

# **We the North? Race, Nation and the Multicultural Politics of Toronto's First NBA Championship**

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## **Abstract**

The Toronto Raptors' 2019 NBA championship win, a first for the franchise and for a Canadian team, "turned hockey country into basketball nation" (CBC Radio 2020). Canadians' growing embrace of the team and the sport seemed to point to a growing celebration of Blackness within the nation. However, we problematize the 2019 championship win to tell a more expansive story about how sport and national myths conceal truths about race and belonging in Canada. We explore two particular cases, the We the North campaign and the media coverage of Raptors superfan Nav Bhatia, to highlight the contradictory ways that the Raptors coverage mobilized symbols of the North and multiculturalism in order to produce the team as quintessentially Canadian and rebrand basketball for Canadian audiences. We further explore how these stark contradictions manifest in the racialized policing of basketball courts in the Greater Toronto Area. These cases demonstrate that the celebrations of the Raptors and basketball not only continued to police racialized bodies, but also ensured their inclusion was contingent on the maintenance of the status quo.

**Keywords:** basketball, Canada, Raptors, the North, Blackness, Whiteness, Toronto

## **Introduction**

In June 2019, at the close of a long victory parade and in front of thousands of fans, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Ontario Premier Doug Ford, and Toronto Mayor John Tory handed the keys to the city to Kawhi Leonard, the hero of the Toronto Raptors' historic basketball season. For the first time since their inception in 1995, the Raptors had won the Eastern Conference Finals and gone on to be crowned National Basketball Association (NBA) "world" champions. This was more than an underdog story; it was a national fairy tale. Almost all areas of Canadian life celebrated the team's success, most notably the press, the public, and the state. For many Canadians, especially those who publicly celebrated it, the Raptors 2019 championship symbolized a shift in Canadian national identity, sport, and (racial) difference that marked a movement away from a national sports identity recognized through the lens of Whiteness and hockey, and catapulted basketball and racialized "Others" to the forefront of the Canadian national imaginary.

In this article, we seek to understand "how the Raptors turned hockey country into basketball nation" (CBC Radio 2020). Here we problematize the 2019 championship win to tell a more expansive story about how sport and national myths conceal truths about race and belonging in Canada. By examining media representations and advertising campaigns, we establish how the concept of the North, often situated as a landscape of barrenness and Whiteness, commodifies racial difference (largely through cursory forms of inclusion) to mobilize national myths and rebrand basketball for Canadian consumer markets.<sup>2</sup> We consider this shift through the following conceptual themes. First, the Raptors' fanbase, and even its ambassador (Drake) and superfan (Nav Bhatia), represent a multicultural ethos not elicited by other national (winter) sports or in other national contexts (namely the US) — as the innumerable images of Toronto's Jurassic

Park(s) demonstrated. The mythologies associated with Canadian multiculturalism, and the symbolic celebration of Canadian immigration and (racial) difference, speak to a particular kind of idealism in which mainly “*Canadian-Canadians*”<sup>3</sup> view themselves as more progressive than their American neighbours (McKittrick 2007). Second, drawing on national symbols that paint Canada as the land of ice and snow, the press, the team, fans and others mobilize the romantic (and often hegemonically masculine and contradictorily White) image of the North in order to secure the Raptors’ unique position (i.e., as not American) as a significant marker of Canadian national identity.

This paper sits at the nexus of Canadian national imaginaries, their symbolic representations, the convenient public and state celebrations of non-Whiteness, and the actual basketball-playing experiences of racialized and White youth in Toronto (and how various White community members understand these experiences). At the heart of this examination are the socio-cultural dimensions of promoting the Raptors through the We the North slogan<sup>4</sup> and its historical and contemporary implications. Although the Raptors’ historic playoff run was 25 years in the making, the rallying cry of “We the North” is the relatively recent result of franchise rebranding in 2017, marking a pivotal repositioning of the team. Since then, scholars such as Daniel W. Dylan (2019) have questioned the slogan’s homogenous metanarrative of nationality, notably asserting its subversion of Indigenous identity (2, 5). Furthermore, Gamal Abdel-Shehid (2006) posited long before this rebranding that the scholarship must (also) trouble the capitalist deployment of Black bodies in “an increasingly multicultural age” (200). In considering these questions, this paper addresses how the Raptors 2019 playoff victory worked, in the Canadian imagination, to locate the team, its fans, and the city of Toronto as quintessentially Canadian. Drawing on national symbols associated with the celebration of difference and diversity, the

widespread proliferation of the We the North campaign, and the celebration of Raptors superfan Nav Bhatia, we contend that an examination of sport and national mythologies can offer critical insights into the limits of belonging within the Canadian nation.

Keeping this in mind, we begin by examining the history and significance of the North as a national symbol and question its association with notions of multiculturalism. Next, we explore two particular cases, the We the North campaign and the media representations of Raptors superfan Nav Bhatia, to highlight the contradictory ways that the Raptors' coverage mobilized symbols of the North and multiculturalism in order to produce the team as quintessentially Canadian. Despite media and public understanding of the Raptors' 2019 championship as a true celebration of Canadian national identity, we show how this careful construction of Canadian (multicultural) identity establishes strict limits to definitions of difference, celebrating an imagined Canada that actually manages and commodifies diversity instead of truly celebrating it. To this end, we situate multiculturalism as a "state-sanctioned, state organized ideological affair" that generates, contains and regulates meanings of difference to reveal the contours of racial and cultural power (Bannerji 2000, 27). In our final section, we further explore these stark contradictions through the material experiences of young Black basketball-playing youth. We outline how, despite public celebrations of racial and ethnic diversity within Toronto, the policing of indoor and outdoor basketball courts in the surrounding Greater Toronto Area demonstrate that some residents and authorities see diversity, and in particular Blackness, as troublesome and dangerous. Through these cases, we articulate how the celebrations of the Raptors exposed the mythical nature of the multicultural nation within the Canadian imaginary, and show how these celebrations not only policed racialized bodies, but ensured their inclusion was contingent on the maintenance of the status quo.

**The Great (White) North: Understanding the “Romance of the Frozen World” (Clarke 1997, 104)**

Popular emblems of Canada (the red maple leaf, the “true North strong and free,” hockey, the Mountie, etc.) rely on tropes revolving around the nation’s geographic location (Braz 2005, 2–4, 7; Dylan 2019, 6, 9). As popular culture symbolically (re)produces the cold and icy North, hockey is “naturally” imbedded into the fabric of Canadian society, to the exclusion of other physical culture practices.<sup>5</sup> The rise of hockey as *the* national sport is tied to a common-sense understanding of the sport as a natural outgrowth of Canada’s northern location (Holman 2018, 30–31). The overwhelming number of White participants in hockey helps to cement this metaphor. The North, an archetype of White-European colonial conquest intrinsic to the production of national identity and symbols, leaves little room within the collective understanding of nation for participants or practices that do not reflect that traditional White image. Although basketball is distantly Canadian (via inventor James Naismith), it lacks the “Canadianness” that hockey embodies, becomes marketable through its presentation of non-threatening Blackness in the NBA, and is racially coded as “inner city” (Wilson 1999, 234–236). The We the North slogan is therefore particularly compelling, given its simultaneous perpetuation and disruption of the historical myth of Canada.

