Too Many Men on the Ice: Intersections of Gender, Race, and Sexuality in the NHL

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 2017, Saturday Night Live aired a sketch featuring Chance the Rapper as basketball announcer temporarily reassigned to cover a hockey game. In the sketch, Chance is bewildered and out of his element, overwhelmed by the strangeness of hockey. As he flounderingly attempts to report on the game, areas of particular confusion appear: the violence, the staggering whiteness of players and fans, the fast-paced and intricate game play, the jargon, even the environmental shock of the cold arena. The sketch exposes the idiosyncratic specificity of hockey. Although in many respects it is a sport like any other, key truths of hockey are visible only through the correct lenses. Hockey is both wildly popular—the National Hockey League rakes in roughly $25 million per season (Ozanian & Badenhausen, 2018)—and opaque to the casual observer, as the Saturday Night Live sketch illustrated.

Despite its quirks, hockey shares many defining traits with other sports, most notably its status as a site imbued with political and cultural meaning. Professional sports for any gender are politically and socially charged, but men’s sports in particular have a long history of being culturally and politically influenced. Men’s sports have historically been ways for privileged groups to respond to crisis, especially crises of race and gender. Sports act as mechanisms that reaffirm certain structures of power, such as whiteness, heterosexuality, and maleness (Messner, 1989). Instead of merely reproducing existing hierarchies, sports are sites of projection and longing for idealized ways of being and doing. Sports act as a spectacular backdrop in front of which cultural desires, fears, and power dynamics are played out.

THE NHL IN CONTEXT

The National Hockey League, or NHL, was founded in 1917, and has expanded over the years to 31 teams across the continental United States and Canada (Klein, 2016). It was
integrated in 1958 by Willie O’Ree, a Black player who played for the Boston Bruins. Notably, O’Ree was both Black and disabled—he was blind in his right eye, but kept it a secret so that he could play hockey (Takahama, 2018), illustrating the fact that marginalized people not only exist within the hyper-privileged sphere of professional ice hockey but have played important roles in its development.

I use the NHL as my primary site of analysis because it is the most highly visible arm of ice hockey. The NHL is the ice hockey equivalent of the National Football League and wields considerable cultural power. Professional sports, in a white Western context, are tied to ideas of class and race, as they were first only open to wealthy white men, and then gradually expanded as a way to organize and surveil the free time of working-class people. Sports are also vehicles for political movements, and act as embodied vehicles for often coded cultural values, desires, and hierarchies. Professional sports are tied to the state (Weinberg, 2016), and act as sites of patriotic and militarized meaning-making as well as more personal and localized sites of meaning-making. Ice hockey is similar to many other sports, but its violence, whiteness, and relative insularity create a space of extreme privilege and spectacle which is ripe for feminist analysis. Understanding how masculinity, race, sexuality, and intimacies are made through and by the NHL allow us to understand the desires that shape these outcomes.

**KEY QUESTIONS**

This thesis explores the following questions: how are masculinities created within the NHL? How does professional ice hockey inform intimacy? How do fan interactions with masculinities drive intimacy creation and expression? Examining these questions not only helps to make the NHL seem less opaque to new arrivals like Chance the Rapper in the SNL sketch, it also illuminates how the insider knowledge and inner machinations of the NHL shape distributions of
power and resources. This thesis understands sports as a site of desire, and ice hockey in particular as a sport concerned with what I describe as “desired masculinity.” Desired masculinity is both painful and pleasurable—it is, depending on the context, an end goal, a sexualized display, a reminder of inadequacy, or some middle ground among the three. Desired masculinity, when combined with concepts of hegemonic masculinity, helps us to understand how longing and intimacy are negotiated in rigidly structured environments.

The masculinity created and enforced by the NHL creates unattainable ideals, making it impossible for players to embody it while creating a never-ending supply of fan desire. This fan desire to embody, be closer to, and to derive meaning from the masculinity produced by the NHL isn’t just an individual pursuit, but also a means of creating and strengthening community and intimacy. While the production of masculinity is one of the key aspects of how the NHL cultivates fans, it goes beyond that; the desired masculinity that the NHL produces and that this thesis explores is a form of public-facing intimacy which unsettles seemingly discrete boundaries between public and private space.

This public form of intimacy created by desire destabilizes common conceptions of what it means to be a fan or to be loyal to a certain organization. Intimacy, in the context of this thesis, is an organizing force which can be used as a tool to reconceptualize how fans weave narratives around themselves (Wilson 2012), others, and structures of larger cultural meaning such as masculinity, white supremacy or the NHL. Narratives of masculinity are crucial vehicles through which fans map idealized versions of themselves and their values onto players, creating a shared narrative of intimacy. Through longing, the NHL fosters belonging, but it is a sense of belonging that is exploited by the NHL’s profit-seeking structures. These fan communities and longings are as varied as the masculinity of the NHL is idealized, but they are held together by the common
thread of desired masculinity. Distance between fans and the violent, hegemonic masculinity of the NHL creates pain for many marginalized fan communities, but it doesn’t necessarily hinder intimacy. Fans for whom the NHL’s masculine ideal is impossibly far still create fantasies and intimacies which are then often exploited by the NHL for profit. This commodification of masculinity and desire often comes at the expense of those within and around the NHL, and further harms queer people, disabled people, people of color, other marginalized communities. Despite this harm, and often times because of it, intimacy within and around the NHL bolsters and explains fan experiences.

BOUNDARIES OF MASCULINITIES

To explore the guiding questions of this thesis, I draw on scholarship at the intersections of Women’s, Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies and Sociology. In order to understand the desire central to the NHL—a desire to embody and be close to a fantastically powerful masculinity—a working understanding of masculinity creation and production is necessary. However, offering a precise definition of what masculinity is proves tricky. A gender essentialist approach situates all men as being masculine or possessing masculine traits, but this approach is flawed for many reasons. Perhaps the most obvious flaw is the presupposition of “men” as being a fixed category, in direct and singular opposition to the category of “women.” This is a false binary, as it conflates biological sex with gender and overlooks the existence of transgender and nonbinary people. In reality, the relationship between sex and gender is much more complicated than a simple equivalency. The other obvious flaw of a gender essentialist approach to masculinity is its erasure of non-men who possess or enact masculinity. It is important to clarify that masculinities are not solely linked to cisgender men’s experiences and there exist multiple
forms of masculinities within and beyond communities of cisgender men. This study offers a case study of a specific group of people enacting and creating masculinities and is grounded in the scholarly insight that gender is not a static, immutable concept, but rather is shaped by factors such as temporality, culture, and sexuality, and dynamically evolves over time (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The theory of hegemonic masculinity provides a theoretical scaffolding for categorizing and studying masculinity when a veritable soup of masculinities exists in reality. In its earlier form, hegemonic masculinity was understood as “the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men’s dominance over women to continue. Hegemonic masculinity was distinguished from other masculinities, especially subordinated masculinities” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt clarify the concept of hegemonic masculinity, and push for a broader and more nuanced understanding of gender relations and power dynamics. While certain masculinities may be less privileged than others, Connell and Messerschmidt identify the need for, “recognizing the agency of subordinated groups as much as the power of dominant groups and the mutual conditioning of gender dynamics and other social dynamics” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 848). In my chapter on enforcers, I explore the complex experiences of players with less privileged masculinities while still acknowledging their agency and power.

Though hegemonic masculinity provides a framework for understanding the constitutive dimensions of privileged and subordinate gendered expressions, it remains tethered to flawed, essentialist views of gender and sex. If masculinities are constantly in flux, how do we pin them down? Hegemonic masculinity offers one vantage point for observing hierarchies of power within communities of men, but masculinity outside of these communities is often attached to men, even when not being enacted by men. An important question that emerges is of how to
examine masculinity’s attachment to men while simultaneously complicating the idea that masculinity is always and only in reference to experiences of cisgender men. In the all-male NHL, where ideas of masculinity are indelibly tied to the power and violence of the male body, it can be easy to fall into gender essentialist notions of masculinity. However, this thesis strives to examine the question of how masculinity is linked to manliness while simultaneously complicating the idea that masculinity is always and only in reference to experiences of cisgender men.

ENFORCEMENT OF MASCULINITIES IN HOCKEY

Because hegemonic masculinity is constantly shifting and evolving, it is impossible to exactly pinpoint when and how the hegemonic masculinity of the NHL was created. The NHL has existed for 102 years and has weathered significant cultural shifts in North America. As a historical institution, the NHL reveals trends in masculinities and helps to understand the current hierarchy of masculinities in the league. While conceptions of hegemonic masculinity may have shifted in the world outside of the NHL, violent sports are spaces for a more aggressive, dominant masculinity to exist. This is because sports are sites of crisis, specifically crises of masculinity—as ideas about masculinity shift in the “outside” world, sports offer a place for more traditional, aggressive masculinities to push back against changing narratives. Despite this relative stability of masculinities, there has been a recent change in what is accepted or allowed for ice hockey players. During the 1970s and 1980s, a time period known as the era of enforcers, hockey was extremely violent (Depken II, Groothuis, & Strazicich, 2016). While violence is still very much a part of hockey, the all-out brawls of the 1970s and 1980s are no longer prevalent, and scoring and stickhandling are more valued traits. The masculinity of today’s NHL is still
violent and focused on the body, but it also incorporates strategizing, playmaking, and complex thought processes—the hegemonic masculinity of today’s NHL is more demanding and all-encompassing, if less violent, than past hegemonic masculinities.

Because of how taxing and demanding this form of hegemonic masculinity is, select deviations are allowed. Players create and model family structures within their teams, which shows a level of care and affection for other men that would be seen as gay or unacceptable in many other contexts. On many teams, an older veteran player is designated the father figure, or the “daddy.” Calling certain players “daddy” indicates a level of familial bonding, but it also walks the line of homosocial vs. homoerotic relationships, as “daddy” has, especially in recent years, come to denote a sexually dominant or caring figure. Although “daddy” once was used sexually in mostly kink circles (Dewey, 2016), its use now is so widespread that the New York Times called 2018 “the year of the daddy” (Wertheim, 2018). Although instances like Juuse Saros calling older goaltender Pekka Rinne “daddy” multiple times on camera (Preds TV, 2017) and then being collared by Rinne as a reward for performing well in a game ignited jokes from some online commentators, it largely went unchallenged and unnoticed. “Daddy” is a specific type of masculinity that allows for specific expressions of homoerotic desire, as long as that desire is carefully managed.
The Rinne/Saros daddy incident shows how restrictive and coded behavior in the NHL is, both for players and fans alike—even when two players were engaging in behavior that, to many queer observers, is textbook homoerotic, the blinders of heteronormativity prevented any widespread acknowledgement or even understanding of what was happening. Homosocial and homoerotic behavior is built into the rituals of the NHL, and this new surge of players calling each other “Daddy” is just another example of homoerotic familial structures in the NHL. Players often talk about how difficult it is to be away from their wives, girlfriends, and families for long stretches of time, and pseudo-familial bonds that are formed between players are accepted as ways to fill those gaps. “Bromances” between hockey players living together often feature in short video clips circulated by public relations departments of various teams (Capitals, 2015), but these videos serve to emphasize the pseudo-familial relationships between hockey
players without acknowledging any sexual or romantic subtext. Although fans may interpret these videos differently, the dominant narrative in the NHL is one of platonic, fraternal love, despite the many sexually charged rituals that saturate its culture.

Perhaps one of the most striking examples of homoerotic ritual in the NHL is the prevalence of on-ice fights. It may seem counterintuitive that visible, physical conflict can be read as homoerotic, especially since one of the ways in which hegemonic masculinity is enacted and enforced is through rituals of physical aggression and violence. Both physical aggression and violence are tantamount to the maintenance of the particular hegemonic masculinity of the NHL. Violence in sports serves as a way to reinforce the supremacy of men over women (Messner 1989). As previously noted, masculinity is not immutable, and factors such as race, class, and sexuality affect a man’s status and may in some contexts position him below certain women when it comes to structures of power. Violence, both within and outside of the bounds of sports, doesn’t allow all men to be dominant over all women, but it does serve as a reminder that some men wield more power than all women. This is especially true in the NHL, in which women are notably absent – the power and potential for violence of men is on full display. Messner states that masculine supremacy and power imbalance rests on all types of subordination and violence, but the displays of physical violence within sport serve as reminders of the physical violence that underpins the whole patriarchal structure (Messner, 1990). Messner also acknowledges that violence in sport serves to enforce the dominance of hegemonic masculinity over both women and other types of masculinity (Messner, 1990). In her fascinating and groundbreaking book Consensual Violence: Sex, Sports, and the Politics of Injury, Jill Weinberg writes of how particular forms of violence are broadly accepted when they are morally authorized by the state. Consent in the context of violence “becomes an expression of authority” that “not only operates
as a vehicle to remedy an imbalance in the distribution of power, but also can be the manifestation of unequal power” (Weinberg, 2016). Violence in sports then, is linked not only to consent, but also politics, marking sports as public. Hockey isn’t necessarily political in terms of an explicit, partisan sense, but instead is imbued with the same militaristic, misogynist, and white supremacist notions that arguably influence politics in the US and Canada. Using the works of Messner and Weinberg together establishes how violence in sports, especially ice hockey, is emblematic of state-sponsored (or, at the very least, state-approved) violent masculine supremacy. Hockey, a sport with significant violence embedded in the game, both in the form of legal checks and hits and in the form of enforcers, is then considerably invested in the maintenance and creation of hegemonic masculinity.

However, hockey fights have another, more subversive role—they put the emotional and sexual power of the male body on full display. In later chapters, I will explore more thoroughly how fights act as release valves for sexual tension, but for now, the knowledge that fights facilitate both physical touch and emotional intensity between players should sufficiently explain their homoerotic charge. In hockey, fights are both common and welcomed—in both my data analysis chapter and my chapter on enforcers, I show how fighting is considered by many to be at the heart of what makes hockey so compelling for many fans. Yes, fights act as backdrops in front of which sexually charged dramas can play out, but they also serve to reinforce the violence of hegemonic masculinity that is allowed by both the NHL and by fans at large.

Despite these allowances, the masculinity of hockey players is still tightly regulated, often by the players themselves. In addition to the more traditional forms of regulating behavior, like social pressure and shame, hockey players have instituted fines to control and monitor each other’s behavior. The fining system seems to be slightly different for each team, but it’s difficult
to know because there is so much secrecy around the institution of fines in the NHL. It’s widely known that fines exist, and that players levy fines partially as pranks and partially as a means of control, but players are notoriously tight-lipped when it comes to divulging details of fines (Prewitt, 2016). Each team has a fine master who is in charge of keeping track of fines and bringing charges (Lukan, 2018), but who exactly these fine masters are and what constitutes a fine-able offense are kept secret. Certain things are known: not flushing the toilet is a $500 fine for one unnamed team (Mandell, 2016), walking on the team logo on the ground is a fine, wearing suits that are deemed too flashy or ugly is a fine. Fines may be lighthearted fun, but they also establish group norms and punish players for acting outside of these norms. $500 may be pocket change to a professional hockey player, but it still serves as a reminder of what’s appropriate and what’s not. The secrecy surrounding fines make the internal machinations of the NHL largely invisible, so that the general public only sees the finished product of masculinity. Because of the highly restricted nature of the NHL, it is up to fans to construct elaborate backstories or worlds around players—these fan-made imaginations are incredibly powerful and layered, as I will further explain by analyzing queer hockey fanfiction in Chapter 3.

