



Date: February 1, 2014

Title: Critiquing Culture from the Sidelines, a Conversation on Football, Cultural Critique, Ethics, and Collective Action

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URL: <http://tinyurl.com/q29n6cu>

Mary Ingram-Waters: *Curator's Introduction*

In their statement of purpose, Culture in Conversation (CIC) editors, Brian M. Creech, Evan L. Kropp, and Mark C. Lashley, write that, "It is our hope to make public one of the more fundamental truths of our own education: in the life of a scholar, there are few experiences more exciting than the moment when ideas begin rubbing against one another and turn into something else entirely." For Dr. Jenny Dyck Brian, Dr. Nicki Lisa Cole, and I, these moments of collaboration -- some as quick and informal as hallway chats -- are invaluable not only for the trajectories of our research but also for our development as scholars. Personally, I am at the beginning of a new research study on the social experiences of fantasy sports participants. I have a lot of data and I am trying to make sense of it. Jenny, a colleague and friend, is a bioethicist who once described her family as "organized around football." When I talked with Jenny about my data, I benefited from her expertise as an ethicist, well versed in how people manage their own complicity in response to unsavory phenomena, as much as I did from her personal background as someone who grew up using football as means to interact with her family members. Nicki, a friend and fellow alum from the Sociology Department at the University of California, Santa Barbara, has always been my go-to expert on any kind of cultural practice-based activism. Thus, it seemed like a natural progression of events for me to reach out to both Jenny and Nicki for help in exploring the meaning-making activities of my research participants.

When I first began researching the experiences of people who play fantasy football, I was immediately struck by a bias I carried into my work: without realizing it, I

assumed that fantasy football players, or “team owners” as they call themselves, enjoyed their play in rather uncritical ways. I assumed that the transformative work that they did as fans was somehow different from the work of other media fans. I didn’t see fantasy football as a site for critique the way that something like fanfiction might be. I thought team owners had fun playing fantasy football and that their interactions with each other, along with their shifting identities as fans, were of sociological interest. I realized after a couple of interviews that, like many other kinds of media fans, they use their fan activities to critique the source texts. In short, team owners use the mechanisms of fantasy football to challenge a range of different aspects about football that they find troublesome.

I first approached Jenny with this set of observations. Jenny seemed unsurprised that fans would use fantasy football for both pleasure and critique. Jenny went on to talk about her own decision to boycott professional football games because she didn’t want to be an enabler to a system that minimizes the dangers the game poses to players’ bodies and the off-game violence perpetrated by the players themselves. A few minutes into our conversation, Jenny wondered aloud whether or not her boycott, and the public boycotts of prominent ethicists and sports writers, as well as the choices of fantasy football team owners, could actually make a difference given the strong cultural placement of football. That’s when we reached out to Nicki as someone who might have an answer to that question, given her research about the role of purchasing power, broadly construed, as a means of activism.

Once the three of us began talking, we realized that these examples of taking stances against football provided a good starting point for thinking about how people use cultural practices as a site for cultural critique. That conversation is here.

Mary Ingram-Waters: *The ethical dilemmas of fantasy football*

To begin our conversation on the critical functions of cultural practices, I will briefly summarize my findings on fantasy football team owners’ experiences confronting ethical dilemmas while playing fantasy football.

In interviews with 30 fantasy football team owners, all but three of them mentioned players’ personal lives as some kind of factor in their decision-making processes for the draft. For most of the 27 team owners who considered players’ personal lives, they liked to choose players who were both good on and off the field, generally. For example, it was relatively common to hear something like what this participant said: “I like him. He’s a good player and he’s always doing something for charities.”

Twelve of the 27 went further, though, saying that they thought very seriously about the specific off-game actions of players when they made decisions to draft players onto their teams. Only three out of the 30 participants said that they made their choices entirely on statistics and predictions and specifically not about anything “personal”. One of those three went as far as to say, “Nothing else matters to me but performance. As to what they do on their own time, who am I to judge?” Note that the question asked was: “How do you decide who to draft onto your fantasy football team?” For the twelve participants who did take into consideration players’ specific off-game actions when making draft decisions, players who were implicated in general violence, domestic violence, sexual assault, and/or animal cruelty, were ruled out as unacceptable for inclusion in their teams. Further, one person added what he called demonstrations of “fake religiosity” to the list of unacceptable attributes of players.

