**Hegemony Contests:**

**Challenging the Notion of a Singular Canadian Hockey Nationalism**

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**Abstract:** Sports media, athletes, and the public alike have framed Canadian professional men’s hockey as an important symbol of the nation as a whole, while scholars have devoted considerable energy to pointing out that this celebrated hockey symbol tends to marginalize those in Canada who are not white, male, straight, and/or able-bodied. Yet various linguistic, racial, and ethnic minorities play and celebrate hockey in Canada, and indeed use hockey to express their own subordinated nationalisms. Their styles of play and the meanings they bring to the game have issued counter-hegemonic challenges to white, male, Anglo-Canadian hockey hegemony. Exploring the “hockey nationalisms” of Indigenous, Québécois, Acadian, and Central/Eastern European populations as case studies, this article argues for a reconsideration of Canadian hockey nationalism from below.

**Keywords:** French, Canada, hockey, Indigenous, national identity

*My Country Is Hockey,* the title of Brian Kennedy’s (2011) enthusiastic examination of hockey and Canadian culture, captures the ubiquitous and commonsense idea that Canada is quintessentially linked to, as well as produced by, hockey. This idea is echoed by a recent *Hockey Night in Canada* broadcast conducted in the Plains Cree language. National media, the public and others celebrated the broadcast as an important step toward Canadian reconciliation, addressing historic and ongoing injustices against Indigenous people in the country. John Chabot, a former professional hockey player from Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg First Nation, and a commentator for the broadcast, noted, “As we move forward with whatever issues we have as a country, we do want to move forward and this is one of the ways we can move forward” (Spencer 2019, para. 27). For social scientists, the idea that hockey has something important to offer as a symbol of the Canadian nation provides an important opportunity to examine the ways that sport and national identity produce (and reproduce) privilege. State actors, the public, and culture makers circulating the idea that hockey *is* Canada do important cultural work – work that has very real, material consequences for members of the nation. That work situates some as more central to national belonging, while relegating others to the national periphery. As Nathan Kalman-Lamb (2018) argues, hockey, when produced as a national symbol, is connected to privileged identities, especially those linked to white Canadians. He claims, “Canadian hockey is an arena for the unapologetically naked rehearsal of hegemonic whiteness that persists at the heart of Canadian national identity” (290). In spite of this, however, other national contexts — both within the Canadian nation and outside of it — challenge the idea that Canada *is* hockey. Countries such as Russia, Sweden, and the United States all lay some claim to the game. Some countries, like Russia, have traditionally played a hockey-type game (bandy) that may pre-date the Canadian version. Russia and other nations have produced world-class hockey players and have won international championships — often beating Canada’s own teams (Cantelon 2006). Further, unique understandings of hockey, particularly understandings about the way the game should be played, intersect with various national cultures from within the nation — especially Indigenous (First Nations, Inuit, and Métis) and Franco-Canadian (Acadian and Québécois) nationalisms. These intersections have the potential to produce new understandings of the game while disrupting, resisting, and reconfiguring hegemonic Canadian hockey nationalism and its concomitant on-ice style.

In this article, I advocate for new ways of critically examining hegemonic Canadian hockey nationalism. It is important to bring an analysis of hegemony to these discussions. Although there is indisputable value in pointing out how hegemonic Canadian hockey produces privileged national identities, specifically those linked to the bodies of seemingly straight, able-bodied, young, white men (for example, see Author 2008; Silva et al. forthcoming; Szto 2018; Pitter 2006), dominant identities are not constructed in isolation from, but rather in conversation with, other marginalized forms of national mythmaking. As national symbols are tied to the social creation of the nation, this analysis is significant, helping us understand the ways that national identities are both constructed and contested, representing the interests of various elites, but also standing as sites of resistance and challenge. Furthermore, because scholarship on privileged identities helps to highlight how Anglo-Canadian identity formations (both within hockey and beyond) have marginalized certain “others,” it is also important that we do not view these constructions in isolation. Therefore, this work raises important questions about the ways that scholars approach issues of national identity (even beyond the sport of hockey), and its requisite link to notions of privilege.

This article begins by providing a brief overview of the literature on hegemony, looking at Gramsci’s ([1971], 2003) conceptualization of the theory, its link to national identities (Pozo 2007; Bishop and Jaworski 2003), and how scholars such as Demetrakis Demetriou (2001) have used it. Next, it positions Canadian hockey as hegemonically linked to national identity, discussing how various social actors promote and perpetuate the game’s significance within the Canadian national imaginary, creating a homogenous national “us” in the process. It is important to bear in mind, however, that although different social actors and institutions produce collective sentiment through homogenization, they also specifically privilege the bodies of young, able-bodied, seemingly straight men — a small segment of the population. As I consider Canadian hockey identity as a form of hegemonic national identity (or in other words, secured by consent but also contestable by those others located outside of the Canadian national imaginary), I conclude by demonstrating the potential ways that these other national identities construct hockey as their own. To do this, I will draw on extant literature and my prior work on Canadian hockey’s link to hegemonic national identity, including interviews with Anglo-Canadian, Franco-Canadian, Russian, and other European hockey players, over the past decade. Although I did not conduct these interviews specifically for this research, the participants – both those who play(ed) elite-level and old-timers hockey – routinely discussed what hockey meant to their lives and its relationship to national mythmaking. Based on my analysis, I argue that there is value in not only assessing the ways that the public, the state and other actors produce Canadian hockey identity as a form of privileged national identity, but also in further investigating the ways that marginal national identities, through hegemonic challenges — particularly those operating within the geographical boundaries of Canada — have the potential to disrupt, resist and alter this taken-for-granted national identity, particularly as it is tied to hegemonic forms of hockey play.