The North as symbol has a long-standing history, dating back to the mid-nineteenth century, when Canadian nation-builders capitalized on the concept to forge an identity distinct from their American neighbours and British roots. Narratives of colonial conquest helped underscore the legitimacy of settlers’ presence on the territory, while reflecting power and dominance. The colonial violence that secured the settlers’ invasion was then “subsumed into a larger benign narrative of the nation’s identity”<sup>6</sup> by Canadians and Canada, at which junction winter emerged

as a “core component of the national psyche — and popular culture” (Brydges and Hracz 2018, 115). This unique attribute is not only embedded within the nation, but also in how Canada presents itself to the world. As Gilles Vigneault proclaimed in his 1964 song “Mon pays” — that is, his nation — “is not a country, it is winter” (cited in Clarke 1997, 107). Hence, the use of snow and wintry imagery in the Raptors’ rebranding campaign resonated well, despite Toronto having no exclusive claim to the cold (including Toronto, 15 of the 30 NBA teams exist in northern, wintry American cities).

Historically, the true North, strong and free, has exclusively denoted Whiteness. It is not merely a place, but a signifier for a cultural location where White Canadians rally in their collective imagination (Dylan 2019, 9). Fully spelled out as the Great White North, it evokes more than endless snowy landscapes; it is a metaphor for White settlement and racialist “exclusionary politics of nation building” (Anderson 2011, 260). Following Confederation in the late 1860s, Canadian culture makers (and gatekeepers) made efforts to differentiate the nation from its southern neighbour by presenting it as the “Britain of the North” (Comeau and Allahar 2001, 152), which not only underscored Canada’s geographical position in relation to the United States, but also served as a reminder that Canada proudly carried the legacy of so-called “northern races” as distinct from, and superior to, so-called “southern races” (Calliste 1994; Comeau and Allahar 2001; Kelly and Wossen-Taffesse 2012). For instance, popular arguments against Black immigration claimed that “Blacks from below the Mason Dixon line” were not suited to the Canadian climate (Bashi 2004, 585–7, 602–3; Jakubowski 1997, 15, 17).<sup>7</sup> This line of thinking began in the nineteenth century, when the notion of “Black tropicality gave advocates of colonization a biological ground” for hostility towards free Black people in the West (Asaka 2017, 140). Accordingly, “the extent to which any incoming categories of people deviated from

the defined northern race became an ongoing cause of concern for those who hoped to assimilate and build a unified and superior [White] Canadian race” (Comeau and Allahar 2001, 152; see also “An Act Respecting Immigration” 1910, 128; Kelly and Trebilcock 1998, 82–3). Popular culture also reproduces “authentic” (White) Canada as outdoorsy and “wild,” a landscape in which Othered bodies do not belong, as they exist on the periphery due to a putative lack of connection to northern nature and, therefore, to Canadianness (Baldwin, Cameron, and Kobayashi 2011, 10). Iconic images of snowy mountaintops and windswept frozen ponds, ubiquitous provincial and national parks, and the canoe skills of Pierre Elliot Trudeau and his son Justin all evince the call to reaffirm civilization by going back to the wild.<sup>8</sup>

The White supremacist modern imaginary thus omits Black, Brown, and Indigenous people from this portrait (Razack 2011, 268). Katherine McKittrick’s work on Black Canadian geographies confirms this argument as examinations of geographic space, in this case Canada and Toronto, are both (re)produced and perceived as “inflected with both absence and presence” (McKittrick 2002, 27; McKittrick and Woods 2007, 7). In essence, the presence and erasure of Black bodies in Canada “clarifies how race and racism structure and limit black lives and places” (29). Being attentive to Black Canadian geographies helps to explicate how particular geographies of inclusion and exclusion produce national symbols like the North and multiculturalism. Through complex processes, these symbols then go on to produce what Benedict Anderson (1983) calls “imagined communities” that are centred on difference, but simultaneously work to erase the very presence of difference. As such, there is no overlap between urban (new, recent, disruptive, racialized) and rural (heartland, original, authentic, White) conceptions, which is why the We the North campaign, as discussed below, is subversive (in some ways).

These critical perspectives on the symbolism of the Great White North and its relationship to Whiteness demonstrate that the symbolic tie between the North and White Canada have not dissipated. Instead, popular discourse consistently updates this tie to sustain the nation's identity. As discussed above, exclusionary nation-building efforts were overtly mobilized in the twentieth century to limit immigration of "unsuited" races (Comeau and Allahar 2001, 152, 155). In contrast, covert twenty-first century mobilizations illustrate the complex positioning of "outsiders" in the nation; from the margins, they reify Canada's modern myth of multiculturalism. With Whiteness existing as common-sense in Canadian meaning-making, the Other penetrates the matrix only insofar as their presence upholds White Canadian ideals of belonging. In other words, depending on the circumstances, dominant groups' control of space can create inclusion and/or exclusion for subordinate groups (McKittrick and Peake 2005, 48). As outlined in this work, "We the North" inscribes itself within this process. In fact, this is not the only moment in sport or beyond to paint Canada as inclusive by tokenizing difference. Recently, as part of the Canada 150 celebrations in 2017, the Canadian Football League (CFL) launched its "Diversity is Strength" campaign to highlight the contributions of people from various racial and ethnic backgrounds to football and the league. The campaign is significant because Canadian football, like hockey, has played a part in the construction of national identity since the nineteenth century (Valentine 2019, 378). But unlike hockey (and basketball) elite leagues, the CFL is exclusive to Canada and Canadian teams. This uniquely ties it to culture and national unity, and positions it as a defensive tool against internal fractures and the American threat to Canadian sovereignty (Valentine 2019, 377–8, 383). Consequently, the "Diversity is Strength" campaign fits within the routine Canadian championing of multiculturalism for the sake of it; such commentary spreads widely, but only vaguely resonates and does little to



practically address existing racial and ethnic tensions. As explored in the “National Embodiments” section below, efforts to promote difference are often problematic and relay back to a hegemonic idea of nation.