THEORIES OF INTIMACY

Much of this thesis is concerned with how and why fans interact with each other and the institution of the NHL, but in order to fully grasp the complexities of fan interactions, a robust theory of fanhood is needed. While there is significant work on fans and fan communities, many of the scholarly works I reviewed centered on fans of media such as books, movies, or television shows (Barnes, 2015). Applying this scholarship to fans of hockey is complicated due to the difference in subject matter or objects of devotion. Whereas hockey fans are fans of institutions and “real” people, fans of other media are fans of fantasies in a more concrete sense. While
points about representation and devotion gleaned from scholarship about fans of creative media are certainly salient, they don’t quite map perfectly onto hockey fans. I also found ample scholarship on sports fandom, but most of the sources I found didn’t ground their analysis in feminist notions of public and private space or emotion (Kraszewski, 2008), which to me were the aspects of sports fandom that were most compelling. Utilizing a feminist analysis also helps to answer central questions that this thesis explores around race, masculinity, and intimacy more comprehensively. In order to expand the scholarship on sports fans to fit the complexities and experiences that I witnessed while researching this thesis, I draw on Lauren Berlant’s 1998 theory of intimacy, which situates intimacy as a tool to both complicate and destabilize the divide between public and private spheres. Berlant conceives of intimacy as “an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way” (Berlant, 1998, p. 281). In the context of the NHL, this narrative of something shared is a narrative of masculinity. The ways in which fans relate or feel alienated from the NHL’s particular brand of masculinity shape how they interact with each other as well as teams and players. Crucially, intimacy for Berlant is a feeling or act of both yearning and familiarity—it is an “aspiration,” after all (Berlant, 1998, p. 281). Intimacy built around masculinity often hinges on desire—desire to embody the NHL’s idealized form masculinity, desire to watch and/or touch players, desire to be a part of a community.

Using intimacy can help explain both the intensity and the complexity of the fan behaviors and experiences I witnessed, but it also allows for a critical feminist reframing of how institutions like the NHL shape emotion and community connections in a public, capitalist context. Giving serious academic consideration to how emotions are cultivated, felt, and expressed has long been a feminist tactic (Pratt & Rosner, 2012). Paying close attention to
emotions stirred by sports is doubly subversive—sports intentionally harness emotion and desire, but they do so by playing into patriarchal structures of emotion. Even in the context of the melodrama of sports, only specific ways of feeling and expressing emotion are accepted for fans. A critical feminist analysis of emotion and intimacy allows for a more complex and nuanced understanding of power structures and the ways in which the public and private spheres interact.

**METHODOLOGY**

To account for how masculinities are created within the NHL, and how fan perception of masculinities drive intimacy, I reviewed interdisciplinary scholarship on masculinity, sports, race, and queer theory. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 people and engaged in 15 hours of participant observation of open practices. During open practice, I was able to observe both fans and players as well as conduct interviews with fans. I also used discourse analysis to explore how fans and players create meaning around masculinity, race, and sexuality. I use the term “discourse analysis” broadly, to refer to a social constructionist method of research and analysis that attempts to understand how various narratives and practices are created and maintained (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). I am not following a particular school of discourse analysis, but rather using social constructionist theory to closely look at how language and objects of desire inform ways of thinking and being.

I recruited 14 fans, but due to time constraints, only 10 of those 14 fans answered the full list of interview questions. I focused my analysis on those 10 interviews because I wanted a full basis of comparison. Five of these 10 fans were Wellesley students or people I already knew, and the other five were strangers I met at open practice for the Boston Bruins. Open practice is a time for fans to gather and watch players skate for free, and it is often an opportunity for fans to get autographs and pictures with players. Since open practice is a public event, I was able to observe
interactions between players, fans, and the media and use these observations in my research. All but one of the 10 interview subjects were white, and all of them were raised in predominantly white environments and families. My interview questions focused on how fans became fans and created community, as well as how fans created discourses around race, sexuality, and masculinity. The interviews ranged from 15 to 40 minutes. I took handwritten notes during all interviews and in some instances, with participants’ permission, interviews were also recorded. I noticed emerging themes after the first two interviews, and in subsequent interviews I tracked how these themes continued to develop. Pseudonyms are used in this thesis to protect the anonymity of interview participants. I underwent CITI training and obtained IRB approval to ensure that interviews were conducted ethically.

In addition to interviews and observations, I analyzed existing media such as video interviews, game tapes, and social media interactions between fans, teams, and players. Using a social constructionist approach to analyzing media, I examined how fans created intimacy with each other and teams by constructing discourses of masculinity, race, and sexuality. I located most of my media sources by reviewing official social media accounts of NHL teams, as well as by watching games and listening to game analysis. By focusing on the social media accounts of NHL teams, I gained insight into how these teams wished to foster intimacy with fans, but also how fans responded to these attempts. My queer media sources were mostly accounts that I already followed as a fan of hockey, although I did search some hashtags to find new accounts or memes to analyze. Because the internet is such a sprawling and varied entity, I want to emphasize the fact that while my sources are useful in telling us about specific attitudes and opinions, these attitudes and opinions are in no way universal.

1 Full interview protocol is included in the appendix.
CHAPTER OUTLINE

My first chapter examines how the violent role of “enforcer” uses a racialized and hyper-aggressive narrative of masculinity to commodify and harm the bodies of enforcers themselves. Enforcers expose how unattainable and harmful discourses of hegemonic masculinity in the NHL are for the players themselves, while the following chapter on intimacy explores how discourses of masculinity, race, and sexuality negatively impact fans. By analyzing queer online fan communities and works like erotic fanfiction, I examine how the players themselves, as embodied objects of desire in the NHL, are commodified both by the NHL and by queer fans. The spaces between official narratives and discourses and fan-led, grassroots discourses are ripe for intimacy, often because of, not in spite of, the pain of these spaces. Next, I analyze data from interviews I conducted with hockey fans in order to better understand how fans conceive of masculinity, race, and sexuality, as well as how they self-identify as part of a broader community. Finally, I consider possible avenues for future scholarship concerning hockey and masculinity.

NOTES ON TERMINOLOGY

I draw on feminist theories of intimacy to better trace and understand fan experiences. When I reference intimacy, I am referring to a specific feminist reading of intimacy that centers the interactions between public and private. I will explain what specific scholars I’m drawing from in more detail in Chapter 3, but my use of the term “intimacy” as a term charged with public power is consistent throughout the thesis.

In my thesis, I refer to men’s professional ice hockey in North America as just “hockey” or “ice hockey.” This choice reflects outside trends and norms. The fact that “hockey” is
shorthand for men’s professional ice hockey for most people illuminates how undervalued women’s sports are—it presumes that women don’t play ice hockey and suggests that other types of hockey (field hockey, sled hockey) aren’t the hockey. In shortening “men’s professional ice hockey” to merely “hockey,” women, disabled hockey players, and non-cis men are excluded. Of course, even though I bring attention to this elision, I participate in it.

I also want to bring attention to the public-facing nature of the discourses I analyze in this paper. While I am certain that there have been and are queer NHL players, no NHL player, active or retired, has ever come out as anything other than cisgender and heterosexual. My intention in referring to NHL players as a homogenous, cis-hetero bloc is not to erase or discount the experiences of closeted players, but rather to highlight the effects of a publicly cisgender and straight mass of men on the creation of intimacy and power structures.
CHAPTER 2: GOON BUT NOT FORGOTTEN:

ENFORCERS IN THE NHL

In February of 2000, Donald Brashear, a 28-year-old hockey player, suffered a seizure on ice during a game against the Boston Bruins. Brashear, a member of the Vancouver Canucks, had fought Bruin Marty McSorley earlier in the game. On his way to the penalty box, Brashear mocked (or “chirped,” in hockey slang) McSorley, and a few moments later, less than three seconds before the end of the game, McSorley hit Brashear’s skull with his hockey stick. Brashear fell to the ice, his helmet rolled off, and he suffered a seizure and a Grade Three concussion, the most severe type of concussion. Both Brashear and McSorley are known as “enforcers,” an unofficial role for players in ice hockey who wield ritualized violence in distinct and powerful ways.

The Brashear-McSorley incident shook the NHL and was so severe that McSorley was indefinitely suspended and criminally charged with assault with a weapon. In court, McSorley maintained that he hadn’t intended to hurt Brashear, but he defended the existence of both violence and enforcers, emphasizing the role of enforcers in “protecting” teammates (CBC, 2000). To McSorley, his actions weren’t a violation of the social norms of the NHL, but to many outsiders, the extreme violence was shocking and horrifying. Issues of honor, masculinity, and race further complicated the issue. Brashear is Black, while McSorley is white, and Brashear’s reputation as a powerful and frightening enforcer arguably played into narratives of self-defense and violence both in the courtroom and in the view of the public (Wise, 2009).

The severity of the Brashear-McSorley incident is unusual, but elements of the incident are representative of the NHL’s culture of masculinities, race, and violence. Although
McSorley’s actions had catastrophic consequences, fans were divided in their response to the incident. Many were shocked by the extent of Brashear’s physical injuries, but others were sympathetic towards McSorley and cited his role as Wayne Gretzky’s protector as proof of his noble character (Hartford Courant, 2000). The significant cadre of fans who remained loyal to McSorley show how violence is not only accepted but integral in building fan intimacy. Violence and theatrically aggressive masculinity are hallmarks of both ice hockey and many men’s sports. Theatricality is key in both creating and maintaining the NHL’s preferred form of masculinity—as Butler writes, “performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body” (Butler, 2007, p. XV). Masculinity, then, is both embodied and constructed through ritual, and on-ice brawls serve as the NHL’s ritual of choice. With each on-ice fight, ideas of hegemonic masculinity and male dominance are made and re-made.

This chapter explores how players of color are often pushed into the role of enforcer, a role that upholds ideas about hegemonic masculinity through its connections with violence. Applying social science research on masculinity and sports to professional hockey, I argue that hegemonic masculinity is not separate from raced masculinities. Rather, hegemonic masculinity draws from and capitalizes upon certain aspects of marginalized masculinities, including racialized masculinities. Just as the Brashear-McSorley incident reveals the indelible ways in which masculinity, race, and violence intersect, this chapter suggests that an investigation of the role of the enforcer helps reveal stratifications and exploitations within the NHL around such issues of masculinity, race, class, and violence. To explore these tensions and inequalities, I will examine how the role of enforcer interacts with hegemonic masculinity. I will also discuss how
the role of enforcer is racialized and classed, and how those identities influence labor and embodied ideas of morality.

**MASCULINITIES IN ACTION**

In ice hockey, enforcers act as agents of concentrated violence, and thereby enact the supremacy of hegemonic masculinity. However, this does not mean that enforcers themselves possess or perform hegemonic masculinity, even as their actions are used to bolster the illusion of such a masculinity. As I will explain later in this chapter, people of color are funneled into the role of enforcer, and lack the privileges afforded by whiteness. Enforcers, then, are caught in a liminal in-between space, both enforcing and being punished by hegemonic masculinity. This dual form of punishment and privilege is common for many players of color, especially Black athletes. People of color, particularly Black men, are stereotyped as being more physically aggressive and sexual than white people, and these racist expectations are carried into sports (Stone et al, 1999). Black men are often pushed into sports because they are seen as naturally physically aggressive or athletic. Through sports, the supposed dangerous physicality of players of color is both highlighted and leveraged. The public nature of professional sports publicizes the athletic achievements and prowess of players of color, which thereby perpetuates discourses that men of color are inherently more physical than white men. While hockey is predominantly white, the roles assigned, either officially or unofficially, to players of color further narratives of players of color being aggressive and dangerous. The strict rules of professional sports organizations are then harnessed to prevent players of color from being more than commodified and fetishized bodies. Media training and public relations teams serve to muffle any strains of individuality. This is especially true in the NHL, where players are uncomfortable using “I” and instead will use second person or “we,” even when responding to questions directly targeted to their personal
play (Kaplan, 2018). Even as they generate huge profits for the league, players of color are stripped of their intellectual and emotional autonomy as their individual bodies are fetishized in the service of the team.

The NHL is predominantly white, with only 7% of players identifying as non-white (Thrashers Top NHL With Highest Percentage of Black Players, 2011). The concentrated whiteness of the NHL means that most players of color are isolated—as of 2017-2018, there were only 30 players of color and 31 NHL teams (Smith, 2017). This isolation increases pressure on players of color and makes them more susceptible to exploitation as well as fetishization. However, the masculinities of players of color are not fully isolated. For instance, Messner observes that “hegemonic masculinity appropriates from other masculinities whatever appears to be pragmatically useful for continued domination. The result of this dialectic is not a unitary pattern of hegemonic masculinity but a ‘historic bloc’ involving a weaving together of multiple patterns, whose hybridity is the best possible strategy for external hegemony. A constant process of negotiation, translation, and reconfiguration occurs” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 844). Thus, hegemonic masculinity in hockey privileges whiteness while drawing upon other, marginalized masculinities. The role of enforcer acts as a sort of buffer or middle ground between hegemonic masculinity and marginalized masculinities in the NHL by containing aspects of both marginalized and privileged masculinities. While not all enforcers are players of color, the role of enforcer is racialized and uses aspects of perceived Black masculinity to protect whiteness and hegemonic masculinity. In the section that follows, I discuss how the role of enforcer is linked to ideas of honor, violence, and class.

ENFORCERS AS HOCKEY’S TOUGH GUYS
While almost every team-based sport has “tough guy” characters, hockey takes the tough guy and transforms it into something entirely new and unique in both its proliferation and visibility, creating so-called called “enforcers.” Enforcers are players specially selected to get in fights and protect smaller or more high-scoring players. While enforcers do engage in legal physical plays, they are set apart from other players by their willingness (or duty) to engage in illegal fights and maneuvers. Fighting and violence have been parts of the NHL since its beginning in 1917, but the role of enforcer wasn’t created until around 1922, when fighting was demoted from an ejection offense to an offense with a five-minute penalty (Depken, Groothuis, & Strazicich, 2018). It is important to note that the role of enforcer isn’t an official one – enforcers are simply players who have a reputation for engaging in fist fights or physically aggressive plays more often than other players. There is no publicly delegated enforcer on the roster, but it is a role that exists nonetheless. John Valentine calls the role of enforcer a “cultural role,” rather than an official position (Valentine, 2012, p. 116). Despite this nebulous definition, some common themes emerge when it comes to identifying who, exactly, enforcers are. Enforcers are typically wingers, an offensive position that plays on the side, or “wings” of the center player.

*Image source: minnesotahockey.org, 2018*
In hockey, there are four lines, similar to strings in other sports. These lines play in shifts, rotating out throughout games. The fourth line is the last, or least skilled line. Here it is important to note that definitions of “skill” are defined as consistent goal-scoring ability used by players. In hockey, though this is not a definition I agree with for reasons that I will explain later. Of note here is that enforcers typically play on the fourth line, which indicates their lack of skill in the eyes of coaches. However, enforcers may play positions other than winger, and may be placed on lines other than the fourth—these parameters are meant to serve as a general description, not a definition.

