

The Aesthetics and Erotics of Hockey

BY ALISON PRYER

À partir de son expérience personnelle et des théories féministes de Judith Butler et de Ann Ferguson, l'auteure explore l'esthétisme et l'érotisme dans les jeux de la Ligue nationale de hockey. Ces jeux offrent un terrain propice à une cohésion homosociale et en même temps, actualise l'idéologie dominante canadienne d'une masculinité identifiée à une culture où la violence est institutionnalisée.

When I first moved to Canada several years ago—a bewildered Landed Immigrant—my new Canadian husband joked that if I really wanted to understand Canadian culture all I had to do was taste the local delicacy, *Kraft Dinner*, and attend a hockey game. I hated *Kraft Dinner*. And I hated hockey. Perhaps because hockey permeates Canadian culture, most Canadians have something to say about hockey, even if they loathe the sport. Yet, from my many discussions with friends I was unable to discover why so many Canadians loved such a violent game.

The night I attended my first NHL game a fight broke out between a Vancouver Canuck player named Scottie “The Bulldog” Walker and a Phoenix Coyote player, Michel Petit. The two began throwing punches just a few metres from our seats. The crowd shuddered and stirred itself to life. The people sitting in the four rows in front of me, the rows between me and the glass, all stood up to get a better view. I stood up too. The home crowd cheered on The Bulldog. I was aghast and thrilled as the Coyote’s fists landed on Bulldog’s face. He could not defend himself as his arms were being held by another Coyote player. Blood flowed from The Bulldog’s split skin, red-

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dening his sweater and freezing in brilliant splashes on the ice. After what seemed like a few minutes, the referees skated in and pried the players apart. They had to scrape the blood off the ice. Only then did the spectators sit down. The next day the *Vancouver Sun* carried a picture of The Bulldog’s face covered with five gashes that were held together with 22 stitches.

I knew I had a problem. I was confused about what I was feeling while I was watching: horror and excitement, shame and a sense of passion and aliveness. I was located in a site of contradiction, ambivalence and tension.

Many Canadians experience the emotional and bodily pleasures of watching and playing hockey as sensuous and connecting. The aesthetic of hockey lies in the technical virtuosity of the players, their skills perfected through intense, repetitive practice. The players are so aware, so mindful, of their art form that when

they step onto the ice, they are ready to unite with the archetypal forms of the game, to improvise as the game unfolds. This improvisation follows and creates the game’s dynamic pace and flow. It is easy to see this beauty in the never-ending, pick-up games of shinny, or street hockey, which children commonly play all over Canada. The beauty of improvisation is also to be found in the narrative genre of hockey commentary. Indeed, sections of the famous Foster Hewitt’s commentary have been transcribed and transformed into freeform poetry (Gowdey). Hockey is a love of “pure play,” a form of dance that embodies the spirit and passions of Canadians.

Drawing on Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity, I interpret the “pure play” of hockey as ritualized gender performance, a celebratory, communal expression of heterosexual, heteronormative culture. An NHL game “performs” the dominant ideology of North American society, a society in which masculinity is closely intertwined with a culture of institutionalized violence.

According to Butler, gender is not an essential, biological category, but a series of ritualized enactments or performances that are repeated over and over. Each performance carries within it a set of values and meanings that function to create and maintain gender. These gender performances are so deeply embedded in all established cultural activities and social transactions that they may feel as if they are a natural, integral part of our identities. In fact, we are usually unaware that we are engaging in daily gender performance. Most people perform their gender within the

binary dualisms of compulsory heterosexuality, in which, as Butler writes, "one is one's gender to the extent that one is not the other gender" (22).

In her wicked analysis of popular men's sports, Naomi Goldenberg suggests that bat and ball, and stick and puck games involve players in an intense phallic drama that mirrors "the rigid gender arrangements and restricted sexual activities we practice" in our culture (264). In hockey, for example, a player must control his phallic stick well in order to shoot small the seminal puck into a vaginal goal cavity. But, on the other hand, as Freud himself once said: Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.

However, the hypermasculine, often violent, gender performance of professional hockey cannot be so easily equivocated. The ideal NHL hockey player is expected to perform to certain standards every night. He must have high levels of physical and mental endurance and stamina, play stoically through pain and injury, be ruthlessly competitive and fearless, and display an unquenchable desire to win at any cost (Vaz).