The legacy of the North makes indelible the idea of sports such as basketball (and associated “urban” and/or racialized players) as incompatible with an authentic Canadianness. In light of this, the Raptors’ innovation is in the link established between the northern imagery and basketball, a sport widely associated with non-White and frequently marginal identities (as discussed in the case study on Toronto’s basketball courts below). Ultimately, the use of the North to promote a Canadian sport team is nothing new. Sport’s deep ties to national identity construction (Hobsbawm [1992] 2012, 143) have led media, Canadian culture makers, state representatives, sport stakeholders, and the public to connect the North (the land of ice and snow) to certain activities in order to suggest an authentic Canadian sports identity (see Allain 2011; Robidoux 2018). Hockey epitomizes that link, but other sports have borrowed it as well. Most recently, the Canadian Olympic Committee mobilized the North for the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympic team slogan, “We Are Winter” (CTV News 2013), and the 2016 Rio team’s “Ice in Our Veins” (Brydges and Hracz 2018; Canadian Press 2016). Interestingly, the Rio campaign evoked winter to illustrate summer Olympic athletes’ triumph over the cold as a symbol of the nation’s hardiness and ruggedness. Still, we reiterate that the leveraging of the “eternal cold” in sport and elsewhere produces the mythical nation while simultaneously obfuscating social hierarchies. Given the legacy of the notion of North, “authentic” Canadian practices are those imbued with Whiteness. Basketball, despite being invented by a White Canadian man, does not reflect the imagined character of Canada in the manner of hockey or canoeing, nor does it possess the historical foothold of Canadian football. Considering the exclusionary nature of Canadian

nationhood, dominant narratives of nation commodify non-White identities and practices, attributing them value only so long as they fulfill an ideological or symbolic purpose that is useful to a White majority. It is within this framework that we position the Raptors' 2018 playoff run and its rally-cry, "We the North."

### **"It Became Kind of Like the New Flag of Canada" (Powell 2019): Placing the We the North Campaign in a (Re)Imagined Nation**

Although beginning long before the 2019 Raptors playoff run, the We the North campaign not only became synonymous with the team's championship victory, but it became the rallying cry for Canadian fans across the nation — and as argued above, it further commodified racialized bodies in order to sell a particular kind of (northern) Canadian nationhood. We the North paraphernalia adorned both fans and physical spaces across the country, becoming synonymous with the many so-called Jurassic Parks, large jubilant outdoor viewing centres that began in Toronto's Maple Leaf Square, but appeared to pop up all over the nation during the Raptors' victorious 2019 playoff run.<sup>9</sup> The We the North slogan itself is crafted in jagged font to appear haphazardly cut from scraps of white fabric. Assembled like a protest sign, its lack of a formalized font serves as a symbol of unity for a seemingly dissonant community of outsiders against the forces of the mainstream.

The We the North advertising campaign, launched in 2014 by Sid Lee Toronto, accentuates this oppositional identity. The campaign is a departure from earlier efforts that focused on the Raptors' child-friendly cartoon dinosaur mascot dribbling a basketball. The brand launch included a 60-second advertisement showcasing Toronto, which is constructed as the urban wild (Niedoba 2016, para. 3). Beginning with a pan over an icy Lake Ontario, the spot features a snow-sprinkled urban landscape, graffiti-covered concrete, dark underpasses, flashes of fire, and

outdoor basketball courts surrounded by urban apartment towers. The faces and bodies of racially diverse men flash quickly across the screen — all young, seemingly athletic, and apparently passionate about basketball. Clips of young men playing basketball on outdoor courts also flash on the screen, their bodies marked as belonging to the city both by their difference (most of the men in this advertisement are racialized) and also by their body art, with the camera lingering over their tattoos. As Karen Bettez Halnon and Sandra Cohen's (2006) work on gentrification and the city finds, both these men's muscles and their tattoos, much like some of the new Raptors fans, speak to the co-optation of symbols that popular culture previously associated with the working class, and therefore indicate the gentrification of the city.

These shots are cut with the flashes of the Toronto Raptors players, aggressively dunking basketballs over their opponents. Although the advertisement situates the Raptors' North as urban, elements of the Canadian wilderness encroach, most notably with the image of a wild dog,<sup>10</sup> who watches the outdoor game and then appears again in the closing scenes of the ad. Here the silhouette of a man, basketball in hand, wanders out of frame through a snow-covered field as marks of the urban landscape disappear; the rural and the urban are deeply connected and, at times, inseparable.

The ad's narration highlights how the North and its diverse — read racialized — inhabitants are also outsiders. With measured intensity, its masculine narrator explains,

We the North. In many ways, we're in a league of our own. Just beyond the boundaries. Some would say we're on the outside looking in. But from our perspective, we're on the outside looking within. (We The North 2019)

Claiming a North ideologically aligned with aggression and toughness, he continues, "That's where the effort resides. Toughness is found. Aggression is tapped. ... We are the North side. A

territory all our own. If that makes us outsiders, we're in." According to the marketers, one must struggle to overcome the North — an act similar to the taming of the wilderness that structured Canada's settler-colonial past. Sherrill Grace (1997) argues that popular representations of the North are frequently related to particular celebrations of masculinity (163–181). She claims that the southern (Canadian) imagination sees the North as a space of masculine adventure and independence. Echoing the campaign, she finds that southerners present the North as "exclusively male," a "space for testing and proving masculine identities, where sissies and wimps will be turned into real men or be destroyed" (166). Although not rooted in the reality of the North, but in its popular mobilizations as a national symbol, these ideas marshal myths of Canadian national identity that privilege the masculine, erase Indigenous identities, and often reproduce Whiteness as central to the nation.

For the Raptors, the idea of the North positions Canada as different from the United States. Within sports, marketers have perpetuated a need to protect Canadian difference through their deployment of tropes associated with "outsiderness." These are important for an advertising campaign focusing on locating Canada's only NBA team against the larger US market and its 29 American teams. By symbolically situating Canada as distinct from the US, the Raptors' campaign mobilizes the language and visual representation of "difference" to reimagine Canada. When discussing the campaign, one advertiser reported:

[We thought,] what can we say about us that's true? Well, we're the only team in the NBA outside of the United States. We also wanted to represent Toronto in a way that was a little bit different than the cliché symbols you associate with Canada in general. (Powell 2019, para. 22)

Canada's concern with distinguishing itself from the US has a long history. These apprehensions worked to legitimate the nineteenth-century invention of hockey as quintessentially Canadian (Robidoux 2018, 219). The 1951 Massey Commission and George Grant's 1965 *Lament for a Nation* saw Canadian elites argue that the cultural hegemony of the United States would take over Canadian national culture (Litt 1991, 381). More recently, Canadian hockey fans and stakeholders have expressed fears of an American takeover in the "Canadian game," rejecting US hockey innovations like the FoxTrax puck,<sup>11</sup> and expressing anger and sadness at the loss of Wayne Gretzky to the Los Angeles Kings during the 1988 Canada-US Free Trade Agreement (Jackson 1994). In many cases, including the We the North campaign, this insecurity has generated a need amongst culture makers and the public to produce Canada as different than its large southern neighbour.

The significance of positioning the Raptors We the North (re)brand campaign as quintessentially tied to notions of a particular form of Canadian national identity (albeit one that is less "cliché" than other national symbols) is apparent not only in its 60-second commercial, but in the ways that Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment (MLSE) executives have discussed their branding choices.<sup>12</sup> Shannon Hosford, a marketing executive with MLSE, described the link between the campaign and Canadian national identity, stating, "It's authentic, it's about who we are as Canadians ... it might be cold but we are the North and we're proud of it" (Niedoba 2016, para. 5).

