

ATHLETIC LABOUR, SPECTATORSHIP, AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION IN THE
WORLD OF PROFESSIONAL HOCKEY

NATHAN KALMAN-LAMB

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES IN
PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR
OF PHILOSOPHY

GRADUATE PROGRAMME IN SOCIAL AND POLITICAL THOUGHT
YORK UNIVERSITY
TORONTO, ONTARIO

February 2016

© Nathan Kalman-Lamb, 2016

ABSTRACT

Existing literature in the sociology of sport largely omits any discussion of the relation between the spectator and athlete in professional and high performance sport. This dissertation explores that relation, demonstrating that exploitation in athletic labour and the enduring allure of sport as spectacle are inextricably linked as part of a broader political economy. The labour of professional athletes is theorized as a form of social reproductive labour that offers affective/subjective renewal for fans. Spectators who experience isolation and alienation in their day-to-day lives as capitalist subjects come to sport seeking a sense of meaning, connection, and community. Athletic labour in professional sport provides this to them and enables them to continue to function as productive capitalist subjects by serving as an armature upon which an imagined athletic community of fans can be built. However, for social reproduction to occur for fans, athletes must sacrifice their bodies completely in the performance of their labour. It is only through this sacrifice that the imagined athletic community becomes concretized as something tangible and real and spectators become willing to spend their money on sports fandom.

This theoretical understanding of athletic labour and spectatorship is explored through semi-structured qualitative interviews with eight former professional hockey players and eight spectators of sport. The testimony of former players consistently links the political economy of professional sport and the harm and exploitation they experienced in the course of their work. The testimony of spectators, on the other hand, typically fails to acknowledge that the meaning and pleasure derived from watching professional sport is predicated on the destruction of athletic bodies. This study ultimately suggests that a form of alienation exists between athletes and spectators. The spectator grasps for an elusive sense of community within a society structured to deny that form of connection by placing vicarious investment in the bodies of athletes. Yet, this act of investment instrumentalizes and commodifies the athlete. Athletes understand this process as it occurs because it denies them their humanity by transforming them into something both more (the heroic vessel) and less (the abject failure) than human.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| Abstract..... | ii |
| Table of Contents..... | iii |
| Chapter One: Introduction..... | 1 |
| Chapter Two: Theorizing Sport as Social Reproduction..... | 16 |
| Chapter Three: Theorizing the Imagined Athletic Community..... | 44 |
| Chapter Four: Methodology | 68 |
| Subject Biographical Sketches..... | 81 |
| Chapter Five: Professional Hockey, Political Economy, Labour, and Meaning..... | 90 |
| Athletic Labour as Labour..... | 91 |
| Athletic Labour and Fandom..... | 108 |
| The Influence of Spectatorship on Athletic Labour..... | 127 |
| Chapter Six: Spectatorship, Meaning, and the Rejection of Political Economy..... | 136 |
| Professional Sport as Meaning..... | 136 |
| Reifying the Imagined Athletic Community..... | 163 |
| A Necessary Sacrifice..... | 172 |
| Chapter Seven: Fandom and Imagined Community..... | 193 |
| Fandom as Connection..... | 193 |
| Capitalism and the Imagined Athletic Community..... | 215 |
| Implications of the Imagined Athletic Community..... | 221 |
| Chapter Eight: The Consequences of Athletic Social Reproductive Labour..... | 229 |
| Professional Hockey as Role Playing..... | 230 |
| Vessels of Meaning..... | 237 |
| Injury..... | 247 |
| Chapter Nine: Conclusion..... | 290 |
| Spectatorship, False Consciousness, and Hegemony..... | 295 |
| Face-to-Face..... | 298 |
| Bibliography | 305 |
| Appendices | 313 |
| Appendix A: Race and Social Reproduction in Professional Hockey..... | 313 |

Chapter 1: Introduction

On December 17, 2014, Chris Conte of the Chicago Bears of the National Football League had this to say about the costs of athletic injury:

“Ever since I was a little kid, it's what I've wanted to do,” Conte told WBBM Newsradio in Chicago. “In college, I didn't even graduate school because my senior year, I honestly let school be a casualty to that because I knew I had one opportunity to make it to the NFL, and I put everything into that. And I felt school's something I could figure out later. As far as after football, who knows. My life will revolve around football to some point, but I'd rather have the experience of playing and, who knows, die 10, 15 years earlier than not be able to play in the NFL and live a long life. It's something I've wanted to do with my life and I wanted to accomplish. And I pretty much set my whole life up to accomplish that goal. So I don't really look toward my life after football because I'll figure things out when I get there and see how I am.” (ESPN.com news services, 2014)

Slightly more than one month earlier, Steve Nash of the Los Angeles Lakers of the National Basketball Association had this to say on Facebook after announcing that he would sit out the entire season:

I definitely don't want to be a distraction, but I felt it best everyone heard from me in my own words.

I have a ton of miles on my back. Three buldging disks (a tear in one), stenosis of the nerve route and spondylolisthesis. I suffer from sciatica and after games I often can't sit in the car on the drive home, which has made for some interesting rides. Most nights I'm bothered by severe cramping in both calves while I sleep, a result of the same damn nerve routes, and the list goes on somewhat comically. That's what you deserve for playing over 1,300 NBA games. By no means do I tell you this for sympathy - especially since I see these ailments as badges of honor - but maybe I can bring some clarity.

I've always been one of the hardest workers in the game and I say that at the risk of what it assumes. The past 2 years I've worked like a dog to not only overcome these setbacks but to find the form that could lift up and inspire the fans in LA as my last chapter. Obviously it's been a disaster on both fronts but I've never worked harder, sacrificed more or faced such a difficult challenge mentally and emotionally.

I understand why some fans are disappointed. I haven't been able to play a lot of games or at the level we all wanted. Unfortunately that's a part of pro sports that happens every year on every team. I wish desperately it was different. I want to play more than anything in the world. I've lost an incredible amount of sleep over this disappointment. (Nash, 2014)

Finally, years earlier, academic and former rugby star Andrew Sparkes wrote of his experiences after suffering developmental spinal stenosis as a consequence of his athletic exploits. He describes walking from class to class:

Inhaling, I unfold my collapsible walking stick and begin to hobble. As my left foot hits the ground a searing, slashing pain, arcs from my lower back into my left buttock, left thigh, left calf muscle, and finally, into my foot. Right step-fine. Left step-stab. Right step-fine. Left step-stab. Left, left, left-stab, stab, stab... Stand still, lift left foot off the ground. Stand still, take all the weight on the right foot. Lean on my walking stick. Relief. Stand still. Move. Left step-stab. The world, my world, collapsing, into the left side of my lower body. I am my left limb. I am the space between pain and no pain. I stand still. I cannot take one more step. This is a world of stillness, slowness, impairment, disability, of otherness (2004, p. 165).

Later, when listening to others recount what it was like to watch him perform during his athletic prime, he says: “They are celebrating a me I don’t remember. A me I don’t recall. Their applause is for a historical self, a ghost. Someone who was ‘me’ long ago. Things have changed. My body has changed. I have changed,” (168).

It is, I imagine, a bit unorthodox to begin a work of this nature by drawing on the words of anyone but myself. After all, this project is supposed to demonstrate the intellectual contribution that I can make to the field of sociology and sport. However, despite the counterintuitive nature of this approach, I believe it is appropriate. This project, above all, is about the experiences that people have with sport, whether as athletes or as spectators. There is no doubt that my role as a sociologist is to find meaning and order in those experiences, to render them intelligible in the context of broader structures. But, that is not the most important responsibility of the social scientist who engages in qualitative research. No, rather, more than anything, what I am empowered to do as a sociologist is to record and publish the testimony of

others who live, labour, and struggle to find meaning in the world. That is what I have endeavoured to do in this dissertation through the interviews I conducted with eight athletes and eight spectators of sport. And, in the spirit of that project, I begin with three voices who I believe demonstrate the imperatives that drive this project forward. Let us examine them each, one by one.

Conte's disclosure is striking for two predominant reasons: he acknowledges the extent of the physical sacrifices he has made and he legitimizes them. It is no surprise to anyone who participates in sport and few who watch it that these games cause extensive bodily harm. Yet, it is nevertheless startling to hear this cost articulated in terms of "10, 15 years" of life lost. However, in the testimony that is to follow, it will become clear that Conte's appraisal of the physical cost of sport is not unique. Rather, for professional athletes, it is a reality that they experience everyday in their work. The second part of this equation is no easier to digest than the first. Most would assume that Conte's willingness to sacrifice years off of his life is a product of the monetary rewards that he receives for playing. After all, it is an ad nauseam refrain that athletes are overpaid to an outlandish and exorbitant degree. I have chosen this statement by Conte as a starting point in no small measure because it provides an opportunity to engage with this assumption head-on from the outset. I begin from the premise that although many athletes are paid more money than any individual is justly entitled to, a) this does not exempt them from exploitation, b) only a relatively miniscule proportion of professional athletes receive such sums, and c) they are compelled to make sacrifices that cannot be measured by traditional notions of exploitation. Conte himself is not arguing that money justifies the years of his life he is prepared to lose. No, he refers instead to a different source of motivation, an ephemeral "goal" he has known "ever since [he] was a little kid, it's what [he's] wanted to do." Thus, he "pretty much set

[his] whole life up to accomplish that goal.” The meaning that Conte extracts from the game is something larger than a question of dollars and cents and much more complicated to understand. It is a theme that will recur again and again in the testimony of the former athletes who I interviewed and which, I ultimately contend, is inextricably linked to the relationship that exists between spectators and athletes in the realm of professional sport.

I have selected this statement by Steve Nash because it elaborates on the themes introduced by Conte. Like Conte, Nash indexes the tremendous damage suffered by his body over the course of his professional athletic career. Unlike Conte, however, Nash suggests that the toll of this harm – the sacrifice the athlete is compelled to make – may not be worthwhile. Rather, he seems to suggest that at a certain point the cost of the suffering his body is put through can no longer be justified or legitimized. Yet, what is most remarkable about Nash’s testimony is who it is targeted at: his fans. He seems to feel compelled to explain his decision to those who follow and worship him. One might imagine that the intimate experience of bodily pain he experiences would be something he would keep private, yet he has chosen to share it with the world. What this indicates, I think, is that Nash is cognizant of the fact that for the athlete, the body does not exist in the private domain. His labour is not just in the public spotlight, it is *for* the public in very fundamental ways. The high performance professional athlete, in this sense, gives up his body (and I use “his” very deliberately, for, as I will explain, this phenomenon is gendered in the way that it connects to political economy) to the broader community.

This is not a wholly unique phenomenon, for, as Karl Marx (1994a) has shown, all capitalist labour is in some way alienated. The worker, in contracting to sell her labour to another for a wage, loses connection with that which she creates. Her body becomes an instrument for the will of the capitalist. While the athlete’s labour is in some ways alienated in the typical sense

(after all, he labours for the owner(s) of the team), there is something different also about the way in which the athlete's body is taken from him. Many have written about the way in which a problematic sort of Cartesian dualism occurs (i.e. Meier, 1975; Loland, 2006) in which the mind and body of the athlete are perceived to be distinct entities with the latter functioning as instrument of the former. This, too, is a theory with merit. What Nash implies through his Facebook post, though, is that there is still another way in which the athlete's body is taken from him: it becomes the affective locus of fans. Nash apologizes to fans because, on some level, he recognizes that his body has become the site of their investment, their hopes, and dreams, and meaning. His body is his own, of course, but, for a time, it has also, in a very significant albeit ephemeral sense, been theirs. This is, I argue, a form of exploitation, but it is not the exploitation that Marx (1976) writes of in *Capital*. For Marx, exploitation refers to the systematic exploitation of the worker's labour-power by the capitalist in the productive labour process. Rather, the form of exploitation, as I am referring to it, shares more in common with the social reproductive labour necessary for the reproduction of the capitalist economy. This is the work required to produce labour-power in the first place and it is work that thus has a significant affective component, as the worker must transfer a profound element of her subjective self to another in order to reproduce that other's labour capacity.