The distinction between enforcers, “tough guys,” and other unofficial hockey roles like “pests” is a difficult and messy one. Less ambiguous is the fact that the enforcers’ role is indelibly shaped by dominant discourses of race, class, and physical ability. Although hockey is a physical sport, enforcers are a separate class of players when it comes to physical violence and intensity. Enforcers are typically large players, even in the realm of hockey, where the average height in the NHL is 6’1 and the average weight is 200.7 pounds (Mirtle, 2018). However, sheer physical size is not the only reason behind what makes an enforcer an enforcer. Consider: Zdeno Chara is nearly 7 feet tall, but is too valued as a goal-scoring player to become a true enforcer, while Daniel Carcillo, a notorious fighter, is well under the 6-foot mark (Daniel Carcillo #13, 2018). Clearly other factors besides sheer force and power are weighted when designating certain players as enforcers. While physicality is key to identifying what makes an enforcer, physical description falls short.

Perhaps the easiest and simplest way to describe how the enforcer is different from other roles is to see how enforcers are understood and valued in relation to other players. Any player of any position can (and, knowing hockey, will) get into an on-ice fist fight, but enforcers are
valued differently from a star center who drops gloves after being checked. The enforcer’s primary objective is to protect members of their team, especially smaller offensive players. Other players may get into fights if they feel as if they or a teammate suffered a dirty hit, but these fights are frowned upon by coaches and managements as they result in lost playing time. Enforcers, however, are encouraged to fight, and often are more proactive than reactive when it comes to physical plays and fistfights. Enforcers are more physical than “pests,” who serve to annoy or goad opposing players into committing penalties. Perhaps the key difference here is that pests and tough guys serve other functions as well, but enforcers are tasked only with intimidating and physically fighting opposing players – violence is central to the identity (and livelihoods) of enforcers.

Male sports, especially violent sports, serve not only as a form of recreation, but also as a symbol of male supremacy. While male supremacy relies on many forms of violence, the physical aspect of sport reinforces the threat of physical violence that underpins patriarchal systems (Messner, 1990). Each time an enforcer lays a hit or punches another player, the violent underpinnings of patriarchy are on full display. Enforcers, then, are embodied sites of masculine supremacy. Through physical actions such as punches, checks, and hits, enforcers display the full destructive potential of the male body and perform a specific type of masculinity for the duration of these fights. The bodies of enforcers act as vessels and symbols through which ideas of violent masculine supremacy can be channeled. However, this doesn’t always translate to personal gain for the individual enforcer. Rather, enforcers act as a site for broader ideas of hegemonic masculinity and race to play out, and often suffer the consequences personally. Enforcers often act as symbolic vessels of real violence and cannot personally withstand the intense pressure and harm of being in this position. Kaufman writes of “the triad of men’s violence” and the damage
inflicted by masculine supremacy. The “triad of men’s violence” has 3 points: violence against women, violence against other men, and violence against self (Kaufman, 1987). Enforcers routinely practice violence against other men, and by doing so practice symbolic violence against women and marginalized masculinities (Messner, 1990). Violence against self is achieved through bodily and emotional harm—enforcers, even more so than other hockey players, put themselves through taxing and dangerous physical conditions. The lasting impact of this violence upon enforcers is visible in their battered noses, missing teeth, and painful gaits; visible ramifications of invisible structural violence.

By employing and creating enforcers, teams and leagues can codify and capitalize upon violence and condemn it at the same time. Some proponents say that having enforcers on their teams allows for bursts of contained violence, stopping the targeting of small or high-scoring players. NHL commissioner Gary Bettman said, in response to concerns about concussions and Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy, that “fighting may help prevent other injuries” (Vinton, 2016, paragraph 2). While the data on whether or not enforcers actually prevent violence is inconclusive, enforcers certainly turn violence into a ritualized spectacle. Having a special role dedicated to inflicting violence categorizes violence as something special and rare. Enforcers may take on a certain gladiator-esque glamour, but they also themselves become spectacles. When layers of race and injury are taken into consideration, the spectacular nature of enforcers becomes troubling.

**MAKING AND ENFORCING RACE**

In addition to violence and on-ice behavior, enforcers are separated from other players by constructed notions of race, class, and skill. Although hockey is a predominantly white sport,
players of color are often “stacked” in the role of enforcer. “Stacking,” a term created by Harry Edwards, describes the practice of assigning players of certain races or ethnicities in certain types of roles. Stacking places players who are members of marginalized communities in roles that are less prestigious and are thought to take less skill than other roles or positions. In her analysis of how racial ideologies shape stereotypes, Ferber writes that, “depictions of African American athletes may also reinforce the traditional hierarchy by reifying stereotypes of their animal-like nature, emphasizing their sexuality, aggressiveness, and physical power” (Ferber, 2007, p. 19). John Valentine analyzes how players of color, especially Aboriginal players in Canada, are stacked in the role of enforcer. Stacking then, allows conceptions of race to make enforcers, but enforcers also make race. While not all enforcers are players of color—as previously mentioned, the NHL is overwhelmingly white—stacking relegates players of color into more easily controllable and fetishized roles.

The role of enforcer is seen by most as a less skilled role, both physically and mentally, than the other roles available. This is why enforcers typically play on the fourth line. Of course, enforcing takes a wide range of impressive skills, including keen critical thinking, strategic planning, and complex physical skills. According to Valentine, stacking players of color in roles that are seen as taking less mental ability or leadership skills is common (Valentine 2012). This plays into the discourse of people of color as inherently more physical or threatening while also enforcing white supremacy. Allowing white athletes to play in positions that score goals in turn allows white athletes more fame and income, reinforcing racialized structures of income inequality. Professional sports add another layer to this racial stratification, as it embodies these inequalities, thereby attempting to make them appear natural. Black and Indigenous men especially have long been othered as physically and sexually aggressive and powerful. These
discourses have allowed Black and Indigenous men to be criminalized and punished in the name of public safety, with emphasis on protecting white women. Patterns of racialized economic inequality, punitive carceral systems, and even medical protocols are current-day examples of how the US enacts racist structures predicated on the idea that Black men are inherently hypersexual and aggressive (Collins, 2004). Since women are excluded from the NHL\(^2\), the perceived sexual “threat” of men of color is somewhat removed, allowing teams to cleanly capitalize on discourses of men of color’s perceived physical aggressiveness and prowess. The NHL exploits narratives of hyper-aggression and uses it as a tool in constructing a violent form of masculinity.

By stacking players of color into the role of enforcer, aggression of players of color is seen as natural, while the skill of players of color is devalued. The idea that scoring takes more skill and mental ability than being an enforcer is simply untrue – enforcers must quickly assess hits as legal or illegal to decide whether or not to retaliate, engage in dangerous and taxing physical maneuvers, and be able to make long-term judgment calls about whether or not their team can afford losing a player to the penalty box. Relegating players of color to a role that is not only seen as less skilled, but also as a role that exists only to protect other (whiter) players systematically denigrates players of color in the name of privileging whiteness.

**ENFORCERS AS (IM)MORAL AGENTS**

Although enforcers are often hated or feared by opposing players, to fans they are beloved—this is evident in the public’s sympathy towards McSorley after he caused Brashear’s seizure. Constructions and performances of masculinity shape how fans situate themselves in

\(^2\) The lone exception to this is Manon Rheaume, who played in a few pre-season exhibition games in the NHL.
relation to each other, as well as how they relate to players and teams. Indeed, masculinity acts as a force of desire: sexual desire, desire to be part of a community, desire to be a better person. I will explore the intersections between intimacy and masculinity in more depth in the next chapter, but it is important to note here that enforcers embody all these aforementioned desires to some extent, especially when they engage in fights. Because of the aspirational nature of their performed masculinity, enforcers are marketed as honorable and noble to fans. The (im)morality of enforcers is then warped and reinforced by notions of class, race, and sexuality. Enforcers who are deemed especially heroic or loveable by fans are given a badge of honor in the form of the title “goon.” The term “goon” was originally used to describe “a foolish person,” according to the Oxford English Dictionary, and gradually grew to include both hired hit men and hockey players. While now “goon” is now used affectionately to describe players of all races who are enforcers, the ableist origins of the word as well as the stacking of players of color in the role of enforcer both serve to add problematic undertones to the word. The term “goon” may be a badge of honor, but it still signifies a sort of happy-go-lucky, brawn-over-brains character, which can further perpetuate discourses of players of color as more physically aggressive and less intelligent than white players.

Fan attendance at hockey games has been shown to increase when there are fights, and while data is inconclusive when it comes to seeing whether or not enforcers actually increase revenue, they certainly increase fan participation and loyalty (Depken, Groothuis, & Strazicich, 2018). A goon is a bit of a folk hero and has aspects of working-class sensibilities. Taking penalties for protecting teammates or retaliating against dirty hits paints the enforcer as a Robin Hood of sorts, redistributing violence where it is just and sticking it to referees who often represent oppressive and unsympathetic rule makers.
This use of enforcers for revenge serves to place them in an ethical conundrum. Enforcers operate in a curious gray zone — while their actions are often penalized, enforcers are commonly accepted as a part of the game. Fights are not only accepted but coveted by fans for their potential to build intimacy and excitement. The fans I interviewed all told me that they enjoyed it when fights broke out at games, and evidence suggests that attendance at games increases when the home team is known for fighting (Rodney et al, 2013). The positive reinforcement from fans pushes enforcers to fight, but the consequences of fighting can be catastrophic, as evidenced by the McSorley incident. Enforcers, then, have to negotiate a difficult moral conundrum each time they play.

Bredeimer and Shields write of “contextual morality,” which allows participants to be free of their own moral qualms or questions if they fully play by the rules of their society (Bredemeieir & Shields, 1986). The rules of hockey state that fighting is a penalized offense, but the penalty for fighting shows that it is still accepted as a part of hockey. This might sound counterintuitive, but the relative quickness of a penalty for fighting shows that it is still accepted to some extent. The job of an enforcer is to push the rules just enough to be feared, but not enough to be hated or excluded from the sport. In order to create some sort of morality structure within the overall structures of hockey, enforcers have their own code of conduct. While of course enforcers, like all other players, are beholden to the wishes of their coaches, they also have rules of their own. “Dirty” or illegal hits (aside from punches and other tactics common in fistfights) are usually looked down upon if they are enacted without much prior warning, as are unprovoked hits to the head. Big-name enforcers will often talk to each other before the game or have some sort of agreement before fighting (Colburn, 1985). According to several veteran enforcers, “a subtle communication takes place — a tap on the shoulder, a few words — the
instigator asking for a fight. The other player is free to decline. Most enforcers hate to say ‘no’ but must consider the circumstances” (Wharton, 2010, paragraph 51). These informal agreements between enforcers serve as a sort of treaty or code, which further codifies enforcers as noble knight-like figures.

When one enforcer fights another “unprovoked” — either without having previously discussed fighting, or in a situation that would not ordinarily demand a violent response — the code is violated. The notion of consent amongst enforcers is an interesting one, especially in light of the horrific violence often enacted by and upon enforcers. This notion of consent is not necessarily a legal one – there have been very few cases of hockey players being criminally charged for on-ice incidents. Criminal or even civil action is rare, perhaps because in the US, one of the few areas in which a person can somewhat consent to harm is if they participate in “lawful athletic contest or competitive sport” (Weinberg, 2016, p. 6). Even when horrific injuries are sustained in hockey fights, most players and teams do not look for recourse beyond the league. Solutions within the league are few and far between, as well.

Figures associated with the NHL profit from the violence of enforcers at least as much as they publicly (and rarely) stand against it. The Director of Player Safety in the NHL, George Parros, owns a clothing company that sells hats inspired by Trump’s Make America Great Again hats that read, “Make Hockey Violent Again” (Szto, 2018). The Director of Player Safety should work to educate players about what hits are acceptable and how to prevent injury and serve to implement discipline when these boundaries are overstepped. However, Parros is a former NHL enforcer himself, and has repeatedly referred to himself as someone who “knows how to walk the line” between violence that is deemed acceptable and violence that is punishable. Parros is also aware of the ability of enforcers to be crowd favorites, and has said, “I think fans love the
idea of a player sticking up for his teammates and creating some excitement in the game” (Morreale, 2016). It is both revealing and deeply troubling that the top official in the NHL tasked with ending violence is himself a fan (and enactor) of on-ice violence. This resistance to finding solutions from outside sources puts more pressure and weight into the enforcer’s code and absolves the league from responsibility in the eyes of many fans and players.

The enforcer’s code serves not only to provide some guidelines for the gray moral area in which enforcers exist, but also to give a sheen of honor and respect to the game. The question of whether or not honor and respect are integral to hockey is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, an exploration of the appearance or symbolism of honor and respect, specifically as it is enacted and embodied by enforcers is important as it reveals expectations placed on marginalized players. By restricting the types of plays they enact as well as how often they enact these plays, enforcers are styled as noble avengers who make the game fairer. Enforcers specialize primarily in fistfights and hard checks, which are plays where they slam their bodies into other players, but tend to steer clear of attacks involving sticks. Hockey sticks, usually a mix of fiberglass and wood composite, have the potential to do serious harm. Players who have been hit by sticks have suffered fractured skulls, open wounds, broken limbs, and a variety of other injuries (Kurtzberg, 2012). When enforcers such as McSorley engages in “dirty hits” involving hockey sticks (McSorley Says Blow to Brashear's Head Unintentional, 2000), they violate the enforcer’s code and expose the strict rules of masculine aggression in sports.

While the idea that violence, both in sports and otherwise, acts as a sort of “release valve” for aggression and anger, has been debunked (Messner, 1990), enforcers play into this perception of men as needing a way to release aggression. While enforcers are mostly hired and employed to protect high-scoring teammates and star players, they also “defend the honor” of teammates. If
a teammate is the victim of a dirty hit or even a hit deemed too rough, enforcers will often target the perpetrator for revenge. This plays into the folk hero aspect of enforcers, as they are painted as scrappy guys who just want revenge for the poor treatment of their teammates. However, it also posits the only possible player-based solution to conflict as violence. I say “player-based” solution to violence, since penalties and suspensions are handed down from the leagues and referees, not the players themselves.