Violent drama is part of the NHL spectacle. Players are trained to be aggressive and physical, to make contact (Vaz). There are unwritten codes of conduct for behaviour on the ice that encourage fighting. Players are expected to break the formal "written" rules of hockey for particular ends: to ensure that goals are scored or not scored, to intimidate aggressive players, to protect the star players from aggressive contact. Some players are selected specifically for their abilities to perform the task of fighting during the game. In fact, if they do their jobs well, they become known as "role players." By engaging in role playing and performance, hockey players are continuing ancient sporting and dramatic traditions, such as the Roman gladiator fights, and the *agon* of Greek drama — the enactment of the contest between the incumbent god and his

challenger. No wonder that star hockey players are called heroes, warriors and idols, and are worshipped by their fans.

But what is being performed in a hockey game? And, why? The drama of the hockey game re-enacts and celebrates the organization and direction of sexual and social energies

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that prevail in the wider society. Ann Ferguson's notion of sex/affective production sheds light on the intense emotions that are generated by hockey in Canada. According to Ferguson, in western culture, sexual and social energies have been "socially defined, focused and organised" (62) in such a way as to create and perpetuate a system of male dominance over females, as well as other forms of dominance. Ferguson writes:

Affectionate attachments and friendships of the Platonic sort, maternal and paternal love, kin tie and social bonding with work mates or with a community of identity ... are all forms of sex/affective energy ... The point is that all known human social constructions of sex/affective energy create the social desire to unite with others as the key focus of this energy (78).

As sex/affective energy is directed

toward the creation and maintenance of the strong human bonds required for people to survive individually and collectively, sex/affective production is a part of the patriarchal capitalist system of economic production.

When sex/affective energies are manifested through rituals of gender performance, such as hockey, we may experience them deeply, bodily, and emotionally. Clearly, the expression of sex/affective energies through gender performance is closely linked to the erotic. Butler rightly maintains that in western culture, heterosexual gender performance occurs under "a situation of duress" (139). Nevertheless, we may experience our own gender performance as being pleasurable, sensuous and connecting. We may desire certain gender performances and derive pleasure from them even while they perpetuate social and psychic violence (Martusewicz).

Hockey not only teaches heterosexual masculine gender performance, it provides a forum for male homosocial intimacy. Patriarchal cultures require a high level of homosocial bonding, and it is socially acceptable for men to bond with one another through their shared experiences of playing and watching hockey. Thus, hockey also provides a channel for homoerotic energy within heterosexual culture. Men, as well as women, are able to enjoy the male athletes' physicality, although the spectators' conscious knowledge of their homoerotic desires is often repressed. According to Horrocks, some spectators, both male and female, identify with the players to such a degree that they may also fantasize about *being* a player. I think of the little boys sitting in the row on front of me at an NHL game, who seeing their favourite centre sent off for fighting mimicked his actions, making fists with their hands and punching the air with delight.

In Canada, hockey has traditionally strengthened kinship bonds within certain ethnic, class and cultural groups, as well as celebrating

and enforcing the mythology of Canadian national identity. Gruneau and Whitson write that hockey is a “popular cultural forum for playing out the central themes of Canadian life: French and English, East and West, Canada and the United States, Canada and the Soviet Union” (136). They stress that hockey has always had “a range of different meanings and intended uses for various groups in Canada” (27). Indeed, hockey has helped build communities of identity on the dominant ideological foundations of nationalism, racism, imperialism and sexism (Horrocks).

Loving and losing

Whenever one team wins, another loses. For every NHL superstar, there are dozens of NHL players who slog away almost unnoticed by the public year after year. For every boy who makes it to the NHL, thousands do not. Loss comes early to a hockey player. According to Dryden, “if you don’t make it in the minor hockey league by age nine, you won’t make it to the NHL at all” (84). Under the intense scrutiny of their parents’ and coaches’ gazes, some boys are labelled “losers” the first time they step onto the ice. Dryden and MacGregor describe the kinds of questions parents and coaches ask as they watch a boy play for the first time: “Is he a puck hog? Is he useless? Does he keep trying even when the game is lost? Does he quit?” (69). Girls and women have traditionally had an extremely hard time in the sexist world of hockey (Avery and Stevens). Yet, it is important to bear in mind that hockey also excludes and alienates many men and boys.