The final passage I have chosen comes from the work of Andrew Sparkes. If Conte instructs us about the physical cost of athletic labour and Nash indicates the way in which the athlete's body is colonized by the fan, what Sparkes reveals is the cost of this exploitation to the athletic labourer. Conte imagines what this cost will be, suggesting that he is willing, in the end, to lose years off of his life. Nash is less cavalier, disclosing that the toll he has suffered has already begun to significantly impact his quality of life. Sparkes provides us an even clearer

window into the subjective dimensions of the physical harm that athletes experience. The first passage I have selected emphasizes his relationship with pain. That is, for Sparkes, pain has become “the world, my world.” The implications of this go beyond suffering (although his suffering should not be minimized), for his entire sense of identity has changed. Where once his world was defined by physical agency and mastery, now it is “a world of stillness, slowness, impairment, disability, of otherness.” Indeed, it is difficult even for him to recognize himself in the athlete he once was. When he hears his exploits being extolled, he remarks: “They are celebrating a me I don’t remember. A me I don’t recall. Their applause is for a historical self, a ghost. Someone who was ‘me’ long ago. Things have changed. My body has changed. I have changed.” In this brief passage, Sparkes brings us face to face with the full extent of the sacrifice made by the athletic labourer. The harm his body has experienced, the loss of physical ability, is the loss of the self he once was. This is a subjective crisis that extends beyond simply pain alone. It is the sacrifice that the athletic labourer makes and it has not yet adequately been accounted for in the literature on sport, exploitation, and injury.

In this way, my project departs from previous scholarship on sport, exploitation, and injury. In *Damaged Bodies, Injured Selves*, Sabo (2004) argues, “We create small armies of wounded athletes and former-athletes who limp and grimace through their daily routines, but we do not try to understand what the war is all about,” (p. 63). Although I find it hard to agree with his assessment that no answers have been provided – for much literature has been produced on this subject – I believe that he is nevertheless correct to continue posing this question, for I do not believe it has yet been adequately answered. This is largely because the question of *why* the sacrifice of athletic bodies occurs has largely been reframed as a question of *how*. To that end, there is no question that Marxist, feminist, and post-structuralist theorists have all provided much

insight into the exploitative and dehumanizing elements of sport. The Marxist (i.e. Brohm, 1978) approach has yielded a fuller understanding of the ways in which sport is a form of productive labour yielding surplus-value through the exploitation of the labour of the athlete. Feminist approaches (i.e. Burstyn, 1999; Connell, 1990; Messner, 1992) have deconstructed hegemonic masculinity and sport, revealing the ways in which the athlete is conditioned to treat her or his body as a sort of machine optimized for violence and aggression at the expense of personal emotion and intimacy (and also of women and homosexual men, against whom masculinity comes to define itself). Post-structuralist theorists (i.e. Shogan, 1999) have elaborated on this notion, contending that the athlete's body is rendered docile as it is subjected to discipline and surveillance under the regime of high performance sport. Yet, as illuminating as this analysis of the mechanisms of high performance sport is, it is only by answering Sabo's question of why athletic sacrifice occurs that we can come to understand the full extent of exploitation and dehumanization that athletes necessarily experience. For, what is missing from much of this literature is an analysis of the extent to which the physical devastation of the athlete's body is pivotal for the political economy of sport.

In what follows, I theorize that the sacrifice made by the athletic labourer is fundamental to the political economy of professional sport. This is not a complex argument from the standpoint of political economy. Every economy requires effective demand (consumption) in order to generate surplus value. Marx provides the simple equation $M-C-M'$ to indicate the cycle of capitalist production. Money is converted into commodities – labour power and means of production – and these, through the labour process, become another commodity that incorporates the value of all the dead labour invested in it plus the socially necessary abstract labour time of the worker. Because the labour power of the worker produces more value than it costs, the

commodity that is ultimately produced through this labour process has more value than the sum of the original commodities purchased by the capitalist in order to initiate the labour process. Thus, the cycle is complete when the commodity that is produced is sold in the market and converted into more money than was originally invested. Ultimately, the capitalist will invest this money back into production in order to continually and systematically generate increasing sums of capital. However, as we can see, if the commodity is produced in this manner *but not sold*, it becomes a loss for the capitalist. The productive cycle can only be completed through the purchase of the commodity by the consumer.

So, what is the relevance of all this to the political economy of professional sport? Well, again, it is quite simple. For the owners of professional teams to earn a profit, they require effective demand for their product, the games they exhibit. That money may come from different sources, for, ticket sales make up a decreasingly significant portion of total revenue. Whether it is the large rights contracts doled out by cable television companies or merchandising, however, the bottom line remains the same: the effective demand for professional sport hinges on the desire of fans to invest their meaning and money in the teams they follow. As Julian Ammirante puts it in his discussion of the political economy of the NHL:

This point bears repeating: the value to a sports organization – such as the NHL, the NFL, or any other sports franchise – of the services provided by the athletes it hires is derived from the demand sports fans exhibit for the events these inputs produce. All other things being equal, the payments athletes receive for their services are positively correlated with fans' demand for professional sporting events. (2009, p. 187).

My contention is that the harm the athlete experiences in professional sport is not incidental to the meaning that the spectator receives from watching and following and investing in her team. That is, it is a necessary part of what makes the commodity of professional sport desirable to the consuming fan. In fact, what I will suggest is that the spectator in a certain sense requires the

athlete to be willing to make a sacrifice of his body in order to make her investment (emotional and financial) in the first place. Thus, in order to fully grasp the experience and implications of athletic injury – and the full extent of exploitation inherent in professional sport – it is essential that we understand not only the subjective experience of professional athletes, but also that of fans.

In broadest terms, the purpose of this project will be to explore the significance of sport to the North American political economy. However, instead of approaching this from the standpoint of the political economy of sport and its impact on the broader productive economy, my focus will be on sport as a form of social reproduction: an invisible yet essential foundation for the wider political economy. My contention is that the widespread alienation produced by the capitalist mode of production (particularly in its late capitalist, highly spectacularized phase (Debord, 1994)) creates a market for sport in that it produces a society of individuals desperate for a sense of connection and community. The surrogate sense of species-being (Marx, 1994) provided by sports spectatorship in turn serves to buttress the broader political economy of the society by providing workers with the meaning they need in order to sustain themselves as productive labour. There is a cost to this social reproduction and it is paid through the sacrifice of the athlete's body. That is, there is a level of exploitation experienced by the athlete beyond simply the realm of productive labour. This exploitation requires the complete sacrifice of the athlete's body, and in turn, sense of self. Without this sacrifice, spectator sport would not satiate the desire for meaning and community that draws fans to it. Thus, my contention is that sport must be theorized not merely as an arena of exploitation and hegemonic masculinity, but as a site of social reproduction in order to account for the full extent of exploitation experienced by

athletes and also for why this exploitation is inherent prevalent feature of high performance spectator sport.

The concept of social reproduction is perhaps the most important theoretical principle underpinning this project. It is a concept developed by Marxist-Feminist thinkers to account for the role of labour in the capitalist political economy. For Marx, productive labour is labour that produces surplus-value. That is, it is labour that produces commodities which acquire a higher value than the amount of value required to produce them because labour-power is the one commodity which produces value. This is because the cost of labour-power is the means of subsistence of the labourer and this cost is less than the full day of work the labourer contracts to give the capitalist in return for a wage that will provide for the cost of subsistence (Marx, 1976). What is missing from Marx's schema is any account of the labour required to reproduce the labourer: the work to feed, clothe, and house the worker, and also the work to reproduce the next generation of labourers (child-rearing). This is social reproductive labour, labour traditionally performed by women in the home, and labour without which the productive economy would cease to exist. As capitalism has advanced and evolved, so too has the role of social reproductive labour and the way it has been understood. Johanna Brenner and Barbara Laslett (1989) have argued that the needs of the worker must be understood to extend beyond physical subsistence to include mental and emotional requirements.

This is both a logical extension of the original premise of social reproduction and a somewhat revolutionary expansion of the idea. For, if social reproduction is about more than simply material needs, it need not be performed in the private sphere. Indeed, it means that social reproductive labour can also occur in the productive sector of the economy. Bridget Anderson (2000) and Anna Agathangelou (2004) have picked up on this idea, arguing that social

reproduction is performed by racialized domestic and sex workers, who satisfy more than physical needs alone. Instead, these workers facilitate the reproduction of bourgeois subjectivities through the dynamics of race, class, and gender that inform the power relations at play in the exchange of their labour for a wage. Moreover, just as the employer who hires the sex or domestic worker receives an additional form of value in the exchange, so too does the worker lose more than her labour-power alone. An unquantifiable part of the self is sacrificed in this dehumanizing transaction. Thus, this form of paid social reproductive work involves a sort of double exploitation: the economic exploitation essential for the production of value in a capitalist system and the exploitation of personhood required to sustain that system.

Athletic labour is distinct from domestic, and, particularly, sex, work in some fundamental ways. Workers in these sectors are typically subject to a level and type of violence and insecurity, and also dehumanization, that are not experienced by most athletes in the course of their professional lives. Workers in these fields are also often guided in their choice of profession by a level of material constraint—and thus lack of choice in the truest sense of the word—that is often, although not always, more extreme than that facing athletes. These are not merely token caveats; they are important realities that must be considered in any theoretical engagement with these forms of labour. Nevertheless, with that injunction in mind, there is much that can be gleaned about athletic labour through the application of Anderson and Agathangelou's models of social reproduction. In order to understand why this might be the case, we must return first turn to a discussion of spectatorship so as to unpack the dialectical nature of the relationship between fan and player.

Benedict Anderson (1991) has argued that nations are “imagined communities.” He theorizes that although there is nothing natural or essential about the nation as a construct, it

comes to be cherished by those who claim membership as something that is. Anne McClintock (1995) and Paul Gilroy (2000) have extended this analysis by showing that imagined national communities are continuously reproduced through fetish spectacles that range from the recitation of national anthems and songs, to the waving of flags and other sorts of visual symbols. Among the crucial insights offered by Gilroy is the notion that visual symbols can have a compelling effect without requiring the rationality that is a prerequisite for verbal forms of communication. Thus, the repetition of such symbols produces a nation based on no logic other than the existence of the symbols themselves.

It is not difficult to see how sport might come to serve as a locus for the performance of such national spectacle. Indeed, events such as the Olympics and the FIFA World Cup serve precisely this function. This is not, however, the only way in which sport intersects with the logic of the imagined community. In fact, the theoretical paradigm of Anderson, McClintock, and Gilroy allows us to understand the appeal of professional sport for its consumers, fans. Just as the nation itself satisfied the crisis of identity precipitated by industrial capitalism in the nineteenth-century (Hobsbawm, 1992b), athletic fandom comes to serve a similar purpose in late capitalism. In northern societies, particularly Canada and the United States, marked by atomism, alienation, and increasing isolation due to both the structure of capitalism and the proliferation of new technologies, subjects long for a sense of connection and meaning (species-being) that is difficult to find.