Patterns of dialogue and behavior in the NHL put pressure on enforcers to act as both aggressors and moral compasses simply because violence is seen as the only solution to conflict. Productive dialogue is restricted by the time limit of the game as well as social norms — in hockey, discussions about plays are generally seen as falling into one of two categories: whining or chirping. Chirping is more along the lines of teasing or trash-talking, while almost any verbal protests or questions are classified as whining. Whining is viewed as an emasculating action, and players are penalized by fans, other players, and sometimes even officials as disputing plays or penalties in a way that is seen as whining. Sidney Crosby, perhaps the most famous active hockey player, has come under fire for disputing plays too much and whining (Eltiempo, 2012). “Chirping,” on the other hand, is hockey slang for trash-talk. While chirping is a common occurrence in hockey games, it is not a way to resolve conflict — it’s an escalation tactic. The power of chirping as escalation is seen in the Brashear-McSorley incident—shortly before being hit by McSorley, Brashear skated by the opposing team’s bench and chirped McSorley (Milbert, 2000). I say this not to blame Brashear for somehow goading McSorley into attacking him with a hockey stick, but instead to highlight how inadequate chirping is as a mediation or problem-solving technique. If discussion is out of the question as a conflict-resolution option, then violence is the only other player-based option. Violence as a player-based solution to conflict
legitimizes and naturalizes both violence and conflict. Since the response of violence is coming from the players, not the league or officials, it is seen as a natural reaction free from the confines of rules or orders – it is just “men being men.” Here again, race is key in this naturalization of masculine aggression. Not all enforcers are players of color, but the work of both John Valentine and Marc Lavoie shows that players who are “othered” — particularly Aboriginal players — are stacked into the role of enforcer. The raced and gendered aspect of violence inflicted by and on enforcers makes it both natural and unremarkable – the othered identities of many enforcers serves to diminish public concern and outrage over harm. While enforcers may enjoy heroic status among fans, they are treated as unskilled, easily replaceable labor. Enforcers are often subject to frequent trade deals and shuffled around the league, and enforcers are paid less than players who score more goals, highlighting the devaluation of enforcers. Enforcers are hockey’s way of making structural systems including racism, xenophobia, and the commodification of bodies appear natural.

Enforcers act as focusing sites for many tensions within the NHL, and the United States and Canada at large. Through enforcers, aspects of working-class and Black masculinities, or more accurately, discourses or perceptions of working-class and Black masculinities, are weaponized and used to protect and privilege hegemonic masculinity. Their use of ritualized violence both legitimizes their existence as a role and acts to further sensationalize working-class and Black masculinities. Through the sensational nature of fights and ritualized violence, the NHL can monetize the bodies and talents of enforcers while still discounting their skill and intelligence. Enforcers, then, enforce hegemonic ideas of masculinity while suffering the consequences themselves. The NHL profits off of their popularity with fans while demonizing enforcers as aggressive and volatile, when it benefits the NHL to distance themselves from
enforcers. For instance, shortly after the McSorley-Brashear incident, the NHL suspended McSorley, and commissioner Gary Bettman said that, “our discipline was a lot harsher [than the court ruling against McSorley]” (Milbert, 2000, paragraph 8). Arguably, enforcers are treated as disposable labor, and as such, a brief analysis of enforcer’s labor is useful.

Although enforcers, as NHL players, enjoy a large amount of economic privilege relative to most Americans, within the bubble of the NHL, their labor is exploited and devalued. To be clear, by no means are NHL enforcers a working-class group: the lowest possible NHL salary in 2012 was $525,000 (NHL Collective Bargaining Agreement, 2005), and the average income of an NHL player is more than eight times higher than the average household income in the US in 2018 (Appelbaum & Pear, 2018). Enforcers earn much more than the average American citizen, but their labor, within the privileged context of the NHL, is devalued and exploited. Enforcers are not paid as much as their higher-scoring counterparts, despite the horrific injuries experienced by many enforcers. Enforcers are also traded more often than other types of players (Captstick, 2012). The body of the enforcer, then, is a disposable one, shuffled around the league and subjected to catastrophic injury after catastrophic injury. The racialized and classed aspects of the enforcer as a figure and a body serve to further marginalize and devalue the enforcer.

While enforcers work to protect teammates and lay hits, enforcers themselves are arguably the real products of this labor. This is true both in a physical sense—enforcers, and all NHL players, spend hours working out and molding their bodies into desired configurations—and a metaphorical sense. I am skeptical of Bettman and Parros’s claims that enforcers actually prevent violence; what of the violence, both physical and emotional, inflicted upon enforcers? However, I do think that the personas, constructed or otherwise, of enforcers play a significant role in how fans interact with teams and players. In my next chapter, I explore how the
construction of personas and identities facilitates public intimacies and profits for the NHL. The NHL uses enforcers to sell a particular brand of masculinity, one that is influenced by working-class gumption and justice, perceived aggression of people of color, and the supremacy of the cis male body, all while protecting and privileging whiteness and the profit-making capabilities of the NHL. The working-class toughness and resistance to oppressive rule in the form of referees and penalties is key to a labor analysis of enforcers. NHL enforcers, in their capacity as professional athletes, are by no stretch of the imagination working-class, but they act as caricatures of working-class values and ideals. Their labor is not only the work they put in to keep their bodies muscular and capable of laying hard hits, but also the work they do to become symbols of masculinity. In essence, enforcers become not only the primary site of labor, but also the product (Pande, 2014).

Although enforcers earn much more than the average American citizen, their labor, within the privileged context of the NHL, is devalued and exploited. Enforcers are not paid as much as their higher-scoring counterparts, despite the horrific injuries experienced by many enforcers. Enforcers are also traded more often than other types of players (Captstick, 2012). The body of the enforcer, then, is a disposable one, shuffled around the league and subjected to catastrophic injury after catastrophic injury. The racialized and classed aspects of the enforcer as a figure and a body serve to further marginalize and devalue the enforcer.

**CONCLUSION**

Analyzing the role of enforcers is central to understanding how hegemonic masculinity is produced in the NHL; enforcers embody discourses of race, gender, and violence that shape professional hockey. The masculinity foisted upon all players and taken up by enforcers is toxic
and enforcers often suffer the most harm. This harm aligns with Kaufman’s idea of the “triad of men’s violence,” which consists of violence against other men, women, and self (Kaufman, 1987). The more spectacular the outward violence enacted by the enforcer, the more catastrophic the harm to self. Harm to self here is in the form of potentially life-threatening injuries, Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy and the host of accompanying ailments, and the emotional and mental toll of constant aggression. The physical toll violence takes on the bodies of enforcers makes visible the hidden structural violence they are subjected to. Even when enforcers possess or enact qualities of hegemonic masculinity such as whiteness, economic privilege, and straightness, the role of enforcer itself is racialized, classed, and marginalized within the world of professional ice hockey. The NHL, through the unofficial role of enforcer, weaponizes and devalues marginalized masculinities and identities while using them to earn a profit and protect more privileged masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity on its own is not an adequate framework for analyzing enforcers and their uniquely violent role in sports – an analysis of racialized stratifications of masculinity and how that then feeds into labor exploitation within the context of the NHL is needed for a more complex and rich exploration of the role of enforcer. Enforcers also act as public projections of ideas about masculinity, race, and class, and help to bridge the gap between fans and teams—earlier in the chapter, I discussed how enforcers are often fan favorites, especially among working-class fans. This tension between “reality” and what fans perceive and create is key when analyzing both discourses around race and sexuality as well as the idea of public-facing intimacy. My next chapter will discuss how fan communities, specifically queer fan communities, are shaped and exploited by desire-driven intimacy.
CHAPTER 3: INTIMACY AND QUEER IMAGINATION

While the experiences of hockey fans are as varied as the fans themselves, some basic identify of “fan” presumes some similar experiences and emotions. In searching for a definition of fan and fandom that satisfies the intricacies I observed and experienced firsthand as a hockey fan, a gap in available research became apparent. In my review of available research, theories of fans of television, movies, and books tend to focus on representation and how it affects fans, while theories on sports fans focus more on a sense of cultural belonging and community, often spurred by familial or geographic ties. While the research that I found on both hockey fans as well as fans of media more broadly is certainly illuminating, the experiences I have had as a hockey fan as well as the experiences of people I interviewed and observed for this project didn’t exactly fit in either school of thought. The act of being a hockey fan combines aspects of public and private life and emotion as well as provides a medium through which the public can become private and vice versa. In order to capture how emotions and experiences are made both communal as well as highly personal, a nuanced understanding of how conceptions of the public and private affect emotion and identity is needed. To do this, the work of Lauren Berlant is useful, particularly Berlant’s 1998 work “Intimacy: A Special Issue.” In it, Berlant conceives of intimacy as a force to complicate the public/private sphere divide—this definition of intimacy is incredibly useful when describing the experiences of fans in the NHL. Fans experience emotions such as loyalty or excitement that are typically tied to private spaces, but these emotions are projected onto the public spectacle of sport. These emotions are made public and monetized through social media and shared fan experiences, a process that transforms fan’s private desires
into public commodified displays of devotion. Yet despite relying on the sale of intimacy to survive as a business, the NHL struggles with self-made barriers to intimacy between fans and players. In order to examine how these barriers to intimacy are constructed and circumnavigated, I examine Berlant’s theory of intimacy and look at how the NHL’s communications department attempts to harness affective labor to create and commodify intimacy. I then explore erotic hockey fanfiction as a way to understand how queer intimacies fit into hostile environments and how queer imagination and intimacies in hockey are deeply embodied experiences.

The idea that professional sports provide sites for fantasy, connection, and meaning-making is not a new one, but these sites can be reworked and understood more deeply when analyzed through the lens of intimacy. Feminist scholars have drawn on the analytical lens of intimacy to re-legitimize emotions and the private sphere (Wilson 2016). While I use the term “private sphere” here, I use it in a historical academic context—as this chapter will make clear, the bounded separation of spheres as either private or public is fraught. Nevertheless, “intimacy has been traditionally associated with the feminine—and, not coincidentally, has sometimes been sidelined in scholarly inquiries. Feminist approaches to the intimate have sought to redress this exclusion” (Pratt and Rosner, 2006, p. 5). Feminist theorist Lauren Berlant conceives of intimacy as “an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way. Usually, this story is set within zones of familiarity and comfort: friendship, the couple, and the family form, animated by expressive and emancipating kinds of love. Yet the inwardness of the intimate is met by a corresponding publicness” (Berlant, 1998, p. 281). While sportswriter Michael Roberts writes that sports hinge upon “the linking of the participant’s destiny with the fan’s, in terms of a common city, nation, race, religion, or institution of higher learning” (Roberts, 1974, p. 17), Berlant’s conception of
intimacy is still necessary because of the politicized complexities of how fans link themselves to teams. Later in her essay, Berlant seeks to unsettle the separation of public and private spheres while still acknowledging the special power that public (or at least, mass) intimacy holds. Intimacy certainly does exist within “private” spaces and relationships, but it also is created alongside every shared narrative. In the NHL and other professional sports leagues, this conception of intimacy as a shared narrative is both accepted and commodified. The feminist adage, “the personal is political” is especially salient when discussing intimacy and the political implications of emotions that are often thought of as strictly private. Sports explicitly combine aspects of public and private intimacies, and ice hockey is certainly no exception. Centering intimacy within the hyper-masculine, public sphere of professional ice hockey ruptures the seemingly clear divide between the public and private realms, especially when examining fan experiences that challenge the official shared narratives of intimacy. Moreover, drawing on a feminist analysis of intimacy helps to better understand the (re)productions of masculinity, race, and sexuality, as well as the experiences of queer fans.

**Barriers to Intimacy**

While hockey is, at first glance, hostile to displays of intimacy, these barriers to intimacy force it into more interesting and charged configurations. Professional ice hockey players are isolated from the general population by social factors such as wealth and race as well as the literal physical barriers of padding and the confines of the rink. Intimacy, in terms of Berlant’s “shared narrative” (Berlant, 1998, p. 281), requires, at the very least, a common experience, emotion, or goal. Professional ice hockey players are extraordinarily wealthy compared to the average person in the United States (NHL Collective Bargaining Agreement, 2005), and even players born into middle- or working-class families are often funneled through the insular and
wealthy world of hockey schools and leagues. Given their socioeconomic status and lack of regular contact with the “outside world,” hockey players are exempt from many of the narratives and possibilities for intimacy creation with their (usually less economically privileged) fans.

In addition to broad, more structural barriers to intimacy such as class, the lack of public emotional availability or vulnerability of many players further impedes “traditional” intimacy making. Ice hockey players are notoriously bland in interviews and repeat the same rote phrases over and over. Part of this is due to media training—teams and publicists are wary of players going off script and making damaging or controversial statements, and have trained players to circumnavigate difficult questions (Doyle, 2014). While most public figures have been media trained, professional ice hockey players routinely churn out interviews devoid of almost any personality or originality at an astonishing rate. This problem is acknowledged within the profession and has become a bit of an inside joke. Recently, the NHL featured a video in its “Puck Personalities” series that consisted of various players listing their favorite interview clichés. Several players had difficulty choosing just one, saying that there were just too many from which to choose. In addition to using the same phrases over and over—“we gotta get pucks deep,” “we just gotta, you know, give 110%,” (SportsNet, 2018) and the like—NHL players overwhelmingly avoid using the singular, “I” in favor of using “we” or talking about the team instead. This discomfort around using the singular “I” pronoun goes deeper than humility; it reinforces the homogenous culture of the NHL, where any deviation from the norm or celebration of accomplishments is punished (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993). Events or comments that may seem innocuous in other sports are cause for concern and reprimand in the NHL. For example, when PK Subban celebrated a goal by firing an imaginary arrow, or when the Carolina Hurricanes began their “Storm Surge” tradition of clapping their hands to a beat after a win,
hockey commentators, fans, and players alike expressed outrage (Russell, 2019). To critics, PK Subban and the Carolina Hurricanes were drawing too much attention to themselves and engaging in too much showmanship. Ice hockey is a team sport, after all. However, it is worth noting that PK Subban is Black, and the Carolina Hurricanes are a young team whose roster is nearly one-third non-North Americans (2019-19 Carolina Hurricanes Roster and Statistics, 2019)—players who are punished for “drawing too much attention to themselves” are often players of color or players who aren’t North American. This unwritten rule and cultural norm extends from on-ice plays and celebrations to fashion, interview behavior, and use of social media. Connor McDavid, a young player sometimes referred to as, “The Next One” or “Hockey McJesus,” explains the performative humility of hockey, saying, “In hockey, there’s definitely that middle ground where you need to be, and as soon as you get out of the middle, you start getting chirped again” (Marsh, 2018, paragraph 13). As previously stated, “chirping” is hockey slang for mocking or trash-talking. Later in the interview, McDavid references how “PK Subban does some pretty out-there stuff,” which further reinforces the racialized subtext of player culture. McDavid others Subban, describing him as “out there,” which thereby separates him from the dominant white culture of hockey. The code of conformity and false humility serves to enforce a specific brand of North American whiteness that punishes and others players who resist, which in turn severely limits public expressions of potential intimacy. Even among white players themselves, the code of conformity is meant to enforce a specific brand of whiteness—namely, an anglophone Canadian or American middle-class whiteness. Whiteness as a racial category is nebulous at best (Hartigan, 1997), and is maintained in hockey through a studied, constructed blandness. When players purposefully give clichéd answers or wear drab suits, they are (re)creating whiteness, which is “not a simple allusion to skin colour; rather, it is a reference
to a way of conducting, acting, dressing, speaking, being and living with and through a racialized body” (Hylton & Lawrence, 2015, p. 771). This unofficial code of conduct serves not only to enforce whiteness among players, but also to prevent fans from meaningfully connecting with players due to their isolated and intentionally bland public personas.