The notion that Canadian sport is mythically tied to Canada's place in the North is not new. Despite marketers' attempts to stay away from cliché symbols, they, along with the press, politicians, educators, writers, and the public, frequently circulate the idea that "authentic" Canada (see Niedoba 2016, para. 5) is tied to its common-sense position as a northern nation.

However, before the We the North campaign, this idea was less often connected to indoor sports like basketball, and more often associated with winter sports like hockey, where it linked to ideas of rural spaces and the wilderness. In the words of the marketers, “A lot of Americans probably don’t imagine Canada that way. ... There’s ... a general idea of the way Canada looks, and it’s rivers and streams and beavers” (Da Silva cited in Powell 2019, para. 23).

Beginning with the development of Canadian modern sport, its often-cited founder, W. George Beers (1883), claimed, “We have chosen the most abused season of the year, our Winter ... when on the spot you can see ... how Canadians not only look Jack Frost in the face, but force him to become our companion in sport rather than our master” (3). Numerous statements about hockey, curling, skiing, and other Canadian winter sports echo this sentiment, positing a common-sense understanding of these sports as a natural outgrowth of a land characterized by ice and snow. That they cast the landscape as masculine also leads to the understanding that one must embody the ideals of White masculinity and take hold of its rugged and wild terrain in order to represent Canadian sport authentically. Bruce Kidd and John Macfarlane further contextualize this claim, contending, “In a land so inescapably and inhospitably cold, hockey is the dance of life, an affirmation that despite the deathly chill of winter we are alive” (cited in Hardy 2015, 199). Beyond situating the frozen landscape as symbolic of Canada’s position in the North, participating and mastering winter sports in Canada outlines how (“authentic”) Canadians *exist* in the north. And as McKittrick’s (2002) work reminds us, it also helps to illustrate how these identities invest in the celebrations of particular bodies while erasing others.

In contrast to the Raptors campaign, the notion that Canadian winter sport, and hockey in particular, is tied to the North also works to privilege the significance of rural spaces (Allain 2016, 122–124) and White people as central to national myth making (Kalman-Lamb 2018;

Pitter 2006; Robidoux 2018, 71). In this regard, the idyllic imagery looming in the Canadian national imaginary involves young (White) boys, carrying hockey skates hung over the blades of hockey sticks by their laces, trucking out to wide rural expanses to play “the Canadian game” on local ponds. It is this northern wilderness, captured in state representations of the country such as the Winter Olympic Games, marked by national events such as the mourning of the Humboldt bus tragedy in 2018 (Kennedy, Silva, Coelho, and Cipolli 2019), and commercialized by brands such as Tim Hortons<sup>13</sup> or Roots (Brydges and Hracz 2018, 114), that have been (at least in the past) more frequently associated with the mythology of the Canadian nation.

As a response to this anachronistic Canadian sport identity, We the North mobilized a different, albeit connected, set of scripts to reimagine the Canadian nation. At the core of this restructuring, while aligning with other national symbols, We the North (problematically) deployed racialized people, and particularly Black men, to demonstrate the (original) Jurassic Park as a racial (and class) utopia (Campbell 2019). Specifically, the campaign disrupted common-sense ideology that represents the North as rural and white, instead linking it to urbanness and racialized diversity, and the seeming inclusion of the working class. Maple Leaf Square’s Jurassic Park, where Raptors fans were most frequently filmed in We the North merchandise, was composed of a large contingent of young racialized fans, a crowd generally unable to afford tickets to the Scotiabank Arena. The most intense moments of excitement and anxiety during the Raptors playoff games were channeled through these fans, squeezed into the park while brandishing We the North apparel, signs, and flags. Here, sports media mobilized images of diversity, cutting to the crowd during key plays. Drake, the Raptors’ global ambassador, even joined the crowd to watch the title-winning away game.

The media used the Raptors fan's racial and class status to boost the romantic Canadian narrative of braving the elements to cheer for the national team. Much like athletes who participate in winter sports, Raptors fans also braved the outdoors, and at the start of the playoffs in the chill of late winter, demonstrated their dedication to the Canadian nation. Critical to this discourse then is not only how media, marketers, and others use racialized Others to both disrupt and ascribe to national myths of the Canadian nation, but also how these entities can commodify racialized Others when necessary. In both the We the North campaign and its representatives in Jurassic Park, racialized Canadians, regularly dismissed by mainstream media, are given value insofar as they fulfill an ideological/symbolic purpose. In this regard, many in the Canadian press celebrated this repositioning of Canada as diverse, questioning whether the sport of basketball, with its "inclusive diversity" of players and fans, might be a better representation of Canada than ice hockey (Salutin 2019, para. 1; also see Gee 2019).

Although this shift from the Great White North to a more multicultural "Great Diverse North" appeared like a step in the right direction, breaking with nostalgic notions of national identity and forging new, more inclusive ways to imagine Canada, it is important to approach this shift with caution. This marketing strategy, much like Canadian multiculturalism more broadly (see Bissoondath 1994), was designed to sell Canada as a land of diversity. In the words of marketing professor, Vijay Setlur, who commented on the campaign:

That's where the cool factor comes into play when you're trying to reach a multi-ethnic audience; the Filipino community is different than the South Asian community, which is different than the Italian community. The one constant is no matter what the idiosyncrasies are for their ethnicities they all like to be following what's cool, what's now, what's popular. (cited in Dunne 2019, para. 29)



As a result, this shift from the Great White North to the Multicultural North leans towards seeming inclusion despite the fact that racialized others are still not considered “authentic” Canadians. In this instance, Raptors fans are only *in place* by being out of place (McKittrick 2006, xv). The use of this kind of symbolism, especially in the hands of marketers, sells Canadian diversity while ignoring that racialized people in Canada — particularly Black and Indigenous people — experience disproportionate levels of material disadvantage and violence (Banerji 2000). Furthermore, the celebration of this style of diversity in fact acts as a measure of racialized containment, described below.

### **National Embodiments: Superfan Nav Bhatia, Multiculturalism and the “Character” of Canada**

One of the ways in which the We the North campaign marketed and commodified Canadian Multiculturalism to sell “diversity” involved its ambassador Nav Bhatia, a Sikh Canadian dubbed the Toronto Raptors superfan, who helped to elevate basketball’s symbolic belonging to the North. Since Canadian sport culture needs Indigenous, Black, and Brown bodies to reflect its multicultural “authenticity,” it also repurposes these bodies to reimagine the “We” in the Raptors’ 2019 campaign, effectively making basketball more palatable for mainstream Canadian audiences.