Professional teams come to function as what can be termed imagined athletic communities. Through precisely the same sorts of fetish spectacle employed by traditional nations, imagined athletic communities come into existence through the leap of faith that to cheer for a team is to don an identity shared by countless others. This impression is affirmed

through the purchase of jerseys and other memorabilia and the (choreographed) collective performances enacted by spectators at games. This is, of course, a capitalist project engineered by the teams themselves. For the fans, however, it becomes a fetishistic substitute for more fully realized human relationships and communities. None of this would be possible without the bodies of the athletes themselves.

It is my contention that sport is a form of social reproductive labour. The body of the athlete becomes a vessel for the meaning that sustains the political economy of sport. The sacrifice, or potential sacrifice of the athlete's body – and by this I mean the subjection of the body to extreme forms of physical strain and trauma in the process of training and performance – is a significant element of the appeal spectator sport, for it sets the stakes high enough to justify affective and economic investment. It is in this sense that I contend athletes must be willing to sacrifice their bodies in order to sustain the fiction of the imagined athletic community. When they do so, they effectively allow for the reproduction of the spectator's subjectivity as a labouring subject, for in doing so they are enacting the very existence of the imagined athletic community and the spectator's ability to identify with it. This in turn allows the spectator to combat the sense of isolation and alienation that make it difficult to provide the system with the optimal productive labour it demands. In other words, athletic labour provides the affective sustenance fans need in order to function as ideal capitalist subjects. There is a tremendous cost to the athlete who performs social reproductive labour. The toll is physical: the body becomes damaged to a degree that may never fully recover its former capacities. It is also mental/affective, for the loss of the physical capabilities that once served as the foundation for the athlete's identity is profoundly dispiriting.

In the chapters that follow, I will develop this argument by examining the experiences of hockey players and spectators of professional sport through a series of qualitative interviews in order to reveal how sport functions as social reproductive labour and what the consequences of this are for those involved, particularly labouring players. What I will attempt to reveal is that athletic labour is both more integral to the late capitalist political economy of North America than we typically imagine, and also that this fact has profoundly deleterious consequences for those who labour to make that possible. Chapters two and three focus on the theoretical underpinnings of this project. In chapter two, I elaborate in greater depth how sport can be understood to be social reproductive labour and what some of the implications of this are. In chapter three, I develop the concept of the imagined athletic community in order to account for the role of spectators in the political economy of sport. Chapter four begins the second stage of the project, outlining the methodological considerations involved in conducting interviews with former professional hockey players and fans. This is followed by four chapters which draw on the results of these interviews to explore the theoretical considerations developed in the first half of the dissertation. In chapter five, I examine the ways in which hockey players understand their relation to the broader political economy in terms of the way they are commodified, alienated, and subjected to the forces of labour market competition. Chapter six looks at the ways in which fans construct meaning through their experiences of spectatorship and how the particular form this meaning takes places expectations and demands on players to animate that construct. In chapter seven, I focus on the way in which fandom – the imagined athletic community – is organized and how it becomes reified as something that seems natural and normal. Chapter eight concludes my discussion of interview testimony by revealing the consequences professional hockey players experience for providing social reproductive labour. In the final chapter, I

theorize how it might be possible to participate in sporting cultures without becoming complicit in the dehumanization of social reproductive labour for both spectators and athletes.

Ultimately, this project is an attempt to render intelligible the structural and ideological contexts that makes experiences such as those described by Conte, Nash, and Sparkes, as well as the eight hockey players interviewed for this study, possible. I believe that it is only by bringing this testimony into conversation with the ideas and experiences of spectators of sport that we can begin to grasp why athletic labour requires such incredible sacrifice on the part of athletes, who must be willing to potentially concede “10, 15 years” off of their lives in order to produce the meaning that spectators seek from sport. Above all, this study seeks to address the question of whether this sacrifice is a necessary part of professional sport and, if so, why. While I believe that theory is a useful and valuable tool towards achieving this end, it is in the words and experiences of athletes and spectators themselves that we will find the richest and most provocative answers.

Chapter 2: Theorizing Sport as Social Reproduction

Although sport is conventionally viewed as a site of pleasure – for participants and spectators alike – many scholars have commented on some troubling aspects of this hegemonic cultural form. Some have argued that high performance athletes are subjects of exploitation like any other workers in the capitalist mode of production (Brohm, 1978; Robidoux, 2001). Others have argued that sport is a primary arena for the production and reproduction of hegemonic masculinities. Such masculine identifications can rob men of the ability to feel and can inflict violence, physical and emotional, upon women and those who do not identify as heterosexual (Connell, 1990; Messner, 1992; Burstyn, 1999). I do not take issue with any of these contentions in their own right. On the contrary, I would suggest that each of these theoretical approaches can teach us something important about sport. Indeed, these lessons are vital in the context of common sense understandings of sport, which tend to frame it in functionalist terms as a site for the production of character, perseverance, toughness, team work, competitive spirit, and so forth. With the ever-increasing proliferation of new media, these functionalist, conventional ideas about sport are spread increasingly broadly. Thus, in what follows, I do not intend to refute critiques of sport that have been levelled from Marxist or feminist perspectives. Rather, I will attempt to develop a slightly different theoretical perspective that builds on and can be brought into conversation with these other articulations of discomfort with the role of sport in North America.

Jean-Marie Brohm (1978) was at the forefront of Marxist research into sport and provided a wealth of insight into the ways in which high performance and professional sport function both to exploit athletes and to reinforce the legitimacy of capitalism for spectators.

Brohm's work is particularly important – and relevant to this project – because of the manner in which it highlights the ways in which capitalism conditions the experiences of athletes and spectators alike. For Brohm, the athlete represents the worst of the dehumanizing qualities of capitalism, as s/he is compelled to labour for a wage that is incommensurate with the value s/he produces. Moreover, this labour is performed in an environment that is the apotheosis of competition, a characteristic crucial to the system as a whole. David L. Andrews has echoed this position, arguing that in the post-war era, U.S. sport reorganized from a logic that followed its own sporting imperatives to the logic of capital and big business (2006). Elsewhere, he has argued that contemporary sport “represents a lucrative site for the accumulation of capital via the rationalized manufacture of popular practices, products and pleasures for mass audiences,” (2009, p. 217). Finally, and perhaps most influential to the literature that would follow, Brohm theorizes the mechanistic nature of the relationship between the athlete and her body. He shows that athletic labour is just as depersonalized as factory work, for the athlete's body becomes little more than a machine pushed to ever greater demands of efficiency and productivity. In the process, the athlete becomes alienated from his body and the performances produced by that body. Athletic labour thus becomes a neat symbol for labour writ large in a capitalist economy. More recently, Rob Beamish (2009) has argued that high performance sport, particularly as exemplified by Coubertin's Olympic movement, which emerged out of the same society that prompted Marx's theorization of capitalism, is fundamentally alienated labour within the context of capitalism.

Brohm's analysis of spectatorship emerges out of the framework of Guy Debord (1994) who theorized late capitalism as a society of spectacle. For Debord, the proliferation of postmodern cultural forms meant little more than that human experience had become mediated

through a cultural ideological apparatus. He wrote, “All that once was directly lived has become mere representation,” (p. 12). The consequence of this representational mediation was that citizens of advanced capitalism were distracted from the exploitation and inequality inherent to capitalist society. Their focus was entirely drawn to the spectacle. It is not difficult to see how professional sport fits in for Brohm. As a form of spectacle, sport distracts fans from the suffering of their world (poverty, exploitation, alienation, etc.). More than this, it actively functions to naturalize it, for athletic spectacle is a contest that yields winners – legitimization for the victory that is capitalist prosperity – and, more significantly, losers, often with bodies broken from the struggle who come to stand in for the average capitalist subject, often the fan herself. Thus, sport inures the spectator to the capitalist system, and in doing so, facilitates the perpetuation of the status quo. This argument has been advanced more recently in work by Anouk Bélanger (2009).

My intention in this study is not to challenge Brohm’s conclusions. On the contrary, they are part of the foundation upon which this project is fabricated. What I do hope to demonstrate, however, is that sport, rather than existing merely as superstructure to the capitalist mode of production as Brohm sees it, is itself an important reproductive component of capitalism in its contemporary iterations. This is because I see the athlete and spectator locked in a mutually-constitutive relationship that Brohm does not flesh out, one that is ultimately responsible for the degree of popularity that sport holds and the remarkable level of dehumanization it causes. The shortcoming in Brohm’s analysis, if it is to be put in such terms, is that it does not account for the insights of socialist feminists on the essential role of social reproduction in the capitalist economy. Brohm remains preoccupied on the level of a more vulgar materialism that remains anchored in the centrality of the productive economy to capitalism and an overly mechanistic

reading of the base-superstructure, wherein sport merely functions to naturalize the system's social relations. This focus means that he is unable to fully imagine the ways in which some types of labour – and I contend in what follows that athletic labour is one such form of labour – are actually more important to the ultimate reproduction, and thus, perpetuation of the mode of production precisely because they satisfy problems that the system causes ideologically and emotionally for its subjects. It is possible that Brohm does not see this because his profound pessimism in modern sport leads him to dismiss it as simply “the new opiate of the people,” (1978, p. 7) a form of spectacle that obliterates their ability to critically engage with the conditions of their oppression and exploitation. While there is more than just a kernel of truth to this, it does not account for the fact that sport actually gives something to spectators beyond the stultifying effects of anesthesia: it provides a sense of meaning and belonging that compensate for the otherwise alienating and isolating effects of the system and, crucially, in doing so refreshes the capabilities of capitalist subjects to provide the labouring potential that the productive economy demands. All of this comes at a tremendous cost to the athletic labourer, a cost I will further elaborate below.

The other key branch of critical scholarship into sport and injury focuses on the ideological interpellations of the athlete, whether that is into codes of masculinity, discipline, or a culture of risk. Unlike the Marxist approach exemplified by Brohm, this scholarship is less concerned with the imbrication of sporting culture into broader structures of political economy and more preoccupied with the meanings that athletes associate with their experiences and the implications of these meanings. As Kevin Young (2004) puts it, this literature examines “Socialisation into specific sport cultures where risk is widely tolerated, and socialisation into gendered identities strongly linked to these cultures,” (p. 8).

There is a long tradition of literature on the subject of hegemonic masculinity and sport. Two exemplary figures in this tradition are Michael Messner and Varda Burstyn. Messner views hegemonic masculinity as the dominant form of identity produced and reproduced through sport. Athletic culture socializes men (and women, I would add) to be “instrumental males,” (1992, p. 62) for whom the body is nothing more than a tool that can be wielded to prove the dominance of the self over the other. The competitive environment of professional sport is a cauldron for the formation of surface-level relationships and identities predicated upon the ability to win through domination. The consequence, all too often, particularly after the end of the athletic career, is a sense of pointlessness and emptiness. Varda Burstyn (1999) builds on this analysis in formulating her notion of coercive entitlement. By coercive entitlement, Burstyn means that high performance sport teaches athletes that they deserve whatever they are able to take through the domination of the other. This is a mentality that is impossible to switch off at the end of the game. Athletes thus become accustomed to treating those around them in an instrumental fashion, often resulting in misogyny and homophobia, even domestic and gender-based violence.