When fantasy football team owners form a league, their first order of league business is usually the draft. Team owners have a range of activities that they may or may not engage in when making decisions on players. Some team owners do what they call extensive research on players before trying to draft them. Some team owners do no research and instead rely on their “gut instincts.” Still, other team owners make research-based decisions on some positions and consider auto-draft selections for other positions. The twelve participants who made what they think of as ethically conscious player decisions could be found in each of these different decision-making groups. For example, one owner, who was also a long-standing commissioner of a league, said that he did “hours and hours” of research in the three weeks prior to his league’s draft. He said that even though one player in particular seemed like a “no brainer pick” based on strong predictions for high scoring throughout the season, he could “never draft a player like that,” who, in this case, had been convicted of animal cruelty. Moreover, he consistently “talked trash” about this particular player’s performance whenever he could to the team owner who did draft that player, saying things like, “Dog killer isn’t so hot this week, is he?”

Another interviewee said that he would not have rapists on his team. Like the person quoted above, this participant said that he knew that a particular player was well favored to bring in a lot of points over the season. Yet, he went on to say that he would not do anything that would indicate that he supported the actions, in any way, of the player who had been implicated in numerous sexual assault cases. He said, “I won’t play that guy because he is a rapist,” and explained that for him, playing “a rapist” would be “glorifying his behavior.” In a different example, two team owners

who played in the same league said that no one in their entire league drafted a particular player because of their shared ethical stance on that player's alleged behavior. One of the owners told me: "No one picked him or would. We don't want any of that." For these three participants, what is implied by their choices is that there are players in the NFL who are generally undesirable, regardless of their on-field performance potential.

When I think of these twelve participants' choices, I can see that they all have something in common: though they are still watching football and playing fantasy football, they are doing so while honoring their own sense of what's right. They recognize that within football, there are players who are successful even though they are charged with or even convicted of criminal behavior. For most of the twelve participants that I am considering here, they see their choices as a means to critique particular players' actions. When participants say, "We don't want any of that" and that playing "a rapist" would be "glorifying his behavior," they are also critiquing the larger system of football that doesn't seem to censure players' morality. When they say no to particular players because of their actions, they imply that the NFL, in not saying no, has been complicit.

When I focus on fantasy football team owners' ethical stances and consequent exclusionary practices, I can also see them as people who are disillusioned with a cultural system, football, and, in their own way, are taking steps to critique or even reform it. These fantasy football team owners are not boycotting football as a whole. Even the participants most vocal with their disgust of certain players' actions and the NFL's perceived inadequacy at dealing with players' actions didn't want to give up football. But they didn't want to actively support those players, either.

Jenny Dyck Brian: Managing Moral Panic

Perhaps due to my doctoral training in ethics or perhaps due to my peculiar moral instincts (at age 12, I declared my opposition to the patriarchal and potentially repressive institution of marriage, my intention to adopt children, and my vegetarianism), I frequently experience a sense of moral distress over wider wrongs I am powerless to stop. Football was not a source of moral panic, but it did start to become uncomfortable a couple years ago, as more evidence of brain injuries, and specifically chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), surfaced, and as I saw (or at least, noticed and paid more attention to) more reports of criminal activity (sexual assault, domestic violence, assault, robbery, gun violence) by NFL players in the off-season. I started to seek out commentaries or opinion pieces that were more critical

of football and the NFL. I had conversations about why watching football was feeling more challenging with friends and family. Many of them agreed with my concerns, and together we discussed how complicated the issues are. For example, one study (that is now 15 years old) found that crime rates amongst NFL players are well below crime rates for the general population. We might just have the perception that criminal arrests are more common amongst NFL players because of media reports, or because we dedicate our Sundays to doing nothing but taking in all the information we can about football. And now that we have, or are gathering, significant evidence about CTE, adult male football players can make whatever decisions they want to with respect to their bodies and futures. I mean, to a certain extent, everyone who watches and likes football (and everyone who doesn't) understands that the game is violent and very unsafe; it is a profession with tremendous injury risk, and the players accept that risk in exchange for what they perceive to be the worthwhile benefits of money, fame, or "love of the game."

