From the first glance, the title of Besnier, Brownell, and Carter’s latest volume hints that the authors aim to develop the first anthropology of sport, a subfield which has eluded the discipline for decades. While the authors indeed discuss anthropology and sport, its implications for the discipline are much more profound, as the subtle yet suggestive subtitle *Bodies, Borders, Biopolitics* (an extension of Foucauldian biopower) shows. The text proposes a “sport for anthropology” (rather than “of”), meaning “that it is concerned with what broad questions we can ask through the lens of sport” (257). As such, Besnier, Brownell, and Carter’s proposed approach is not a recursive application of theories and methods, rather an engagement of anthropologic and sporting lenses with issues such as “the body, nationalism, modernity, globalization, transnationalism, the state, citizenship, gender, and sexuality” (257). The authors’ list of topics one could study through the lens of sports is an important set of contemporary issues for anthropologists, despite conflicting opinions about sporting cultures and their applicability to anthropological research. The authors claim that as a cultural practice, sport intersects with our daily lives; it is ubiquitous yet imponderable in profound ways, similar to art and music (1). Unlike art and music however, sport has neither the pleasure of a peer-reviewed publication nor the privilege of a focus in anthropological research irrespective of the subfield. As a result, there is little dialogue among anthropologists about the topic and a significant gap in ethnographic literature on works that position “sport and sport-like activities within questions of central importance to the discipline” (9) or illustrate what the topic might add to “a multiscalar analysis of the contemporary world” (6). The authors assert their use of biopower and biopolitics exemplifies such an approach by understanding power as polymorphous and entangled with intersectionality, and politics as the control and regulation of bodies, including diet, training, production, and reproduction (6). The takeaway from such a perspective is even though an activity is fun or pleasurable, that does not mean it may not be divorced from structures of power.

Our modern conception of sport emerged in the height of mid-to-late-19th-century Eurocentrism alongside a new, regimented categorization of time and fetishized record keeping. Modern sport is irrefutably linked to an imperialist history (a history often highlighted in contemporary discourses about intersectionality) and cannot be separated from “cultural and political assumptions” (4). Despite these origins, Besnier, Brownell, and Carter attempt to reposition sport as an inclusive term designating distinct social activities and emphasizing local practices and meanings. Their revised term is placed in contrast to internationally normative notions of “sport” (5)—for instance, those legitimized through the contemporary hegemony of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the ideological conformity it demands.
Moving from classical antiquity into the colonialism and imperialism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, sport has become subsumed into hegemonic ideologies and practices of national, international, and transnational organizations including the IOC and Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA). Modern sport, the authors inform, is rooted in the ideology of the “agonal spirit” (after Greek agon, for “contest”) or competitive spirit (13) with human agency and practice codified and structured by written rules (41-42). Such sportive structure later serviced imperial and colonial agendas personified by the white man’s burden and fused with religious ideology (39–70). The authors demonstrate the intersections of sport in Britain and the United States with the religious movements of a “Muscular Christianity” body culture and organizations such as the YMCA to “save”, “civilize” and bring “the excessive” masculinity of others under colonial control” most noted in East Asia (45–62). Imperial cultural practices, including sporting cultures, were diffused to the colonists under different guises in a process the authors call “ludic diffusion” (49). Often, the historian perspective reduces colonized persons’ agency, writing them off as complicit in the sporting hegemony that sought to civilize and socialize them into Western ethics and values. Hegemony, however, is not complete without resistance and restructurings. The authors conceptualize sport as an “empty form” to explain its decontextualization, deconstruction, and reconstruction in new contexts (50). As the ideologies that legitimize a certain sporting hegemony are in continual state of negotiation, the term itself is imprecise and often amorphous.

In addition to this colonial history, the authors touch on the role of sport in Western medicine’s divergence from non-Western and holistic practices and transition into biomedicine (71-96) as well as its intersections with social class, race, and ethnicity (97-126), and sex, gender and sexuality (127-157). Spread across two chapters, the authors’ discussion of intersectionality relies heavily on Bourdieuan “practice theory,” with which they analyze sport-based conspicuous consumption across different sporting events and sociocultural contexts. Introducing the modalities of sport and the polymorphic ideologies coded in it, the authors urge ethnographers to take up research at the and world systems. Television has transformed global sport (178-180) by reinforcing the elements of performance and spectacle inherent to both modern sport and ideological systems—elements which further structure nationalist tendencies (203-207) and give shape to the intersectionality detailed in prior chapters. With homage to Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities” and Eric Hobsbawm’s “invented tradition,” the authors explain how the intertwining of nationalism and sporting events, and its commodified and conspicuous performativity, influence (and is influenced by) systems of economic and political capital and can even function to revive historic civil tensions.

Although this long list of important topics could not possibly be covered in detail in one text, the book is a good starting point for anyone interested in anthropology and sport. After finishing the text, one can readily conclude that much research remains to be done. Of foremost importance is a framing of traditional and contemporary topics through the lens of sport and the inclusion of multifaceted theoretical approaches such as gender studies, affect, and queer theory, into sport research. Because an interconnected dialogue between anthropologists and sport has yet to occur in any substantial way, one cannot judge the authors for not exploring other important themes in their opening gambit, including (but not limited to) symbology and semiotics, human trafficking, civil and human rights (especially during mega-events), human physiology, and competition in extreme environments. Even though it resonates clearly with the evocative ideas so common in introductory classes, such as Geertz’ deep play or Bourdieu’s practice theory, sport has remained outcast in undergraduate and graduate anthropological education. This book has opened the door to a much-needed new arena of anthropological inquiry, but the full potential of an anthropology of (or for) sport is yet to be filled.