategies like feature editing, advertisements, camera-use and positioning, and formulaic research questioning, a consistent *preferred narrative* would be presented to the consumer; one that celebrated the 2003 LLWS as a youthful yet International pastime (field-notes 2003; ABC, personal communications 2003; italics ours). Indeed, such a narrative was a part of the collective affinity between the LLWS and LLC, as one of the LLWS production staff explained, 'in light of the patriotism and the "things American angle", we really never let that enter our thinking. We're simply trying to make engaging, unique, likeable promotion(s) for our properties. We thought this would be something new and fresh.'

Not surprisingly, these narratives were easier to weave into games involving the international bracket, where less pre-game footage was available⁷, and less was known about the participants. By contrast, coverage of the US bracket focused more on the seemingly innocent and youthful narrative of 'having fun' – depicted as the ultimate goal for each team. Indeed, and rather than centring the narrative on the United States, there was an explicit effort to maintain a consistent storyline. As one of the production crew explicitly explained: 'why would Americans (viewers) be excited about sharing its culture? People hate America. We're a selfish country. We have what everybody wants, and it doesn't seem like we'd share. We think our shit doesn't stink. We don't share.' Thus while the producers openly admitted that the United States was difficult to defend, they attempted to formulate a televised spectacle that served to emotively reify a safe and benign America.

Moreover, despite this portrayal of innocence, of distance from the aggressive appropriation, mobilization, and substantiation of commercialized sport within the (global) political trajectories of the Bush administration (and thereby resistive anti-Americanisms [see, e.g. Giroux 2005; Harvey 2003; Sardar & Wyn-Davies 2002, 2004]), the international narrative was itself sliding towards making explicit alliances with the imperialist aims of the Bush administration. In fact much of the coverage espoused one very clear and superior unilateral hegemon (Hardt & Negri 2000) that dictated this cartographic, if not, epistemological, space of the LLWS spectacle – the United States. In the following section, we outline how, as a 'spectacular' media event, the LLWS was related to the broader society which it serves, and of which it is an extension (Debord 1994), and was centred on a populist platform that positioned the United States as 'hallowed', 'moral,' 'indispensable;' a 'vast inaccessible reality that can never be questioned' (Debord 1994: #12⁸). In this sense, we point to the particular slippages, and outright fissures, in the seemingly progressive notions

of internationalism, suggesting that the production of the 2003 LLWS was deeply embedded in the reproduction of an ever-growing and dangerous ideology fuelled by the American government and that has seeped into the public sphere – one that explicitly and implicitly views the United States as economically, militarily, culturally, morally and politically superior to all other nation-states. This is despite the deeply contradictory fact that Americo-centric neoliberal capitalism sets the lawful parameter of capital accumulation as the only way to achieve success (Grossberg 2005; Kelly 2001), thus necessarily eschewing a world-promoting ‘democracy’, ‘human rights’ and the ‘international rule of law’ (Hardt & Negri 2004).

Normalized American (sporting) superiority

Embedded within a decidedly regressive form of internationalism, then, we argue that the LLWS stands as an exemplar of the supposedly ethically, and morally, based historical destiny that the United States should lead the world. Based in neo-conservative virtue and the USA's exceptional power and ability to dominate the global order (Hardt & Negri 2004) in our present, the LLWS can be seen as part of the wider cultural and political discourse of American Exceptionalism – a discourse that is at the centre of what David Harvey (2003) terms the shift, although not outright replacement, in the dominant US political regime from a neo-liberal state to a neo-conservative imperialism. In other words, the LLWS spectacle was bound with a society which had been urged by the Bush Administration to recognize the ‘inherent greatness’ (Ferguson 2004: 43–44) of US-led corporate capitalism in the instantiation of an imperialist empire in which the ‘sovereign must stand above the law and take control’ (Hardt & Negri, 2004: 9). This exceptional role of the United States in the global state of exception is thus not simply about nationalisms or internationalisms, but about how, in the space of a mediated sporting spectacle based on children, sovereign nation state politics intersect and interact with emergent modes of power, religiosity, moral tyranny and sovereignty. This is particularly evident in case of the LLWS, and we argue that this event was complicit in the placing of the United States at the center of international relations and in the ‘language of Empire’ (Negri & Hardt, 2000).⁹