As a brief aside, chronic traumatic encephalopathy is a progressive degenerative disease of the brain found in athletes (and others) with a history of repetitive brain trauma. Unlike traumatic brain injuries, it can only be diagnosed postmortem. Traumatic brain injury (TBI) is a form of acquired brain injury, and occurs when a sudden trauma causes damage to the brain. Symptoms of TBI can range from mild to severe (as a point of reference, a concussion is a mild traumatic brain injury). In 2012, almost 4,500 former players sued the National Football League, accusing the league of concealing the dangers of concussion and failing to properly treat injured players. Days before the start of the 2013-14 season, the plaintiffs reached a tentative \$765 million settlement over concussion-related brain injuries among its 18,000 retired players. The league agreed to compensate victims (of Alzheimer's disease, CTE, dementia), pay for medical exams, and fund research. The reactions amongst observers were mixed, but there was general agreement that the settlement was very friendly to the NFL. One likely outcome of the settlement is that the results of the NFL's decade-long study on mild traumatic brain injuries, led by a rheumatologist, will never be released to the public.

Mary Ingram-Waters: A brief aside to Jenny's brief aside

Let me pause and tell you about one of my non-findings. I found no evidence that fantasy football participants feel complicit about football players' increased risk of CTE or other sport-related injuries. Further, the only participant who raised the issue of concussions did so to tell me that he is more aware of them because he might have players out on the injury list for longer periods of time as they recover

from concussions. Thus, fantasy football team owners who I talked to are primarily concerned with their own complicity in players' morally questionable actions and, sometimes, in the NFL's complicity with these same actions. But they tend to not feel responsible at all for those players' injuries or risk of injuries.

Jenny Dyck Brian: Speaking Out

One of the people who followed the suit closely is my colleague, Daniel Goldberg. Goldberg is a lawyer and bioethicist at East Carolina University who has written about football and head injuries. He and I are friends on Twitter, and we started tweeting about the difficulties of watching football at about the same time. We had followed the writings of *The Atlantic's* Ta-Nehisi Coates, who publicly declared – upon news of the suicide of celebrated player, Junior Seau – that he could no longer watch football. Coates wrote eloquently about his discomfort, and cited a Malcolm Gladwell interview in *Slate* in which Gladwell claimed banning the NFL is difficult, if players are explicitly made aware of the risks and are compensated for their injuries (Gladwell does argue we ought to ban college football). According to Gladwell, deciding whether it is ethical to watch football is *very* difficult.

The issue that Gladwell alludes to is one of complicity. In *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas argued there are nine ways a person can be complicit in wrongdoing: by command, by counsel, by consent, by flattery, by receiving, by participation, by silence, by not preventing, and by not denouncing. He argued that to have complicity in most cases, actions of enabler are necessary condition for the production of harm by actions of primary agent. In order for the NFL (primary agents) to be successful, it must have fans (enablers) who are willing to spend money on tickets, merchandise, cable television packages. By speaking out and denouncing the wrongdoings of the NFL, I and others are trying to do *something* about our perceived and actual complicity. However, complicity is not the same as responsibility. In *On Complicity and Compromise* (Oxford University Press, 2013), Lepora and Goodin argue that it is important to recognize situations in which we are already complicit, as well as the need to justify our choices. As moral agents in a globalized world, we are complicit in many horrible wrong doings for which we are not responsible. So, one larger question for this conversation (and beyond) is: when we can avoid complicity, ought we? Where will we focus our energies, and by what equation will we justify our decisions?

Nicki Lisa Cole: On What Makes a Boycott Successful

That's a great point, Jenny. Indeed, when we can avoid being complicit in things we

frame as morally or ethically wrong, we surely ought to. From Mary's data and your own experience and observations, it seems clear that boycotting the NFL or certain players within the fantasy football context are meaningful actions in just this way. As an unabashed critical sociologist, however, I can't help but dig into this logic.

