

May 2023

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Recommended Citation

Ferrell, Ashley P. (2023) "Vainuku, T., & Duffy, R. (Directors). (2022). *Untold: The Girlfriend Who Didn't Exist* [Documentary]. Netflix.," *Feminist Pedagogy*. Vol. 3: Iss. 4, Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/feministpedagogy/vol3/iss4/5>

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Untold: The Girlfriend Who Didn't Exist is a two-part documentary detailing the story of Hawaiian football player Manti Te'o's meteoric rise to nationwide fame and consequent lambasting in this same limelight. Directed by Tony Vainuku and Ryan Duffy, the documentary is one of nine, stand-alone installments of the sports anthology docuseries *Untold* on Netflix. In the context of the classroom, this iteration of *Untold* can provide a starting point for feminist pedagogues interested in race, sport, and the imperial university. The documentary also offers feminist educators the opportunity to work with students to analyze how gender and sexuality are implicated in collegiate sport as well as contemporary re-articulations of regressive gender binaries. In what follows, I provide an overview of the documentary and discuss the ways in which these directions invite generative and increasingly urgent feminist critique.

In 2013, Te'o became the center of public ridicule and suspicion. He was already a collegiate athlete of extraordinary ability known for triumphing on the field after tragically losing his grandmother and girlfriend on the same day. However, Te'o garnered intensified national attention when news broke that he had been catfished. His long-term, long-distance girlfriend not only was alive but also was someone else entirely. Back then, the public revelation that Te'o was catfished by a man spurred virulent homophobic accusations of "inauthenticity" and claims that Te'o was perhaps involved in this "hoax." The representation of these events in this documentary is further complicated by the fact that Naya, the individual who catfished Te'o, today identifies as trans (a fact unknown by all other subjects in the film). Feminist educators can use this documentary as a foundation for discussing the racialized relationship between student athletes and universities. Further, instructors might engage students in analyses of how contemporary discourses interrogating athletic performance fortify and further compel heteronormative performances of gender.

After graduating from high school, Te'o decides to leave Hawai'i—along with his family and culture—to play football for the University of Notre Dame. From the student body to the snowy midwestern campus, Te'o is visibly engulfed in whiteness upon arrival at the university. In episode 1, the directors pair Te'o's culture shock with clips of white-presenting commentators dissecting his abilities and retrospectively remarking on his image as "this warrior. You know, he had tattoos, and he had kinda this Hawaiian persona." Te'o's racialized presence on and off the field is especially apparent in one interview wherein the reporter asks a feminine-presenting blond individual about Te'o: "You know him?" She quickly answers, "Nope." "Have you seen him?" The student smiles and without hesitation responds, "Yeah." "Have you talked to him?" Again, "No." After the reporter prods, "Why?" She answers sheepishly, "Because he's scary," before qualifying, "Because he's really good at football, so that's intimidating." By juxtaposing such interactions with images of Te'o signing autographs and greeting fans, the directors highlight how his figure looms large, even when out of sight.

These subtle moments of dissonance invite viewers to begin seeing how athletes of color at U.S. universities become at once hyper-visible institutional commodities and invisibilized individuals. In the feminist classroom, these events might be further examined through the lens of what Chatterjee and Maira (2014) identify as the imperial university. Chatterjee and Maira point to the policing of knowledge production and the surveillance of student bodies that unfolds across academic terrain and in connection with the U.S. imperial project, which is characterized by the imbrication of racism, national borders, citizenship, and warfare. As students probe the ways in which these logics traffic across curricula, classrooms, and collegiate athletics, they can further develop their analysis by contextualizing Te'o's Polynesian culture amid legacies of U.S. settler colonialism. As Arvin (2019) explains, present-day conceptualizations of Polynesia are rife with exoticized ambiguity, while the

history of Polynesia demonstrates the flexible and accumulative properties of whiteness. In these ways, *Untold: The Girlfriend Who Didn't Exist* offers a site for examining how “otherness” might be recruited to, incorporated in, and capitalized upon by the brands of elite athletic programs at predominantly white institutions.

Throughout the documentary, Te'o's retelling of his conspicuously public rise and fall is accompanied by Naya's own reflections. Over the arc of her narrative, Naya gradually articulates an understanding of her gender identity and desires. At this climax of the film, the directors emphasize the media's investment in the story and public's captivation by repeating the prolific media discourse of nefarious deception and of a “hoax.” Though the documentary focuses on events now ten years past, the way in which this language abuts Naya's present story and gender presentation carries implications that require further examination. As Nyong'o (2010) points out, there is a “long sordid history of considering transgender embodiment an intrinsic hoax” (p. 98). Students might consider the stakes of rehearsing this rhetoric and of articulating accusations of inauthenticity alongside gender identity. How are these stakes amplified amid the recent public scrutiny of trans athletes and enduring violence toward trans communities?

Untold: The Girlfriend Who Didn't Exist concludes just as it begins to gesture toward the ways in which race, sexuality, and gender presentation factor into the public's ongoing fascination with this story. The film would fit well on sexuality studies syllabi and complement readings that introduce ways in which discourse generates and disciplines the terms of gender and sexuality. It could also aid feminist educators who aim to encourage students to critically reflect on their own position within the imperial university and in relation to race, gender, and sexuality.

References:

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