This article takes up hockey in its most celebrated form — the hockey played by men — as (problematically) it is this version of the sport that has most consistently been tied to national imaginings. I have spent my career researching the hockey experiences of men, examining expressions of masculinity amongst both the young and old. This, however, does not devalue the experiences of women, newcomer Canadians, disabled hockey players, members of the LGBTQ communities, and other racialized people. The insights gleaned in this article also help to illuminate and encourage further research on the experiences of these groups, who celebrate their own significant forms of hockey and national identity at the periphery, and who also challenge Canadian hegemonic hockey nationalism in varied ways.

**Slippery Business: The Construction of National Hegemony**

In Antonio Gramsci’s ([1971], 2003) work on hegemony, he argues that social power is produced through consent, especially when it is circulated within social institutions. As Luis Pozo (2007) explains in his essay on hegemonic nationalism, hegemony is about creating cultural uniformity, while attempting to paper over the feelings associated with class difference. Hegemony then works as a moral ideal, uniting a diverse populace despite any contradictory class positions (or interests) members may occupy. Pozo states, “Hegemony proceeds by finding mechanisms that elicit the consent of the masses to class politics on an integrative basis, as a prerequisite for the legitimation of the social order” (59). For Pozo, nations are necessarily hegemonic, as they represent the class interests of the bourgeois, but also conversely work to bring people together by “securing social harmony” (65) through the construction of national identities. This power, however, is not absolute. As Gramsci argues, “History is, on the contrary, a continuous struggle of individuals and groups to challenge what exists in each given moment” (cited in Bates 1975, 365). In this regard, dominant expressions of national identity work as a particular form of hegemony, but they do not exist without challenges.

Drawing from Demetriou’s (2001) work on hegemonic masculinity, we can see that Canadian hockey hegemony, or the form that dominant national identity takes when social actors and institutions tie it to an understanding of Canada as a land of hockey and hockey players, faces existential challenges from both internal and external sources. Internal challenges come from other national hockey expressions and identities inside the country, like Québécois hockey nationalism, while external challenges emerge from hockey nationalism located outside the country, like Russian hockey nationalism. Demetriou explains that although Gramsci never explicitly distinguishes between internal and external hegemony, he does note that some challenges to the established social order are addressed through leadership (internal), while others are addressed through domination (external). This distinction between internal and external hegemonic challenges also applies to Canadian hockey hegemony.

Hegemonic nationalisms operate as common sense, benefit the ruling classes, and develop through a process of consensus and opposition. Many within the nation support national imaginaries (e.g., Canada as the land of hockey), even if they often do not benefit from them or are even explicitly marginalized by them. It is instructive here to address the process by which national consent is produced. To begin, it is important to note that for scholars, the nation is a frustrating object, difficult to define with any sort of precision. Pozo (2007) reports that Gramsci himself, along with other scholars of hegemony, have largely overlooked the operations of national hegemony, while nationalism scholars have wrestled to come up with a commonly accepted definition of the nation. Walter Bagehot claims, “We know what it is when you do not ask us, but we cannot very quickly explain or define it” (in Hobsbawm 1990, 1). Hugh Seton-Watson asserts, “No ‘scientific definition’ of the nation can be devised; yet the phenomenon has existed and exists” (in Anderson [1983], 2006, 3). In spite of this, nationalism will continue to be a useful and well-used concept (Calhoun 1993), including the various kinds of hegemonic nationalism celebrated in Canada.

The most convincing definitions of the nation and nationalism point to its social production, defining it as a constructed identity, drawing people together in a sense of communal belonging that transcends other identities (Anderson [1983], 2006). In the words of Benedict Anderson, “Nationality, or as one might prefer to put it … nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artifacts of a particular kind” (4). Anderson goes on to state that the nation is a sort of social imagining that creates boundaries, visualizes itself as free, and believes that it is a community, regardless of inequality and exploitation. Although the idea that nations work as communities is widely supported by scholars of nationalism, they place varying emphasis on the social institutions that work to produce these communities. For example, Anderson argues that technical apparatuses, including mass print media, create nations, while Brennan (1990) asserts that it is the novel that plays this role, and Billig (1995) privileges more banal practices and images, such as the ubiquity of national flags adorning everything from stamps to public buildings. Although many social institutions and activities construct the nation in a multitude of ways, using various strategies, it most consistently appears as natural and enduring (Billig 1995). As Richer and Hopkins (2001) state, “National identity is always a project, the success of which depends upon being seen as an essence” (231).

As nations are socially produced, they are imbued with inequalities. Although not widely explored by some notable theorists of nationalism, the process of creating national identity is one that secures particular hegemonic positions of power. Sociologist Ernest Gellner (2009), for example, draws attention to the fact that the creation of nations and national identity is not necessarily an inclusive process. He states that in order to address the needs of some groups, others will necessarily be excluded or marginalized. Specifically, he argues: “Not all nationalisms can be satisfied” (2). The significance of Gellner’s work is his emphasis on the generation of national mythologies, or, in the words of Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), “invented traditions.” Gellner (2009) recognizes that nationalisms work ahead of the nation—specifically, we cannot have nations without nationalism. The process of generating nationalist sentiment is bound up in mythologies that promote narrow definitions of national identity and consequently work to promote some ideals (and people), while systematically marginalizing or erasing others. In this regard, nationalism is tied to symbolism, and it is these vast symbols (such as hockey) that work to engender hegemonic national imaginings, however invented they may be.