**Intimacy Production and Authenticity**

Despite the many barriers to public expressions of vulnerability in the NHL, teams need to commodify intimacy in order to survive and turn a profit—in fact, it could be argued that professional sports are really just intimacy machines. In order to manufacture intimacy, teams employ a variety of strategies to make players seem relatable to fans. The Puck Personality videos are a visible part of this league-wide strategy to package up intimacy and make it profitable. The videos tackle innocuous questions about hockey, food, and habits. Each video has a catchy intro and gimmicky visual effects and noises, all of which function to keep the viewer engaged as white hockey player after white hockey player describes his favorite flavor of doughnut in a monotone. The NHL also has various social media accounts and uses them to interact with fans by spreading stats, standings, and memes. These efforts are successful in keeping a stream of content and information steady for fans, but intimacy creation between players themselves and fans is stilted.

A large portion of the labor of the communications departments for NHL teams is the push to make intimacy, and in the process make connections between players and fans, seem effortless or organic. When canned interviews and memes fail, communications departments often turn to philanthropy as an intimacy-building tool. Philanthropy, for most teams in the NHL, is highly visible and performative and almost always centers children—cancer-ridden children,
poor children, disabled children, eternally grateful and filmable children. Each winter, NHL players bedecked in Christmas-themed costumes visit the nearest children’s hospital to pass out gifts, sign autographs, and most importantly, pose for photos and videos. By linking themselves to vulnerable children, NHL players become more relatable and sympathetic, thereby creating more opportunities for intimacy to be cultivated. The families of these sick children are interviewed, and these interviews are interspersed with shots of players signing jerseys and attempting to engage the children in games of miniature floor hockey. The families usually express gratitude and awe, but occasionally a player is interviewed as well, and usually discusses the joys of giving back or affirming what’s “really important.” These yearly hospital visits tie players to both their local communities and the idea of precarious families, which are both sites ripe for intimacy creation. Widely circulated videos and photos of NHL players interacting with children and caring for children serve to associate players, however briefly, with feminized labor and the feminized private sphere. Momentarily feminizing NHL players makes them appear more vulnerable and also ties them to intimacy, a traditionally private emotion or creation.

However, the shared narrative of Berlant’s intimacy that public philanthropy attempts to invoke has limits, especially when it comes to race. PK Subban, perhaps the most famous current Black NHL player, has failed to reap the public relations benefits of philanthropy that were afforded to his white teammates. PK Subban is, objectively, an extremely skilled player: he has won the Norris Trophy (P.K. Subban | #76, 2019), which is awarded to the best defenseman of the year, and has been picked for multiple All-Star Games. During his time with the Montreal Canadiens, PK Subban donated $10 million, a sum higher than his yearly salary, to the Montreal Children’s Hospital (Johnston, 2018). In addition to this staggering donation, Subban would frequently visit the hospital and formed close bonds with several children. While many of his
visits were private (by which I mean they went un-filmed and relatively undocumented), Subban’s overall philanthropic efforts were well documented, and received coverage from hockey press as well as mainstream press. In theory, the increased visibility coupled with a focus on children and philanthropy should have built considerable public goodwill and intimacy (or at least laid the potential groundwork for intimacy creation). However, the shared experience or vulnerability necessary for intimacy does not always translate into intimacy, especially when navigating issues of race, class, or other broad societal disparities. Berlant notes the tension of intimacy and race, writing, “when people of apparently different races and classes find themselves in slow, crowded elevators...intimacy reveals itself to be a relation associated with tacit fantasies, tacit rules, and tacit obligations to remain unproblematic” (Berlant, 1998, p. 287). The easy fantasies that one need only care for children in order to create intimacy were punctured by racist fans, players, and commentators. Intimacy, for PK Subban, was not as easily made as it was for his white colleagues—in fact, it is widely acknowledged that PK Subban was traded from Montreal due to “off-ice issues” (Kelly, 2018) despite his considerable philanthropic efforts. In addition to engaging in child-focused philanthropy, PK Subban did intimacy far more effectively than most of his other colleagues—the only issue was that the rules of hockey are different from the rules for many other cultures in the United States. In interviews, PK Subban is routinely engaging, cracking jokes and gently teasing reporters. He also is one of the few players who uses the singular “I” pronoun in interviews and will directly address questions about his personal play or incidents that he was directly involved in. While PK Subban is not the only player to bend the NHL’s unofficial code of conduct, his so-called infractions are by far the most visible because of his status as the most well-known Black player in hockey.
Black players in other sports are routinely penalized more often and more harshly than their white counterparts for engaging in “unsportsmanlike” conduct, such as celebrating or trash-talking (“chirping” in hockey). Part of this is due to the lack of clear boundaries on sportsmanship calls, which leaves more room for personal judgement and bias, but another causal factor is the meaning of sportsmanship itself. Sports, in a modern Western context, have always been political and reliant upon social stratifications like race and class. Organized sports were only for the upper class, and working-class people were forced to adhere to strict guidelines or barred from participating altogether (Simons, 2003). The term and concept “sportsmanlike,” then, is inherently tied to ideas of class and privileged behavior, and enforcing rules about sportsmanship penalizes those who do not fit within highly exclusive groups. This gap in what is deemed sportsmanlike translates into who is deemed worthy of loyalty and intimacy, and puts the NHL in a conundrum. To create intimacy, glimpses of vulnerability or a common narrative is needed, but the barriers of enforced conformity and issues of race and class all conspire to make creating intimacy in the traditional sense difficult for the NHL. Despite these barriers, however, the NHL is still extremely profitable and popular. Potential explanations for success in creating intimacy despite the best efforts of the players themselves requires a more grassroots, fan-focused exploration of intimacy creation.

**The Limits of Queer Imagination and Creation**

Social media has made it easier for teams to reach out to fans in a more targeted way, but it has also facilitated fan creation of intimacy, fantasy, and overlaps of the two. Hockey, and sports in general, act as focusing sites for existing group loyalties and desires. When the desires and intimacies created by fans differ from those intentionally created by athletes and sports leagues, a tension arises. This is particularly true when it comes to the imagination of queer fans.
who are attempting to carve out space in the notoriously homophobic NHL. While fantasy as being a key part of sports and masculine participation in sports is nothing new (Messner, 2002), queer fan participation and involvement in ice hockey is a relatively unexplored topic. It is difficult to precisely gauge how many queer fans of men’s professional ice hockey there are, but I think it safe to say that queer fans make up a minority of men’s ice hockey fans. This is due to statistics of queer people in the general population combined with the lack of queer representation and acceptance in the NHL. The relative scarcity of queer hockey fans in the NHL doesn’t affect the vibrancy of queer hockey fan communities—social media and the internet have allowed queer fans to create complex and powerful online communities that often spill over into the “real world.” Many of these queer online fan communities are similar to other online fan communities: fans talk about their team’s chances, trash talk players, and share statistics and memes. This in and of itself can create intimacy, both with and without the specific intervention and commodified intimacy of the official communications departments of teams. The creation of social media networks and technologies that allow for the vast spreading of information have facilitated this commodified intimacy, however. Instead of relying on radio or newspaper reports, the NHL can now disseminate information directly to its fans and avoid the hassle and risk of dealing with reporters as a middle man. In addition to releasing player and game statistics and schedules, the social media accounts of NHL teams are now tasked with making both the team as a whole and individual players seem relatable and likeable in an attempt to create lucrative intimacy and loyalty. As previously discussed, the (overwhelmingly female) communication department for each team uses Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and other social media platforms to update fans on news and statistics as well as to release funny video clips or quizzes or memes. Certain teams rely more on memes and videos than others—the Colorado Avalanche and the Las
Vegas Knights are perhaps the most highly visible and technologically literate teams online, although the Philadelphia Flyers have recently capitalized on the surprising internet popularity of their new mascot Gritty to form lucrative bonds of intimacy.

Social media has allowed teams to interact more directly with fans and oftentimes cut out the middleman of reporters, but teams can easily lose control of how certain players or clips or memes are perceived by fans. Social media gives fans and fan communities more opportunities to construct their own narratives and “hot takes.” This is both due to the increased ease and likelihood of finding similarly minded fans, as well as the increased creative power of many social media platforms. Queer fans can find each other by looking at specific hashtags, Facebook groups, or any number of other social media groupings. Of course, increased queer fan community or presence doesn’t always neatly transition into increased representation or inclusion from the NHL. While the NHL has recently partnered with You Can Play, an organization that works to combat homophobia in sports, there still remains the fact that there has never been an openly queer hockey player, active or retired, in the NHL’s more than 100-year-old history. No amount of “Pride Nights” or rainbow-colored tape on hockey sticks can make up for the fact that NHL stars routinely use homophobic slurs as insults, even when mic’d up, or the fact that You Can Play has been co-opted from a grassroots organization to an easy public relations opportunity for controversial players. Most notably, Andrew Shaw was named a You Can Play Ambassador, “a leader in the locker room and in the community on diversity, equality and inclusion” (Hockey is For Everyone Ambassadors named, 2018). The fact that Shaw was selected as an Ambassador was alarming to queer fans, since in 2016 Shaw was reprimanded for calling a referee a faggot. Instead of working to address the culture that had allowed or encouraged Shaw to use a homophobic slur, the NHL utilized terms like “inclusivity”
to publicly redeem a player who, in an apology press conference, still didn’t seem to grasp how harmful slurs are to the queer community, hedging his actions by stating that, “I know some that use it [the word “faggot”] might not use it towards that [queer] community at all” (Basu, 2017, paragraph 6). By appropriating tools and concepts of inclusivity and queer acceptance, the NHL acknowledges the existence of queer fans without fully coming to terms with how queerness is harmed by the NHL’s policies and practices. Queer fans of the NHL exist in a time when teams are desperately trying to connect, to find common ground, to commodify intimacy, but are unwilling to hold their players or institutional practices accountable. In order to bridge that gap, queer fans combine increased communication with teams and players with fantasy.

The fantasy of queer men’s hockey fans takes many forms, but perhaps the most transformative and powerful form is fanfiction. Fanfiction in general refers to art created by fans that plays with the world, characters, or plot points of other works of established, “professional” art. It is often formally recognized as beginning when fans of Star Trek traded zines that included stories about existing characters, although it has existed since at least the 1930s (Barnes, 2015). Since then, fanfiction has bloomed into a powerful tool for building community, especially queer community. An important caveat: while there have been little to no in-depth ethnographic studies of fanfiction communities and authors, most authors seem to be female, and most works focus on queer relationships (Barnes, 2015). In the context of this thesis, all the creators of memes or fanfiction that I cite have identified themselves as queer on their social media accounts. Art as a way to imagine better, queerer futures or possibilities is no new phenomenon, but fanfiction sharpens that queer imagination and makes it specific, political, and targeted. Fanfiction exists in the gap between the reality of a loved work of art and its potential—fanfiction is a form of intimacy, bridging these gaps, but it is an intimacy necessitated by pain and isolation. Berlant
writes that, “intimacy builds worlds; it creates spaces” (Berlant, 1998, p. 282), and this is especially true of fanfiction—it creates spaces for emotions that exist in the painful semiological no man’s land between perception and desire. This painful intimacy is present in all works of fanfiction, but especially in works of fanfiction about professional men’s hockey, because the subject matter is “realer” than, say, Teen Wolf, and because the likelihood of the source material of hockey changing due to fanfiction is less likely than Teen Wolf adding more queer representation—ice hockey fanfiction focuses on real people who can’t change their sexual orientation just because fans would like them to. However, fanfiction created about hockey players isn’t simply a protest against the homophobic policies and actions of the NHL—it is also an expression of love and joy within a hostile sphere. Yes, merely existing is often an act of protest, but I do not want to reduce fanfiction to protest art—while queer hockey fanfiction is inextricably tied to the homophobia of the NHL, it also expands beyond those limits and constraints into something quite surprising and lovely.

Despite the challenges of creating fiction around a world that already exists, creators and consumers of queer hockey fanfiction have built dynamic communities that center hockey fanfiction and the fantasy of an NHL that is inclusive of queer identities. These queer, fanfiction-centered online hockey communities are similar to many other queer online communities, but their source material adds a layer of strangeness. By using Twitter and Tumblr for analysis, I was able to use their hashtag systems, which allow users to sort content more easily. I also want to emphasize the specific and particular nature of my analysis on these online queer hockey fan communities—the internet is enormous, and my analysis only focuses on the small pockets of communities that I could find and interact with fairly easily. I also created an account on Archive of Our Own, or AO3, a website specifically meant to catalogue fanfiction. AO3 uses a highly
modular and extensive tagging system, so I could quickly and easily filter my search parameters. This method of using tags allowed me to track trends and patterns that emerged in my analysis of these communities.

Using the search terms and tagging systems that were built into Archive of Our Own, I was able to roughly break down trends in men’s ice hockey fanfiction into quantitative chunks. While Archive of Our Own was an invaluable resource to me in my research (and to countless other users in search of community, quick reading, or an audience for their art) because of how easy it is to sort through piles of data, its comprehensive tagging system also elides different forms of intimacy, attraction, and queerness. Perhaps the most glaring example of this is found in AO3’s “work tags” section, which allows users to sort by content.

Image source: archiveofourown.org, 2018

AO3 allows users to filter works by rating, ranging from General to Explicit, categories (F/F for female-female pairings, M/M for male-male, and so on), and relationships, to name a few tags. These pre-existing tags are useful for broad searches and overall data coherence, but they are reductive and can force works into predetermined boxes. This tendency to crumple intimacy
into purely romantic and sexual partnerships is not confined only to AO3—Berlant asks, “desires for intimacy that bypass the couple or the life narrative it generates have no alternative plots, let alone few laws and stable spaces of culture in which to clarify and to cultivate them. What happens to the energy of attachment when it has no designated place? To the glances, gestures, encounters, collaborations, or fantasies that have no canon” (Berlant, 1998, p. 285)? These surplus or difficult intimacies are either funneled into romantic and sexual partnerships instead of being given weight in their own right—touches or desires between teammates and friends are forced into non-platonic (or more socially accepted sexual) forms instead. Fanfiction tropes are familiar and comforting spots where forms and expressions of intimacy are worn smooth by repeated use—this provides a common language for fans but limits exciting and unruly intimacies. Queer imagination is a powerful tool, but it is often limited by the tendency to only “count” certain types of intimacy, namely, coupled intimacy.

This tendency to reduce intimacy to a romantic and sexual pairing is reflected in the trending search results for ice hockey fanfiction. As of February 20th, 2019, there are 19,972 works in the “Men’s Hockey RPF” category (RPF stands for “real person fiction”). The most popular works focus on one of two pairings: Sidney Crosby/Evgeni Malkin and Jonathan Toews/Patrick Kane. Many of these works are tagged in the Explicit category, meaning that they contain graphic sexual descriptions, and many within the works tagged as Explicit feature graphic descriptions of sex heavily. Sexually explicit porn is common in all works of fanfiction, but in hockey fanfiction, sexual scenes and themes are arguably more heavily weighted than in works for other fandoms.

The weighting of sexually explicit scenes and themes in ice hockey fanfiction is tied to the emphasis on the body found in professional ice hockey. Professional sports are obviously tied
to the performance and maintenance of the body, but sports sociologists like Michael Messner also point out how men’s sports rest upon implicit threats and histories of male violence (Messner, 2007). The body becomes not only a site of physical power, but also a vehicle for politicized desire. What Messner and other sports sociologists don’t discuss is how the embodied politicized desire can be co-opted by queer fans.