Throughout the event, the United States, somewhat prophetically (and perhaps predictably given the national baseball mythologizing in representations such as Universal Studio's *Field of Dreams* [1989]) was narratively constructed as the *field of dreams* for international competitors. As was announced prior to the *International* Bracket final, the United States was the place on earth in which dreams (the ‘American’ Dream) could be realized:

Across spacious oceans and desert lands, they have traveled to *their field of dreams*. Stories these twelve year olds bring back to their countries of great lessons learned. It's a story of a Russian team that won their first game ever, or a Venezuelan fisherman who sent his son with 4 dollars to play, or maybe even a story of love . . . We've all come to expect dominance from the *Far East*. When Japan defeated Mexico City, they *earned* their seventh consecutive trip to the International championship. So why has Japan been so successful? Maybe it is been the long practice sections, or *their* ideals of perfection, or

9 The ‘foreign’ policy of American neo-conservatism, embodied in the election of George W. Bush in 2000, and predicated on ‘moral’ principles based in Christian fundamentalism (9/11 for example, at least according to this ‘logic’, was a sign of God’s anger at the permissiveness of a society that allows abortion and homosexuality) is ground in the ‘principles’ set forth in *The Project for the New American Century* charter (the project is a non-profit, educational organization whose goal is to promote American global leadership) (Harvey 2003). The project presents distinctly U.S. values (such as American leadership being good for both America and the world, that such leadership requires military strength, and that too few political leaders today make the case for global leadership) as universals through deployment of terms such as ‘freedom and democracy and respect for private property, the individual, and the law bundled together as a code of conduct for the whole world’ (Harvey 2003: 192; see also www.newamericancentury.org). Nationalism, coupled with imperialism—and the attendant racism inherent both internally and internationally (Harvey 2003)—has not just become the doctrine of the

geopolitical-economic vision of the Bush administration; but, in capillary-like fashion, the rhetoric has filtered through the mechanisms of what Giroux (2005) has termed the 'proto' fascism of the Bush administration: the cult of traditionalism, the corporatization of civil society, a culture of fear and 'patriotic correctness', the collapse of the separation between church and state, a language of official 'newspeak', and the ownership and control of the media. Following Hardt & Negri (2004), and viewing the 'perpetual state of war' located within U.S. neo-conservatism as a regime of biopower—a form of rule aimed not only at compelling the population but producing and reproducing all aspects of social life—it is of little surprise that the LLWS spectacle would both serve and extend the neo-conservative agenda.

maybe the answer is they love, and dream baseball as much as anyone . . . anywhere. Like the *Far East*, Curacao's heart also beats for baseball. Free willing *spirits* enjoying the warmth of Williamsport and a passion of a great game . . . But no matter what the outcome, they will return to their countries with stories to tell. But what makes *us* different is what brings the opposite ends of the world together (Gowdy Jr. 2003) [*italics added*]).

This passage is instructive in many ways – not only is this particular game the culmination of the International bracket allowing the winner to earn the right to get to the game that matters (the World Series Championship game against the US representative), but it speaks to America as the hub, the special place, in which others can achieve their dreams. In the *longue durée*, this is perhaps not surprising, the US was founded on the principles of exceptionalism; as George Bancroft (1896) wrote in volume 5 of his classic the 'History of the United States' (1834–1875), the United States had been designed by God to demonstrate to the world the moral and political superiority of democratic institutions. Further, it is of little surprise that baseball was bound within these principles and, in the second part of the 19th century, served as a key institution through which to mould the bodies of citizens (men) into productive citizens of a new industrial republic, assimilate certain immigrant populations into the 'culture' of the country, mark off 'others' both internally (especially African Americans and immigrants from Eastern Europe) and externally (especially the British) and reconnect, however artificially, the industrial worker back to nature (see, e.g. Dyerson 1999; Riess 1995; Rader 2005).