**Skating into the Play: The Creation of a (*Canadian*-) Canadian Hockey Hegemony**

In Canada, symbols like multiculturalism, universal health care, and even the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) (Dawson, Gidney, and Wright 2018; Francis 1997), work in popular discourse to generate an understanding of the nation as a benevolent place that celebrates difference, cares for its citizens, and is committed to law and order (Mackey 2002; Day 2000; Walcott 2011). In spite of these popular imaginings, Mike Dawson, Catherine Gidney, and Donald Wright (2018) point out, “Even though symbols are used to fashion a national ‘we’ and a national ‘us,’ they are complicated and contested” (5).

Sport in the West, and hockey in Canada, play an important role in the generation of national myths, creating both complicated and contested notions of the nation. Hobsbawm (1990) notes that sport became the leading representation of the nation, particularly during the interwar years and beyond, replacing the war hero and acting as a symbol of national struggle, or an expression of a sport team’s “imagined community” (143). He claims that “what has made sport so uniquely effective a medium for inculcating national feeling … is the ease with which even the least political or public individuals can identify with the nation as symbolized by young persons excelling at what practically every man wants, or at one time in life has wanted, to be good at” (143). Hobsbawm’s ideas about the ways that nationalisms are constructed are not unproblematic. He inadvertently signals a phenomenon that Nira Yuval-Davis (1993) has highlighted more explicitly: specifically, that national hegemony is tied more directly to the bodies of men than to the bodies of women — an argument supported by trends in the public celebration of Canadian sport heroes. National symbols, particularly when they are tied to sport, work to marginalize the gender expressions of the working class, women, racialized populations, and queer, trans, and non-binary folk, while celebrating the gender expressions of young, most often white, seemingly straight, middle-class, able-bodied men.

Canadian hockey hegemony asserts that hockey is quintessentially Canadian, a natural outgrowth of our northern climate. Many social actors and arenas of social life, including the Canadian public, politicians, artists, a multitude of individuals representing state and cultural institutions, and even some academic researchers, have promoted ideas linked to this sentiment (Scherer and McDermott 2011; Leacock n.d.; Kennedy 2011). Even more importantly, this disparate group frequently argues that the sport joins the country together and creates social community. In one notable example, *CBC* personality Ron MacLean intoned during an advertisement for *Hockey Night in Canada,* a television show broadcasting (professional men’s) National Hockey League (NHL) games:

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. We are maybe coming from different places but we’re all coming from the same place. If you want to teach someone from another part of the world about Canada, you go to the television on Saturday night and it becomes crystal clear (Sportsnet Creative 2017).

MacLean’s sentiment, although sappy, appears to be supported by a 2012 Environics survey that found that 80% of Canadians strongly agreed or agreed somewhat that “hockey was a key part of what it means to be Canadian.” By 2015, hockey was still firmly entrenched as one of the most important Canadian symbols, falling behind only health care, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, public education, the RCMP, Indigenous peoples, multiculturalism, and the CBC (Environics Institute, 2016). But as Tony Patoine (2015) points out, “Hockey sparks our passion and unites us much more powerfully” (3) than many of these other symbols. Study guides for the Canadian citizenship test routinely feature questions about hockey and famous hockey players. One such guide asks: “What is important about hockey in Canada?” (Roes, Quinney and Drumheller District Literacy Project 2018).

The seeming importance of hockey to Canada abounds in Canadian popular culture. There are numerous songs (e.g., “Fireworks” and “50 Mission Cap” by The Tragically Hip; “The Hockey Song” by Stompin’ Tom Connors; “Big League” by Tom Cochrane and Red Rider; and “Hockey Teeth” by Bahamas) and popular books (e.g., Dryden 1983; Gzowksi 2004; Henderson 2011) that sing the praises of the sport. The Kingston, Ontario band The Tragically Hip (1998) proclaims hockey as a unifying national force, singing, “If there’s a goal that everyone remembers, It was back in ol’ 72.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Former hockey player Paul Henderson (2011) calls hockey “The Sport that Defines a Country,” while former *CBC* radio broadcaster and writer Peter Gzowski (2004) declared it *The Game of Our Lives*. In Quebec, the hockey movie “Les Boys” sparked three sequels and a television series (Ransom 2014), and starred several notable Francophone hockey celebrities (“Ice Hockey” n.d.). Text from Roch Carrier’s (1984) famous children’s book *The Hockey Sweater/Le chandail de hockey*, documenting the significance of hockey (as well as Anglophone-Francophone tensions) in small-town Quebec was memorialized on the 2002 Canadian five-dollar bill. A 2018 *Globe and Mail* article supports the significance of both Carrier’s text and hockey in Canada in its discussion of astronaut Robert Thirsk’s decision to bring *The Hockey Sweater* to space with him. The astronaut quotes his wife as stating, “It’s not a book — it’s an allegory about our country” (MacGregor para. 7).

Even in my own work on youthful and older Canadian hockey players (Allain 2012),[[2]](#endnote-2) players routinely connect hockey to their sense of nationhood. Noah, a young university-level hockey player, stated: “There is nothing I like to see more than a good ol’ Canadian player, playing the way we were brought up to … passionate I guess would be the right word because it means so much to us that we are willing to sacrifice ourselves and our own bodies for the good of the game.” Frank, a 71-year-old old-timers hockey player from the Maritimes, claimed that hockey was

[a] source of national pride that we’re good at it. Maybe better than, on average, most countries. It’s got a lot to do with the climate, especially you know, you have winters like this. Everybody had their own little rink and you gathered around and hockey became very, very important activity … I don’t know if it’s any less important than it used to be.

