NO LYMPIANS

INSIDE THE FIGHT AGAINST CAPITALIST MEGA-SPORTS IN LOS ANGELES, TOKYO & BEYOND

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For Kaia Sand and Jessi Wahnetah
And for Gilmar Mascarenhas (1962–2019)

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Sudo Kumiko, anti-Olympics organizer with the Tokyo-based group Hangorin No Kai, speaks at a pop-up protest outside the official one-year-to-go Olympic ceremony on 24 July 2019. Tokyo.
Photo credit: Jules Boykoff

Introduction

A COLLECTIVE GASP RIPPLED THROUGH the ballroom at the Tokyo International Forum. After entering the room at a brisk clip, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe stumbled forward, lurching toward the dais of Olympic luminaries, which included International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach. Fortunately for Abe, a security official caught him before he hit the floor, dodging a potentially mortifying, viral-video moment. "I almost tripped when I entered the room," the prime minister said. "Thomas Bach praised me that my recovery was like an athlete."

It was July 2019, and Abe and Bach were on hand for the official one-year-to-go ceremony ahead of the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics. The room was packed with hundreds of VIPs from the spheres of sport, politics, and art who were spread out across thirteen elegantly arranged tables replete with name cards propped atop gleaming white tablecloths. Behind them, hundreds of journalists had arranged themselves in a horseshoe. Some wobbled uncomfortably from foot to foot while others sat on the floor, since chairs were not provided. Many grumbled under their breath about the juxtaposition. Journalists did not have the opportunity to vent publicly, however, as they were never granted time to ask questions — the information only flowed in one direction.

Although I am not a journalist, per se, I had cajoled my way into the event. After a torrent of Twitter direct messages, a Tokyo 2020 communications staff member showed me a flicker of mercy. At check-in, I saw that my name was scrawled onto a light-blue sticky note affixed to the official list of accredited journalists. That's how I ended up twenty meters from the IOC President when he vowed that because of the Olympics, "You will see all of Japan united." Bach and Prime Minister Abe sang from the same five-ring hymnal that the Tokyo 2020 Olympics were the "Recovery Games," a nod to the triple-whammy earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown in Fukushima in 2011. Bach stated, "You will see that people

in the devastated areas will benefit from the infrastructure brought by the Games and they will benefit from the hope that the Olympics bring."

I was not in my comfort zone, and not just because I was wedged between ornery journalists on the floor while a phalanx of earpiece-clad security personnel was staring us down. And not just because of the jocular backslapping and fawning flattery at the front of the room.

In reality, Fukushima was on my mind. I had just returned from Fukushima Prefecture where I spoke with locals who openly guffawed at the "Recovery Games" slogan. The roads there were riddled with abandoned homes and businesses. The locals wore protective masks. Enormous stacks of black plastic bags containing soil in the throes of the radiation decontamination process dotted the landscape — locals dubbed them "black pyramids." Fukushima-based journalist Hiroko Aihara told me, "The government has pushed propaganda over truth," adding, "People in Fukushima are still suffering today. For them, the crisis and the cleanup and contamination continue."[1]

Such truth-telling was nowhere to be found at the gala ceremony in Tokyo. Only one speaker uttered the word "Fukushima." Instead, Bach broke out the boilerplate bromides, words that could be applied to every Olympic host: "It will be a wonderful and unique moment for our gracious Japanese hosts, for you, to show the world the best of Japan. Your rich history and traditions, your cutting-edge innovation, your culture of hospitality, and of course your love and passion for sport." This was the cut-and-paste rhetoric of high-level Olympic leadership.

When I walked outside after the ceremony, I encountered a striking contrast. Anti-Olympics activists from Tokyo, Los Angeles, Rio de Janeiro, and Pyeongchang, South Korea — cities that are future and former Olympic hosts — had created a pop-up protest on the edge of the official Olympic celebration zone. They chanted anti-Games slogans in multiple languages while drums thumped in the background. If the official Olympic ceremony was monochromatic and rote, the raucous rally outside was colorful and unpredictable.

The truth is that I am a whole lot more comfortable in the streets than in the suites. For more than a decade, I have been tracking anti-Olympics activism. My approach has always been bottom-up rather than top-down. In other words, rather than attending official Olympic events, I talk to and work with grassroots activists, homeless people, community organizers,

displaced residents, poets, and everyday working people — those in the Olympic city who are unlikely to have the means to afford a ticket to an Olympic event. Over the years, I have found in city after Olympic city that the streets pulsed with creativity and life, promise and potential, as well as a vigorous skepticism for what the Games would bring. Along the way, I have attended events featuring Olympic officials that were full of pomp, opulence, and top-shelf cheese plates, far from the scruffy vim, vitality, and whimsicality of the street.