In our present, and given the ontological disruption or rupture (Cocco & Lazzarato 2002) in imperialist ambition, it was somewhat expected that ABC would discursively construct *us* (US) as a special place where other cultures can visit, learn, be free, succeed – realize a dream – and, at the same time, continue to mark off the US as different and superior. Indeed, this narrative formed a consistent theme for the production crews. Framed within a notion of 'superiority', ABC 'really wanted to play up' (ABC, personal communication, 2003) acts of 'charity' to other nations. Under this banner, ABC celebrated teams from Moscow, Russia, Altagracia, Venezuela, Dharan, Saudi Arabia and Mexico City (Mexico coming to the utopian baseball fields of America) while at the same time offering no critique of the apparent economic, political and social domination of South American, Latin American, Middle Eastern and Eastern nation states by the United States (Butler 2002; Giroux 2005; Klein 1988, 1991, 1995; Zinn 2003). Indeed, according to Mosher (2001), many of the children representing teams from the *Caribbean* and *Latin America* come to the tournament extremely underfed and gain several pounds during their ten-day stay, a hunger that is compounded by the extreme jet-lag that many experience after the long trip to Williamsport (field notes, 2003).

Additionally, the features crew produced a series of vignettes to highlight, despite inequalities, that the 2003 LLWS was contested on a 'level playing field' (Little League, personal communication, 2003). One such feature focused on Magglio Ordoñez, a native Venezuelan, and an All-Star left fielder for Major League Baseball's Chicago White Sox, who learned that

some of the team from Altagracia, Venezuela, came to the United States without shoes, gloves, or uniforms, and with a single bat made out of a wood post (field notes 2003; Gowdy Jr. 2003; Little League, personal communication, 2003). Upon notification of the team's economic disparity, Ordoñez cut the team a blank check and told them 'to buy whatever they want with it' (field notes 2003; ABC, personal communication, 2003). Of course, that Ordoñez, a native Venezuelan who was 'living' the American Dream, was placed on a pedestal, further reinforced the special place of the US as a *field of dreams* – obscuring the racisms, degraded images of 'others' particularly (at that time) those who 'look Arab or Muslim', official immigration policies, the directives of the Department of Homeland Security, racial profiling on highways and at airports, or the physical and psychological abuse on the bodies and minds of the abject American (see, e.g., Ahmed 2002; Giroux 2005; Harvey 2003; McLaren 2002; McLaren & Martin 2004; Merskin 2004). Indeed, that the executive producer would claim the LLWS as 'a piece of Americana' hawked through satellite to 105 countries (Gowdy Jr. 2003) further emphasizes the somewhat messier juxtapositions and intersections between nation-state sovereignty and emergent modes of power, religiosity and moral tyranny within the neo-conservatism of the Bush regime.

Furthermore, despite ABC's conscious attempts to promote intercultural goodwill during the World Championship game (with repeated shots and announcer narrative of the Japanese and Floridian players congratulating one another after hitting homeruns), advancing the notion of (Disneyfied) innocence at the event by parading Mickey Mouse around the field during the fourth inning and downplaying the significance of the United States playing another country (by lowering the volume, deafening at the event, of its in-crowd microphone feed when the throng of 45,000 was chanting 'USA, USA' or somewhat more arrogantly 'America, America', and only referring to the US champion as the 'team from Florida'), this growing culture of militarism was played out on the diamonds of the LLWS. For example, in an early discussion with a Little League official, we were told that Little League had taken steps to join the heightened counter-terrorist state of post-9/11 'America' by implementing a simulated post-attack exercise in June (personal interview, 2003) and installing metal detectors that all people entering the Little League premises had to pass through (field notes 2003). Further, immediately prior to the final game and following a rendition of the National Anthem by a local State Policeman (another site that is increasingly indistinguishable from the military), there was a 4 Fighter Jet flyover before the final game while a group from the local Air Force, Marine Corp, held a flag that took up over 1/3 of the outfield during which Dugout (the official Little League mascot) could be seen standing at attention – an act which did not take place during a rendition of the abbreviated Japanese national anthem!

In this sense, and as Gilroy (2001) has contended – and somewhat bolstered by the Bush Administration's frequent use of sporting metaphors (see King 2004) – war, in language, has become sport, highlighting the important role of the US sporting media in foreclosing the possibility for critique and vibrant democracy, instead deteriorating into a combination

- 10 LLWS games are 6 innings in length - by putting the 'Building Blocks' segments 3½ innings into the game, the producers ensured that they would air during each game no matter when it ended.

of commercialism, propaganda and entertainment while shrouding the (domineering) realities of the event (Giroux 2005). At the LLWS, not only did the crew reify the neo-conservatism of Bush by downplaying the overt police state of this 'new-America', but language, national superiority and imperialist ambitions fused together to (re)assert the language(s) and success of the colossus (Ferguson 2004).