Raymond, a 74-year-old Acadian player, said,“Hockey is still [Canada’s] sport. We have 600,000 people playing hockey. What else would we do?”

Even those who are critical of symbolism that links hockey to the nation have claimed that hockey, in some particular ways, speaks to a national sense of self. Mary Louise Adams (2006), for example, states, “If hockey is life in Canada, then life in Canada remains decidedly masculine and white” (71). Likewise, Michael Robidoux (2018) argues:

Hockey is more than a mythological construct; it is a legitimate expression of Canadian national history and identity. Hockey *does* speak to issues of gender, race, ethnicity, and region in this nation, albeit not entirely in a positive manner. For this reason, hockey moves beyond symbol and becomes more of a metaphoric representation of Canadian identity (71).

Canada is not, of course, exempt from these expressions of national privilege. Therefore, while various social actors widely celebrate hockey as *a* (and quite possibly *the*) national symbol, doing the work of hegemonically binding the national citizenry, academics such as Richard Gruneau and Dave Whitson (1993) have noted that “this older sense of Canadian identity is rooted in an image of a common culture that has often papered over some of the most deeply rooted inequalities and conflicts in society” (7). They argue that “at the very least, hockey’s enduring link to the idea of “Canadianness” is something to be analysed rather than romanticized” (7).

**The Neutral Zone Trap: An Examination of External Challenges**

Scholars have focused their attention on the ways that Canadian hockey hegemony has worked to mask inequalities and privilege (Pitter 2006; Szto 2018; Theberge 1997). As I have demonstrated in some of my earlier work on the experiences of non-North American hockey players in the Canadian Hockey League (CHL), young men’s/boy’s elite-level hockey in Canada produces a narrow understanding of appropriate hockey play, linked to a sense of national identity, that works to marginalize those others, including women and non-North American hockey players, who will not or cannot play hockey in a way that favors a commitment to aggressive physicality. The idea of the Canadian game, one premised on a particular style of play, speaks to a metaphoric understanding of what it means to be a morally good Canadian (Allain 2008; Allain 2012), and can therefore be understood as hegemonically meaningful in a particular place and at a particular historical moment. One of my Canadian participants (Noah) described Canadian hockey as “relentless, punishment and just doing everything that is possible to win.” Another (Jason) stated that the Canadian game involved “more hitting. I would say more fighting for sure, but more hitting. Definitely a more aggressive style of play.” Other players described Canadian-style hockey as “hardnosed” (John), “physical” (Brady), “crash and bang” (Cooper), “rugged,” “in your face,” and “feisty” (Mark).[[3]](#endnote-3)

However, my work with former Canadian Hockey League players also highlights the fact that hockey is meaningful and important beyond Anglo-Canadian practices. Non-North Americans in the Canadian Hockey League (CHL), mainly young men or boys from Scandinavia, Eastern and Central Europe, and Russia, left their homes, culture, language, and most significantly their families to pursue elite-level hockey. Although there were many challenges associated with the position of non-North American hockey players in the CHL, the narratives shared by these players during this research, outlining their decisions to come to North America and their experiences playing hockey in the CHL, demonstrate that Anglo-Canadian hockey hegemony does not exist without resistance (Allain 2008).

These players explained the importance of the game they learned at home and the ways it informed the meanings they brought to their experiences as hockey players in Canada. They stressed that although Canadian hockey was played with similar rules and on a similar (yet not identical) rinks, the game they learned at home was unique and valuable, representing important national differences. Sergei,[[4]](#endnote-4) a Russian player in the Ontario Hockey League (OHL),[[5]](#endnote-5) expounded upon this:

European style is pass. Combinations mainly. A lot of time you are playing in the neutral zone. Especially Soviet Union hockey. It is all passing in the neutral zone. Canadian hockey, I think, more simple, but I think the speed is much better and it is much tougher … Everyone is bigger and everyone is skating faster [in the OHL]. After a couple of months, I had the feeling that my European style can help me, because I know some combinations. Some passes. Some Russian passes and things which a Canadian are not usually doing.

An interview with two Czech players, who also played in the OHL, supported many of Sergei’s comments. Radoslav declared:

Ah, it’s much different than in [Czech Republic] (*Czech teammate Jan laughs in agreement*), because in Europe it’s just not like dump puck in corner and go chasing. We have different style. It’s not that fast like here [in the OHL]. There is a lot of passing, kind of like smarter than here. But still here is much better because faster and you don’t have to have time for making big plays.

The unique understandings that various external national actors have of hegemonic Canadian hockey play represent a challenge to a singular Canadian hockey hegemony. Although the positions articulated above are generally considered marginal in Canada, and the players who played European-style hockey often felt pressure to conform to more (Anglo-) Canadian modes of hockey play, these challenges were nonetheless meaningful. These players did not give up their European style of play entirely. Indeed, they routinely expressed that it was advantageous for them to maintain their style of play. Even after playing hockey in North America for more than a year, these players still found value in European forms of hockey, and often spoke about it more favourably than the Canadian game.