Another influential strand of scholarship on sport has focused on how athletes participate in a culture of risk that legitimizes bodily harm. For those writing in this tradition (e.g. Frey, 1991; Nixon, 1992; Curry, 1993) the risks associated with sport (job security, economic viability) are downloaded from those with more power and agency, such as front office executives, to those with less, namely players. This creates a culture in which players are expected to assume the bodily risks associated with competition as a basic job requirement. This in turn creates an ideological system in which players receive constant reinforcement from within their social network that risk is a legitimate aspect of their athletic pursuits. Injury is thus naturalized and normalized as part of the job even as players are held accountable for the

assumption of risk. The concept of the culture of risk dovetails neatly with the notion of hegemonic masculinity, for a willingness to assume risk becomes a hallmark characteristic of the masculine athlete. These ideas circulate in locker rooms across professional sport, reproducing again and again the association between toughness and masculinity.

Hegemonic masculinity and the culture of risk work alongside a third normalizing discourse in sport: Foucauldian discipline. Shogan (1999) argues that discipline operates within high performance sport as a constraint upon athletic bodies designed to ensure that they can perform at a high performance level. This discipline is not necessarily externally imposed – it can be freely chosen by athletes themselves in their effort to achieve success and prosperity in the world of professional sport (although, I would add, in many cases the choice to accept this discipline is actually a constraint imposed by structural conditions such as poverty). Yet, what it means in practice is that athletes become docile bodies subject to the demands of those above them in the athletic hierarchy. It becomes possible to view both hegemonic masculinity and the culture of risk as elements in this discipline. Athletes are taught to develop an instrumental relationship with their body – one that views it as much as a machine as a part of the self – in order to maximize their ability to compete and achieve victory in professional sport. Part of this process is the assumption of the necessary risks to the body, in other words, a willingness to sacrifice, in order to achieve those ends. Hegemonic masculinity becomes a useful form of identity, for it privileges toughness, stoicism, and a willingness to dominate the other.

Like the Marxist approach to sport, there is much to be gleaned from the scholarship on masculinity, risk, and discipline in relation to sport. Each of these lines of inquiry lucidly account for the normalization of ideologies within sport that ultimately lead athletes to sacrifice both their own bodies and those of others. That is to say, they explain *how* injury is naturalized in the world

of sport. What is missing from each is a broader discussion of the material relations that underpin these ideological formations: the question of *why* injury, risk, and discipline are necessary to professional sport. Without such context it becomes possible to suggest, as Shogan and so much of the literature on hegemonic masculinity does, that athletes should be held personally accountable for the choice to participate and reproduce these insidious cultural practices. While there is always an element of agency present in such dynamics, I believe it is more productive to examine the structure that animates these ideological formations. The structure in question is the political economy of sport. My contention is that each of these lines of analysis fails to sufficiently account for the capitalistic imperatives which are ultimately responsible for the sacrifice of the athlete's body. Discipline, risk, and even the iteration of masculinity that prizes physicality above all else all serve the ends of political economy. The goal of professional sport, after all, much like the goal of any capitalist political economy, is to generate profit at the expense of labour. In the analysis that follows, I will attempt to demonstrate that the sacrifice of the athlete's body is a necessary – and fundamentally exploitative – element of the political economy of sport. For, it is, I believe, only when understood in these terms that we can fully grasp the extent of the exploitation critiqued by Brohm and Marxist scholars of sport and the ultimate necessity of the discipline and culture of risk that mark hegemonic masculinity as it manifests in professional sporting cultures.

My approach builds on a history of social reproduction feminism and also on the notion that affect is a basic human need. I intend to demonstrate that sport can be understood to be a site of social reproduction. This insight is important because it demonstrates that high performance sport is not only a productive sector of the economy, it is also a *reproductive one*. This means that sport is significantly more exploitative than it might first appear (particularly given the

bloated salaries of some players). Moreover, understanding sport as social reproduction allows us to see that sport for spectators is not merely discursive or ideological. Fans who watch sports are not simply taught lessons about the nature of the world (although this does occur). Spectators are also impacted in a much more material sense, in that their basic human need for affect is satiated through the experience of viewing sport. While this might appear at first blush to be a positive development, I contend that it is a largely fetishistic one. Sport provides temporary relief from alienation and isolation that allows the worker to avoid burn-out and continue to provide labour-power for capitalism. Yet, this temporary relief does nothing to change the conditions that deny affect in the first place, nor does it provide lasting satisfaction for the spectator. Thus, athlete and spectator are caught in a dialectic that leads to the exploitation of each. In what follows, I will trace the concept of social reproductive labour from the writing of Marx himself to the various elaborations and expansions of socialist feminists. I will then explain how affect functions as a basic human need, much like food or shelter. Finally, I will show that sport can be viewed as a form of social reproductive labour.

In order to grasp the concept of social reproductive labour, it is important to turn to the source from which it first derives: Marx's *Capital*. First, however, there is the question of production itself. Capitalist production is the production of what Marx calls "surplus value." Basically, a worker sells her labour-power to a capitalist in return for a wage. The value of labour-power tends to be the value of reproducing the labourer's ability to subsist (a point we will return to at length). However, the value a labourer produces during a day of work tends to be considerably greater than the value of her labour-power. This extra value is what Marx refers to as surplus value. Capitalism, then, is the process of systematically producing surplus value by exploiting labour-power (Marx, 1976). Now, to explain the concept of reproduction, I turn to

Marx, ““When viewed... as a connected whole, and in the constant flux of its incessant renewal, every social process of production is at the same time a process of reproduction,”” (as cited in Cameron, 2006, p. 45). Marx broadly defines here the nature of reproduction. By this, he means both the reproduction of the capitalist economy and the reproduction of labour-power. I will briefly begin with the former point, which is less relevant to our purposes. Marx is describing the way in which the capitalist economy perpetually reproduces itself. This passage comes from his section on “simple reproduction.” The basic notion is that the capitalist can either spend the surplus value appropriated from workers on consumption or investment. If the capitalist spends the surplus on consumption, simple reproduction occurs. In simple reproduction, the capital goods sector of the economy (department one) and the consumption goods sector (department two) are reproduced in exactly the same proportion as they began. Conversely, the capitalist can invest a proportion of surplus value into the acquisition of more means of production and labour-power, which will lead to accumulation and growth. This is expanded reproduction (Marx, 1978).

In order for either simple or expanded reproduction to occur, labour-power must also be reproduced: “The maintenance and reproduction of the working class remains a necessary condition for the reproduction of capital,” (Marx, 1976, p. 718). There are two aspects to the reproduction of labour-power. The first is the ability of the labourer to both survive and return to work ready to provide labour-power. Marx writes, “The capital given in return for labour-power is converted into means of subsistence which have to be consumed to reproduce the muscles, nerves, bones and brains of existing workers,” (p. 717). Much earlier, he suggests that “natural needs” for workers include “food, clothing, fuel and housing,” (p. 275). Thus, workers must have certain natural needs met in order to serve their function as labour-power for capital. The

satisfaction of these needs results in the reproduction of the worker. The second aspect of the reproduction of labour-power is equally important: “the sum of means of subsistence necessary for the production of labour-power must include the means necessary for the worker’s replacement, i.e. his children,” (p. 275). Here we see Marx introduce the family and a broader notion of reproduction. Although only the worker is mentioned, others must stand behind the worker, including his (to use Marx’s pronoun) wife and children. We also have the implication here that the value of labour-power includes the cost of subsistence of the entire family. For, if the worker’s wage is meant to reproduce the labour force, it must be able to subsidize the cost of raising children. Thus, although the labour of women in the home is not explicitly discussed, it must nevertheless be present. The worker’s wife must feed and clothe the family, keep the home clean, etc., in order to both send the worker back to work revitalized and raise the next generation of labourers. These tasks are the tasks of social reproductive labour. We can see from this very vague discussion in *Capital* that this labour is remunerated, although hardly adequately. Finally, there is one more significant point in Marx with respect to social reproductive labour that should be touched upon: “the determination of the value of labour-power contains a historical and moral element,” (p. 275). The value of labour-power is not the same in all societies because needs are historically and morally constituted – they are not trans-historical or essential. Consequently, the nature of the labour required to satisfy needs and reproduce labour will vary from society to society.

Although it is clearly possible to tease the concept of social reproduction out of *Capital*, as I have attempted to do, it is much easier to understand the scope of social reproductive labour by turning to some of the later socialist feminist commentators who have elaborated this theoretical concept. I will begin by turning to Johanna Brenner and Barbara Laslett and then look

at the work of Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Bridget Anderson, and, finally, Anna Agathangelou.

Brenner and Laslett provide a particularly comprehensive explanation of social reproductive labour that is well worth quoting at length:

Writing on the gendered division of labor, feminists use social reproduction to refer to the activities and attitudes, behaviours and emotions, responsibilities and relationships directly involved in the maintenance of life on a daily basis, and intergenerationally. Among other things, social reproduction includes how food, clothing, and shelter are made available for immediate consumption, the ways in which the care and socialization of children are provided, the care of the infirm and elderly, and the social organization of sexuality (1989, pp. 382-383).

This explanation is useful because it demonstrates how broad the scope of social reproduction is.

Brenner and Laslett go on in an oft-quoted passage: “Social reproduction can thus be seen to include various kinds of work – mental, manual, and emotional – aimed at providing the historically and socially, as well as biologically, defined care necessary to maintain existing life and to reproduce the next generation,” (p. 383). Here they pick up on Marx’s notion that needs are historical and social as well as biological. They also emphasize that social reproductive work must come in a variety of forms, since the reproduction of labour-power involves the mind as much as the body. This is a crucial point because it expands the concept of social reproduction from labour that satisfies the most apparent material needs alone to labour that satisfies a broader set of human needs. Brenner and Laslett also make an important contribution in terms of connecting gender to social reproductive labour. They argue that reproductive roles have historically fallen primarily to women and thus have reproduced structures of gender as well as class (although they do not see these roles as the necessary product of biology). They explain that the tradition of social reproduction feminism is particularly important because it reveals that women’s labour has often involved largely unpaid, yet vitally important, reproductive domestic work. Understanding this domestic work as social reproduction is significant because it reveals

that this work is essential to the operation of capitalism. Surplus value could not be produced if labour-power did not exist. Labour-power is only possible if it can be continually reproduced. Thus, the social reproductive labour of women has been an invisible but necessary ingredient in capitalist accumulation.

Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1992) picks up on the work of Brenner and Laslett and their predecessors in the social reproduction tradition and brings it into conversation with histories of racialization. Glenn suggests that the approach to social reproduction focused on domestic labour that reproduces workers and future generations is part of a white feminist project which is largely oblivious to race and sees social reproduction, instead, as an issue exclusively of the sexual division of labour. Glenn argues, on the contrary, that in the first half of the 20th century in the United States, particularly the South, domestic work in households was primarily performed by black women. This meant that white women, freed by black women of social reproductive tasks, were able to enter the productive labour force. In the second half of the century, black women came to do reproductive work in the public sector in low-paying service jobs.