This co-opting of the body for both aesthetic appreciation and as a vehicle for desire is easily seen in queer fanfiction about ice hockey players—sex scenes often include long winded descriptions of players’ physical attributes (Sidney Crosby’s famous “hockey butt” in particular gets more than its fair share of play), and gifs of players working out are often linked at the end of fanfictions to allow the reader to see what the “real thing” looks like. However, the focus on the body is more than just sexual attraction—the bodies and motions of hockey players are deeply weighted with meaning for many queer hockey fans. Due to the lack of substantive or emotionally revealing interviews, the actions and body language of players becomes inspirational fodder for queer hockey fanfictions. Photos of players touching each other during celebrations (“cellys” in hockey slang), smiling at each other, or leaning towards each other are enlarged and edited, and videos of these same encounters are slowed down and put into gif sets. The video cited at the beginning of this thesis of Juuse Saros being collared by Pekka Rinne after a win directly inspired many works of fanfiction, some of which directly lift the encounter and make it more explicitly sexual:

When Juuse’s completely bare, he feels a large warm hand spread across his shoulder blades. He looks up, meeting Pekka’s near worshipful gaze. In his left hand, he holds a thin black leather collar. Juuse swallows before nodding, lifting his chin to encourage Pekka to slip it on.
Pekka moves to stand fully behind Juuse, putting the collar on with little flair. The buckle cinches on the well worn second notch, giving Juuse plenty of room to breathe and swallow, but tight enough that he can already feel himself starting to drift away. Pekka’s hands sliding down his body now, greedy in their exploration of his still warmed up, still aching muscles… (matskreider, 2019)

The body becomes, constantly, erotically charged and political. Gif sets of two players hugging in full pads after a goal inspire sexually explicit and emotionally wrenching works of fanfiction, some of which are long enough to be novels. Images of these hugs, glances, and touches become especially meaningful for queer fans, a sort of proof—proof of attraction, proof of desire, proof of some semblance of queerness existing within the NHL. Through social media sites, images are circulated by thousands of queer fans and become saturated with meaning and queer fantasies. Images become what theorists Star and Griesemer call “bounded objects,” which are “both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. They are weakly structured in common use, and become strongly structured in individual-site use…The creation and management of boundary objects is key in developing and maintaining coherence across intersecting social worlds” (Star & Griesemer, 1989, p. 393). Images in the form of gifs, photos, and video clips, then, are simultaneously public and profoundly private. Images become bridges of intimacy, allowing fans to create a shared language that is also intensely specific. In a way, it doesn’t matter that players are so stingy with their words in interviews, or that padding obscures most of players’ bodies—images of these padded, silent bodies exist almost separately from their subjects, while at the same time being inexorably tied concretely to the body. Fans often use
highly academic or ironic language to describe touch-based encounters between players while at
the same time acknowledging the importance of these encounters to their communities. Memes
parodying an untitled work of Barbara Kruger that reads, “You construct intricate rituals which
allow you to touch the skin of other men” have become incredibly popular in queer hockey
Twitter circles recently.

Image sources, clockwise from top right: MFA (1981), @leafsbian (2018), and @kidzbopdeathgrips (2019)

These memes, and others like them, are highly analytical towards both the interactions of
players and of fan perception. Fans understand the subtext of homoeroticism and queer desire
within sports and make memes and jokes out of it. While this meme-ification of interactions and
queer theories may flatten the complexities of such interactions and theories, it certainly allows a
larger audience to roughly grasp Sedgwick’s theorization of homosocial desire (Sedgwick,
While the analytical aspect of memes makes certain interactions and touches funny, the analytical aspect doesn’t undercut the importance of touch for queer fans—queer imagination in hockey rests upon embodied fantasy.

Despite the power of queer fantasy in online queer ice hockey communities, the space between fantasy and reality is still gaping. Yes, You Can Play and other queer advocate organizations have certainly made strides—rainbow warm-up jerseys would have been nearly unthinkable for many teams in the 90s—but the NHL still uses queer acceptance as a throwaway publicity booster. Even if the NHL were to become more inclusive by actually working to change locker room culture and partnering with more queer organizations, its status as a billion-dollar corporation would hinder true queer acceptance, which is antithetical to queer liberation. The pain of the gap between queer fantasy and the reality of the NHL is very real and felt deeply by many fans, me included, but this gap has also facilitated the creation of vibrant communities and radical imaginings of the possibilities of masculinity and masculine affection and intimacy. At the same time, these vibrant communities are inextricably linked to a corporation and sport which enforce ideals of white masculine supremacy, and the heightened and dramatized intimacy of queer fanfiction is not enough to fully reconcile those competing ideologies.

CONCLUSION

Berlant conceives of intimacy as a shared experience or narrative. Within her formulation, hockey presents an interesting conundrum: it is a site of devotion and meaning-making, while at the same time a site of pain and distance. The NHL, in its capacity as an organization that sells a vision of masculinity that is so white, wealthy, and violent, uses gendered notions of intimacy creation in an attempt to peddle and commodify a shared narrative.
By continually focusing on drawing attention to the violent masculinity of enforcers, the NHL attempts to capitalize on desire for an aggressive, dominant masculinity—but what of the fans for whom this masculinity is not a desired ideal? Projects such as the Puck Personality videos are the NHL’s attempts to sell a softer, more approachable companion masculinity. These attempts at intimacy creation are somewhat stymied by both the hyper-privileged nature of the NHL as well as the active imagination of queer fans—the intimacy created by queer hockey fans in online communities is radically different from the intimacy officially peddled by the NHL. These intimacies are spurred by and encapsulated in embodied moments, which solidifies the often intangible and unreachable desires of queer fans. The experiences and creations of queer fans in the NHL expands a feminist conception of intimacy as well as a definition of fandom, especially when the creative potential of pain and commodified intimacy is considered. Desire is a driving factor in intimacy creation as well as community creation, but the gap in what queer fans desire and what the NHL offers creates surprising queer intimacies that are nonetheless just as embodied as the intimacies and desires projected onto enforcers.
CHAPTER 4: “A CLASSIC PART OF THE GAME:”

FANS, FIGHTS, AND FATHERHOOD

OVERALL GOALS OF INTERVIEWS

Once a week during the month of March, I travelled to watch the Boston Bruins practice, where I was instantly accepted into a tightly knit and bizarre community where normal rules of social interaction were suspended. During my first time watching the Boston Bruins practice, I interviewed John, a father who had taken his kids out of school and driven five hours across state lines so that they could watch the Bruins practice. John, like most of the Bruins fans I interviewed, lit up when I asked him about his favorite player, and reflexively blurted out “Bergy,” or captain Patrice Bergeron. John and I talked for about half an hour, all the while keeping a watchful eye on his two kids who were running up and down the bleachers with the other children at practice. John was incredibly kind to me, answering all my questions thoughtfully and playfully ribbing me about my team loyalties—when John learned that I was a fan of the Pittsburgh Penguins, he launched into an impersonation of their captain, Sidney Crosby. When our interview ended, he wished me luck with my project and wandered off to sit near his kids at the opposite end of the building. An hour later, the fans near me started waving jerseys and photos around and talking excitedly. When I looked closer, I saw that Patrice Bergeron had entered a section of the stadium near them and was signing autographs. John and his kids were absorbed in conversation and hadn’t noticed Bergeron, so I made my way over to them and alerted them before starting an interview with another fan. At the end of practice as I was packing up, John rushed over to me and thanked me for alerting him to Bergeron’s presence
and gave me a bear hug. I relay this encounter because I think it illustrates key themes that also emerged in interviews, namely, the importance of fathers in hockey fandom, the intense attachment fans have to certain players, and the role that hockey plays in fostering community. John, a burly man with a long Duck Dynasty-style beard and an avowed distaste for “whiners and sissies,” hugged me, a complete stranger, simply because I told him a hockey player was signing autographs. My encounter with John illustrated how powerful the intimacies created by hockey are, and how that intimacy is a tool to break down understandings of the boundaries of emotions in the public-private divide.

To deepen my understanding of themes that emerged from analyzing social media accounts and materials produced by teams, I conducted interviews with fans. This allowed me to get a more detailed and nuanced view of how fans think about what I would describe as their intimate connection to the NHL and how masculinity, sexuality, and race figures into these constructions. My interviews with fans were successful in extending my analysis, but they also destabilized my analysis of power dynamics of intimacy in the NHL. Conducting interviews with fans, especially middle-aged and older fans I met in Boston, touched me more deeply than I had anticipated. The intimacy I observed (and, to some extent, experienced) at open practice was complex, and led me to identify three distinct themes that animate it: fatherhood, geographic area, and extension of self. In addition to these particular themes, interviews with fans revealed specific ideas about sexuality, gender, and race in the NHL as well as fan authenticity, particularly as it relates to women who are hockey fans.

**METHODOLOGY**

*Interviews*
I recruited 14 fans, but only 10 could answer all of my questions, so I will be focusing my analysis on those 10 fans. Half of the 10 were Wellesley students, and the other half were fans I met at open practice. All participants identified themselves as hockey fans, though the degree of their individual commitment to the sport varied considerably. Five of the interview participants are Wellesley students and the other five are people I met at open practice for the Boston Bruins.

I started off each interview by asking participants the same guiding questions, though there was some variation in the follow-up questions I asked based on the participants’ answers. A list of the interview questions I used is in Appendix A. Interview questions were intended to be broad enough to invite participants’ nuanced individual reflections while still providing some structure and a basis for comparison between respondents. I was interested in understanding how fans construct their identities in connection to teams, players, other fans, and to learn more about their ideas about masculinity, sexuality, and race. I took handwritten notes of all interviews and also recorded most using an app on my phone after having obtained written consent.

*Open Practice Observations*

In addition to conducting interviews with individual fans, I spent a little over ten hours engaged in observations at open practice for the Boston Bruins. Open practice refers to times when NHL practices are free and open to the general public and the media. Open practices are typically optional practices or skates, so not all players are present, and the atmosphere is a bit less structured than during a closed or “regular” practice. Open practice for the Bruins takes place at Warrior Ice Arena, while the Bruins play games at TD Garden, a large stadium. Open practice is both more accessible and interactive than games, and thus more intimate due to the lack of admission fee, the smaller stadium and the opportunity it offers for fans to meet one another and get autographs and pictures with players. The people I met at open practice were a
combination of hardcore fans and folks looking for something free to do in Boston. I met families who had driven hours for the possibility of seeing star player Patrice Bergeron, and I also talked to teachers at a Jewish daycare who used open practice as a free outing for the kids. The hardcore fans and the more casual fans didn’t seem to interact much with each other, and these two groups were easily distinguishable. People who identified as fans wore Bruins shirts, jerseys, hats, and scarves, while non-fans or casual onlookers weren’t decked out in the same paraphernalia. The hardcore fans whom I observed were all white-passing, and the few people of color I talked to did not consider themselves to be Bruins fans. The hardcore fans and the casual observers even stayed in different parts of the stadium. For instance, the hardcore fans clustered around the tunnel used by players to exit the ice so that they could more easily talk to players and pass down items to be autographed. In an effort to blend in with both groups, I wore a plain yellow sweater each time I came to open practice—yellow is one of the colors of the Bruins. I also wore makeup and dangly earrings each time I went to open practice in an effort to appear feminine and capitalize on a “quirky girl” image that I hoped would make me seem nonthreatening, especially to the older white men who heavily populate open practice. This tactic paid off, and older men especially gravitated towards me, sometimes over-explaining concepts, but also disclosing personal feelings about controversial topics such as race and sexuality without batting an eye. While it is troubling that these older men did not take me seriously as a researcher or informed fan, their lowly assessments of me nonetheless translated into them freely sharing their thoughts and feelings with me.

I had no trouble engaging people in conversation or talking with fans about potentially sensitive or controversial issues. However, I ran into difficulty when I asked people to sign an informed consent sheet or record audio of interviews. When I clarified that the informed consent
sheet is just a record to show that they understand the purpose of my project and agree to be interviewed, multiple people told me that it was unnecessary, and that they didn’t need to sign a sheet to give me permission. Four people in total had this reaction, which was surprising and confusing to me. My hunch is that the informed consent sheet seemed unnecessarily academic and formal to those four people who didn’t sign it.

**Open Practice as Facilitator of Fan Intimacy**

The informality of open practice facilitates intimacy—intimacy between fans, players, members of the media, and even between errant Wellesley researchers like me. Being a sports fan is an inherently intimate act that requires a tethering of oneself and one’s desires to another person or collection of people, and open practice illuminates and furthers this tethered intimacy. Coming to open practice as a fan makes visible the often hidden or secret work of being a fan—it exposes the emotional ties that people have constructed within themselves. Coming to open practice, then, is both an admission and a proof of intimacy. Fans at open practice strike up conversations with each other, knowing that they have a shared base of emotion, if not experience. These interactions—a conversation on the topic of Charlie McAvoy’s edgework, jokes about the rink coffee, shared smiles as children argue over whether or not Brad Marchand will show up—all work to more deeply cement existing intimacies between fans and teams as well as among fans themselves.

These bits of intimacy created at open practice are fairly spontaneous, while the decision to go to open practice is a more premeditated or structured intimacy creation. The reasons why people go to open practice is telling. All the people I talked to who identified themselves as fans at open practice linked their trip to open practice to life events or experiences. Birthdays were a fairly common life event that was linked to open practice. I met and spoke with two women who
were there to celebrate a birthday, and one small child had a sign that read, “It’s my birthday! Show me some love!” Birthdays are typically events that are marked by spending time with close friends or family members, or by going to some sort of event or show. While aesthetic tastes vary, open practice is not exactly a bombastic or spectacular event—depending on the schedule, it could just be one or two players skating through cones or practicing shots over and over. Even with economic restraints taken into consideration, open practice is (in my opinion) not the most exciting free event in Boston. Celebrating a birthday by going to an open practice, then, signifies some form of felt closeness between fans and players. This closeness goes beyond admiration or even appreciation of players and integrates teams and players into the family structures and traditions of fans.

Another person I interviewed linked open practice to a less happy life event. Mark told me that he had recently lost his job due to an injury, and decided to go to open practice because it’s free and he figured, “why not?” Mark now goes to open practice at least two times a week when the Bruins are in town, sometimes with his father, sister, and stepmother, sometimes by himself. Open practice offers Mark a chance to “get out of the house” and “talk to the other guys,” giving him a sense of community. For Mark, open practice created new intimacies with other fans while deepening existing familial ties. Open practice is also an opportunity for intimacy to be created between fans and players, especially intimacy built around the desire of a transformed or extended self, a theme I return to later in the chapter. By mapping or extending a sense of self onto players, intimacy is created out of a desire to be better or more. It is telling that Mark chose to go to open practice instead of spending time in a coffee shop or park. Yes, the relative lack of cost associated with open practice made this community-building possible in a
way that going to games could not, and Mark used open practice to supplement and strengthen his family supports.