Not only are there differences in the potential ways that players understand hockey from disparate national perspectives, different national imaginaries have used hockey to support their ideas of what it means to be appropriately masculine within particular national contexts (Stark 2001). Within the Anglo-Canadian hockey tradition, being an appropriately masculine man is related to playing a rough and tough game. Stark’s work demonstrates that other hockey-playing nations have historically fostered a link between their preferred style of hockey play and dominant gender expressions within that nation. Interestingly, these privileged (gender/national) identities have often contradicted and potentially challenged those that are privileged in Canada. For example, in Sweden during the Cold War, hockey masculinity was expressed through a dialectical process that contrasted Swedish hockey masculinity to dominant Canadian and Russian hockey masculinities. The archetype of the “pal,” a model that Stark describes as disciplined and morally virtuous, was an expression of Swedish hockey masculinity, while the Swedish public and various Swedish hockey actors understood the Canadian style of play as undisciplined and immoral (see also MacIntosh and Greenhorn 1993). Stark argues that Sweden’s representation of appropriate hockey play and its link to masculine expression drew upon Sweden’s social democratic history. He further finds that those involved in Swedish hockey had assigned negative characteristics to Russian/Soviet hockey players and their perceived style of play, describing it, especially during the Cold War period, as one that reflects an autocratic government and a despotic coaching style.

The hegemony of Canadian hockey masculinity is not static. Understandings of European and Russian players in North American hockey come from a particular place and represent a privileged hockey expression of a particular time. The dominance of these positions change and shift as they meet challenges from various others. For example, as new rules develop to protect player safety, and mathematical modelling of best strategic practices (called analytics) becomes more common, elite teams are beginning to value new ways of selecting hockey players, altering the hegemonically celebrated style of play. Therefore, it is not surprising that external challenges to the supremacy of Canadian hockey nationalisms have shifted state, public, and media understandings of the significance of European players, and, more importantly, understandings of the value of the so-called Canadian game. MacIntosh and Greenhorn (1993), for example, describe how Canada’s pugnacious international play in the 1950s and 60s prompted the concerns of the Canadian Department of External Affairs and other governmental agencies. Governmental officials believed that the Canadian style of aggressive brutality was particularly damaging to international relations between Europe and Canada.

Furthermore, overt challenges to Canadian hockey supremacy beginning in the 1950s, particularly the Soviet domination (to use Gramsci’s term) of international hockey in the second half of the twentieth century, produced new understandings of what appropriate play should look like. For example, consider the panic by the Canadian media, public and hockey community after Canada’s near loss in the 1972 Canada-Soviet Summit Series (Cantelon 2006; Scherer, Duquette and Mason 2007). The results of these near losses were dramatic changes in the ways those on and off the ice understood the Canadian game. As Kreiser (2012) reports, lessons from the series, including the importance of a passing game and pre-season conditioning, continue to inform Canadian understandings of the game today. In his words, “It’s safe to say that hockey as we know it has never been the same” (para. 8).

By the 1990s, the public, media and others critiqued those who resisted changes in game play that incorporated European players and their understandings of hockey, believing them to be regressive. For example, when Canadian celebrity Don Cherry attempted to keep non-North American players from his own OHL hockey team, many were highly critical, accepting the value of European hockey and the benefits it brought to these teams, an attitude that Cherry eventually adopted as well (CBC Sports 2001; Spencer 2001). The challenges posed by non-North Americans, their unique styles of play, and their commitment to valuing the games they learned and played in Europe and Russia have resulted in what Demetriou (2001) (following the work of Gramsci) calls “dialectical” processes that “involve reciprocity and mutual interaction” (345). Extant work points to the ways that both external and internal processes have the potential to add new insights into the ways that national symbols, and the hegemonic understandings of them, are created and then sustained in conversation with various Canadian national others.[[6]](#endnote-6) In these next sections, I build on this analysis and focus my attention on the internal challenges to Canadian hockey hegemony, specifically those brought from French Canada and First Nations.

**Strong Offensive Zone Play: An Examination of Internal National Challenges**

***The Case of Franco-Hockey Nationalisms***

Scholars have pointed out hockey’s importance to understandings of identity in French Canada, particularly Quebec (Moreau, Laurin-Lamothe and Rivest 2015; Ransom 2014; Harvey 2006; Blake and Holman 2017). Jean Harvey (2006) argues that “In the first half of the twentieth century, then, French-Canadians enthusiastically took up hockey and made it a symbol of their national identity, of their fight for survival and for the survival of their culture, on an English-speaking continent and within a country dominated by the English” (34). For Harvey, the link between Quebec culture and hockey is one characterized by resistance, not assimilation. This culture of resistance has been celebrated within Quebec popular culture, with the tensions between English and French Canada particularly exemplified by the rivalry between the Montreal Canadiens and the Toronto Maple Leafs, as was memorialized in Roch Carrier’s (1984) iconic autobiographical work, *The Hockey Sweater/Le chandail de hockey*. In it, Carrier fictionalizes a boyhood incident involving him mistakenly receiving a Toronto Maple Leafs sweater instead of the jersey of his beloved Montreal Canadiens. Wearing his Leafs jersey, he is ostracized, and eventually excluded from the game he loves. *The Hockey Sweater* is more than a childhood story and vividly portrays Anglo-Francophone tensions in 1940s small-town Quebec.

Today, thinkers like Patoine (2015) assert that when considering the Toronto–Montreal rivalry, hockey has proven a more “powerful” nation-building tool for Canada than for Quebec. Hockey in Quebec, on the other hand, has been a tool to counter Anglo assimilation instead of building a national imaginary. He argues that this is largely the result of Quebec’s lack of a national team. Specifically:

there is no doubt that a Team Québec, a politically legitimate project that 72 percent of Québécois support, would do much more for Québec nationalism than the Montréal Canadiens can . . . it would create a sustainable and renewable sense of collective identity . . . a Team Québec would be a source of pride across Québec, a symbol of success, our very own “Yes We Can!” (19).