It is worth noting a few of the changes both explicit and implicit in the way that Glenn uses the concept of social reproduction. First, social reproduction in the United States has been racialized work. In other words, it was both work performed by racialized subjects and work that reproduced ideas about race as well as those about gender and class (in that it came to be seen as work appropriate for racialized, gendered, and proletarianized workers). Second, social reproductive labour has become *paid* labour. Domestic servants could be paid to do social reproductive work. Third, social reproduction has become public. That is, it can be performed by institutions. Glenn writes of the broader applicability of this category of work: “This labor can be organized in myriad ways—in and out of the household, as paid or unpaid work, creating

exchange value or only use value—and these ways are not mutually exclusive,” (p. 4). Thus, Glenn tells us, the preparation of food is social reproductive labour, whether it is done by a wife and mother in the home, a servant, or by a cook in a restaurant. Building on Harry Braverman, Glenn argues that social reproduction has been commodified: both parents now work, which means services are relied upon even by the working class to reproduce themselves. Braverman (1974) argues that in late capitalism, there is a flood of women into the workforce. Initially, it appears, according to the general tendencies of capitalism, that this is a problematic development for the system since, as we have seen, women historically perform social reproductive labour that reproduces the ability of the labourer to go back to work every day. Consequently, it seems as if it would be against the best interests of capitalism for women to enter the workforce. However, there is an important countertendency that occurs here that more than compensates for the loss of the social reproductive labour of women. When women enter the labour force, the family is compelled to purchase more commodities to reproduce themselves (microwavable dinners, laundry machines, even domestic workers such as nannies). At the same time, the labour of women bolsters the size of the reserve army, driving down the cost of labour and up the “mass of wage labourers,” (Mandel, 1978, p. 393). Thus, the entry of women into the labour force significantly increases the “mass of social surplus-value produced,” and, through the wages women earn, also increases total consumptive demand. In essence, then, the entry of women into the labour force offsets the loss of social reproductive labour by enlarging the reserve army, increasing the total social surplus produced, and increasing total demand for consumption goods. Overall, this leads to an acceleration in the growth of capital (pp. 392-393). Of course, and this is Glenn’s point, this does not mean that social reproduction is no longer necessary. It just means that it must now often be purchased. Thus, Glenn indexes the increasing complexity of social

reproductive labour. It is labour that can be performed inside or outside of the home, for a wage or for none. Moreover, as this work increasingly becomes waged, it likewise comes to fall to racialized portions of the population. For, social reproductive labour, despite its importance to the reproduction of capital, is among the most poorly-compensated and least-appreciated forms of work.

In her discussion of international domestic labour, Bridget Anderson (2000) makes a crucial distinction between paid and unpaid reproductive domestic work that teases out the importance of some of the developments charted by Glenn. Although both forms of social reproductive labour reproduce labour-power, the paid domestic worker also reproduces “the female employer’s status (middle-class, non-labourer, clean) in contrast to herself (worker, degraded, dirty),” (p. 2). She goes on to argue that the employer attempts to purchase “personhood,” not just labour-power. This is why it is so important that this work is racialized: racialization both justifies and enables (by opening space for projection onto an other) this *subjective* reproduction. Beyond allowing for survival/subsistence, domestic labour also reproduces status within social relations. For instance, the immaculate, polished home represents a notion of the self that can only be achieved through domestic work. In this case, then, domestic labour reproduces a bourgeois subject who perceives herself to be clean. Anderson writes: “the domestic worker is herself, in her very essence, a means of reproduction,” (p. 113). The employer purchases not just her labour-power, but in purchasing that, also purchases the ability to control the domestic worker completely—to make her perform work she herself would never do. In doing that work, the domestic worker reproduces the employer’s sense of bourgeois superiority as someone who would never perform that work. Moreover, when this dynamic is racialized, it also reproduces the employer’s sense of whiteness.

Anna Agathangelou builds on some of Anderson's most important points, pushing them further to their logical conclusion. She begins by expanding Anderson's focus on domestic work to include sex work (2004). She argues that like domestic work, sex work reproduces bourgeois subjectivities by producing a sense of power and superiority in the client who dominates the body of the sex worker. The key here, then, is that exploitation occurs at the level of the body. Although a wage is paid to the sex worker, her entire self is sacrificed in the labour process in order to reproduce the subjectivity of the employer. In a sense, the self of the social reproductive labourer is transferred to someone else. Clearly, *this* exchange is not compensated by capitalism. It involves another kind of surplus value, and I believe it is what Agathangelou means when she argues, "Thus, the 'production of things' is not the only material base for the oppression and exploitation of people; so is the production of people because it depends on the private appropriation of surplus labour of those who own nothing but their labor power to sell," (p. 14). I contend that this is a broader notion of surplus labour. It is not merely surplus value generated by pimps and owners of maid services, but surplus generated from the transfer of self from the worker to the person hiring the labour. This transfer occurs because the personhood of the worker is utterly violated. S/he is treated as if s/he has no identity whatsoever, as if her body and subjectivity are worthless. Agathangelou writes: "The employee's labor power is a commodity, and the person herself becomes a commodity and object of desire for the peripheral economy and the employer," (p. 48).

I argue, building on, but departing from, Agathangelou and Anderson, that social reproductive labour need not merely reproduce bourgeois subjectivities. On the contrary, I suggest that it can also, more in the spirit of the original concept of social reproduction, reproduce the subjectivities of labourers. For the capitalist, as Agathangelou and Anderson

demonstrate, such subjective reproduction requires the reproduction of a sense of superiority so that exploitation seems natural and necessary. For the labourer, on the other hand, what must be subjectively reproduced is a sense of community, connection, and emotional fulfillment in the context of a system that is isolating, alienating, and emotionally-deadening. In order to develop this point, and ultimately, demonstrate that athletic labour can be understood to be social reproduction, I would like to examine the work of a few theorists who have developed the notion of affect as need. For, my contention is that Marx's list of "food, clothing, fuel and housing," can be extended to include affect. Once we understand affect as one of the needs of the labourer, it becomes clear that the satisfaction of this need through social reproductive labour is one of the conditions for the reproduction of labour-power. For, a labourer who feels emotionally despondent will be ill-equipped to provide labour-power.

Before developing the notion of affect as need, it is important to address how my analysis departs from psychoanalytic theorization around affect. Although there has been much fruitful scholarship in this area, it is my contention that this theoretical approach to affect begins from an ontological position that does not adequately account for the way that specific historical material conditions inform subjective experiences. In practice, this means that psychoanalytic theories of affect posit a transhistorical notion of human nature immune to the exigencies of human societies and social relations. Such a view both overly diminishes the significance of socialization in human subjectivity formation and omits the fundamental necessity of social relations in the development of affect.

In psychoanalytic theory, affect emerges from within the individual and is a problem that must be confronted by the individual with the therapist in order to achieve resolution. For Freud, affect is either a part of the internal drives/libido or is a consequence of trauma that must be

expelled. The point of the therapeutic process is to expunge affect in the healthiest, most self-conscious manner possible. Ruth Stein writes,

Theoretically, Freud came to consider feelings first as mostly traumatogenic physical energy products and later as (physiological) drive derivatives. Feelings were seen to gather in so-called psychical groups or in the so-called second consciousness in the *Studies*; as accumulated libido leading to anxiety in *The Neuropsychoses of Defense*; and as disturbances of functioning in the *Project*. The main thrust of Freud's therapeutic work was aimed at getting the affects out, preferably but not necessarily with the accompaniment of the verbalization of the events and experiences that had surrounded them. (1991, p. 32)

Thus, for Freud, the problem of affect is one the individual must resolve for herself through the guidance of the therapist. Satisfaction is achieved once all the problematic affect is eliminated from the individual's psyche, or subjectivity. What this all indexes is a notion of the individual subjectivity as something that is self-contained and self-reliant, requiring nothing but a mediating analyst for its ultimate satisfactory realization.

Jacques Lacan's analysis of the mirror stage is more promising. The mirror stage is the original moment in which the infant perceives herself in the mirror as an imagined totality and thus assumes that s/he will experience such a sense of completion throughout her life (Helstein, 2007). Yet, the mirror stage is "the original adventure through which man, for the first time, has the experience of seeing himself, of reflecting on himself and conceiving of himself as other than he is – an essential dimension of the human, which entirely structures his fantasy life," (Lacan, 1988, p. 79). He is "other than he is" because there is a misrecognition that while the image appears to be a unified, fully-realized self, it is actually an object being observed by the subject. The subject is only able to know the self by observing itself in the mirror in this way as an object. This creates a split, for the subject believes that the plenitude observed in the image is possible to achieve in life, when in fact it has never and can never fully exist: "Identification with the image looking back initiates in the subject a split (body as both subject and object/other) that

means that the self can never be whole, transparent, or coherent. Therefore, this identification with the image looking back is what constitutes the self as subject in a Lacanian sense,” (Helstein, 2007, p. 86). Herein lies the fundamental lack at the heart of the human experience for Lacan. It is this lack that produces a constant, insatiable desire for plenitude that can never fully be achieved. This desire is the form in which affect manifests in Lacan’s work. Although Lacan’s reading of affect is less self-contained than Freud’s, in that it can never be fully resolved and thus comes to inform the subject’s relations with the external world, it nevertheless remains an individual, transhistorical problem.

Deleuze and Guattari pick up on the notion of desire as affect, but reframe it in materialist terms that allow us to see how affect can exist within social relations rather than outside of them. They write, “Desire always remains in close touch with the conditions of objective existence; it embraces them and follows them, shifts when they shift, and does not outlive them,” (1983, p. 27). That is to say, affect is connected to social relations and to relations with the external world in general (including relations to that which the human produces, the products of her labour). It does not exist hermetically-sealed in the mind of the subject waiting to be explored and resolved in dialogue with a therapist, but rather flows between subjectivities through interpersonal interchange. It is not transhistorical, but rather responds directly to changing social and historical conditions. In short, affect, or desire, is as much a social phenomenon as a personal one, although no less significant for that. Deleuze and Guattari continue:

It is no use saying: We are not green plants; we have long since been unable to synthesize chlorophyll, so it’s necessary to eat.... Desire then becomes this abject fear of lacking something. But it should be noted that this is not a phrase uttered by the poor or the dispossessed. On the contrary, such people know that they are close to grass, almost akin to it, and that desire ‘needs’ very few things—*not the leftovers that chance to come their way, but the very things that are continually taken from them*—and that what is missing is

not things a subject feels the lack of somewhere deep down inside himself, but rather the objectivity of man, the objective being of man, for whom desire is to produce, to produce within the realm of the real. (1983, p. 27)

What I take this dense, challenging, provocative passage to mean is that desire, as affect, does not emerge from any fundamental lack, be it Oedipal or predicated on misrecognition, but rather emerges out of the objective conditions of life. True lack – “what is missing” – with respect to desire/affect is species-being, what, I think, Deleuze and Guattari are referring to when they write, “As Marx notes, what exists in fact is not lack, but passion, as a ‘natural and sensuous object.’” This is what creates the objective existence of human beings connected to each other as “desiring machines” in a constant chain of affective renewal and production. This state is impossible to fully realize within capitalism, for it alienates people from each other and from that which they produce for work, creating a persistent, but transhistorically limited, sense of lack, absence, and affective need.

Ultimately, the psychoanalytic reading of affect too-neatly buttresses a liberal ontology predicated on individuality. A psychology that figures affect as a self-contained problem for the individual is ideal for a mode of production premised on the fiction of individual freedom and equality in the market place. The psychoanalytic approach to affect suggests the possibility that all capitalist subjects are capable of self-reliance as long as they are willing to do the necessary self-reflective work. Moreover, it implies that competition and exploitation are simply superficial, external issues outside the scope of affective well-being, for such well-being can always be sought by turning inward. My approach, conversely, is grounded in the Marxist ontology of species-being, read through Deleuze and Guattari, which suggests that human affect always exists within the context of social relations. Individual subjective experiences occur within broader reciprocal affective networks. Thus, material conditions have an inherent effect

upon affective well-being. Competition, exploitation, and alienation are all affective processes in that they involve the relations between human beings. In a capitalist system, these social relations are commodified, which means that they are evacuated of their affective potentialities in favour of a logic of exchange. This is why capitalism produces fundamental affective, or emotional, needs. Other Marxist scholars have explored how capitalism has also spawned forms of (always already commodified) labour to satisfy the affective needs it creates.