**DISCOURSES AROUND MASCULINITY, SEXUALITY, AND RACE**

My questions were targeted to uncover fan understandings of masculinity, sexuality, and race. Discourses around sexuality, masculinity, and race in turn shaped how participants constructed intimacies and communities. There was a noticeable divide between Wellesley students and open practice interview participants when it came to answering questions about race, masculinity, and sexuality candidly: Wellesley students were much more hesitant than people at open practice to address controversial topics directly. Each person I interviewed at open practice answered questions five, six, and nine quickly and candidly. Four of the five people I met at open practice then qualified that they hadn’t really thought about issues of race and sexuality in the context of professional ice hockey before. This lack of thought signals privilege—privileged identities often go unnoticed by the people who hold them because they are the standard by which everything else is judged (Rothenberg, 2008). None of the people I interviewed at open practice considered the possibility that the NHL is so straight and white because of structural oppression or inequality. In answering a question about why he thought there hasn’t been an openly queer player in the NHL, Mark pushed back on the line of inquiry, saying “there’s only, what, 600 guys in the NHL? [queer people] are just, you know, into, stuff like interior design.” Mark’s response suggests that queer people self-select out of the NHL.

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3 When I asked Wellesley students questions specifically targeting race, sexuality, or masculinity, they clammed up or qualified their answers so much that their responses were nearly meaningless. Although I repeatedly stressed that participants would remain anonymous and I wouldn’t judge them for anything they said in the interview, clearly my reassurances weren’t enough. This may have been because I knew all of the Wellesley students personally and they were afraid to jeopardize our relationship, or it could have been due to generational or gender-based differences.
John, the father who hugged me, gave a similar response when opining that “they [queer people] are just into other things,” an explanation that aligned with Mark’s self-selection theory. Queer men, to John and Mark, fall into a specific stereotype that conflates queerness with visible, flamboyant femininity. Mark linked queer men to interior design, a vocation tied to the feminine private sphere. One of my Wellesley participants, Kassidy, echoed the thoughts of Mark and John, citing an example of somebody she knew who was interested in figure skating and then later told his parents, “I’m gay! And they were like, oh, that makes sense!” While Kassidy admitted that there was a culture of homophobia in the NHL due to “the guys in the locker room mentality” and made sure to clarify that “not that all [queer] people are like that [interested in feminine activities]”, she also presented more feminine activities as alternate hobbies or careers for gay men. If effeminate queer men were just “into other things” like John and Mark seemed to think, then NHL players were drawn to the sport naturally.

The idea that NHL players are naturally aggressive or athletic or even skilled erases the intense work that goes into making hockey bodies and prevents prevailing discourses of masculinity and sexuality from being challenged. As Michael Robidoux writes, hockey players “dedicate themselves to rigorous training regimes and shape or mould their bodies to best suit the demands of labour” (Robidoux, 2001, p. 26). This all-consuming labor undertaken by hockey players challenges the idea that hockey comes naturally or easily to certain types of (cisgender, straight, white) men. Interestingly, both Mark and John seemed to acknowledge this embodied labor later in their interviews, when I asked how they thought hockey players were different from other men. Mark said that professional hockey players have to be “determined and really just keep going at it,” while John thought that he could never be a professional hockey player because of “the crazy time commitments that they have.” The bodies of hockey players, for Mark
and John, were almost magical—they weren’t necessarily the result of hard work, but somehow trophies or rewards. Here again the heavily embodied aspect of desire and masculinity is present. Mark and John appear to each know and hold two conflicting views: that being a hockey player is something natural for masculine men, and that being a hockey player requires a tremendous amount of work.

This paradox or tension popped up again and again in my interviews of people at open practice—interview participants flagged hockey players as somehow more naturally masculine than other men, but also admired their hard work and discipline. When I asked interview participants about their favorite players, the most important attributes of their favorite players were variations of being hardworking, disciplined, and a “team player.” Multiple people named Patrice Bergeron as their favorite player and cited his steady leadership style and commitment to the team, often at his own expense. I was a bit surprised by how consistently the interview participants chose Bergeron as their favorite player—I was expecting at least one or two people to choose enforcer Torey Krug or stars Zdeno Chara or Brad Marchand. I noticed many children at open practice wearing Marchand or Chara jerseys, but all the adults chose Bergeron. I asked one participant, Henry why he didn’t choose Marchand, and he responded that “Marchy’s [Marchand’s] a pest and fun, you know, to watch, I don’t know, but Bergy, [Bergeron] he’s old-school.”

Brad Marchand’s provocative playing style and antics, both on and off the ice, were less compelling for my interview participants than Bergeron’s quiet loyalty. This tendency to reward understated behavior echoes research I cited in the intimacy chapter which focused on the code of conformity in the NHL. The NHL’s official and unofficial rules value conformity and punish difference, especially if that difference is racialized. One of my interview participants from
Wellesley illustrated how that code of conformity creates discourses around racialized masculinity when she told me about which player she admires the most. Like the people I interviewed at open practice, Hannah chose Bergeron as her favorite player, but she told me that the player she admires the most is P.K. Subban. As she explained:

I feel like he’s just one of those players that everyone bashes on, and he seems like he takes it with a grain of salt, but he also contributes a lot to whatever community he lives in. Like, even after he got traded from Montreal, he still like, talked about how much he appreciated everything they gave him, and still contributes to the community even though he’s in Nashville now. I feel like you just don’t hear about players doing that a lot…he’s such a whole-hearted person. And everyone just bashes on him! Which I also can’t blame them, since some of the stunts he’s pulled…

Hannah recognizes the fan community’s overall dislike of P.K. Subban, who is currently the most visible Black player in the NHL. She never explicitly mentions race as a reason for why “everyone bashes on him,” but she does reference “stunts” as a reason why she and others dislike his behavior on-ice. Hannah’s reflection resembles a comment from Connor McDavid, the player who criticized Subban for being “out there” (Marsh, 2018). As previously established, the concept of sportsmanship is inherently biased towards low-income people and people of color (Hylton & Lawrence, 2015), and the NHL weaponizes its code of conduct to negatively impact players from marginalized communities.

Although the NHL’s commitment to white conformity allows fans, other players, and teams to criticize and punish P.K. Subban and other players of color for failing to adequately assimilate or conform, the coded nature of this white supremacy allows it to go unnoticed by white fans. At open practice, when I asked interview participants why they thought the NHL was
overwhelmingly white, they either admitted that they’d never thought about it before or chalked it up to geographic area. Geographic area is influenced by race and class (Zenou & Boccard, 2000), but my interview participants seemed to think that it was more up to chance, rather than inequality. Wellesley interview participants all used the word “inequality” when answering my question about hockey’s whiteness, but only one participant fleshed out her answer—the others dodged the question or just admitted that they didn’t know why hockey was white. Kassidy explicitly told me that “I think that definitely it’s a money thing. Hockey’s an expensive sport. Ice time costs a ton…on top of that, all the equipment you have to have…I’d say that’s why. Because, you know, white people tend to have more money.” Kassidy, the one interview participant who fully answered my question about the whiteness of hockey, was herself a person of color, although she grew up in a predominantly white neighborhood and was adopted by a white family. Again, this shows how privilege makes oppression invisible to all but those experiencing the oppression.

While my question about favorite players sparked the most impassioned answers from fans, my question about fights was a close second. My Wellesley College participants were initially bashful or hesitant about their responses to this question, but all of the people I interviewed were enthusiastic about fights in hockey. Hannah, a Wellesley College student, told me about her disappointment when she went to a hockey game and her team lost, “but there were like three fights, which kinda made up [for the team’s loss].” All of the other interview participants echoed Hannah’s view that fights were exciting and had value on their own, separate from the end score of the game. Kassidy told me about going to a game for a team she didn’t particularly like or even follow, in the hopes of “seeing a fight break out.” John, when I asked if he enjoyed watching hockey fights, told me that he was worried fights were being phased out of
hockey, and said, “they’re just, I know for me, and a lot of other folks I know, a classic part of the game.” For these fans, fighting was part of why they loved and watched hockey. Male violence is inextricably linked to their sport of choice, and their fan experiences hinge upon being spectators of male violence. However, none of my interview participants mentioned enforcers as their favorite players. Despite fights being a key aspect of why these fans loved hockey, the people engaging in fights themselves were not given the same prestige and love as other players, further cementing the exploitation of the embodied labor of enforcers. In addition to exposing the exploitation of enforcers, the fact that so many fans love fights is a clue about fan desire. As explained in the chapter on enforcers, male violence is both an affirmation of male supremacy and patriarchy while also containing elements of homoeroticism. While fans may not consciously be mapping sexual desires onto the fights or bodies of hockey players, the sexualized and racialized bodies of enforcers make fights expressions of power—physical, sexual, and symbolic. Fights are expressions of emotion and embodied power, and fans’ love of fights, in a queer analysis of hockey, could be read as eroticized desire.

While fans may project eroticized desire onto players, I did not observe any outward expressions of desire towards fellow fans at open practice. Instead, the atmosphere among fans was familial and sterile in regard to each other. The importance of family relationships in hockey could explain this, but even fans who weren’t related showed no desire towards each other or even much awareness of each other’s bodies. Fans were hyper-aware of the bodies of players and would remark to me about how certain players were “big ones” or even refer to players as “beautiful.” The de-eroticized atmosphere among fans at open practice could partly be due to the familial atmosphere, but attributing it solely to this seems half-hearted. Instead, perhaps the de-eroticized inter-fan relationships could be because fans funnel their sexual desire through the
relationships and projections between themselves and players. Hockey fights provide violent
spectacles, but they also showcase passion and the power of the body. Within such scenes of
violence fans can more safely channel their erotic desire into their emotions about and towards
players than they can towards each other.

**FATHERHOOD**

As illustrated by my encounter with John, the dad travelling from another state with his
family to open practice, fathers are certainly present at open practice. In fact, open practice is
downright crawling with fathers; during my last visit, I chatted with six fathers, all of whom had
come without their spouses. Not only is fatherhood a salient feature of open practice, I observed
individual fathers engage in a shared version of fatherhood when one child of about six or seven
was attempting to hit an empty juice box with a hockey stick; the entire section of fathers began
coaching him as if their efforts were coordinated. Clearly, certain ideas, practices, and parenting
instincts were shared by the many fathers. The prevalence of fathers at open practice is mirrored
in the importance of fathers to my interview participants. All of my interview participants
mentioned family members and family traditions as the primary reasons why they became
hockey fans, and all but two interview participants specifically mentioned their fathers. This
could be because of hockey’s intensely masculine and male-dominated nature, but I think it also
has to do with the involvement of fathers in all sports. In the nineteenth century, industrialization
separated fathers from children as men often left the family household. To fill the educational
and social gap left by this family disruption, “sport emerged as an institution of social fatherhood
to provide training in manly pursuits – war, commerce, and government – and a stepping stone
out of the family of women and into the world of men” (Burstyn, 1999, p. 45). Burstyn illustrates
how sports neatly tie together affairs of the state and the family in one masculine package. Male sports and the attitudes that they produce have historically been reactions to crises of masculinity, and this historical precedent continues today. Although the purpose of sports in the nineteenth century was to distribute paternal figures to fill the gaps in family structure by industrialization (Burstyn, 1999, p. 52), today the relationship of fatherhood to sports is a bit more varied. Yes, sports provide a way for boys to learn the rules of masculinity and be socialized with other boys, but fathers are often directly involved in this process, as evidenced by the responses to my interview questions.

When I asked interview participants how they became fans of hockey, each person cited their fathers. For some, they simply grew up in a hockey family, but for others, their fathers took a more active, almost persuasive role in shaping their identities as fans. Hannah, a Wellesley college student, told me that for her, being a hockey fan was an identity she was born into, saying, “Honestly, I couldn’t tell you when I found out [that I was a hockey fan] …My dad didn’t really give me a say.” Hannah didn’t fully embrace hockey until middle school, when she played field hockey but found that “you can’t watch field hockey on TV here,” and her father suggested watching ice hockey on TV instead. Kassidy, another Wellesley College student, told me:

My dad is from extra New Hampshire and he, like, hockey has always been a huge part of his life. He grew up playing street hockey in the summer, and over the winter the river would freeze over, and he and his friends would go out, like, for every day for hours. And so he, one, would tell me about that, two, there’s this picture, and I’m like a year and a half in the picture, and my dad is like, on skates, because he used to play rec hockey, and I guess my mom would stay and watch. And I’m there all bundled up, and he’s like,
swinging me over the ice with him. And the first time I went skating I was three. He basically did it as soon as possible, and I learned how to skate on hockey skates.

Kassidy’s experience with ice hockey is intricately linked with her father—as the interview progressed, she had more and more examples of spending time with him at hockey events. In fact, Kassidy, recalled, “the atmosphere—you know, the sound of people skating all around” was more important to her than attending games, and she doesn’t consider herself “an actual fan.” Instead, she uses hockey as a vehicle for her relationship with her father and will go to hockey practices or games to relax. She called herself a “cultural” fan, and it is clear that this is due to her relationship with her father—ice hockey is a way for her to feel close to her father and her family.

My interactions with John, the father who hugged me at open practice, further emphasize the importance of fathers in intimacy-building. John’s wife didn’t attend open practice because, according to John, she “doesn’t really get it,” leaving it “up to” him to inculcate in his children an appreciation and understanding of hockey. He took his children out of school in order to educate them in the social norms and customs of the NHL, but he spent most of his time explaining the rules to his son instead of his daughter. This inequality of attention reflects hockey’s male-centered structures: fathers create and re-create gendered imbalances of care and attention. Fathers as gatekeepers and caretakers of hockey fandom are emblematic of the patriarchal structure of the NHL as a whole.

**GEOGRAPHIC AREA**

While geographic area is tied to families, it also includes factors such as class, race, and broader ideas of community. All the people I interviewed were loyal to their hometown or home-
region teams, and disparaged “bandwagon fans” who liked popular or good teams. Being loyal to a hometown team was seen by my interview participants as being indicative of loyalty in other aspects and was a trait to be respected. I witnessed this attitude firsthand—going into my first open practice, I was nervous about being asked about my personal opinions about hockey. I didn’t want to lie to my interview participants, but I also didn’t want to antagonize them or create distance. When my first interview participant, Mark, asked me what team I supported, I hedged my answer by joking about not liking Sidney Crosby, the star of the Pittsburgh Penguins. When Mark first heard I liked the Penguins, he jokingly yelled no, but upon finding out that I am from Central Pennsylvania, he told me, “well that’s alright—that’s your home team, you can’t help that.” Mark forgave me for liking perhaps the most hated team in the NHL right now because I was from a region close to Pittsburgh, even though later in his interview he called Pittsburgh Penguins captain Sidney Crosby “a crybaby.”

In my interviews, participants identified certain areas as hockey hotspots, particularly areas in the American northeast and Canada. This mirrors the location of teams that have long been in the NHL and suggests that hockey fandom is heavily influenced by geographic proximity to a team—this is not a surprising or new discovery. However, the fact that Mark was so accepting of my team loyalties despite my geographic distance from Pennsylvania indicates that it’s not just initial geographic proximity to a team that determines allegiances, but instead a sense of place and home. Wellesley College student Kassidy spent her childhood moving from state to state. However, she remains loyal to the Bruins because she spent the most time Massachusetts and considers it home, despite being born in the South. The connection between sports teams and home or sense of home is a vibrant one—Jon Kraszewski writes that, “displaced fans look to sports teams from their former places of residence as a way to understand ‘home’” (Kraszewski,
2008, p. 141). Sports teams are focusing sites for cultural traditions and attitudes of their areas—the Philadelphia Flyers are notoriously scrappy and violent, the Dallas Stars are conservative, the Boston Bruins value rough play and loyalty over showy displays, and so on. Latching on to a sports team from home (and I grant that “home” is a nebulous and complex concept that I will not attempt to unpack in this paper) provides a deeper sense of belonging and community, even in a large geographic area or when a fan is no longer in the same geographic area as their team. Of course, hockey’s whiteness, straightness, and cis-ness come together to make “home” a welcoming concept for only those who fit hockey’s parameters of privilege.