What are the implications of these choices? Are such boycotts effective ways of expressing critique? Do they actually put pressure on the NFL to address the problems of player safety and violence? If we avoid being complicit in something we do not like, who is served by that avoidance?

In responding to these questions I think it will be useful to reflect on the historical origins of the boycott and to examine the characteristics of successful boycotts throughout history. In *Buying power: A history of consumer activism in America* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), Lawrence B. Glickman recounts that the practice of boycotting, so named for a British land agent targeted by Irish peasants in 1880, was introduced in the United States shortly thereafter. From that point on, it quickly became a popular mode for the collective expression of political, ethical, or moral displeasure. According to Glickman, the latter decades of the 19th century in America were riddled with boycotts, which seemingly broke out, expanded, and multiplied like a contagion.

In these early days of what we might now consider consumer activism, the boycott was an effective mode of political activism because it ostracized the target, cutting them off from social and economic ties in a multitude of ways. A business target was not only boycotted by its customers and often its employees, but any suppliers or related businesses who had dealings with the target were pressured to mind the boycott, lest they be enclosed within its scope. During this era, boycotts gained momentum through word of mouth in urban centers and advertising in local newspapers, in "working men's" papers that circulated amongst the labor class, and even via boycott-specific publications, like the aptly named "Boycotter," that kept the public abreast of ongoing and new boycotts. They were effective because the vast majority of the consuming audience for the target's products or services participated, a goal readily achievable at that time due to the more localized nature of production, distribution, consumption, and the scale of business.

These boycotts were about far more than avoiding complicity. Their leaders articulated clear demands of the target, and used collective ostracism to put the target in a position in which relenting to those demands was the only way to resolve

the boycott. Solidarity with the cause, and widespread participation in a boycott, are necessary for it to be effective. In fact, one could argue that without collective ostracism of the target, the boycott doesn't actually exist, apart from in the mind of an individual or a group of people.

This calls into question the efficacy of an impassioned, though not widespread, boycott of the NFL, or of the individual boycott of certain players within fantasy football. If the NFL and its players do not know that people are boycotting them, then they are neither socially nor economically ostracized, and, therefore, a boycott does not actually exist. Rather, certain people are practicing abstinence as regards the NFL and its problematic players.

This is exactly what I see happening with Mary's interviewees, and how I would characterize the actions of dedicated consumers of ethically sourced coffee, who I surveyed and interviewed between 2007 and 2009. When I read through Mary's description of the moral and ethical considerations fantasy football team owners take in the process of choosing players, I was struck by the fact that it is the same logic I observed amongst my own research participants. In essence, this logic breaks down to avoiding association with those we see as bad actors, and instead, associating with those we see as good actors, or at least, neutral. One my informants put it this way: "I just don't like people suffering, or people's lives to go bad because of my personal choices." (See "Ethical Consumption in the Global Age: Coffee's Promise of a Better World," forthcoming in *Consumer culture, modernity and identity*.)

What this logic and practice amounts to is eliminating one's guilt-from-association with identified bad actors, be they Starbucks, Walmart, or Michael Vick. This kind of approach and logic is pretty far afield from the collective ostracism that has historically undergirded successful boycotts. The outcome of such an effort is that an individual's conscience is cleared, and that's about it. This kind of individualized ethical maneuvering within a troubled system does not have an impact on the system itself.

Mary Ingram-Waters: Avoidance as Critique?

I hear you, Nicki, and I appreciate how you situate boycotts historically. That is definitely not what the fantasy football team owners that I talked to are doing. They didn't say anything that would lead me to believe that they are disillusioned enough with football to engage in what we might think of as serious, sustained activism. But

many of the people I talked to were so thoughtful and conscientious about their actions. How do we think about the meaning-making practices of their choices?