Arlie Hochschild discusses what she calls “emotional labor” in *The Managed Heart* (1983). She argues that service work (her focus is particularly on flight attendants) forces workers to manipulate their emotions as part of their jobs. This repeated performance of emotion leads to a frequent consequence: “burnout,” (p. 188). Workers who suffer burnout lose the capacity to feel emotion. This makes it difficult or impossible for them to perform their work or live full emotional lives. Earlier in her text, she argues that the “estrangement” or alienation of emotional labour is more extreme for service workers (emotional labourers) than for other kinds of workers: “The problem was not one that would cause much concern among those who do not do emotional labor – the assembly line worker or the wallpaper machine operator, for example,” (p. 136). I would suggest that although there is certainly a qualitative difference in the experience workers have depending on the type of work they engage in, this does not mean that other types of workers do not feel estranged from affect. I argue that precisely because they have no access to affect whatsoever while on the job, manufacturing workers, for instance, also feel emotionally alienated. Either way, what Hochschild indexes, albeit indirectly, is the centrality of affect as need: to burnout is to suffer the lack of something essential. While I suggest that nearly *all* workers under capitalism are drained of affect at work (much like they are drained of energy),

the point Hochschild makes for us is that without emotional sustenance, workers cannot be productive. They burn out.

Ann Ferguson engages with the concept of affect as need more directly in her discussion of “sex/affective energy,” (1989). In her book, she highlights the importance of sexuality and emotion to capitalism and systems of gender inequality. Broadly, she critiques radical feminist theory for not being attentive enough to historical particularity and, thus, the distinct way in which capitalism articulates with gender relations. Rather than delving into the complexity of this argument, I want to pick up on some of the fundamental theoretical claims she makes about affect as a human need in order to elaborate the ideas alluded to in the work of Hochschild. Ferguson writes that the “satisfaction” of “sexuality” and “nurturance” “is just as basic to the functioning of human society as is the satisfaction of the material needs of hunger and physical security,” (p. 83). Thus, affect is a need labour-power requires for its reproduction. She makes this point still clearer: “We must broaden the underlying philosophical assumptions of Marxist materialism to suppose that the needs for social union involved in sex and nurturance are just as basic to human survival as eating, being clothed and having a roof over one’s head,” (p. 95). She then goes on to add that these needs are *historical*. That means that the form affect takes, like all other needs, may change from society to society.

Ultimately, Ferguson’s focus is on sex/affective labour in the home—the conventional notion of social reproductive labour. This is what I want to expand on in the same way that we have seen the expansion of the concept of social reproduction. Just as for Ferguson women are exploited and uncompensated for affective labour in the home, so too is the athlete uncompensated for labour that produces affect in a more public arena. Like Ferguson, Rosemary Hennessy (2000) sees affect as a human need. She points to research that suggests infants require

affect and being touched in order to thrive. For Hennessy, affective needs are outlawed needs in the sense that there is no place for them in the workplace. Thus, they must be addressed in the home, much like other needs that must be satisfied through social reproductive labour in the home by women. I think that it is useful to read Ferguson and Hennessy through Braverman and Mandel here on the commodification of social reproduction. Much like other needs such as food and cleaning which are increasingly provided by the service industry (be it domestic workers or restaurants), affective labour too has increasingly become commodified. Athletic labour is one example of this commodification of affective social reproductive labour.

I would now like to turn back to some of the theoretical developments discussed above in order to elaborate exactly how athletic labour can be understood to be affective social reproductive labour. My intention is to demonstrate that high performance sport is not merely a productive sector of the economy that generates surplus value; it is also a site of social reproduction that reproduces labour-power by satisfying the affective needs of fans who otherwise risk suffering from burnout.

Let us begin by situating the industry of North American high performance sport (and by this I mean professional sport in both major and minor leagues, elite amateur sport, and college sports) historically in late capitalism. This is important because Marx suggested that the nature of needs varies historically. Guy Debord has argued that late capitalism is a society of spectacle in which each of us is increasingly atomized. He writes, “the spectacle is... a social relationship between people that is mediated by images,” (1994, p. 12). In a context in which people interact with television and computer screens as much or more than one another, the need for affect in any form becomes all the more essential. This is the historical context in which we must understand the role of high performance sport as social reproductive labour. I argue that sport

temporarily satisfies this need by providing a sense of meaning and community. Fans watch sporting events and feel a part of something that is larger than themselves. They feel like they are part of the team and part of a community of others who are also part of the team. Brenner and Laslett's key point that "mental, manual, and emotional" varieties of labour can all be reproductive is essential to this understanding of athletic labour as social reproductive labour. Although athletes obviously labour with their bodies in a manual sense, this manual labour has an *emotional* consequence for fans. Much as a parent nurtures a child emotionally by touching and speaking to her, an athlete's exertion on the field stokes the hopes and dreams of fans, producing a sense of connectedness that satisfies an affective need. The work of Glenn Braverman, and Mandel makes it abundantly clear that it is in the best interests for capital to have social reproduction performed as a service rather than as unpaid labour. As all adult members of the family enter the labour force, less time is available for care within the family than when one partner (historically typically a woman) was tasked with this full-time responsibility. The result is an increasing need to find care, like food and other necessities, outside of the home as a paid service. The spectacle of sport serves such a function. Bridget Anderson builds on this argument and provides a point of emphasis that is absolutely essential for understanding athletic labour as social reproductive labour: subjectivities can be reproduced as well as bodies. For the worker to get up, go to work, and provide maximum labour-power, s/he must be refreshed emotionally and psychologically, as well as physically. Athletic labour provides this renewal for the fan. While domestic work reproduces bourgeois subjectivities, athletic labour reproduces labouring ones. By providing a fetishistic sense of meaning and belonging, it enables the labourer to feel, temporarily, whole. Of course, this sense of meaning and belonging is frequently fleeting, for it is often not founded on actual social relationships.

Thus, in these cases, it must be rehearsed over and over again through the acquisition of commodities such as jerseys and caps.

Anna Agathangelou's insight about the way in which the very self of the worker is sacrificed in some forms of social reproductive labour reveals the cost of social reproductive labour for the labourer who reproduces the subjectivity of an other through a process of exchange. Before delving into a comparison between athletic labour and sex work, however, it is of course crucial to acknowledge some significant differences between these two types of work. Typically, sex work involves a level of structural constraint far greater than the constraint facing athletes. Although many athletes, particularly in the most violent sports, such as boxing, do face social and economic constraints that prompt them to pursue sport, sex workers experience this to a much greater degree. This form of work is typically a last resort and the violence and fear confronting individuals who ultimately find themselves engaging in it is perhaps unparalleled. Nevertheless, Agathangelou's insights into sex work do teach us a great deal about athletic labour. Indeed, although generally speaking, there is little question that social reproductive labour is typically performed by among the most disadvantaged members of a given society, like sex and domestic workers, athletes, specifically, in the case of this study, hockey players, are paid to perform a service. For these athletes, this means that they must engage in physical and mental training and compete in live events. This is the labour that athletes are paid to perform, and, like all labourers, they tend to be exploited for a surplus. However, frequently, in the process of this labour, athletes' bodies experience pain and even serious injury. This harm can accumulate to the point at which it becomes debilitating, particularly once athletic careers end. This damage to the body is not merely physical. It can lead to a crisis of identity, as most athletes understand themselves as people with extraordinary physical capacities (Sparkes, 2004). It is in

this sense that I contend that violence – defined broadly as physical and mental harm – is not an incidental part of athletic labour. On the contrary, I argue that it is a structural feature of professional sports. Violence manifests in the form of rigorous physical and psychological discipline and pressure to perform which mark the athletic body in corporeal and affective ways. Thus, the statement that violence is a structural feature of professional sport is not meant to denote the inherent or pervasive presence of fighting or intent to injure in sporting cultures. These may at times be features of professional sport, but they are not structural features. The corollary of this is that the claim that professional sport inflicts violence upon and invites sacrifice from the athletic labourer is not limited to sports conventionally understood to be violent such as football, hockey, and rugby. I argue that violence is a structural feature of professional sport because fans are only able to fully invest in athletes *because* athletes are willing to sacrifice themselves to this violence on behalf of the team. This is what makes the athletic community meaningful and real for the fan. Yet, again, we must be clear on the fact that although fans require athletes to submit themselves to potential pain/damage/harm in the course of their labour, this is not the same as saying that they want players to experience injury in the conventional sense of damage to the body that renders a player unable to play or to play properly. Fans do not tend to want to see players subjected to such extreme forms of harm, not because of empathy or consideration, but because of the instrumental role of the player in her fantasy, as we shall see. What I am saying is that fans expect players to persevere through the generalized violence of professional sport rather than rejecting it by retiring, refusing to play, or demonstrating a general lack of passion or intensity. In other words, they require players to prove through their willingness to endure harm that professional sport is a fundamentally legitimate site of meaning and investment. While they may mourn the implications of an injury to a player for

the prospects of their team, they much like the client of a sex worker who is only too happy to move on to another sex worker to achieve subjective renewal, are similarly inclined to move their investment from one player to the next when an injury does occur. For, the injured, retired, or simply underperforming body of the athlete can be readily discarded by the fan in favour of a new, more promising vessel since it is ultimately to the team, not the player, s/he offers allegiance. This, of course, helps explain the subjective crisis of the ex-athlete, for she, but mostly he, goes from being the locus of excessive emotional investment, affect, and meaning, to the bearer of none whatsoever. It is this sacrifice that is the athlete's true surplus labour. He offers up his entire self to reproduce the fan, yet he is compensated only for his productive labour. Again, for the few truly fortunate elite athletes, this compensation is plentiful. For most high-performance athletes, it is not.