Bhatia immigrated to Canada from India in 1984, after anti-Sikh riots in the country, and experienced difficulty finding work. Despite his educational training as a mechanical engineer, systemic and social discrimination meant that he was unable to get a job in his field (Lila 2019). Bhatia explained that “nobody wanted a guy with a turban and a beard. I didn’t get an opportunity for that, so (after an estimated 300 job interviews) I started working as a car salesman” (Ballingall 2016). It was here that Bhatia’s luck began to change. After selling 127

cars in 90 days, Bhatia became the owner of the dealership, which would go on to become one of the highest-selling dealerships in the city.<sup>14</sup> By the time the Raptors were created in 1995, Bhatia saw basketball as an opportunity to change perceptions about South Asian Sikhs in the city.

Just in time for game six of the 2019 NBA Finals, Bhatia partnered with Tim Hortons to share the story of his twenty-four-year journey attending Raptors games. The Tim Hortons ad campaign, titled “Courtside Seat A12,” used basketball to articulate notions of inclusivity, diversity, and hard work. Highlighting the (hyper)visibility of his position in seat A12, a Scotiabank Arena courtside seat between the bench and basket, Bhatia embodied the language of multiculturalism in ways that accommodated the Other into Canadian sports culture. In the advertisement, Bhatia said, “Some see Indian. Some see Canadian. Some see both. Some see a turban. I hope they see diversity and loyalty. I hope they see why Canada is so special” (Tim Hortons 2019). Using the neoliberal discourse of a multicultural Canada, Bhatia’s Tim Hortons ad is rife with national symbolism about racial and cultural diversity, reflecting how far the symbolic North has come.<sup>15</sup> What made Nav Bhatia so appealing to the marketing of the Raptors was not only his visibility, as a racial minority donning a turban, but also the ways he personified multiculturalism itself. While early news reports explained that Bhatia’s “loud, boisterous personality” made him well-known to players, referees, and fans, it was the commodification of his public image as a wealthy Sikh immigrant dedicated to the Raptors that repurposed national myths of the Canadian wilderness as accessible to those who could endure its frigid landscape (Haber 2016). Given Canada’s history of discriminatory immigration policies until 1961, Nav Bhatia would be considered “unfit” for immigration and belonging to the Canadian nation-state. Yet in 2019, Bhatia represented a different kind of masculine sports identity, an in-betweenness that moved racial diversity and, by proxy, the Canadian nation from Jurassic Park to

courtside, or from outside to inside. Although his insider-outsider positionality did little to disrupt long entrenched notions that privileged white masculinity as representative of true and legitimate Canadian sports culture, Bhatia symbolically embodied how mainstream media outlets gave some flexibility to those “others” who could help reify the collective Canadian imaginary.

Bhatia’s celebrity-like stature reached new heights during the 2019 playoff season, shortly after journalist Muhammad Lila (2019) took to Twitter to share the story of how Bhatia came to love the Toronto Raptors. Shortly after his story became viral, news reports, articles, and campaigns constructed Bhatia as the quintessential representative of hard-working immigrant communities and economic success. Most pointedly, Bhatia demonstrated not only the success of Canada’s policy on Multiculturalism, but he also situated the place of racial minorities within the nation.<sup>16</sup> Although the Canadian state implemented Multiculturalism as an official federal policy in 1971, it did very little to dismantle the foundations of Canadian identity as rooted in French and British citizenship. Instead, Multiculturalism represented Canada’s recognition of and partial commitment to cultural diversity, with limited room for institutional inclusion. At the heart of Multiculturalism was its ability to mobilize diversity in the nation-building project (Mackey 2002, 67). By the twenty-first century, multiculturalism became both institutionalised and idealized as the *character* of Canadianness, one that embraced cultural difference and inclusion. Shifting from policy to national identity, multiculturalism became a narrative that positioned Others within the Canadian nation. Thus it is not surprising that the 2019 Raptors campaign utilized Nav Bhatia’s immigration, settlement, and success in Canada in ways that sustained discourses of White ownership of the North, while also harkening to national myths of Canadian equality and egalitarianism. Emerging alongside rising media attention around the deportation of

Mexican and Central American immigrants in the United States, Canada's embrace of Bhatia's story distinguished "good Canadian values" from exclusionary American practices.

However, Bhatia did not just stand as the tokenistic representation of Canadian goodness, he also vocalized narratives of kindness, gratitude and tolerance that reflected a sense of belonging to the Canadian nation. These narratives suggested that despite experiencing racial discrimination upon his immigration to Canada, Bhatia was able to make a success of himself in a country of opportunity and racial equality. In an early interview describing how he became known as a "superfan," Bhatia described an encounter he had with a white man after being mistaken for the cab driver:

I guess he assumed I was a taxi driver, because I wear a turban and I have a beard. But I didn't get upset at him, because it was not his fault. It's the fault of our own people — Sikh people, the religious leaders, the community leaders who haven't done enough to integrate Sikhs into the mainstream. Yes, we are different looking, we are different, but our passions are the same. (cited in Ballingall 2016)

Significant to Bhatia's explanation was that he did not ground these experiences in systemic and social forms of racial discrimination, but rather chose to articulate a sense of shared Canadian values and sensibilities (Allain, Crath, and Çalışkan 2019, 7). By ascribing to this imagining of collectivity, Bhatia demonstrated that Canadian multiculturalism, both as an ideology and national policy, worked; not only did he proudly identify as Sikh *and* Canadian, but he articulated the progress and potential of the Great (White) North. In addition, Bhatia's willingness to locate the difficulties of integration as the fault of the (Sikh) immigrant community, reproduced stereotypes of cultural lack and deficit in immigrant communities

As the 2019 playoff season progressed, the public spectacle of basketball fandom, most visible in the Jurassic Parks that sprang up across the country, gave Othered Canadians an opportunity to learn and articulate Canadianness. As such, Nav Bhatia's public demonstration of his loyalty to Canada and the Raptors had a longer and more complex history that encouraged integration and assimilation. As with the advertisements mentioned earlier in this piece, the commodification and use of racialized bodies effectively connected images of diversity with Canadian nationalism. For example, after Raptors fans cheered Kevin Durant's injury in game five of the NBA finals, Bhatia issued a public response on Instagram reminding fans of what made them Canadian. He apologized to Kevin Durant on behalf of Toronto and told Raptors fans, "One of the NBA superstars Kevin Durant went down. We should have supported him. We should have acknowledged his heart and strength for rushing back to help his team. Instead, we acted un-Canadian [*sic*] as I have seen" (cited in Williams 2019b). Bhatia alluded to a set of Canadian values rooted in kindness, forgiveness, respect for others, and not behaving like American sports fans. That Bhatia took this position at the height of the Raptors' playoffs indicated the levels to which he performed and understood a shared sense of "Canadian" sensibilities and traditions (Allain, Crath, and Çalışkan 2019, 7). In addition, he also positioned himself as not only a superfan, but as an ambassador — a representative of all fans.