So even as Jean Harvey (2006) argues that the Montreal Canadiens are no longer linked to “the common destiny of French-Canada” (49), the significance of the sport to Quebec identity appears strong.

The more recent scholarship of Quebec Studies scholar Amy Ransom (2014) demonstrates the cultural importance of hockey to a sense of Quebec identity. Specifically, her analyses of the cultural products generated around hockey in Quebec demonstrate how Québécois use hockey, as a way of asserting an identity that is unique and separate from the rest of Canada. She argues:

Hockey appears … as a common ground where the two solitudes may meet, particularly through the Montreal Canadiens’ rivalry with the Toronto Maple Leafs ­— the team’s very names reveal their connection to distinct national identities — while also allowing the symbolical acting out of their discords in the sage arena of the national sport (23).

Or as Suzanne Laberge (2011) asks in her writing on the Richard/Campbell affair:[[7]](#endnote-7) “To what nation does the mythical figure of the ‘Rocket’ belong? To Quebec, to French Canada, to all of Canada . . . or quite simply to hockey?” Although she concludes that “we could say he belongs to all of these” (9), his meaning in Quebec, where he remains a symbol of Francophone resistance and hockey superiority, is quite different from his meaning to the NHL or hockey as a whole. Hockey in Quebec contains different meanings, understandings and ideas about national belonging and identity than it does in English Canada. This is aptly illustrated by the title of Jason Blake and Andrew Holman’s (2017) text, *The Same but Different,* examining the significance of hockey in Quebec culture*.* As authors such as Ransom (2014), Harvey (2006), Carrier (1983), Laberge (2011) and others begin to point out, Quebec hockey nationalism — particularly one expressed through the prominence of Francophone players and teams such as the Montreal Canadiens dynasties of the 50s, 60s and 70s — challenges the cultural hegemony of *a* singular Canadian hockey nationalism. As Emmanuel Lapierre (2017) states, “French Canadians appropriated hockey in *their own manner* and used it to tell a story about themselves” (69).

In my recent work with old-timers hockey players, I have begun to find that there is not only a Quebec nationalism expressed through hockey (in the words of old-timers hockey player François, “[There’s] a different spirit [in Quebec hockey]”), but that Acadians also express their unique commitment to culture, language, and identity through their participation in the sport. For example, a 63-year-old research participant and Acadian old-timers hockey player, Jean-Charles, explained that in his primarily Anglophone community, he started his own Acadian hockey team (Les Acadiens) in order to play with other Acadians, particularly those who were French-speaking. He explained the significance of this:

When you are looking at a minority, in any languages, there is a tendency to basically form … to remain within your own group. My perspective, from a hockey perspective, is not that … That question was ask [by other Anglophone league members]: “So you don’t want Anglophones?” No. It’s not that. The reality is, you put one Anglophone into a Francophone group and then the Francophone will basically speak English … to be polite. For me it was very simple. I’m in a group. When the game is over, it’s the social part … The conversation for the next hour, we’re having a beer, we’re talking, we’re joking … It’s not playing hockey only!

Jean-Charles continued, explaining how Anglophones in the league understood his team. He commented:

 That brought some negative thing. And believe me it created [pause] … there was some backlash. When we were playing teams [pause] … I can’t prove it … The word was they were playing the French team and believe me there was a lot of friction.

For Jean-Charles, it was important to be with other Acadian players. He commented that it was about being together and creating a community. He stressed that he never selected players for the team based on their ability, but instead privileged their Acadian identity, their capacity to speak French, and their conviviality.

In another instance, an Acadian player named Raymond commented on the English-French tensions in the old-timers league. Raymond explained that like Jean-Charles, he preferred playing with Acadians because he found them to be more fun, more entertaining, and less serious than their Anglo counterparts. In this regard, hockey for both Québécois and Acadians is an important cultural space to practice, celebrate, and challenge what Eva Mackey (2002) calls *Canadian*-Canadian identities,[[8]](#endnote-8) asserting instead the importance and value of their unique national positions. Likewise, the hockey culture of various Indigenous peoples (including the Inuit, Métis, and First Nations) represents an alternative understanding of the game of hockey and its related national mythologies.

***The Case of Indigenous Nationalisms***

For some Indigenous peoples in Canada, hockey is culturally significant, a practice that existed prior to colonialism and has continued to today. This reality causes ruptures in the (white) origin stories often associated with Canadian hockey (see for example Houston 2002). Even as non-Indigenous actors represent hockey as a Canadian practice developed by settlers, Indigenous actors and their histories offer resistance to these claims. Specifically, public historians, the media, municipal officials and even the National Hockey League (NHL) argue over which Canadian community (Kingston, ON; Windsor, NS; Montreal, QC; Deline, NT) is the birthplace of hockey.[[9]](#endnote-9) The homepage for the municipal website for Windsor, NS asks visitors to “enter the birthplace of hockey,” while the local hockey museum, called The Birthplace of Hockey (underlining appears in original), features pictures of early hockey teams (all members appear white). However, Paul Bennett (2012) argues that the much more likely explanation for hockey’s development and growth in colonial Canada is its historic existence as an Indigenous game, developed simultaneously in several different communities, brought to settler Canada through contact between Indigenous peoples and settlers. Bennett (2018) points out that Mi’kmaq experiences with the game of hockey, including their skills at crafting the first mass-produced sticks, the words for the sport present in their language, and oral histories which support its pre-colonial cultural importance, explicitly challenge the notion that hockey is Canada, and in fact suggest that the so-called Canadian game has roots in First Nations communities and their contact with colonial settlers.Bennett quotes from Harley (2002), stating, “The cultural influence of the Mi’kmaq and the Acadians established the foundation for the playing of the game of ice hockey in Canada” (49).