Moreover, a central component of each game broadcast on ABC was a segment put together by the features crew titled 'Building Blocks'. Working with colour commentators Harold Reynolds and Tom Candiotti, both former major leaguers, these segments, which usually aired before or during the middle of the fourth inning¹⁰, showed the announcers – along with LLWS participants – demonstrating the basic fundamentals of baseball. Most of these segments featured representatives from the US teams, regardless of the teams participating in the game being broadcast. While this may have been part of building the consistent narrative espoused above – offering a pedagogical tool to train the 'other' in a piece of Americana – it was at least in part attributable to availability and desire of athletes to participate, ease of verbal communication (since few of the announcers could speak/understand anything besides American-English), and, in many cases, the 'luck of the draw' (field notes 2003). Despite the global reach of the broadcasts, and although there was no concerted effort by producers to displace non-American athletes during 'Building Blocks' segments, comments made by announcers during the airtime certainly reinforced the idea that the 2003 LLWS was meant for an American audience. For example, during a game between Willemstad (Curacao, Netherlands Antilles) and Tokyo, Japan, Harold Reynolds was working with two young players participating from Curacao to teach the audience how to communicate on a flyball in such a way as to prevent a collision. Instead of calling for the ball with the traditional (read American-English) 'I've got it, I've got it', the two boys used *laga! laga!* (Meaning: 'I've got it' in Papiamentu). During the broadcast, Reynolds discussed the use of Papiamentu with commentator Gary Thorne:

HR: *laga! laga!* (laughs)

GT: Speaking blocks (haha) *laga . . . laga*. How many languages do you speak?

HR: I speak ONE.

Taken alone, it would be a stretch to assert too much from this privileging of the American-English language. However, when seen in conjunction with a number of other incidents, it became clear that the LLWS broadcasts operated to trivialize any 'other' language than that traditionally spoken within the United States – we are using 'traditionally' to distinguish those languages that are officially, juridically, the languages of the United States as opposed to the multitude of dialects and languages spoken by those at the margins of the US citizenry. While commentators were 'never told exactly what to say' (ABC, personal communication, 2003), and therefore held a significant amount of power in what the home viewer 'got', the in-game producers retained the power to 'lead' the announcers with open-ended sentences to help fill empty air time, and forward narratives that

may have been temporarily underdeveloped (field notes 2003; ABC, personal communications, 2003; MacNeill 1996). For example, and despite the international pastime narrative outlined above, announcers were directed not to explicitly focus on issues of cultural diversity between players from different nations – this may well have been in an effort to ensure the legitimacy of the international feed or to proffer a bland, if not nationally disembodied, game of baseball for an American audience – yet it speaks to the flattening of cultural difference (Williams 1994).

Indeed, when taken with the graphics and logo used by the LLWS production – a not too subtle combination of red, white, and blue – the broadcasts did little to suggest anything other than that the event was a piece of Americana being played for the largest audience segment: Americans. Furthermore, ABC required that all participants introduce themselves in American-English, a feature that would be inserted into each game. This resulted in a number of the young players struggling to (Anglo) phonetically reproduce their name – the resultant broadcast offering a less than flattering, in fact stumbling, stuttered, or slow depiction of anyone who could not speak American-English. Finally, and despite the significant presence of Latino/Latina populations in the United States, generally, and the over-representation of these populations in baseball specifically, only one on-field announcer employed at the production, Alvaro Martin, could translate from Spanish to English. Additionally, ABC employed no announcer who could, in real time¹¹, do the same with Dutch, Japanese, Papiamentto or Russian; four languages used by teams that participated in the event. Therefore no announcer could accurately decipher exactly what was being said during substitutions, mound visits, coach-to-coach and coach-to-player conversations. In lieu of having a Dutch, Japanese, Papiamentto or Russian translator present, ABC announcers were left to describe or continue speaking about what they thought was being said during these interactions (Gowdy, Jr. 2003). Thus as Bhaba (1994) states, ‘colonial discourse [becomes] an apparatus of power’ (70) that serves to reify distinct differences between the home nation, the United States, and the other. Interestingly this affectively ignores ‘the shifting positionalities of its subjects’ (70) evidenced by the ironic fact (since both of the following teams played in the International division) that only one team member for the team representing Saudi Arabia was actually a citizen of that country (13 were Americans, and one Canadian) and that the team from Guam consisted of American-English speaking athletes, who live under the rule of the United States (field notes 2003).

