“This is the story of a love affair between a country and a game. It’s simple really: for
many of us it’s a sense of belonging.” So begins a commercial for the popular television
program *Hockey Night in Canada*. Many viewers would agree with this message. Indeed,
a recent poll revealed that 80 percent of Canadians believe that “hockey is a key part of
what it means to be Canadian.” What explains such devotion to a game that, at first
glance, can appear to be nothing more than a frenzy of reckless abandon and violent
collisions? For some, it is the skill and agility of the players, who seem to defy the laws
of physics on a frozen surface. For others, it is the strategy and teamwork required for
these players to successfully deposit the puck in their opponents’ net. Still others
celebrate the determination and reflexes of the hockey goaltender who must contend with
rubber discs flying through the air at remarkable speed. The nation’s bookshelves seem to
confirm Canadians’ love affair with this sport, boasting hockey-related titles such as *The
Sport That Defines a Country*, *The Game of Our Lives*, and *Hockey Dreams*, while
musical celebrations of Canada’s official winter sport include Stompin’ Tom Connors’s
“The Hockey Song” and Tom Cochrane’s “Big League.” If you factor in the never-
ending stream of hockey-themed Tim Hortons commercials, it is clear that culture makers
and corporations circulate a relentless stream of romantic hockey imagery that informs,
and is informed by, popular understandings of Canadian identity.

Yet in spite of the prevalence of this imagery—which frequently draws on
hockey’s link to small-town, northern settings—hockey’s presence in Canadian life is, in fact, complex, contested, and exclusive. The most public and celebrated version of the game is professional men’s hockey (i.e., the National Hockey League), whose audiences watch primarily white, ostensibly straight, young, and able-bodied male players. It is this form of hockey that most profoundly shapes Canadians’ understandings of the sport’s symbolic importance. In many ways, this status is most clearly visible at critical moments when the connection between hockey and national identity is in crisis, for these moments reveal cracks in the armour of an all-too-comfortable story of Canada’s relationship with hockey.

[Insert Figure Hockey.2: $5 Bill]

As a populist expression of Canadian identity, hockey occupies a key place in the country’s political culture. Examples of national politicians using this symbol of “ordinary” Canadian identity for political gain include former prime minister Stephen Harper’s much-publicized decision to write *A Great Game*, a history of the Toronto Maple Leafs. Indeed, hockey’s symbolism works to secure a politician’s own “ordinary” Canadianness, especially for those whose urban and/or privileged upbringing might mark them as out of touch with everyday people. In fact, the link between Canadian politics and hockey has a long history. In the mid- to late nineteenth century, Canadian nationalists developed hockey and lacrosse as distinctly Canadian sports in order to secure a unique sense of self and independence from British nationalism and American influence. Canadian settlers understood that a particularly violent and hockey-centric
identity, one that differed from the gentlemanly masculinity of the British, would aid in the development of a distinctly Canadian sense of self. Hockey’s more relaxed rules about amateurism, relative to the sport of lacrosse, meant that it became more popular and more iconically Canadian. Furthermore, Canadian men’s hockey’s track record in beating American teams (which it did regularly in Olympic play from the 1920s until the early 1950s) worked to instill a superior sense of national identity.  

Beginning with its entry into the Olympic Games in 1956, the Soviet Union challenged Canada’s position as the pre-eminent hockey nation. During the Cold War, Canadian politicians mobilized “hockey diplomacy” as a tool to engage the Soviet Union in political discussion, and, perhaps even more importantly, to assert Canadian “hockey authority” and the perceived supremacy of capitalism over Soviet-style communism. In 1972, the Canadian and Soviet governments decided to pit their nations’ best male hockey players against one another in a hockey tournament—something that had never been done because of rules forbidding professional competitors in the Olympic Games. This contest, and Paul Henderson’s series-winning goal, remain nationally significant markers of Canadian hockey success. As the Tragically Hip song goes: “If there’s a goal that everyone remembers / it was back in ol’ ’72.” But popular myth tends to forget that the Soviet team’s remarkable play, and the series’ close outcome, precipitated discussion of a national hockey “crisis.” For example, after Team Canada lost the first game of the tournament, the headline of one major newspaper proclaimed that “Canada Mourns Hockey Myth,” while another emphatically exclaimed, “WE LOST.”