For me, it started in Vancouver, Canada — just up the road from where I live in Portland, Oregon — host of the 2010 Winter Olympics. In response to the Games, activists organized a rambunctious, multi-front rebuttal that deployed a diversity of tactics.[2] In 2012, I moved to England to follow the anti-Olympics dissent that was percolating there ahead of the London 2012 Summer Games. I skipped the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia on the advice of a journalist from a major US newspaper who told me that I had already written plenty to offend the higher-ups in Russia — including Vladimir Putin and the oligarchs who were backing the Olympics with millions of the billions they had siphoned off during the neoliberal bacchanalia known as the Yeltsin years — and that it would be wise to stay outside the country. In 2015, I moved to Rio de Janeiro, thanks to a research fellowship from the Fulbright Commission, where I worked with activist groups who were challenging the logic of the Olympics. I attended protests, debates, and organizational meetings before and during the 2016 Rio Games.

Truth be told, after Rio, I thought I was done writing about anti-Olympic activism. That was until the NOlympics LA group surfaced in May 2017 to oppose the Los Angeles bid for the Summer Olympics. NOlympics LA emerged from the Democratic Socialists of America chapter in Los Angeles and more specifically its Housing and Homelessness Committee. It quickly became clear to me that something very different was happening in Los Angeles. I decided to dig in and find out what was going on. I traveled to Los Angeles numerous times for extended periods to attend events and meetings and to carry out interviews with activists. I spoke with activists from NOlympics LA and the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), circled back to anti-Olympics campaigners in cities like Chicago, Vancouver, and London, and talked with anti-Games folks from future hosts like Tokyo and Paris. And I convened with many of them in Tokyo in July 2019 at the first-ever transnational anti-Olympics summit, a week-long slate of events

with anti-Games activists from around the globe that coincided with the IOC's official one-year-to-go ceremony.

One of the great contrasts of sports mega-events is that while they often bring out the best in athletes, they tend to bring out the worst in host cities and countries. History has shown that the Olympics create a prime opportunity for hosts to engage in sportswashing: using sports events to launder their stained reputations and to distract domestic publics from chronic problems. With authoritarian hosts, the Games can deflect global attention from their horrific human rights record.[3] Exhibit A is the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia. Exhibit B is the 2008 Beijing Summer Games. In a moment of candor, one high-level sports administrator admitted "less democracy is sometimes better for organizing a [sports mega-event] … When you have a very strong head of state who can decide, as maybe Putin can…that is easier for us organizers."[4] IOC member Gian-Franco Kaspar echoed this sentiment: "Dictators can perhaps carry out such events; they do not have to ask the people."[5] In democratic societies, sportswashing distracts us from unjust processes like gentrification and overpolicing. And human-rights violations happen daily in Western democracies, too. For instance, in Los Angeles, in the lead up to the 2028 Olympics, an epic humanitarian crisis around homelessness is unfolding in plain sight.

The Path Forward

This book charts the decline of host-city interest in the Olympics — fewer and fewer cities are game to stage the Games — and the rise of two political forces: anti-Olympics activism and the Democratic Socialists of America. As Mike Davis presciently recognized in his epic study of Los Angeles, the city has emerged as both "the archetypal site of massive and unprotesting subordination of industrialized intelligensias to the program of capital" as well as "fertile soil for some of the most acute critiques of the culture of late capitalism."[6] This trenchant assessment encapsulates the dynamics nestled at the core of this book: the machinations of capital that churn mercilessly throughout the City of Angels and that backbone the plans of Olympics boosters as well as the bracing political realities of hosting the Olympic Games that local activists spotlight in response. In Los Angeles, NOlympics LA is converting criticism of capitalism — and how it plays out in the context of hosting the Olympics — into boots-to-pavement action,

using the Games as a trampoline for leftist activism.

Since bursting onto the political scene in the wake of the 2016 election, the Democratic Socialists of America have generated immense public interest, whether from right-wing outlets detracting the activists, leftist outlets cautiously hyping the zeitgeist, or mainstream media groping to slot the group into conventional political grooves. DSA has shown that socialism is no mere vestige of the past, but a vibrant political laboratory of the future. It has embraced a version of anti-capitalism expressed by sociologist Erik Olin Wright "not simply as a moral stance toward the harms and injustices in the world in which we live, but as a practical stance toward building an alternative for greater human flourishing."[7]

By focusing on one spirited DSA campaign in Los Angeles against the 2028 Olympic Games, this book pulls back the DSA curtain, affording a robust look at how one of its most innovative and energetic campaigns functions, the strategies and tactics it embraces, the challenges it faces, and the way it negotiates an anti-capitalist stance in a hyper-capitalist country. *NOlympians* makes sense of a resurgent socialism in the US by zeroing in on the NOlympics LA campaign. "One key to taking activist ideas and practices seriously," writes scholar-activist Chris Dixon, "is historicizing them — understanding their origins and trajectories. In this way, we can begin to develop a 'history of the present,' a genealogy of ways of thinking and acting that circulate in contemporary movements."[8] With an eye on anti-Olympics activist cultures, that is precisely what I aim to do.