Ojibwe writer Richard Wagamese’s novel *Indian Horse* tells the story of an Ojibwe boy who is abducted by representatives of the Canadian state, placed in residential school, and sexually abused by his teacher, but finds some solace in the game of hockey. *Indian Horse* demonstrates the ways that First Nations hockey play challenges operations of power, linked to Canadian hockey hegemony.Like Bennett, literature scholars Sam McKegney and Trevor Phillips argue that “purveyors of the game promote senses of ‘Native Canadian’ identity among those who play it, in the process erasing—or denying—differential senses of belonging among First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people who may or may not self-identify as ‘Canadian’” (2018, 99). In spite of this, they demonstrate that First Nations understandings of the game are rooted in Indigenous worldviews and the unique contexts in which they emerge. McKegney and Phillips show the ways that Wagamese’s novel ties hockey to Indigenous healing and Indigenization, with competition taking a back seat to community play. They draw attention to the contradictions associated with the idea of hockey as Canada’s game, noting that although the sport is falsely presented as one of inclusion, the conclusion of *Indian Horse* “reaffirms the game’s collaborative energies in the cause of Indigenous communal empowerment” (98).

The experiences of the Indigenous peoples who play the game today support the cultural importance of hockey to various First Nations. Michael Robidoux’s (2012) ethnographic work on hockey tournaments in Indigenous communities across Canada demonstrates the unique meaning and identities that Indigenous peoples bring to hockey. In one poignant example, Robidoux (2012) describes his experiences conducting field work in Esketemc First Nation (British Columbia). Notably, Robidoux and his research team were confused by the culture of the sport and the way it was played. Players privileged flair, something sanctioned as inappropriately masculine in men’s/boys’ Anglo-Canadian hockey cultures, and the team lacked the stifling rationalization often associated with modern sport practices. When Robidoux approached the Chief, asking him about the relationship between sport and marginalization, he replied: “I don’t see it as assimilation if we do it in a better way” (50). Careful to not essentialize First Nations understandings of the sport, Robidoux’s work demonstrates the unique cultural and symbolic meanings that various Indigenous participants (including different First Nations, Métis, and Inuit) bring to the game and the important ways that they disrupt colonial discourse and understandings of modern sport in Canada**.** Specifically, he states, “What is important here is that what is being described is not merely a matter of variations in style of play, but the colliding of two different ways of knowing/being” (2012, 137).

Prominent Indigenous professional hockey players also emphasize the importance of their unique worldviews and the impact of those views on their understandings of the game. For example, in the lead-up to the Sochi Winter Olympic Games in 2014, the Canadian press commented on the calm demeanor of Canadian goaltender Carey Price (Nuxalk and Southern Carrier). In an interview with *Indian Country Today* (2014)*,* Price’s mother attributed this to “her son’s culture” (para. 6), stating, “I think the sense of connection to our land and where we come from helps keep us all grounded in who we are. We cannot become disconnected and caught up in a whirlwind of popularity and become disconnected from the ‘real world’” (para. 7). Former NHL player and coach Ted Nolan (Ojibwa) notes, “We always talk about the traditional ways of life and as far as I’m concerned hockey’s part of that tradition too. Summer time it was moccasins and winter time it was the skates” (Marks and Zubeck 2008). Works by Robidoux (2012) and Wagamese (2012), and the personal accounts of Indigenous hockey players represents an important challenge to hockey’s hegemonic position as *the* symbol of the Canadian nation, demonstrating the ways that Indigenous hockey exists as separate from but in conversation with non-Indigenous versions of the sport. For instance, Allan Downey (2018) applies Mary-Ellen Kelm’s work on rodeos to lacrosse, sharing the following passage from Kelm, which could relate to hockey: “Aboriginal people, like other disenfranchised or marginalized people, used such events to claim a public presence, to intervene in dialogue about nation-building, and it put forward their own interests upon a highly visible stage” (68).[[10]](#endnote-10)

**Dump and Chase: Conclusions**

The stories of those internal and national “others” who participate in Canadian hockey teach important lessons. The meanings they bring to these experiences, both as individual actors and as members of given communities, demonstrate that other Canadian national contexts conceptualize the sport of hockey differently. Although for the purposes of this paper, I have focused my analysis on various Franco-Canadian and Indigenous identities, the lessons learned here may help explain the internal and external challenges posed by an even wider variety of national others, including women, gender and sexual minorities, disabled people, and racialized people. The players discussed in this work understand and play the game in ways that represent unique modes of being a hockey player, and demonstrate the varying kinds of cultural importance different communities assign to the game, and how these communities use the sport of hockey to consolidate and celebrate their identities. This deceptively simple understanding of sport — that different people and nations understand and play it differently — can grow scholars’ understandings of privilege. Specifically, acknowledging these challenges to the hegemony of a singular hockey nationalism in Canada — one specifically tied to the bodies of Anglo, white, young men in Canada — helps to demonstrate the ways that more privileged identities shape themselves in discussion with and in contradiction to more marginalized versions of the game.