Apologizing on behalf of the city was also a significant marker of his elevated status. Bhatia's appeal to Raptors fans represented how visible minorities, under the guise of multicultural ideals of racial inclusion and diversity, could demonstrate their Canadianness. By employing tropes of Canadian nationalism, Bhatia situated the place of sports fandom, and the regulation of fan behaviour, as an extension of the nation-building project. As scholar Eva MacKay (1998) contends, the Canadian state has used multiculturalism to "institutionalise, constitute, shape,

manage and control difference” (70). Fundamentally, cultural difference is celebrated by mainstream society in specific ways that keep the authority of the Canadian nation-state intact. Therefore, racial minorities such as Bhatia are critical to maintaining this narrative and helping regulate “others” who interrupt Anglo-Canadian ideals (67).

Perhaps the most significant way that Bhatia represents multiculturalism is in the mobilization of his socio-economic success as a symbol of the Canadian dream, despite the systemic and social discrimination experienced along the way. To this end, Bhatia represents the image of the “model minority” because he not only represents the visibility and place of racial minorities within Canada, but he also articulates the kind of patriotic symbolism that gives Raptors fans, and by extension other racial minorities, the space to assimilate and adhere to Canadian values. As such, media representations during the 2019 Raptors playoffs repositioned the notion of an authentic Canadian and transformed Bhatia into a national icon. Scholars such as Rob Ho (2014, 2015), Dan Cui (2019), and Gordon Pon (2000) contend that the myth of the model minority reinforces neoliberal discourses that not only stereotype Asian Canadians, but also absolve state apparatuses from creating institutional change from within. The model minority discourse assumes that racial minorities have the ability to move past the historical and material conditions of settler-colonial practices and achieve the Canadian dream. In Canadian public discourse and media representations, the ideal model minorities are Asian Canadians, including those from East, Southeast, and South Asia (Ty 2017, 4). Model minorities represent the ideal of good work ethic and “upward mobility on the strength of inner conviction and self-help” (3). In Bhatia’s case, he discussed basketball as an equalizing force. Media outlets often reported that he spent upwards of \$300,000 on basketball tickets, mostly for Sikh and immigrant youth (Lila 2019a). Bhatia explained in a media interview, “We started bringing a busload of kids from all over,

from our temples, from the mosques, from the churches, we brought all that in order to do the integration of the fans with each other” (Attfield 2018). In addition, Bhatia also became a World Vision Ambassador, built basketball courts in the Peel Region near Toronto, and helped the Raptors organize multicultural nights during their games (Bennett 2017). While it cannot be denied that these actions created access for many racial minorities, Bhatia’s economic and social capital gave him the ability to use this wealth to bring other racial minorities into the multicultural project with an explicit goal in mind —“integrate my Indian community with the mainstream” (cited in Bennett 2017). In this instance, the symbolic and physical representation of multiculturalism, as embodied through Nav Bhatia, exemplified how national myths could not only manage diversity, but also commodify and depoliticize its goals. Ultimately, embedded in the paradoxical nature of We the North and cultural diversity is the assumption that everyone can be part of this national (and capitalist) project, without the need for structural change to achieve these privileges (Ty 2017, 4). As such, the media did not construct the experiences that Nav Bhatia had upon his early arrival to Canada as representative of the nation itself. Instead, media outlets mobilized imagery of Bhatia in a way that shifted blame away from structural and systemic inequalities, and instead emphasized individual productivity, self-reliance, and discipline. As an extension of this, Bhatia’s position as the quintessential model minority also worked to silence more radical demands of racial minorities within the Canadian nation, and kept the liberal democratic ideals of multiculturalism intact. Yet despite the overwhelming emphasis on diversity through Nav Bhatia, the Raptors playoff campaign also gave way to a review of the limitations of multiculturalism.

### **“Our Kids Play Hockey; They Don’t Play Basketball”: Shifting Multicultural Realities Through Containment in Leisure Spaces**

While the frenzy of the 2019 playoff run projected the façade of a racial utopia in Canada, the reality indicated far more restrictive and exclusionary practices for racialized communities who play basketball in the city's public spaces. Shortly after the Toronto Raptors won their first championship, media stories regarding the removal of basketball nets throughout the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) began to emerge, with youth experiencing restricted access to public basketball spaces within their communities. While the reports seemed to surprise many, others understood the restricted access as part of broader historical patterns of exclusion, and as a demonstration of multiculturalism's fissures, as these restrictive practices maintained a centring of Whiteness and a marking of particular bodies as problematic Others. An examination of the methods of containment of particular racialized communities, as well as their restricted leisure space access, makes these contradictions within multiculturalism more visible.<sup>17</sup> Although poorly documented in the scholarly literature, especially in the Canadian context, there is some record of the government restricting leisure space access in historically marginalized and racialized communities. Some American literature points to a trend whereby municipal governments restrict access to public basketball spaces through hyper-regulation and basketball net removal, ostensibly out of a fear of attracting gangs, crime, and vandalism (Hartmann 2001; Wheelock and Hartmann 2007). The state often justifies these approaches by claiming that restricting access to basketball courts will curb or control crime, violence, aggression, and social irresponsibility or incivility, which are overidentified in and attached to the Black and Latino communities that basketball often attracts (Hartmann 2001; Henderson et al. 1996, 669; Wheelock and Hartmann 2007). As such, governmental restraints on basketball courts and recreation centres often largely affect Black communities. Governmental and school officials exercise these restraints through privatizing public spaces, restricting access based on officials'



discretion (Henderson et al. 1996, 670), limiting residents by jurisdiction, prioritizing local residents, maintaining facilities poorly in particular communities so as to make them unattractive to players (673–74; Hartmann 2001; Wheelock and Hartmann 2007). These practices can have a deleterious impact (Feagin and Eckberg 1980, 12) on Black patrons by deterring and limiting the frequency and intensity of their basketball participation (Austin 1997, 668–69; Henderson et al. 1996).

From as early as the mid-1990s, Canadian media and research and policy reports have documented these restrictive practices and their ubiquity in racialized communities across the GTA (CityNews 2007; F.A.C.E.S. of Peel 2015; Wamsley 2019).<sup>18</sup> For instance, in 2008, Toronto City Councillor George Mammoliti advocated for and succeeded in having basketball nets removed from Strathburn Park in northwest Toronto, arguing that they were a magnet for trouble, attracting drug dealers rather than encouraging exercise and extracurricular activity in youth (CityNews 2008). Mammoliti also framed the basketball court users as outsiders, warning residents that the nets were attracting an “unwanted crowd” (Etobicoke Guardian 2008). Some residents within the community echoed his sentiments, stating, “I know it is not nice to say, but the people who use the basketball court are not from the neighbourhood.” Another resident argued: “I don’t see why we have to have basketball nets in our neighbourhood for kids from Etobicoke. I’ve been trying to get the damn things down for 28 years. Our kids play hockey, they don’t play basketball” (Etobicoke Guardian 2008). Other residents in the area, however, stated that they had not witnessed drug problems despite living near the park for years. Despite conflicting perceptions of the basketball courts, Mammoliti insisted that his approach was preventative and attempting to quell a problem before it got out of hand.