The metonymic space of loss works to undermine the hypermasculinity of the seemingly monolithic culture of the patriarchal, heterosexist NHL. Paradoxically, it also strengthens the desire for victory, makes each win sweeter, increases the dread of the inevitable defeats, injuries, trades and retirements, intensifies the hatred for the opposing team, and heightens

the emotional responses of players and spectators.

Bruce Kidd writes that no matter how badly boys fear loss, no matter how badly they actually do lose, they are comforted by the knowledge that no girls play on their team. Kidd explains:

“I would have been devastated if a girl had played on any of the teams I was so proud to belong to. It would have proclaimed to the world that I was inadequate.”

I would have been devastated if a girl had played on any of the teams I was so proud to belong to. It would have proclaimed to the world that I was inadequate. At the deepest psychological levels, the blurring of sex roles undermines not only the male-privileging sexual division of labour, but the very process by which males raised within sexually segregated sports have gained personal confidence and social validation (258).

Kidd concludes that male team sports, such as hockey, thrive on the symbolic cultural “annihilation” of women (256).

Learning love

When I began my research on the question of why Canadians love hockey I discovered that Canadian intellectuals have devoted little scholarly study to the subject of hockey.

Gruneau and Whitson believe that many scholars refuse to acknowledge the artistic and creative aspects of popular culture, viewing it as “little more than narcotizing and ideologically conformist commercial spectacle” (22). This intellectual snobbery may have its roots in the taste hierarchies that have traditionally been used to separate high and low culture, and also in the academic disdain for hockey’s violent physicality.

As an educator, however, I am deeply interested in how and why Canadians learn to love hockey. Carmen Luke reminds educators that:

Gender identity and relations cannot be apprehended or theorized on their own abstracted terms. That is, sex, gender or femininity needs to be studied and theorized in its constitutive relationship to other sociocultural significations, economic and political histories, hierarchies and discourses. (1)

Children learn about masculinity and femininity, social identity, sexuality, class, race and gender relations from popular cultural practices, such as hockey. Gruneau and Whitson define popular culture as that which encompasses “all the various modes of expression, pleasure-seeking, and entertainment through which people negotiate their relationships with one another, with an imagined past and future, and with the institutions and prescriptions of a dominant culture” (28). Popular culture produces and maintains much of the knowledge and desire, which constitute our lived discursive practices. Indeed, Carmen Luke calls popular culture “the public pedagogy of everyday life” (7).

The popular cultural practice of hockey functions as a powerful form of public pedagogy within varied Canadian social, geographical, economical, political, and historical contexts. This is a clue to my newfound interest in hockey. Am I just a recent immigrant trying to fit into a new

culture? Immigration may be thought of as a radical act of imagination and transformation. Perhaps my interest in hockey allows me to imagine myself transformed, enables me to write myself into the larger fiction that is Canada. Sharon Todd describes pedagogy as "a process that gets tangled up in the nexus of social relations where identification, fantasy, and desire begin to emerge as pressing concerns" (4). I am now a Canadian citizen, and must begin the work of demystifying my new home, considering the ways in which I am constituted by precisely those discourses and practices I seek to oppose.

I find that instead of answers, I am left with many questions: Can we choose our passions? Can our popular cultural indulgences be compartmentalized, be made to maintain a discrete distance from the rest of our lives? With the increase in popularity of women's hockey I ask:

Does women's hockey disrupt the gender dualism of the patriarchal sex/affective system? Does it provide girls and women with a space to play with "masculine" and "feminine" gender performance, to create oppositional counternarratives to men's hockey? I hope to find out this season.

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DESI DI NARDO

Prosopopoeia

to appear or not to appear as yourself is not
 without knowing the full extent of the act
 which you utter in soliloquy
 and it echoes back in your mouth
 juddering jowls and genitalia
 making sounds out of air
 affirming that somewhere in the forest
 a snapped stump had its moment of glory
 because somebody did hear
 but never bothered to mention
 that death is nuzzled by fear
 and love is something
 in and out of itself
 a vortex of parts
 playing for real

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