Nicki Lisa Cole: The Limits of Awareness

Yet, that does not mean that there is *no* value to boycotting the NFL or certain players in the context of fantasy football. If conversations about injury and criminal behavior are had between NFL fans and fantasy football team owners because some have chosen to practice abstinence, then a discursive shift could occur, and critical awareness of these issues might spread through social networks, both on and offline. So, there may be a *cultural* value to such efforts.

I found through my research with consumers of ethically sourced coffee that choosing to purchase a product surrounded by an ethical frame--like organic produce, locally made clothing, or fair trade certified goods, or even choosing to ride a bicycle rather than consume fossil fuels through driving a car--often spurs critical reflection about one's social role as a consumer, and that one choice can act as a gateway to additional ethical considerations and purchases. So, consumer choices and actions can increase a person's awareness of the range and scope of environmental, social, and economic problems embedded within the system of global capitalism.

Nonetheless, I question the efficacy of increased awareness if the action generated by it is limited to consumer choices. When we make a purchase and the product we buy tells us we've done good, that we should feel good about ourselves, that little by little, we are changing the world, we do tend to feel good, because the purchase has allowed us access to an ethical consumer subjectivity. Consuming ethically coded goods assuages some of the anxiety we feel about living as privileged consumers in a world riddled with troubling inequities, and plagued by environmental unsustainability. But, while ethical consumption can make marginally positive impacts on producing communities, and take small steps toward planetary sustainability, it also has the potential to hamper political activism beyond consumer channels, because it offers a guilty conscience the easy out of instant consumer gratification. Critical theorist Herbert Marcuse referred to this type of phenomenon as "repressive desublimation"--the pushing back into us of the anxieties that bubble to the surface of our consciousness. Reaching for fair trade certified coffee, or *not* drafting NFL players who are violent criminals, can give us access to a "happy consciousness," which the resolution of personal anxieties at no cost to the system that generates them, serves to reproduce the very system that

troubles us.

To that end, I question the efficacy of a limited boycott of--what I would actually call abstinence from--certain NFL players or of the NFL itself. When a fantasy football team owner experiences the warm glow of moral subjectivity after choosing to abstain from a player, what changes in the patriarchal system--the root of the troubling violence and injury--because he or she did this? What changes for survivors of sexual assault or violent crime? I struggle to even understand what the desired outcome of an attempted boycott is, apart from peace of mind for the fantasy team owner, and call into question even using the term "boycott," since no perceptible form of social or economic ostracism is produced by these processes.

Jenny Dyck Brian: Collective responsibility and the call to action

So do I have permission to watch football again?? (Just kidding.) Those are excellent points, Nicki, and they speak really powerfully to the dilemma that many of us face with respect to our consumer decisions. I used the phrase "moral panic" earlier to describe my discomfort with wider wrongs I am powerless to stop. Kwame Anthony Appiah used the phrase "moral taint" to describe a feeling of collective responsibility. According to Appiah, our moral integrity may be affected when we are associated with harm, but are not members of the specific group or collective responsible for the harm ("Racism and Moral Pollution", *Philosophical Forum*, 1987). If we are not members of the collective responsible for the harm, we are in no way responsible for those harms. I -- and fantasy football team owners -- are associated with the harms to NFL players, but we are not responsible for those harms. Once we recognize our association, though, what is the right course of action? I harbor no illusions that I am effecting change by turning off my TV on Sundays, but I see some value in someone, like Ta-Nehisi Coates writing about why football has become too problematic to watch, discuss, or enjoy (especially since he used to write about football frequently and he has a large and loyal following). I also wonder what effect, if any, the lawsuit settlement will have, especially for parents of young children who want to play football.

The Translational Genomic Research Institute (TGen), Riddell (the helmet manufacturer) and Arizona State University are partners in a genetic study on the detection and treatment of concussions. The ASU football team will participate in the study to identify whether the effects of sub-concussive hits can be identified through blood-based molecular information. The goal is to develop ways to develop concussions quickly, on the sidelines, and treat them immediately and effectively.