[Insert Figure Hockey.3: Paul Henderson Book]
While some hockey crises address ideological issues related to national identity, others are much more personal. For example, sex abuse charges levelled in the 1990s disrupted hockey’s imagined innocence. The revelation that older men in powerful positions sexually abused many young (and often marginalized) Toronto boys, luring them with hockey equipment and access to an important hockey shrine, Toronto’s Maple Leaf Gardens, deeply concerned the public and captivated the media. Likewise, news reports of Graham James’s sexual assaults on prominent Canadian junior hockey players revealed a hockey culture in which young men were often vulnerable to sex abuse. The Canadian Hockey League (CHL) responded to the controversy with a policy called “Players First,” which attempted to provide players with adequate resources to address issues of sexual predation in the league; nonetheless, hazing and players’ assaults on women continued through the nineties. Young men’s violence against young women did not warrant a CHL report, nor did it generate the same level of public outcry as did the Graham James affair. Today, fears about chronic traumatic brain encephalopathy caused by fighting and body checking in the men’s professional game mark a new hockey crisis.

Other hockey crises have frequently involved concerns about American encroachment into Canadian cultural practice, thereby flagging anxiety about Canada’s cultural autonomy. For example, Canadians widely rejected the American technological innovation of the FoxTrax puck, which glowed on the television screen to help inexperienced viewers follow the game. As the Toronto-born former ABC World News anchor Peter Jennings summed up the issue: “Canadians will hate the innovation but American fans will love it.” The 1988 trade (or sale) of Wayne Gretzky from the Edmonton Oilers to the Los Angeles Kings also perpetuated a crisis of Canadian cultural
autonomy. In the wake of free trade talks with the United States, Canadians argued that they should not have to bear another significant cultural loss. They directed their venom toward Oilers’ owner Peter Pocklington for selling a national treasure to the Americans.

As various Canadians link hockey to a sense of ordinary Canadianness, others, including many French Canadians, Indigenous peoples, and women, have found that hockey perpetuates both alternative meanings and sometimes marginalization. For example, Canadian women have played hockey since the nineteenth century, with their participation increasing dramatically in the 1970s. Women’s hockey became an Olympic sport in 1998, and it has enjoyed television success during the Games with a level of coverage that is almost equal to that enjoyed by the men’s game. In fact, after a gritty overtime win by the Canadian women’s team in the gold medal match at the 2014 Sochi Games, many media outlets asked the Canadian men’s team to “play like girls” in their own upcoming gold medal game. Yet such exalted status is inevitably short-lived. Women’s hockey receives less money, ice time, media coverage, and prestige than the men’s program. Indeed, many people often overlook women’s hockey (and women in general) when they present Canada as a nation of hockey and hockey players.

Likewise, popular conceptions of hockey frequently erase people of colour from the sport’s identity. While popular culture occasionally represents hockey as a way to bring outsiders into the dominant Canadian fold, it frequently shies away from recognizing the sport’s exclusionary history and problematic present. Past celebrations of Canadian hockey players from immigrant families, including Wayne Gretzky and Stan Mikita, highlight the sport’s capacity to facilitate upward social mobility. Similarly, the fact that Hockey Night in Canada broadcasts today in Punjabi attests to hockey’s growing
following among ethnic minorities. Not surprisingly, advertisers use these understandings of the game as a way to link their product to leading national ideals. A recent Kentucky Fried Chicken commercial depicts a young immigrant boy finding his place on a new hockey team through the sharing of camaraderie and fried chicken with his teammates, local (and mostly white) boys.\textsuperscript{17}