Chapter 1 lays out the endemic problems that are gnawing at the legitimacy of the Olympic Games in the twenty-first century. In recent years, criticisms of the Olympics have been slowly rising into social consciousness. Twenty years ago, Olympic luminaries could trot out one-size-fits-all promises about Games-induced upticks in tourism, jobs, and economic growth without getting much pushback. Today these assurances have largely been debunked. Activists, academics, critical journalists, and human rights workers have done much of the work, engaging collectively in a consciousness-raising exercise.

Thanks to their efforts, the tectonic plates beneath the Olympics have shifted mightily. Behind the IOC's unrelenting hype, the smartest people in global sports circles know that with the number of aspiring host cities dwindling, the Olympics are experiencing a slow-motion crisis. Even *The Economist,* the house journal for corporate capitalism, has admitted

that the current dearth of prospective hosts indicates that "the business model for the Olympic Games is running out of puff."[9] Chapter 1 also introduces the ideas I will use to make sense of anti-Olympics activism, from intersectionality and the radical flank effect to comedy work and coalition-building.

Chapter 2 explains how Los Angeles ended up with the 2028 Summer Games and how the escapade is rooted in a wider history of the Olympics in the city. Los Angeles hosted the Olympic Games in 1932 and 1984. This chapter uncovers some of the lesser-known downsides of previous Games, especially the 1984 Summer Olympics, which are often held up by boosters as an across-the-board success. I also introduce the Democratic Socialists of America, the most auspicious political formation that the US left has produced in decades, and the NOlympics LA campaign. I analyze their creative interventions in light of their stated short-term and long-term goals. Finally, I dissect DSA's brand of socialism and how it gels with wider trends in anti-capitalism.

Clearly, sports are politics by other means. In Chapter 3, I examine NOlympics LA's argument that the metabolism of the Olympic decision-making is fundamentally out of sync with on-the-ground political needs in Los Angeles. NOlympics activists have built capacity by capitalizing on the missteps of Olympic organizers, fomenting creative protests that make full use of the group members' talents. Many NOlympians work in Hollywood and have serious production skills, while others are journalists who know how to write effectively and with purpose. This chapter examines their inside-outside strategy, their use of humor, and how the group has adopted an approach that moves between Olympics-related issues and non-Olympics-related struggles in the city as a way to rally recruits and stoke solidarity. Because the Olympics have become such an enormous enterprise with massive ramifications for development, politics, and social policy, DSA-LA activists have taken the approach that calling Olympics a sporting event is tantamount to claiming that pepper spray is a food product; there's a whole lot more going on with the five-ring juggernaut. I also analyze the anti-Olympics summit that NOlympics activists helped organize in Tokyo a year ahead of the 2020 Games.

We are at a momentous pivot in the Olympic road. I start Chapter 4 by reflecting on how my own experiences as a high-level athlete — a former professional soccer player who represented the US Olympic soccer team

in international competition — inflects my analysis. My own lack of political awareness as an athlete ran parallel to a wider societal credulousness about the positive social power of the Olympics. I tackle the politics of the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics, which, despite grand promises from five-ring luminaries, exhibit many of the problems that plague the Games in the twenty-first century. I also lay out an elaborate remake of the Games that would flip their priorities on their head. For too long, host cities have worked in the service of the Olympics — it's past time that the Olympics start working in the service of host cities, and in particular their everyday denizens. To be sure, prescription is risky business. Marx cautioned against "writing recipes … for the cook-shops of the future" instead of offering "critical analysis of the actual facts."[10] In this book, I'll try to do both, while being mindful of Marx's maxim that "History cannot be made with formulas."[11] I offer reforms cognizant of the fact that, for good reason, NOlympics LA activists are extremely skeptical of redesigning the Olympics, instead adopting a "No Olympics Anywhere" approach. I also discuss two key frontiers of Olympic politics: transnational dissent and athlete activism.

So, this book examines why the Olympics are increasingly a flashpoint for social justice coalitions in the twenty-first century and how that's the case in Los Angeles as the city readies for the 2028 Games. In writing it, I draw from several sources: more than one hundred interviews with anti-Olympics activists, personal experiences at protests in Los Angeles, Rio de Janeiro, London, and Tokyo, academic research, mass-media and alternative-media coverage, and Olympic archives. I aspire to follow the spirit of Stuart Hall, who wrote in an editorial for *New Left Review*, "The task of socialism is to meet people where they are, where they are touched, bitten, moved, frustrated, nauseated — to develop discontent and, at the same time, to give the socialist movement some direct sense of the times and ways in which we live." In light of the immense popularity of sports worldwide, anti-Olympics activists have tried "to meet people where they are." And that is precisely what this book does: analyze moments when grassroots activists leverage the Olympics to engage in what Hall called "the imaginative resistances of people who have to live within capitalism — the growing points of social discontent, the projections of deeply-felt needs."[12] In *NOlympians* I weave together stories of activists fighting against the odds with "the imaginative resistances" of socialists embracing transformative politics.

Satoshi Ukai speaks at an anti-Olympics rally on 24 July 2019. Tokyo.
Photo credit: Jules Boykoff