2024

Introduction

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Recommended Citation
DOI: 10.56702/MPMC7908/saspro4801.2
Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/southernanthro_proceedings/vol48/iss1/2

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Introduction

Kiley E. Molinari

The 56th annual Southern Anthropological Society (SAS) meeting was hosted by the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminal Justice at Valdosta State University, in Valdosta, Georgia. The theme “Anthropological Orientations: Ways of Being Interdisciplinary” brought together students, faculty, and other researchers in the social sciences. Some of the authors in this volume of the Proceedings have taken an interdisciplinary approach through their research methods and writing to give us fascinating topics focusing on various sports around the world, as well as different community changes and adaptations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Whether it was combing through archival materials to find photos and expedition reports perpetuating gendered stereotypes of women in mountaineering, taking Muay Thai classes to get a better understanding of how this particular type of martial art is practiced, or co-authors across the fields of sociology and anthropology writing a paper together, authors in this volume added to the conference’s 2023 theme. In doing so, we learn to celebrate both the big and small victories, including instances that not only have to do with sporting events, but also our own health and well-being.

Across the human experience, there are a range of events that make us come together as families, fans, members of the same group, or citizens of a specific town, city, or country. Often, those events can be happy, fun, or encouraging, and give people a chance
to celebrate a successful martial arts competition, or the acceptance of women into the world of sporting competitions. Two authors used a variety of ways to study different aspects of sports through their exploration of participation, meaning, and belonging in Muay Thai from a global perspective and mountaineering in Patagonia. Sports have been an integral part of people’s lives for thousands of years. These include both professional and amateur sports, individual and team sports, and all the hobby sports in-between. Sports allow us to come together, give us someone to root for, instill a sense of belonging to a particular area of the world, or team more specifically, and afford us a common connection and something to talk about with fellow fans.

Kaitlyn C. Sisco analyzes gender dynamics and the history of feminine marginalization within the digital archive of the Club Andino Bariloche (CAB), an Andean mountaineering and winter sports club located in the Argentine city of Bariloche. Sisco develops the concept of gendered ideologies of mountaineering to evaluate how mountaineers represent nature, construct agency in relation to overcoming nature, and downplay specific types of subjectivity at the expense of others. Though revealing the extent to which masculine hegemony has defined the history of the CAB since its founding in 1931, Sisco also identifies the emergence of a transitional feminism in the late twentieth century that has consolidated new forms of feminine protagonism in the Andes.

Dana B. Dawson produced a capacious qualitative meta-analysis of books, articles, and ethnographies focused on the sport of Muay Thai. Muay Thai is a widely practiced and popular martial art originating in Thailand that has been globalized through its connection to the sport of mixed martial arts (MMA). MMA is a
combat sport that integrates techniques from various martial arts around the world, including Muay Thai, jiu-jitsu, judo, and karate, among others. Centering the study conceptually within the anthropology of the (sporting) body, Dawson’s analysis highlights three dimensions of cultural meaning-making: the search for social mobility for native practitioners; the escape from restricted lives and pursuit of training and fighting opportunities in Thailand by foreign athletes; and efforts by Thailand to protect the cultural heritage of Muay Thai as a national tradition while also seeking to popularize it as a global sport. Dawson pulls in her own experiences of taking Muay Thai classes in the United States to add reflexive and autoethnographic dimensions to the discussion. Through her research she illuminates how Muay Thai is viewed in different competitive spaces around the world, both as an amateur and professional sport.

Other events that cause humans to come together are on the opposite end of human emotions, solidifying people with a shared experience that causes anxiety, forces people to grieve for ‘what was,’ or involves fear of the unknown, such as COVID-19. The pandemic has and continues to influence nearly all segments of our lives. From education to the corporate world, the medical field to the nonprofit sector, remote work from home to jobs across the tourism industry, everyone has had to figure out what a ‘new normal’ means. People’s hobbies, activities, religious services, and daily schedules were all impacted, some changing for a few months or years, and some possibly forever. The last two papers in the volume give audiences a better understanding of how religious rituals, such as the Eucharist, changed during the pandemic to keep practitioners safe, as well as how the pandemic exacerbated the
already overlooked and overworked field of mental health care provisioning in rural areas of Georgia.

The paper by Marjorie M. Snipes focuses on the disruption that the COVID-19 pandemic had on parishioners of different Christian denominations in reference to receiving the Eucharist. Focusing on a rural town in Georgia, Snipes interviewed a total of seven pastors and priests across six denominations to understand how members were able to receive the Eucharist at a time when religious services were forced to find an alternative to face-to-face meetings during the early stages of the pandemic. Each church had their own ways of ensuring that the Eucharistic ritual was practiced each week: some had parishioners use items at their own homes; others had only religious leaders participate while streaming the service; and still others had to-go ‘snack packs’ that members could pick up to use at home while they watched the service online. Through the eyes of these pastors and priests, Snipes explains the importance of maintaining rituals at a time of so much uncertainty.

Shelly A. Yankovskyy and Anne M. Price have written their paper on concerns surrounding mental health issues in South Georgia. While the primary focus of their paper revolves around mental health during COVID-19, they also explore how some changes in the medical field since the pandemic will hopefully help give patients—who are struggling with their mental health and well-being—more aid and opportunities. Telehealth appointments are components of the medical field that were not as common before the pandemic as they are now. These online appointments gave individuals the flexibility and reassurance to be able to continue to talk to a medical professional in a relatively safe and controlled environment. Yankovskyy and Price not only analyzed mental
health data across South Georgia to highlight disparities in mental health provisioning in this region of the United States, but they also interviewed clinicians practicing in the area to get a better perspective on their experiences during and since the pandemic.

Each one of the authors included in this volume spent time researching important topics taking place in different parts of the world. They concentrated on various issues while drawing attention to mental health resources, the politics surrounding gender in mountaineering, perceptions of Muay Thai and its cultural ties, and modifications in taking the Eucharist during the pandemic. Their papers allow readers to get a better idea of events that bring us together, talk about our shared experiences, and continue the fight for the recognition of certain groups. To an extent, they all touch on celebrating: celebrating still being able to accept the body of Christ, the learning of Muay Thai, the advancement of women’s participation in mountaineering, and steps leading to the availability of more resources in the field of mental health.