[Insert Figures Hockey.4: 2016 Canadian Women and Hockey.5: 2016 Canadian Men]

Nonetheless, Canadians’ track record of recognizing hockey’s history of racism, and the game’s ongoing examples of ethnic discrimination, leave much to be desired. Although some public spaces, such as the Willie O’Ree Place in Fredericton, New Brunswick, or the Herb Carnegie Centennial Arena in North York, Ontario, are named after significant black hockey players, the National Library of Canada’s recent tribute to the game contains no texts or images depicting people of colour or Indigenous people.\textsuperscript{18} Such omissions help to explain why the public has paid little attention to the ways that racism limits some players’ access to the NHL, or the ways that racism shapes the experiences of persons of colour in the game. As one South Asian Canadian player recalled, “I’ve totally been called the ‘N’ word on the ice. Like a lot actually.”\textsuperscript{19} After being targeted in a banana-throwing incident at an NHL exhibition game in London, Ontario, Wayne Simmonds, a black Canadian player competing with the Philadelphia Flyers, noted that he “experienced racism throughout his life.”\textsuperscript{20} Hockey’s link to racism, however, is more systemic than incidents of bad behaviour in hockey arenas. A simple examination of both the men’s and women’s national team members over the past several
years (almost all of whom, save for a few notable exceptions, appear white) tells a powerful story about hockey’s link to white people, in spite of (widely celebrated) growing national racial and ethnic diversity.

Public debates about the origins of Canadian hockey often erase the significance of Indigenous peoples in the sport’s development. Today, various communities, including Kingston, Ontario and Windsor, Nova Scotia, argue that they are the birthplace of the sport. Deline, a community in the Northwest Territories, also stakes a claim to this title based on Sir John Franklin’s 1825 diary entry, which recounts the men of his northern expedition playing a hockey-type game there. Yet these debates obscure the far more likely possibility that a hockey-like game developed simultaneously in several North American places long before European contact, and evolved over time and as a result of contact between settlers and Indigenous peoples. First Nations games similar to hockey precede modern ice hockey, including *alchamadijk*, which the Mi’kmaq played with Irish settlers on a frozen pond with a curved stick and ball.

[Hockey’s link to whiteness and white people is connected to early colonial myths that frequently attempted to erase Indigenous peoples from the story of settlement, refashioning the Canadian landscape as a place devoid of people. In the words of Canadian humourist Stephen Leacock, “Hockey captures the essence of Canadian experience in the New World.” Canadians widely conceptualize hockey as emerging naturally out of Canada’s northern landscape, despite the fact that the majority of]
Canadians live within 160 kilometres of the country’s southern border.  

This kind of understanding is deeply connected to a European, masculine spirit of national identity. Within this national vision, Canada is a land of hockey pioneers or, according to the rant of Molson mascot Joe Canadian, Canada is “the first nation of hockey.” In this envisioning, only those (men) who can withstand the brutal punishment associated with settling the North, or succeeding on the hockey rink, are able to maintain an acceptable measure of appropriate Canadian masculinity. Although this metaphor explains the unique and often violent version of the game celebrated by many Canadians, one that differs from its European iteration, it is problematic in that it links Canadian national identity to the activities of young, supposedly straight, and often white able-bodied men and their use of physical violence to dominate apparently less masculine foes. This privileging correspondingly marginalizes men who express a style of masculinity not linked to violence and aggression, along with racialized people, Indigenous peoples, and women and girls.

Popular understandings of hockey as a unifying force nevertheless acknowledge the ways hockey cannot overcome other competing national tensions, particularly those between English and French Canada. For example, in Roch Carrier’s autobiographical *The Hockey Sweater/Le Chandail*, set in the small-town Quebec of the 1940s, he recounts a childhood story about receiving a Toronto Maple Leafs jersey (a symbol of English Canada) instead of the jersey of his beloved Montreal Canadiens, causing no end of pain and jeers. Francophone-anglophone hockey tensions played out more violently in 1955, when many Québécois took to the streets and rioted after the NHL suspended their hero, Maurice Richard. Many Quebec francophones understood Richard, and his ferocity on
the ice, as both a literal and a metaphoric challenge to anglo-Canadian dominance. Some observers argue that the Richard Riot was the symbolic beginning of the Quiet Revolution, a political movement that sought to wrest economic control of the province from an anglophone elite. Hockey, then, has proven a potent symbol not just for Canadian identity, but for Québécois national identity as well.