The use of codified language by the Strathburn resident to describe what “our kids play” demonstrates an acute awareness of and allegiance to Canadian meaning-making that constructs the nation’s identity as the Great White North, marking hockey as central to a Canadian national identity steeped in Whiteness. In framing hockey as the sport that “our” (that is, White) Canadian kids play, basketball becomes something disruptive, foreign or “un-Canadian” that (racial) others play and bring to the nation (Abdel-Shehid 2002, 133). The anticipatory fear of criminality that state officials attach to basketball (Wilson 1997, 184), the restrictions that usually follow, and the marking of the sport as outside of Canadianness, remind the (racialized) other of their status as a perpetual outsider in the nation (McKittrick 2002). In another instance, six outdoor nets that were part of a Nike-sponsored outdoor athletic facility in Scarborough, Ontario, another municipality with a large racialized population, were removed indefinitely in 2010 due to “safety concerns” (Lakey 2010). At the time, there were no repairs being conducted at the facility. Neither the school board nor the city offered any response to the removal, leaving the future of community access to the courts up in the air (Lakey 2010).

This trend of restrictive practices that limit access to basketball courts in particular communities also reflects incompatibilities between “unauthorized” sports — especially those played by racialized communities — and the discomfort that politicians and some community members have about those who *do not belong*. Ultimately, these instances indicate public sentiments that view basketball spaces and the players they may “bring” with them as dangerous and un-Canadian. In many ways, largely Black Canadian community members who sought to play basketball on public courts met with resistance as their engagement was taken up as an affront to Canadian values, and therefore something to be contained and restricted. A 2015 Canadian investigative report called basketball courts “the most fraught out of all public park

facilities because [despite] their popularity, they are fewer in number than other publicly-owned recreational facilities” (Bascaramurty). The report documented how, during the approval process for a public outdoor court in an affluent neighbourhood in South Mississauga, a suburb in the Peel Region west of Toronto, residents also used codified language to express fear that the court would attract violence, drugs, and disrespectful behaviour — or in other words, outsiders. The city eventually approved the court, with assurances to the surrounding community that they would fence the area, implement time restrictions on play, and constantly supervise the court (Bascaramurty 2015). Within this same region of the GTA (Peel), another report capturing the experiences of Black youth found that recreation options did not reflect community preferences, with numerous well-maintained hockey rinks and baseball diamonds, and a limited number of poorly maintained basketball courts (F.A.C.E.S. of Peel 2015). The youth in the study reported that they would often resort to getting jobs to fund their access to private gyms or would travel to other municipalities to gain access to basketball courts.

This trend has continued after the Raptors’ championship win (and still continues at the time of writing), with multiple news reports stating that basketball nets were again being taken down in several communities in the GTA. What was different this time was that it was happening directly after the nation’s first NBA championship, and in predominately White communities. On June 26, 2019, an evening Twitter post with a video showing a city worker taking down the nets in a public park sparked outrage. The video featured two White youth sitting on the sidelines and watching as the net they had been using was taken down. In defiance, one of them attempted a layup on the net-less basketball hoop, with the ball aggressively bouncing off the backboard, emphasizing the lack of rim. Online backlash to the video was swift, with many sharing stories of restricted access to courts in Black communities, and pictures

showing net-less hoops in public parks throughout the region. This highlighted that net removals and restrictions were an ongoing practice in racialized communities. Many posters also insisted that youth should be able to play freely. The national governing body for amateur and Olympic basketball, Basketball Canada (2019), also responded with a photo of the 2019 Toronto Raptors Championship game, stating, “No rim. No history. Everyone deserves the chance to play. Keep the nets up.” Toronto Mayor John Tory replied directly within a few hours of the Twitter post, assuring the public that the city would no longer take nets down. By the next morning, the local news media had documented the incident at length, and the City of Toronto had released an official statement instituting a city-wide suspension of the practice of taking down the nets (Wamsley 2019).

The aforementioned examples in the GTA demonstrate the ways in which containment within public leisure spaces often negatively affects Black communities in particular, and how access to athletic spaces can be informed by race. As media and research reports articulate, prior to the Raptors win in 2019, authorities often hyper-regulated access to basketball courts, removed nets, and/or maintained facilities poorly within racialized communities to dissuade the heavy patronage of racialized youth. The poor documentation and measurement of these restrictive practices also erased their salience and masked the ways in which these racial attitudes contradict key features of Canadian identity, namely its supposed multicultural benevolence. Canada’s multicultural contradictions only became glaringly apparent when the same governmental restriction practices that historically contained Black patrons began to restrict White patrons, resulting in swift public and governmental responses promoting and enacting unfettered access within hours.

These differential responses underscore how, within the Canadian context and in line with American experiences, any unsurveilled and unstructured leisurely engagement with basketball by Black people incites a need to contain and restrict activity for fear of criminality and negative behaviours. These marked differences in experiences and responses to public basketball court access barriers also remind us of the systemic and social forms of racial discrimination that Black Canadian communities face; indeed, until 2019, racialized communities' engagement with basketball was often constructed as an affront to Canadian values and sensibilities. This suggests a racial coding of basketball (Wheelock and Hartmann 2007) that implicitly links the race of basketball players and consumers to notions of respectability, criminality, and Canadianness. As Teelucksingh (2006) argues, within Canadian urban spaces, racialized communities are often othered within society in ways that block their access to public and community resources [like leisure spaces], symbolically and racially mapping them as undesirables both formally and informally (1–4). Teelucksingh further claims, “An examination of the workings of racialization ... uncovers hidden racial meanings that are not reflected in ... the ideology of multiculturalism” (7). Coding basketball as a sport for racialized Others links the sport and its players to criminality, and marks those Othered bodies as undesirables, or “disruptions of the Canadian landscape” (Peake and Ray 2001, 180). However, the We the North campaign has begun to disrupt these linkages, as the kinds of imagined players and consumers of basketball shift (again) from the mostly urban and Black (outsiders) to include more White and non-Black individuals. This repositioning of basketball from the margins towards the centre rebrands and racially re-codes it as a sport for everyone, making it more palatable and acceptable for White people (and other insiders) to play and consume as Canadians, and transforming it into something worthy of enjoying in unregulated ways. As such, institutions and governments follow suit by opening up

access to public basketball facilities, while simultaneously erasing a decades-long legacy of restricting access to racialized communities.

## **Conclusion**

We have argued that the We the North campaign represents a rebranding and reimagining of Canadianness that maintains key features of previous hegemonic ideas of Canada, such as representations of Canada as a frozen wilderness (embodied by the all-weather-defying crowd of Toronto's Jurassic Park), and as a nation with values that diverge from the perceived values of Americans. It also centralizes Whiteness through an emphasis on Nav Bhatia's integration and assimilation to White Canadian norms. Paradoxically, this rebranding also offers an expansion of historical understandings of Canadianness as primarily rural and White, to include the urban context as an emblem of racial diversity and inclusion. In so doing, the We the North campaign and its ambassador, Nav Bhatia, buttress existing and reimagined notions of Canadianness and its values to reify beliefs about Canada's perceived multicultural utopia.