11 There were statements that translations were made in the production truck, but they were loose translations at best, and many times outright guesses made by the announcers (field notes, 2003).

Coda: conducting children

We really wanted to bring it back to the kids . . . *integrated with the stories we set out to tell* (ABC, personal interview, 2003)

To this point, the 2003 LLWS has been discussed as a spectacular media event that was highly scripted and controlled by media production workers in an effort to (however superficially) represent the event as a ‘celebration’ of a truly international youth pastime. In particular, we have

pointed out how the narrative provided a telling space in which sovereign nation state politics collided with emergent modes of power, religiosity, moral tyranny and sovereignty – a neo-conservatism that at once compels the population and reproduces all aspects of social life. The production data provided herein extends the growing work on the (sport) media in what appears to be a shifting yet ‘perpetual state of war’ (Hardt & Negri 2004) and points to the often unquestioned and insidious place of sport as part of the powerful economy of affect which serves particular geo-political trajectories (see, for example, Falcous & Silk 2005; King 2005; McDonald 2005; Silk & Falcous 2005). However and perhaps most worryingly, with its efficient sleight of hand, the LLWS broadcast slips even more under the radar of popular consciousness and critique given that its focus is the seemingly benign realm of children’s baseball.

In this sense, the LLWS productions on ABC & ESPN (both owned and operated by the Disney Corporation) become another space in which we need, as Giroux (1995, 2002) proposed, to contest and struggle against Disney’s ‘trademarked innocence.’ Although talking primarily about animated movies, Giroux (2002: 105) suggested that Disney’s trademarked innocence often ‘renders it unaccountable for the diverse ways in which it shapes the sense of reality it provides for children as they take up specific and often sanitized notions of identity, difference, and history in the seemingly apolitical cultural universe of ‘the Magic Kingdom.’ We would argue that the LLWS productions not only provides a space for a perverse form of public pedagogy, that conditions, if not trains, American youth in the doctrines of Bush’s fanatical neo-conservative visions of geo-political domination, it also does so just as the same administration is waging an internal, domestic war against the poor, youth, women, people of color, and the elderly (Giroux 2003, 2004, 2005; Grossberg 2005).

Thus the LLWS becomes another public space for commercial and political exploitation in the service of a particular political agenda while the very same agenda positions youth in the degraded borderlands of the broken promises of capitalism, projects class and racial anxieties onto youth, polices and governs the very presence of children in our gentrified *urbanité*, weakens support for children’s rights, downgrades social services, creates an increasingly criminogenic public school, and, offers universities that seemingly take on the appearance of corporate training *camps* (Giroux 2003a; Grossberg 2005). In this sense, the LLWS provides a seemingly innocent space that sneaks into the collective (un)conscious of a captive audience through a powerful pedagogical discourse of geo-political domination, a discourse ‘sculpted from the spare rib of a world laid waste by America’s foreign policy’ (Butler 2002: 183).

By furnishing a programme featuring youth, Disney/ABC/ESPN set an emotive example of what constitutes ‘normal’ and safe nationalism in the United States. As we have demonstrated this nationalism is far from benign, as well as distinctly different from an America that was at one time questioning the use of National Anthems and/or other forms of national sentiment prior to sporting events (Martin & Reeves 2001). For now it is commonplace to hear the song *God Bless America* during the 7th inning of baseball games – games which often feature more International competitors

than Americans. It is *normal* for Americans to accept the placement of the flag of the United States on jerseys and caps, yet raise public furore over the desecration of 'our' game when new market logics influence Miramax to buy advertisements on those same bases for the film *Spiderman 2*. Little to no critique exists for the very system which influenced Miramax to do so and which dominates the many in both the United States and internationally (Grossberg 2005). Indeed, it is still often argued that the United States is the highest form of human civilization and that alternatives cannot or should not be considered (McLaren 2002).