**EXTENSION OF SELF**

Perhaps one of the steadiest and most grounding theories of this thesis is the idea that being a fan is an act of intimacy, and this is echoed in the results of my interviews. Intimacy, especially Berlant’s articulation of intimacy, is the result of looking both beyond and within oneself. As such, intimacy is an extension of self into other spheres, people, desires, and publics. In my interviews, both with Wellesley students and with people I met at open practice, I noticed that fans felt the most strongly towards players and teams upon which they had mapped their own desires and experiences. Hannah told me that she played field hockey in middle and high school, and her favorite player “played the same position in field hockey as me, so I thought that was cool. He also wore my number, which added to it.” Hannah went on to tell me about the injuries she suffered as a field hockey player and told me that her favorite player had suffered similar injuries. Intimacy between Hannah and her favorite player was due to an embodied extension of self—Hannah saw her own experiences echoed in the body of her favorite hockey player. In the chapter on intimacy and queer fanfiction, I discussed how intimacy is often
embodied in hockey, as the body of players is the most highly charged and visible material available to fans. The body serves as a conduit for desire and intimacy, and barriers to intimacy like lack of similar economic background, gender differences, or nationality can be overridden by focusing on the body of players. Of course, often visible differences like race and disability status are magnified by the embodied nature of fan-to-player intimacy in the NHL.

Other times, this extension of self that leads into intimacy is less embodied. Peter, a man I met at open practice, told me that he “grew up with” Bobby Orr, and that was why Orr was his favorite player. Based on what Peter told me about his life, I had doubts that he and Bobby Orr shared many life experiences, yet nonetheless, Peter marked his adolescence with Bobby Orr’s ascent in the NHL. Peter worked for 23 years at an HVAC company, and Bobby Orr played for the Bruins for 10 seasons, a significant feat in a league that is consistently rocked by trades (Pickard, 2009). While Peter didn’t explicitly connect the two, the traits he admired most about Orr like the fact that Orr “stuck to it and gave us [Boston Bruins fans] a few runs at the [Stanley] Cup” or Orr’s “toughness” were traits that Peter highlighted in himself when I casually asked about his life. Persistence, loyalty, and toughness were values that Peter saw in both Orr and himself, creating an extension of self as well as a sense of intimacy. It is worth noting that the traits Peter projected onto Orr were all positive traits—the “shared narrative” of intimacy is often an aspirational one, as being a fan is an exercise in desire, and sometimes that desire is a longing for a sense of self, or a better self. Peter’s extension of self onto Orr was less physical and embodied than Hannah’s intimacy, but it still used physical labor and the body of Orr as a site onto which desire and familiarity were projected.

The NHL’s continued viability and profitability rely upon successful extension of selves by fans onto players and organizations—this is the backbone of fan culture. Professional sports
provide a valve of release for desires, emotions, and behaviors that otherwise would fester or be inappropriate. As a number of sociologists and scholars have noted, sports provide ritual and fantasy in equal measure, and “consist of symbolic actions rather than a realistic narrative” (Meyers, 2001, p. 340). Sports exist as a way to map the struggles of the everyday—from anxieties around masculinity to a desire for a stronger, more capable body—onto a more spectacular field (Robidoux, 2001). This desire was starkest in the two men I interviewed who were unemployed who came to open practice as a way to escape their economic circumstances and imagine a more triumphant reality. While I was doing the initial research for this thesis, I vaguely understood how this desire would be mapped onto athletes and teams, but my interviews illustrated how embodied and how vivid this mapping of desire is. Instead of merely imagining oneself as an athlete, fans shape their perceptions of specific athletes to include experiences, feelings, and beliefs they themselves hold. The athlete is at once physically powerful as well as malleable so as to more perfectly contain the fans’ extensions of self. Again, the body of the hockey player is a vessel, and the embodied labor of players becomes more and more complex and demanding.

AUTHENTICITY

The varied responses, backgrounds, and beliefs of the people I interviewed make clear the fact that there is no single way to be a “good fan,” but I observed a persistent theme of anxiety around not being a true or good fan when I interviewed women. Much of this fear or anxiety around being a “fake” or “bandwagon” fan was heavily centered around male athletes as sexual objects. Messner and Connell both write about how male sports, especially violent male
sports, hinge on the idea of the sexually virile male body, so it is ironic that women fans are hesitant to express desire for players.

I was most struck by how all of my interview subjects who went to Wellesley College either denied being sexually attracted to hockey players or turned their sexual attraction to hockey players as a joke (I did not ask interview participants what their sexual orientation was, but all the Wellesley College participants mentioned being attracted to men). Hannah, when I asked her who her favorite player was, mentioned that her favorite was “super dedicated to the team. And um, also I found him attractive (laughs). Not the reason why he was my favorite! But it did not hurt!” Hannah was clear to separate her attraction to her favorite player from her analysis of him as a player or a person—her attraction was treated like a joke and an aside, something mildly shameful. Kassidy echoed this, saying, “I don’t know if I’m a real hockey fan. I’m just there for the entertainment of the sport” before mentioning her attraction to players, remarking on how certain players were “such cuties.” Kassidy used her friend as an example of a real fan, and told me of how her friend, “follows not just one, she follows multiple teams, and even goes into Boston for women’s hockey, which is super cool.” By mentioning women’s hockey as a marker of a true fan (bordering on a super fan), Kassidy marked it as something that wouldn’t necessarily have the “entertainment value” of men’s hockey, feeding into the narrative that men’s sports are more exciting than women’s sports because of the aggression and physical superiority of men. Throughout the interview, Kassidy was so worried about not being a real fan that she checked in with me multiple times to see if I still wanted to keep the interview going.

Kassidy, Hannah, and other Wellesley College interview participants were reflective about whether or not they would be considered true or authentic fans as measured by the straight, white, masculine structures of hockey. However, this self-policing by women fans is not unique
to hockey—Katharine W. Jones conducted a study of 38 female soccer fans and found that they all wrestled with ideas of authenticity and gender (Jones, 2008). Jones found that women fans considered certain displays or behaviors that were too stereotypically feminine, such as wearing makeup, “playing dumb,” and being sexually attracted to players to be markers of fake or inauthentic female fans. However, a sexualized female gaze supports heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity in sports by providing an appreciative audience and validating the embodied power of athletes, so these stereotypically feminine behaviors are necessary to maintain a gendered hierarchy in sports (Toffoletti & Mewett, p. 105, 110). So-called authentic fans are motivated only by athletic displays on the ice and non-sexual traits of athletes, such as commitment or dedication. Being a true fan means overlooking certain transgressions by players when it benefits the team or the league. Using an example from football, Laura explained to me, “My aunt said, over the weekend, when the Robert Kraft stuff came out, because you know, he hired a prostitute, but at the same time, she was like, you know, he was pretty cheap about it. There’s like, if you’re in favor of something, someone, there tends to be like a lot more forgiveness.” Laura and her aunt view Robert Kraft’s actions as immoral, but her aunt is willing to overlook them because she is a “true fan.”

Although female sexual desire is threatening to fan authenticity in many male sports, in hockey the term “puck bunny” adds a layer of insult and shame to female fans who express sexual desire or interest in players. “Puck bunny” is a disparaging term that conflates female hockey fans with groupies, and suggests that they are only interested in hockey because they are sexually attracted to players, not because they “actually” enjoy the sport (Gee, 2013). The hesitation of my Wellesley College interview participants to include sexual desire or enjoyment in their reasons for liking hockey highlights their awareness of the puck bunny stereotype, even
if they did not explicitly name it. Female fans of any sport have to walk a fine line and appreciate the bodies of male athletes in exactly the right context to be taken seriously. While all the women I interviewed showed awareness of this difficult balance, two older women I talked to at open practice mocked the requirements of authenticity. They were dressed up in Bruins gear adorned with sparkles and each had a dramatic smoky-eye makeup look, despite it being 10 in the morning. They told me about their many adventures at games, and when I asked about their favorite players, they started ranking Bruins players by physical attractiveness, cackling the whole time. These two women were aware that they might not be taken seriously by some male fans, but they were secure enough in their identities as fans that they could fully lean into and subvert ideas of female sexuality as threatening to authenticity.

CONCLUSION

Through interviews, I was able to better understand hockey fans’ complex emotions and negotiation of desire, as well as how they built structures of intimacy around ideas of masculinity, race, and sexuality. For a number of the fans I interviewed, especially fans I met at open practice, being a hockey fan involved both a heightened sense of self and an assimilation of self into the larger hockey community. The interviews revealed ideas about race, gender, and sexuality that fed into the overall violent hegemonic masculinity of the NHL. Interview participants, especially those at open practice, viewed hockey players as naturally aggressive, heterosexual, and white. These discourses around race, masculinity, and sexuality drove how fans created shared narratives and understood their own identities in relationship to hockey. Fatherhood, hometowns or geographic area, and extension of self all emerged in the interviews as categories or methods of intimacy creation for fans. These threads of intimacy resonated with the female fans I interviewed, but they also felt anxiety around being authentic fans, which
heightened their awareness of how they interacted with ideas of masculinity and sexuality in the NHL. Regardless of gender, each method or expression of intimacy creation: fatherhood, geographic area, and extension of self, all work to make personal or “private” sites of emotion and identity public. They create ground for shared narratives, central to Berlant’s theory of intimacy, while also allowing the actions of players or teams to deeply resonate on a personal level for fans. Intimacy is a tool to destabilize and collapse notions of public and private, but it is a tool that is exploited by the NHL’s profit-seeking ventures. Fans at open practice wore official Bruins gear and circulated pictures online, performing unpaid labor for the NHL.

This exploitative aspect of fanhood caused me to initially be skeptical that any intimacy felt or created by fans could be “real,” but my experiences conducting interviews complicated that view. While the NHL does exploit, or at least profit off of, unpaid labor of fans, it also provides the overarching structure within which fans create intimacy and community. However, the shared narratives of intimacy pushed by the NHL are not always uniformly accepted by fans. At open practice, I witnessed counter-hegemonic intimacies being created: parents cared for each other’s children, social norms were momentarily suspended (as evidenced by John’s hug), and gruff men could show vulnerability and passion. These expressions of intimacy were facilitated by the NHL, but they also challenge some of its patriarchal, capitalist building blocks.

I am tempted to say that by forging a genuine and caring community among themselves, fans are totally subverting the NHL’s machinations, but this is too naïve and simplistic an approach. The community and intimacy I experienced at open practice were real and surprising, but the NHL still profited from it. Teams need fans to survive, and fans need teams to exist as fans: both the NHL and individual fans benefit from the deeply intimate business of being a fan and participating in hockey community. This relationship, while offering benefits for both fans
and the NHL, is not a balanced one. Although at times divergent or subversive, fan strategies for intimacy formation are all inextricably tied to existing discourses of masculinity, sexuality, and race in the NHL.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Sociologists of sport have long understood that sports act as a lens to understand hierarchies of power and value. Sports in general act as sites where privileged norms of gender, race, sexuality, and other hierarchies can play out, and hockey exists as a unique site of whiteness, violence, and specific masculinity\(^4\). Although discourses of gender, race, and sexuality in the NHL are not applicable to all of Canada and the US, they are nonetheless useful in examining how different values around masculinity hang together. The masculinity centered and privileged in the NHL is powerful in understanding idealized hegemonic masculinities because it is, primarily, a fiction. The theatricality and structured sensationalism of the NHL illustrate the performative aspects of gender, especially the aggressive and physically destructive form of masculinity peddled by professional men’s ice hockey. The NHL both acknowledges and hides the artful construction of its hegemonic masculinity—that is to say, it presents its chosen form of masculinity as both natural and inherent yet also an aspirational “desired masculinity” for fans and players alike.

My chapter about enforcers highlights how the NHL exploits the labor of its players, particularly players of color, in service of creating a fantastical hyper-aggressive masculinity. Players of color are “stacked” into the violent role of enforcer and made more vulnerable to injury and abuse. Although the enforcer role is unique to hockey and is arguably a foundational component to what makes hockey special, the labor and bodies of enforcers are treated as

\(^4\) Although “country club sports” such as tennis and polo are also incredibly white sports, they lack the popularity and cultural importance of hockey.
expendable tools with which the narrative of a powerful, violent masculinity is advanced. Chapter 2 examines how intimacy is created by fans despite (and at times, because of) barriers to intimacy such as differences in class, race, gender, and sexuality. By studying online communities of queer hockey fans and their creations like memes and erotic fanfiction, I explore how intimacy, especially for queer fans of hockey, is an extension of embodied desire. These creations and experiences both collapse and expand notions of public and private, and Lauren Berlant’s theory of intimacy helps to explain the intense emotionality of fan experience as well as the mapping of self onto others. This extension of self as an expression of intimacy is echoed in my data chapter as I parsed how fans interact with each other and with the institution of the NHL. Intimacy and emotion for fans fell into three broad categories: geographic area, fatherhood, and extension of self. In addition to these categories of intimacy, sexist notions about authentic fanhood was an area of self-surveillance and discomfort for the female fans I interviewed, showing how ingrained gendered patterns of behavior and intimacy are in the NHL. The realness and sheer power of the intimacy and community I observed present an interesting dimension to the manufactured masculinity of the NHL.

In addition to illuminating how desire, intimacy, and masculinity intersect, this thesis explores how various theories of sociology, feminist thought, and queer analysis can be used to lay bare the peculiarities of ice hockey. Sports are sites of longing, and ice hockey explicitly funnels that longing towards a desired masculinity that is beyond reach. In this funneling process, certain types of fans and creations of intimacy are compressed in order to make narratives and discourses around masculinity more uniform. However, even as the NHL exploits the labor of its players - particularly players of color - and fans in order to monetize intimacy and community, these intimacies and communities still retain certain counter-hegemonic ideals.
Though this thesis specifically focuses on professional hockey, it raises larger questions about how embodied expressions of masculinity are created, reinforced, and marketed within professional spaces with set norms. Future research could explore how players themselves understand and navigate the performance embodied labor, and a disability-focused exploration of professional ice hockey could shed more light on how bodies are given value and act as sites of intimacy creation.
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APPENDIX A

1. Why or how did you become a hockey fan?

2. Do you spend time with other fans?

3. Which player is your favorite?

4. Which player do you admire most?

5. What kind of man do you think plays hockey?

6. Why do you think most hockey players are white?

7. How do you think the typical hockey player is different from the typical man(person)?

8. What do you think about fights?

9. Why do you think there hasn’t been an openly gay professional men’s hockey player?

10. Do you think players should play through injuries?