Brenner and Laslett's emphasis on the gendered nature of social reproduction raises some important issues for the understanding of athletic labour as social reproduction. First, it underlines the necessity of social reproductive labour for capitalism. Athletic labour emerges as a particularly important site of exploitation because as productive labour it produces surplus value while simultaneously as *reproductive* labour it reproduces labour-power and capitalism itself. Second, Brenner and Laslett emphasize the historically gendered nature of social reproduction as women's work. Athletic labour is evidently not associated with women's roles. Rather, it is quite clearly a site of hegemonic masculinity. Understanding athletic labour as social reproduction is important because it forces us to confront the notion that social reproduction can be the purview of women *and* men. This means that associations between femininity and reproduction on the one hand and masculinity and production on the other are fundamentally flawed. This is not to detract from the significance of scholarship which highlighted the way that previously

unacknowledged women's work was in fact of crucial importance to capitalism. On the contrary, an expanded notion of social reproduction should serve to underline the significance of this form of labour in general, particularly in the historical and contemporary contexts in which it was and is primarily performed by non-white women. However, we must remind ourselves that men and women do not *necessarily* serve particular roles. I do mean to argue against a biological essentialism that sees productive labour as the appropriate role for men and reproductive labour as the natural role for women. On the contrary, I would suggest that these roles are largely socially and historically constituted. At certain stages of capitalism—the early 19th century in Britain, the 1950's and, to some extent 1960's in North America, for instance—much of social reproduction was performed by women in the household. In late capitalism, however, as many women work in productive sectors, men too can perform the role of social reproduction. Conceiving of athletic labour as social reproduction, then, forces us to acknowledge the flexibility of roles within capitalism.¹

To conclude, then, I hope that it has by now become apparent why it is so important to explain athletic labour as social reproduction. My contention is that a focus on athletic labour as simple exploitation, while valuable, does not fully capture the dynamics at play in terms of both the centrality of athletic labour to late capitalism and the degree to which athletes are exploited. I

¹Evelyn Nakano Glenn's injunctions about the importance of race to understanding social reproduction are equally important. There is no question that in North American sport, there is a preponderance of black athletes. This is not a coincidence, given that there are few other structural opportunities available to young black North Americans. Thus, much of the social reproductive labour performed in the sphere of sport is performed by racialized subjects. This is not threatening to white hegemony, for, as Paul Gilroy argues, "In this world of overdetermined racial signs, an outstandingly good but temperamental natural athlete is exactly what we would expect a savage African to become," (2000, p. 173). Thus, as Glenn argues, it is left disproportionately to blacks to perform the double labour of production and reproduction. While this might be well-remunerated in the ranks of professional sport, this is hardly the case in the minor leagues, or at the university level, where athletes receive nothing but tuition in exchange for the massive revenue they generate for universities (Edwards, 1970). The conceptualization of athletic labour as social reproduction thus provides more evidence of the way that ideas about racial difference legitimize and facilitate capitalist exploitation.

have emphasized that athletic labour is social reproduction in order to demonstrate the fact that it serves an essential function for the perpetuation of the system of capitalism. This essential function means that athletes create, in a sense, two integral aspects of value. They produce value itself (surplus value) as productive labourers and they also produce the capacity for value by affectively reproducing the labour-power of others. In the process, they often must sacrifice their own bodies and identities. The extent of this sacrifice, much like the sacrifice of sex and domestic workers, is not compensated or acknowledged. I do not highlight this point in order to advocate for higher wages (although, in the case of many athletes, and certainly sex and domestic workers, wage increases are certainly deserved). Rather, I do so to show how wide-ranging the consequences of capitalism really are. What athletes need is a system that does not require them to sacrifice their bodies in order to allow other workers to feel whole. That is, like all of us, they need a system that does not isolate, alienate, dehumanize, and exploit.

Chapter 3: Theorizing the Imagined Athletic Community

In the preceding chapter, I discussed how athletic labour must be understood as a form of social reproduction in order to fully comprehend the extent of the exploitation athletic labourers experience. I argued that although athletic labourers are subject to the same capitalist conditions as other workers with respect to their productive labour – in this case their athletic performances –, conditions that result in the exploitation of the surplus value that they produce, they also often experience an additional form of exploitation as a result of the social reproductive function of their labour. This exploitation can take the form of short and long-term emotional and physical harm suffered by their bodies, harm that both diminishes their quality of life and disrupts their identities as masters of physical agency. This second level of exploitation is predicated on the social reproductive aspect of this labour. That is, I contend that the extent of the harm suffered by the athlete is directly connected to the social reproductive dimensions of this work. The athlete is, in a structural sense, compelled to offer the sacrifice of his (for the purposes of this study of professional men's hockey) body precisely because of what this sacrifice is able to accomplish for those who experience subjective renewal as a result: fans/spectators. Although I was initially able to articulate this argument by focusing on the experience of athletes, it necessarily remained only partial without greater reference to those who make the extent of this labour necessary. For, athletic labour can only function as social reproduction if it is able to reproduce a labouring subject. I argued that the labouring subjects who athletes reproduce are fans, who find in the spectatorship of professional sport a salve for the isolation and alienation they experience at the hands of neoliberal capitalism. What remains to be understood, however, is precisely how the meaning that fans draw from

sport is organized. That is, in the following chapter, I will explain how the labour of the athlete is transformed into meaning for the fan through the mechanism of the imagined athletic community. It is through this construct that the fan is able to find a revitalized sense of purpose and community – affective renewal – that make it possible for her to function for the system as an ideal labouring subject.

In his sociology of soccer spectatorship, Richard Giulianotti (2002) divides spectators into four categories – supporters, followers, fans, and *flaneurs* – and demonstrates the way each has been affected by globalization. Although there is much to be gleaned from the distinctions he draws between these groups, the underlying premise of his analysis is that the most important relationship for the spectator is between s/he and the club, whether it be out of a sense of obligation, a need to remain involved in sport, a search for vicarious success, or a simple desire for excitement and entertainment. While such an assessment provides a wealth of explanations for the devotion of fans (here I use the more conventional meaning of the term, as I will throughout this article) to their teams, it largely omits a particularly salient aspect of the spectatorial experience: the aspiration for a sense of collective belonging. Dunning, Murphy, and Williams (1986) take the opposite approach, suggesting that the crowd, or mob, is always already the essence of the spectatorial experience. While their figurational² approach, too, is highly instructional, it has a tendency towards the opposite omission, implicitly taking for granted the very membership of the fan in the spectatorial community. In this chapter I posit that the desire for community is at the heart of sports spectatorship, even if this desire, as Giulianotti shows us, is expressed in a plurality of ways. Yet, contrary to the figurational

²Eric Dunning explains that figurations, the object of analysis in his sociological work and an approach he developed in concert with Norbert Elias, are “spatio-temporal interdependency chains and networks, which they form and in which a labile balance of power and a corresponding lattice-work of tensions always form a crucial part,” (1996, p. 191).

theorists, I suggest that there is a greater element of contingency to the communities of spectatorship than they allow. That is, I understand spectatorship as a dynamic negotiation on the part of the spectating subject that is provoked by the very particular structural context that is capitalism. Membership in the community of spectators is a choice, but it is a choice fundamentally informed by the conditions of capitalist society. To this end, I broadly conceptualize communities of fans as imagined communities. In societies marked by capitalist alienation and isolation, desire for community has prompted individuals to turn to the pre-fabricated communities of professional sport to satiate their needs. The needs I am referring to have been theorized by Marx through the concept of species-being: real, meaningful relationships that are unmediated by the exchange of capital. Marx (1994a) suggests that humans must be understood as something greater than just individual selves: “Man is a species-being... in that he practically and theoretically makes his own species... his object,” (p. 62). It is through the prosperity of the species that “he considers himself to be a *universal* and consequently free being,” (p. 62). In a sense, species-being is an ethical philosophy diametrically opposed to individualism. It is a way of understanding the world that posits as its foundation the conscious interconnection of the many, not the primacy of the one (Marx, 1994b). Under capitalism, species-being is impossible. Yet, because it is the only genuinely unalienated human condition, species-being and the sense of collective meaning it provides are nevertheless persistently sought after.

This is not to say that spectator sport *only* holds an appeal in the context of capitalist society. Sport as clearly provided meaning to people in non-capitalist societies in the modern world (e.g. Cuba, USSR) and pre-modern world alike (e.g. Ancient Greece and Rome). In other words, there appears to be a transhistorical appeal to sport as both a cultural activity and an

object of spectatorship. Yet, what is noteworthy about spectator sport in the context of capitalist society is not that it is new in and of itself, but rather that it has become commodified and has been broadly and ubiquitously disseminated in this commodity form through the development of new technologies more than ever before. Professional sport has flourished in capitalism because it offers something that is particularly coveted in a capitalist context precisely because it is relentlessly obliterated by the prevailing tendencies of the system: the possibility of meaning in the form of community. Spectator sport thus becomes a site of social reproduction for capitalism in which fans are able to attain some semblance of affective renewal that in turn enables them to reproduce their own labouring roles within productive circuits of capital. Consequently, although the appeal of spectator sport is not unique to capitalism, this transhistorical appeal (James, 2005) has been rationalized and instrumentalized in a more sophisticated manner than ever before. In this sense, we can conceptualize the transhistorical appeal of spectator sport as a sort of cultural commons that has been enclosed, or appropriated, by capital – a form of what Harvey (2003) calls accumulation by dispossession³ – to its own end: the unlimited imperative to constantly expand.

Before turning to the concept of the imagined community and an extended theoretical discussion of the workings of the nation, it is worth situating these concepts in their historical context. Eric Hobsbawm (1992a) has argued that nationalism emerged in the 19th century as a result of industrialization. The dramatic upheaval to traditional modes of living provoked by these profound economic changes led people to seek novel forms of purpose and self-

³David Harvey (2003, p. 148) writes, “The commodification of cultural forms, histories, and intellectual creativity entails wholesale dispossessions (the music industry is notorious for the appropriation of grassroots culture and creativity). The corporatization and privatization of hitherto public assets (such as universities), to say nothing of the wave of privatization (of water and public utilities of all kinds) that has swept the world, indicate a new wave of ‘enclosing the commons.’”

definition. As Hobsbawm (1992a, p. 8) puts it, “In consciously setting itself against tradition and for radical innovation, the nineteenth-century liberal ideology of social change systematically failed to provide for the social and authority ties taken for granted in earlier societies, and created voids which might have to be filled by invented practices.” Thus, precisely because industrial capitalism did not have the capacity to provide meaning in the place of that which it had destroyed, and further, because of the simultaneous decline in religion, nationalism emerged as an ideological construct that could satisfy the prevailing needs. Yet, the appeal of nationalism was not confined to the working classes. Building on the work of Hobsbawm, Abdel-Shehid and Kalman-Lamb (2011, p. 122) argue that the bourgeoisie also found the idea of the nation compelling: “In a capitalist society rife with class distinctions that privilege some over others, unity between classes would be impossible... Thus, in order for middle classes to unite society while simultaneously retaining their wealth and power, they must invent a common identity that ignores class.” Of course, the identity in question is the nation.

The historical developments described by Hobsbawm and Abdel-Shehid and Kalman-Lamb do not exhaust the relationship between the nation and capitalism. In fact, the conditions outlined by these theorists have only been exacerbated in the contemporary North by the intense alienation of the individual from species-being wrought by advanced capitalism. Isolated and stultified by the rigours of tedious labour, atomized and anonymous in the post-modern metropolis, it is only logical that so many capitalist subjects attempt to compensate for this sense of lack through obsession and identification with spectacular – fetishistic, illusory – forms of surrogate community. The sort of community that I have in mind has been described by Benedict Anderson as the “imagined community.” In his seminal text *Imagined Communities*, Anderson

attempts to understand the phenomenon of nationalism by figuring the modern nation as an imagined community: “It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion,” (1991, p. 6). An imagined community is a community formed by a popular allegiance to shared norms, even if the individuals sharing these norms have no tangible relationship to one another. Prior to Anderson, Guy Debord writes of spectacle that it is “a social relationship between people that is mediated by images,” (1994, p. 4). This is precisely why I see the imagined community as spectacular: it stands in for real, tangible relationships between people based on rational ideas and shared meaningful experiences. Instead, it unites people through a common allegiance to fetish objects and other visual signifiers, as we shall see. The remarkable aspect of the imagined community, however, is that despite its dubious logic, it becomes reified as something frighteningly tangible. This is apparent in the commitment of its members, which, although irrational, is so strong that Anderson is able to assert that a fundamental characteristic of the national community is that people “willingly... die for such limited imaginings,” (p. 7).