However, through this reimagining and racial (re)coding of Canadianness, and through the realities of restricted access to basketball courts experienced by particular communities, we see in real time an unearthing and articulation of the recycled discourses of multiculturalism. These discourses tend to obscure historical, structural, and racial inequalities and the corresponding need for structural interventions, while simultaneously setting the parameters and (re)articulating the specific ways that racial Others can engage with the nation (McKittrick 2002; Peake and Ray 2001). Through this reimagining of the nation's relationship with basketball and the potentially increased ease of access to public basketball spaces in the GTA, Whiteness has remained at the centre of nation, persistently deploying its "social, political, and economic power" to dictate who and what is legitimate within the nation (Peake and Ray 2001, 182). Toronto only moved toward granting and legitimizing unfettered, public basketball court access for racialized Others when

White Torontonians began to adopt the sport in greater numbers, marking a potential shift in the dominant group's acceptance of basketball as a legitimate Canadian sport. It still remains to be seen how these attitudinal shifts will play out in various communities, and if they will be permanent. The aforementioned scholarship, in its sparseness, indicates that the extent of these restrictive practices and the reactions to them have not been formally measured, making it difficult to understand the depth and complexity of these governmental restrictions to public spaces and their impact on communities.

These attitudinal shifts also remind us of the shifting nature of Canadian racial and multicultural discourses, and how racial meaning-making can be amorphous and contingent on the capitalistic interests of the nation. Indeed, these shifts in attitudes, inclusion, and access are not the result of structural changes due to a reckoning with a history of racial containment and restriction, but reflect the interests of the already-powerful in creating myths that will not challenge their power or their profits. In these ways, yesterday's outsiders have an illusory chance of becoming today's insiders, as a White supremacist nation and capitalist interests summon consumers to imagine basketball, the Toronto Raptors, and the Canadian nation anew.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Authors are arranged alphabetically with each author having contributed equally to this manuscript.

<sup>2</sup> A 2010 UN report found that despite Canada's legal frameworks and multicultural policy mandates, ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities (primarily those of African descent and those in certain Asian communities) experience persistent poor educational outcomes and low political and institutional representation. In addition, these communities also experience high levels of precarious work, unemployment, poverty, religious discrimination, racial profiling and over-policing.

<sup>3</sup> Eva Mackey's (2002) term *Canadian-Canadian* refers to those Canadians whose identities appear "unmarked, non-ethnic, and usually white" (20).

<sup>4</sup> We acknowledge that corporations often co-opt and monetize symbols of Black masculine identity (Wilson 1999, 233), but an examination of Maple Leafs Sports & Entertainment's marketing and commercialization of Black bodies through "We the North" is beyond our scope.

<sup>5</sup> Robidoux (218) argues, "Played on a frozen landscape," hockey has long "perfectly embod[ied] what life as a Canadian colonialist was supposed to be like" (71).

<sup>6</sup> The Canadian Mountie is one such marker of White racial elite hegemony over the settled land, and a signifier for oppression and violence which has been rendered benign over time (Dylan 2019, 5; Gittings 1998, 509).

<sup>7</sup> Although slightly modified in 1952, the Act was not completely rewritten until 1962 to focus on skills instead of socio-cultural (race and ethnicity) and climate factors for excluding immigrants from the Southern Hemisphere. (Jakubowski 1997, 17).



<sup>8</sup> The erasure of the Indigenous origin of activities like canoeing, lacrosse, and snowshoeing effectively reasserts settler-colonial (White) victory (Robidoux 2002, 212).

<sup>9</sup> News reports publicized events from Halifax to Saskatoon, noting that Vancouver, a city with a recent history of sports rioting, had to cancel their outdoor viewing party due to an inadequate amount of lead time for preparation (for examples, see Daily Hive 2019; Fisk 2019; Williams 2019a).

<sup>10</sup> According to Brady (2014), the husky dog in the We the North advertisement is supposed to represent the 1946–1947 Toronto Huskies, a team that played in the league that preceded the NBA (para. 8).

<sup>11</sup> Fox Television invented the FoxTrax puck in order to aid new hockey fans in following the puck on the television screen. It glowed in different colours depending on the speed of the shot, helping new fans read the direction of the play. As Mason (2002) points out, more initiated Canadian fans widely rejected this technology.

<sup>12</sup> MLSE is the parent company of the Toronto Raptors. It also currently owns the Toronto Maple Leafs in the National Hockey League (NHL), the Toronto Argonauts in the Canadian Football League (CFL) and the Toronto FC in Major League Soccer (MLS). It is also a real estate company, owning several sporting venues in the Toronto area.

<sup>13</sup> For example, a 2007 Tim Hortons commercial mobilized images of the iconic Canadian North, depicting a bus breakdown and a spontaneous game of pond hockey, complete with NHL players in a thick snowy forest (see Shimizu 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Considering the fact that as of 2017, only 12.2% of small and medium-sized enterprises were owned by visible minorities in Canada (Huang 2020), Bhatia's success was exceptional in comparison to other racial minorities living in the country.

<sup>15</sup> Neoliberal multiculturalism recognizes the ways in which notions of multiculturalism shape ideas of citizenship and define ethnic-state relations. According to Will Kymlicka (2012), multiculturalism can "serve as a vehicle for deepening relations of liberal-democratic citizenship (104)." Kymlicka argues that neoliberal multiculturalism was adopted in Canada as a way to integrate ethnic (and racial) minorities into economic and global markets. As such Bhatia's race and economic wealth connected him to notions of neoliberalism and multiculturalism.

<sup>16</sup> Here we make distinctions between Canada's national policy of Multiculturalism, as indicated by a capital "M," and multicultural discourse which considers the theoretical frameworks that situate diversity and difference in the Canadian context. Roxana Ng (1995) indicates that multiculturalism can be understood as an ideological frame produced by "administrative processes of a liberal democratic state in a particular historical conjuncture to re-conceptualize and reorganize changing social, political and economic realities (35)" Ultimately, Ng argues, as do we, that multiculturalism as an ideology shifted into state policy in the late 1960s in order to contain ethnic and racial minorities' competing claims to the state (35–38).

<sup>17</sup> Leisure can be defined as "activities that involve ... utilizing spaces open to the public (publicly or privately-owned) for the purpose of engaging in pleasurable, generally nonwork-related or after-hours pursuits, many of which entail the sort of face-to-face interaction that carries the potential for identity group formation ... [and can take place in] participant sports

venues like skating rinks and basketball courts, to public streets that are suitable for strolling, cruising, playing, parading, partying, or simply moving about” (Austin 1997, 668).

<sup>18</sup> Due to a dearth of Canadian scholarly literature on access restriction to basketball courts for racialized communities, we drew on media and community reports.

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