While we understand that this is the accepted form of behavior in contemporary American society, we simultaneously assert that this is neither a benign nor an accurate depiction of everyday life in the United States. Unfortunately through spectacular arrangements utilizing the emotive and nationalist aspects of children playing baseball, there is a constant struggle to bring narratives of alternative, critical, and no less important, visions of contemporary society – informed by the recent past – to the fore so that the general public can recognize and, hopefully, name these overt and simplified visions of American superiority as patently false.

We would be remiss were we not to reflect on our current time of writing – 2007. At this juncture, the way the 2003 LLWS was positioned seems ridiculous, given that there now exists a general level of popular distrust in the US government, particularly for its President, his constituents and the general trajectory of the neoconservative Republican Party, which is qualitatively and quantitatively different from just a few short years ago. For example, Pollingreport.com (2007), a website which tracks several sources for George Bush's approval rating (including, among others, CBS News/Fox News/NY Times), has found that his average support has plummeted from approximately 88 percent in September of 2001, to around 33 percent in 2007. Further, staunch Republican Newt Gingrich characterized Karl Rove's 2004 election strategy as 'maniacally dumb for being so conservative' (Rutenberg 2007, p. 16), which he said led to a party in 'collapse' following the 2006 elections where the Democrats overtook the majority seats in the US Senate and House of Representatives. The shift in popular sentiment has been felt in popular culture as well. For example, the liberal-minded, satirical television show *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* is one of the country's most popular cable television 'news' programmes. Earlier in 2007, Rage Against the Machine lead singer, Zach de la Rocha, was cheered wildly following his comment during a performance at the Coachella concert festival in Los Angeles (Schou 2007) that George Bush 'should be tried, hung, and shot' for committing war crimes. Finally, the Dixie Chicks – whose anti-Bush remarks at a London concert in 2003 led to a loss of American public support – returned to sweep the Grammy's with their album *Taking the Long Way* (2006) which included songs like *Not Ready to Make Nice* that suggested that they were still critical of the current US political regime.

Coinciding with the shift in popular and political sentiment against the conservative American government, today it is possible to voice a general critique of US foreign policy in Iraq and Afghanistan, the lack of funding for public schools through the No Child Left Behind Act, or the attempt by

12 This is in reference to the addition of American flags to the tops of pizza boxes to demonstrate unquestioning support for the United States.

Homeland Defense (in)Security/USA Patriot Act to ethnically profile individuals under the guise of terrorist prevention (Denzin and Giardina 2006); to do so in public, or the classroom, without the same fear of 'ultra-patriotic' student/colleague backlash felt in the immediate post-9/11 moment. In other words simple-minded 'pizza box nationalism'¹², unquestioned support of neoconservative policies through popular representations of the Nation through television, film and music (Falcous and Silk 2006; Silk and Falcous, 2005) has more recently given way to a more complicated time whereby the American popular holds a weary and wary eye toward the War in Iraq, their President and the now-obviously disastrous policies his administration has ushered in.

It is perhaps such periods, when the intensity of the post-9/11 context has begun to wane, and the nation becomes attuned to new norms of popular nationalist invective that are often the most interesting and important to understand. It is not the nationalistic irrationality of a moment of crisis but the normalized nationalism of periods of relative and perceived stasis that are the most instructive in illuminating the relationship between the nationalist policies of a government regime and commercial nationalism (for it is a cultural nationalism propelled by economic dictates). Yet despite what we think we may term 'progress', our voices need to get louder and must 'never stop criticizing the levels of justice already achieved' and continue to seek 'more justice and better justice' (Bauman 2002, p. 54). Given these politics, it becomes imperative to think through how shifting social conditions frame cultural production in gaining an understanding of, and intervening in, the cultural politics of media discourse.

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Suggested citation

- White, R., Silk, M. and Andrews, D. (2008), 'Revisiting the networked production of the 2003 Little League World Series: narrative of American innocence', *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics* 4: 2, pp. 183–202, doi: 10.1386/macp.4.2.183/1

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