Drawing on both my own work with Canadian and non-North American hockey players and the extant work on hockey (and its representations) in Quebec and in First Nations communities in Canada, this article argues that there is value in discussing Canadian men’s hockey as a privileged form of national mythmaking. Specifically, when those in Canada celebrate hockey as linked to life in Canada, they work to privilege the experiences of young, Anglo, white, middle-class, seemingly straight, and able-bodied men, positioning their experiences as quintessentially tied to national identity in ways not available to others. However, it is also important to consider the ways that other national identities challenge (and then as a result work to reconstruct) a hegemonic Canadian hockey identity. Drawing from Gramsci, and particularly Demetriou’s (2001) interpretation of his work, this article asserts that there is value in examining the ways that domination and leadership, as expressed by external and internal forces respectively, present hegemonic challenges to this primary (and often taken-for-granted) identity. Although dominant expressions of national identity privilege certain citizens, hegemonic Canadian hockey identity does not construct itself in isolation. It is therefore valuable to assess the various ways that those hockey others come to understand themselves both apart from and in conversation with this identity. However, it is also valuable to move this work farther and look at the ways that these disparate identities pose real challenges to this hegemonic structure, compelling it to change and adapt.

Given this, research that considers the various challenges posed by those hockey others — particularly those expressed from within the national boundary — can be valuable in fleshing out points of tension within the nation, drawing attention to issues such as racism, discrimination, and longstanding linguistic frictions. It can also demonstrate how national identities, as hegemonic entities, must be attentive to the challenges posed by those who play the game of hockey in their own unique ways, investing it with different histories and meanings. In this regard, new scholarship on hockey in Canada must pay attention to the national, cultural, social, and linguistic borders that operate within the Canadian territorial space. We should ask what happens when different understandings of the game bump up against one another. How do the dynamics of power operate there? What are the lasting impacts of these collisions? It is clear that that the diversity of hockey nationalisms (whether from within or without) complement and challenge the idea that hockey is Canada. Being attentive to the ways that Canadian hockey nationalisms work may help us to grow and expand stagnant, privileged, and ultimately exclusive identities in favor of more diverse ways of understanding Canada and its various nationalisms.

**Notes**

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**Notes on Contributor**

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1. The 1972 Canada-Russia Summit Series was the first time that the best hockey players from both Canada and the Soviet Union played one another. Despite an early series of losses to the Soviet Union, the Canadian public enthusiastically embraced the competition, believing that Canada would rout the competition (see Allain 2016). The final game was widely watched on television and listened to on radio, and it is considered to have been a significant national event (see Zweig 2018; CBC 2017; Fisher 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In the former, I examined national identity, expressions of masculinity, and player violence in the Canadian Hockey League (CHL), the premier development league for men’s hockey talent in the world. I interviewed 19 current or former elite-level men’s hockey players. These players were at least 18 years of age and had played at least one season in the Canadian Hockey League (CHL). Of the 19 participants, one was American, eight were European or Russian, and ten were Canadian. In the latter, I interviewed 18 men over the age of 50, who were presently competing in old-timers hockey. All players were from a small city in the Maritimes, a region noted for its aging population. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Over the past several years, there have been changes to North American hockey rules, at both the professional and semi-professional levels (e.g. Canadian Hockey League). These changes have increased the penalties for fighting and some forms of body checking. Although these rule changes have affected the ways that NHL and junior teams obtain success on the ice, physically aggressive players are still routinely celebrated by those in professional North American hockey — and even sometimes over-valued by professional hockey scouts and coaches. NHL scouting reports, as well as the scouting reports from professional hockey writers, still laud aggressive play, especially by Canadian players with large bodies. For example, during the 2018–2019 season, Hamilton Bulldogs winger Navrin Mutter earned only 13 points in 67 games, but was ranked by NHL Central Scouting for the upcoming NHL draft. Scouting reports and hockey blogs commented on the value of his aggressive play and his “size and truculence” (OHL Prospects 2019) describing him as “fearless” and “reckless” (Tiano 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Participants’ names have been changed to maintain their anonymity. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. In order to highlight the ways that players use and misuse language when discussing their hockey experiences, I have maintained all linguistic errors and speech idioms. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The OHL, one of three divisions in the CHL, contains teams located mainly in the province of Ontario, with one team in Michigan and another in Pennsylvania. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. My work on this topic, however (Allain 2008; Allain 2016), demonstrates that these changes are slow and uneven. Even as European players have come into the NHL in increasing numbers over the past 50 years and attitudes towards them have softened, they still face discrimination, stereotyping in the press, and sometimes even abuse by fellow teammates. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. The Richard/Campbell affair references the 1955 suspension of Montreal Canadiens star Maurice Richard. The Quebec public widely viewed Richard’s suspension as unjust (an attitude that was not shared by many in the wider hockey community). When Campbell attended a Canadiens game in Montreal shortly after the suspension, there was a riot in the arena that spilled out onto the streets of Montreal. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Mackey (2002) defines *Canadian*-Canadians as those people who conceive of themselves as “mainstream” Canadians (3). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Journals from Sir John Franklin’s ill-fated 1845 attempt to navigate the Northwest Passage discuss his crew members playing a version of ice hockey in what is now Deline, NT. According to the CBC(2015), this is the first reported “mention” of the game. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. The use of colonial sport to increase visibility of Indigenous communities and worldviews is not strictly a Canadian hockey phenomenon. For example, the documentary “Trobriand Cricket: An Indigenous Response to Cricket” (Kildea and Leach, 1976) carefully documents, at the request of the community, the ways that Trobriand Islanders used the sport to express their world view as unique and important, creating their own version of the game. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)