[Insert Figure Hockey.7: The Hockey Sweater]

At times these competing national conceptions of hockey are stoked by incendiary expressions of anglophone hockey masculinity. The country’s most recognized proponent of such views is Don Cherry, a former NHL coach who serves as a commentator on Hockey Night in Canada’s Saturday night broadcasts. CBC television viewers once voted Cherry as the seventh-greatest Canadian of all time. In doing so they placed him ahead of numerous prime ministers, Leonard Cohen, General Roméo Dallaire, and wheelchair athlete and fundraiser Rick Hansen. From Cherry’s perspective, “real” Canadian identity connects to a sense of masculinity located in the bodies of mostly white, English-speaking, working-class men and their on-ice aggression. He has frequently made disparaging remarks about the masculine expression of French and European players. For example, in early 2004, Cherry embroiled himself in controversy when he argued that visor-wearing players were wimpy, and that “Most of the guys that wear [visors] are Europeans or French guys.” His comments pushed the CBC to implement sensitivity training on language issues for new staff and to subject Cherry to a seven-second time delay on his broadcasts. These actions produced a media debate about
freedom of speech that reached the Canadian and Ontario Parliaments.\textsuperscript{30}

Hockey works surprisingly well when it comes to telling a particular story of Canada. The public romanticization of Canadian life as tied to a violent sport developed in the land of ice and snow perpetuates the settler colonialism, racism, and gender exclusion on display in Canada’s past and present. Because of this, different social groups within Canada have taken up hockey in contradictory and less celebrated ways. For example, European, French, and Indigenous players often play less violent versions of the game, while women embrace a game devoid of body checking altogether.\textsuperscript{31} For other French and English Canadians, Indigenous peoples, people of colour, and ethnic minorities, their relationship to hockey is one of ambivalence or indifference.\textsuperscript{32} While many Canadians treasure hockey’s symbolism as the game for everyone, closer inspection reveals a more complex story about competing national and international tensions, erasures, crises, and the privileging of some social positions over others. That this is the case is not surprising. Like other national symbols, hockey’s utility as a vehicle for commonsense public expressions of identity depends upon evasion, selectivity, and erasure—or, in the common parlance of the sport itself, some fancy stickhandling.

Notes to Chapter 6

\textsuperscript{1} The author would like to sincerely thank Stephanie Dotto for her important contributions to this chapter, and the Canadian Symbols workshop participants and editors for their invaluable guidance.


6 Cantelon, “Have Skates Will Travel.”


“KFC Stories: New Kid,” Adland video, posted by “kidsleepy,”

Pitter, “Racialization and Hockey.”


Amy Ransom, Hockey, PQ: Canada’s Game in Quebec’s Popular Culture (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014).


Harvey, “Whose Sweater is This?”


James Gillet, Phil White, and Kevin Young, “The Prime Minister of Saturday Night: Don Cherry, the CBC, and the Cultural Production of Intolerance,” in Helen Holmes and David Taras, eds., Seeing Ourselves: Media Power and Policy in Canada. 2nd ed. (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Canada, 1996), 59–72; Chris Zelkovich, “Cherry’s Visor Tirade is Very Short-Sighted,” Toronto Star, Jan. 26, 2004; Michael Friscolanti and Joe Paraskevas, “CBC Accused of ‘Censoring’ Cherry,” National Post (Toronto), Feb. 7,


32 Harvey, “Whose Sweater is This?”; Robidoux, *Stickhandling Through the Margins.*