ASU's role as a participating organization can be seen as a different kind of activism, or perhaps a different site for critique from within the cultural system itself. The study acknowledges the significant risks of playing football; it is not a program to reform particular aspects of play. Rather, the study focuses on better detection and treatment methods and better equipment design in order to still justify asking and expecting young players to engage in dangerous activities. While the study feels insufficient to address and correct the significant harms to young football players (in exchange for money, some kind of glory, and team spirit), I do deeply appreciate ASU's participation in this study. It signals, to some extent, that they care about the troubling aspects of the sport.

Mary Ingram-Waters: The View from the Sidelines

While I know that you're joking, Jenny, I am left wondering how you will answer. Even if you know that your boycott, or what Nicki refers to as abstinence, from football isn't particularly effective, will you give yourself permission to watch it again? I wonder what will happen if my research participants are confronted with a player's questionable actions if they've already drafted that player. In other words, when you recognize that you are complicit in something undesirable, do you take steps to manage that complicity? My research participants have tried to manage their complicity by making thoughtful, targeted choices for their teams. If they come to realize that their choices don't actually challenge the larger system of football, will they boycott football or will they seek out larger-scale, more effective forms of activism? Or will they continue to make the choices that they can make and thus continue to sit out on the sidelines?

My interview data suggest that fantasy football team owners can take their draft decisions very seriously. Team owners want to draft players that they feel good about. They also want to make a statement about players whose actions they see as unacceptable. Though their exclusion of unacceptable players is not, in and of itself, a highly visible practice, it could be part of a broader critique of football if it can be effectively tied to other critiques. From what you've said, Nicki, in order for boycotts to be effective, they need to be linked to other sets of social actions that promote social cohesion around a shared identity. Further, this shared identity must be motivated by a clear goal of ostracism. When fantasy football team owners use fantasy football to criticize players and the NFL for its complicity with those players' actions, they are doing so in a larger cultural arena that includes people like Jenny who are boycotting football. This arena also includes other stakeholders who are questioning aspects of football, like its danger for children. When taken in concert

with other stakeholders, fantasy football team owners' actions, as "small" as they are, could affect change.

But as you argue, Nicki, fantasy football team owners' abstinence, while personally meaningful, is not effective as either a widespread and shared identity or a means to ostracize a group of actors. In fact, it is not clear who is targeted by fantasy football team owners' actions: sometimes, the goal is to exclude players while other times, the implied wrongdoer is the NFL. Still, other times, the goal is to make another fantasy football team owner feel bad for drafting a particular player.

Mary Ingram-Waters: Curator's Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, the primary goal of the CIC is to illuminate the relationship between the process and products of collaboration. In this case, the collaboration was almost accidental. When I began having conversations with Jenny about some fantasy football team owners' struggles with whom to draft, I had no idea that I would look at fantasy football as a site for cultural critique. Jenny helped me understand how and why fantasy football team owners would struggle with their own sense of complicity with the actions of players and the NFL. Nicki helped me contextualize their struggles as ineffective as any kind of larger scale activism. To be sure, none of my research participants said that they hoped their actions would bring about the downfall of the NFL. Rather, they wanted to play fantasy football on their own terms, as much as they could. They wanted to opportunity to be critical of players and/or the NFL, even if their audience was limited to their league.

We end this collaborative conversation with a clearer sense of the challenges of using cultural mechanisms (fantasy football), to critique mainstream culture (football). Most of my research participants wanted to feel good about their choices. About half of them made deliberate decisions in response to specific actions by players for the purpose of preserving their own sense of integrity while playing fantasy football. The three participants who clearly said that they didn't judge players for their actions took steps to justify their choices, knowing that they risked tainting themselves with their players' morally objectionable actions. My research participants, even the three outliers, were all aware of players' questionable status as alleged or convicted criminals. Jenny has helped us understand why the awareness manifests in action (and deliberate inaction) and Nicki has cautioned us to understand the limits of awareness if it is a stopping point for critique.

I thank my two conversationalists, Dr. Jenny Dyck Brian and Dr. Nicki Lisa Cole, for talking this through with me. I thank the editors at CIC for recognizing the value of both collaboration and works-in-progress. I warmly invite all comments and questions.