The nation is not the only form in which the imagined community manifests itself. Romila Thapar (1992) demonstrates that Anderson’s concept of imagined *national* communities can be extended to religion. Hinduism, for Thapar, is such an imagined community. Today, alongside its nationalist and religious forms, I argue that the imagined athletic community flourishes as a spectacular and fetishistic substitute for species-being—the sense of connection and belonging that are absent in capitalist societies. The community I speak of is not one of athletes, for the *team* is perhaps one of most ‘real’ communities that one can find. On a team, athletes confront myriad challenges with one another, challenges they can often only overcome

together. Through this process, they frequently develop powerful and intense relationships with one another. Rather, the community to which I refer is that of *spectators* of sport: fans. As Gamal Abdel-Shehid (2005) implies, like national and religious imagined communities of strangers linked by conviction in a shared heritage, a common language, cuisine or belief in God(s), fans form imagined communities that revolve around the shared support of a spectacular professional sports franchise and imagined identifications with the players who comprise those franchises.

I have stated that the imagined athletic community exists alongside the traditional nation, and this is true, for nations continue to structure our world in terms of identity and, often, state boundaries. Yet, the tremendous migration that has accompanied globalization has also served to fragment traditional nation-states. Multiculturalism, in its varied forms, has come to function in many states as a new form of identity (albeit one that conceals the persistent hegemony of whiteness (Bannerji, 2000; Day, 2000; Dhamoon 2009; Hage, 2000; Mackey, 2002; Thobani, 2007)). I do not think it is a great leap to suggest that the ever-increasing popularity of identifications with sports franchises in countries such as Canada and the United States is connected to the destabilization of traditional national forms of identity. Capitalism continues to isolate and alienate, yet the increased heterogeneity of Northern countries inevitably calls into question the assumption of homogeneity upon which the imagined national community relies. This is precisely where the imagined athletic community comes in. It offers all the security and stability of an identity predicated on sameness of traditional nationalism for white subjects threatened by globalization and multiculturalism. It also provides the possibility of inclusion for (im)migrants and non-white subjects explicitly and implicitly excluded from traditional national formations in the North. In this way, sports fandom functions as an adapted form of invented

community for the current era of globalization and advanced capitalism, just as the nation was in the face of industrial capitalism.

Before advancing this argument further, however, it is necessary to acknowledge an important distinction between Anderson's conception of the imagined national community and my own theorization of the imagined athletic community. While both constructs are invented in the face of capitalism and the crises it precipitates, they operate in slightly different ways. The national community of Anderson, while strictly speaking a modern fabrication, is framed as a largely transhistorical essence. Members are always already a part of this community, they must merely come to realize it. The imagined athletic community, on the other hand, is something that must be willfully joined. It is this act of deliberate participation that distinguishes it from Anderson's imagined community. Indeed, in this sense the imagined athletic community shares more in common with 20th and 21st century migration than it does with 19th century nationalism. It is the conscious choice of an identity, albeit with many of the same perils (racial, gendered) that apply to that higher stakes form of community selection. Yet, while the boundaries of the imagined athletic community may be more permeable than those of Anderson's nation, this fact alone does not negate the critical elements that analogize them. Both forms of community are abstractions predicated upon an article of faith: that all members are alike in some fundamental sense (tautological proven by membership in the community). This fiction, unlikely as it may appear from outside the community, is nonetheless one that members treat as fact. It is the wellspring of a form of meaning and identity that comes to define how members come to see themselves and the world around them. It is this common characteristic that makes the spectatorial community of fans as much an imagined community as the one that Anderson describes.

Fundamentally, the imagined athletic community is the identification of spectators who are not playing a sport with those who do, so that the athletes, in essence, become proxies for the fans. Nick Hornby (2000) explains this relationship in his memoir *Fever Pitch* (about his experiences as a fan of London soccer team Arsenal) through the metaphor of a game of foosball, “The players are merely our representatives, chosen by the manager rather than elected by us, but our representatives nonetheless, and sometimes if you look hard you can see the little poles that join them together, and the handles at the side that enable us to move them,” (p. 179). The strength of this connection, absurd as it may seem, far transcends the level of abstraction. Dionne Brand (2001) describes the process through which the fan invests in the athlete as “entering the body,” (p. 39). This is to say that, for the fan of his team, when Shaquille O’Neal scores, it is as if the fan has vicariously scored through him. Vicariousness is fundamental to the concepts of social reproduction and the imagined athletic community, for what they are ultimately predicated upon is the investment by the fan of meaning in the body of an athlete, who becomes through this process a vessel for that meaning. In the moments that it is in play, the body of the athlete is in effect the representative of the community of spectators as a whole. What this vicarious process facilitates is the ability of the fan to remain passive (or at least free of risk, since the various behaviours associated with fandom are not exactly passive – i.e. superstitious practices) and yet still experience a fantasy of activity and agency. The fan never has to actually risk death or sacrifice for the team because the player is tasked with this responsibility in her stead. Yet, the fan imagines that it is s/he who is willing to die for the team.⁴

⁴We see this exemplified in the interview testimony of Maria I., who speaks of a willingness to risk death in the face of a hypothetical fire in order to rescue the fetish signifiers associated with her fandom. This fantasy of sacrifice for the imagined athletic community can be juxtaposed to the actual and repeated sacrifice of the players she cheers for on the Toronto Maple Leafs that make this fantasy possible.

The symbolic death of the player vicariously invested in (whether this is because of debilitating injury, a trade, free agency, or a failure to perform) necessitates the displacement of that investment to another player. If investment is not displaced, the fantasy of the imagined athletic community will collapse. Thus, the fan, as a member invested in the indefinite perpetuation of the imagined athletic community from which s/he draws the sustenance of meaning, *cannot* properly empathize with the players s/he supports and simultaneously sustain the fantasy of the community. The fan's failure to empathize with the player is an inherent corollary of the subjective organization and structure of the imagined athletic community.

In this process, the athlete experiences the almost incomparable plenitude of existing as the locus and vessel of meaning and adulation of fans who worship him (for this is a process primarily, although not exclusively, associated with male athletes) with a level of adoration that is perhaps most akin to the limitless well of self-love. This moment of glory at the heart of the imagined athletic community is an instant of species-being, of absolute connection with other human beings. However, this almost impossibly gratifying moment is not sustainable. What the athlete experiences here is not dissimilar to the mirror stage described by Lacan. After the initial (false) image of identification with the community of fans and consequent sense of absolute plenitude, he is left, post-career, with the reality that this sense of coherence and cohesion (species-being) was in fact illusory. He is nothing but an atomized individual in a capitalist society, discarded from species-being and community. The subjective consequences of this loss are devastating.

Although the cost to the athlete is great, the imperative to participate in the imagined athletic community for the fan becomes apparent when we examine why the fantasy of identification upon which the community is predicated occurs. That reason has far more to do

with other spectators than it does with the athlete himself, who remains a distant, fantastical figure in the psyche of the fan. The allure of the imagined athletic community is in the surrogate sensation of collectivity that it provides. *Sports Illustrated* columnist Paul Forrester (2013) exemplifies the fantasy at the core of the imagined athletic community while writing of his experiences supporting the Cleveland Browns NFL team, sketching out a vision of what the team means to his beleaguered city:

The franchise was the medium through which everyone in northeast Ohio could communicate, no matter how many trough urinals backed up at the stadium or how long you had to wait in line for a beer. Sports fans tailgating at the sprawling municipal lot outside Cleveland Stadium or single mothers who didn't watch a minute of football Sunday all knew whether the Browns had won or lost, who had starred and who had disappointed.

For Forrester, the Browns unify all of Cleveland, disparate as it may be. His rather tautological logic suggests that the team represents a sort of essential community even for those who are not Browns fans in practice. This is because, in his fantasy, everyone in Cleveland is always already a supporter of the team. By this chain of reasoning, then, when residents abstain from the actual performance of allegiance to the team/community, that allegiance can still be assumed.

Forrester draws upon essentialist language, producing the impression that the imagined athletic community, like Anderson's national community, is something inherent, not freely chosen. This is, of course, an illusion. Nevertheless, what he testifies to is the depth and power of this illusion, the fact that what was once choice comes to appear as an intrinsic part of his identity. In this way, the imagined athletic community is as real as the national community. Of equal importance, there is a fundamental fetish at the heart of the imagined athletic community. Fans choose to align themselves with a team in order to become part of something that transcends the atomism of liberal society. What they do not see as they make this complex and

emotional choice is the extent to which the community they are entering is itself a palliative extended by the economic system in order to sustain itself.

Forrester is not alone in ascribing the allure of fandom, or what I call the imagined athletic community, to the desire to be part of something bigger than oneself in a society that constantly frames people as individuals. Eduardo Galeano (2003) writes that after the game, “The stadium is left alone and the fan, too, returns to his solitude: to the I who had been we,” (p. 7). In *Now I Can Die in Peace*, Bill Simmons – the most widely-read sports writer in the United States (Mahler, 2011) and, until very recently, editor of *ESPN* imprint *Grantland.com* – reveals a similar desire when he describes his fantasy of what a Red Sox World Series victory would be like for the team’s fans: “I see the whole thing unfolding like a giant group hug, like when Andy and Red greet each other at the end of *Shawshank*, but multiplied by 10 million people. Does that make sense? And that’s the lure: The giant group hug,” (2005, p. 135). Simmons’ hyperbolic rhetoric here exposes the anxiety of a fan who desperately craves the connections tenuously found through sport in imagined athletic communities. But, precisely because of the fragility of these bonds, he must reassert their existence in exaggerated terms. This anxiety is a reflection of Anderson’s point that for each member of an imagined community, every other member is connected to her or him in his or her mind, not necessarily in reality.

To achieve the fetishistic sense of plenitude that is so integral to the imagined athletic community, a sense of sameness must be manufactured where none previously existed. It is this phenomenon Thapar speaks of when she suggests that the imagined community “tends to iron out diversity and insists on conformity,” (1992, p. 61). In arguing this, she echoes Anderson’s point that the community of nationalism is a sort of “fraternity” or “horizontal comradeship” that overrides any inequalities and exploitation that exist within the community or nation in question

(1991, p. 7). As Thapar puts it, in the process of identification with the imagined community, there is simultaneously the “implied rejection of the applicability of other types of divisions in society,” (p. 61). In the communities of sports spectatorship, the same is true. Distinctions—and subordinations—based on class and race are superficially and spectacularly masked by the veneer of the common rooting interest. One of the principal distinctions in society that is both elided and appropriated by the imagined community is gender. Anne McClintock (1995) argues:

All nations depend on powerful constructions of gender. Despite many nationalists’ ideological investment in the idea of popular *unity*, nations have historically amounted to the sanctioned institutionalization of gender *difference*. No nation in the world gives women and men the same access to the rights and resources of the nation-state. (p. 353)

In fact, Anderson himself symptomatically reveals the patriarchal inclinations of the academy in his choice of the word “fraternity” to characterize the nation. Yet, if fraternity can be used to describe the nation, it is even more apt in the context of the homosocial⁵ community of sport. Recalling his first experience in the crowd at Highbury, Hornby remarks, “I remember the overwhelming *maleness* of it all,” (p. 11). This phrase is salient because it both erases the significance of the women who were in the crowd that day and reveals that it is the homosociality of the audience that made the imagined athletic community appeal to Hornby in the first place.

As we have seen, imagined athletic communities take themselves deathly seriously, a fact that manifests in the persistent need to establish strict codes of behavior. A recent *Grantland* article entitled “The 20 Types of Depressed Sports Fans,” enacts such a code. Entry number

⁵Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985, p. 1) explains, “‘Homosocial’ is a word occasionally used in history and the social sciences, where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with ‘homosexual,’ and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from ‘homosexual.’ In fact, it is applied to such activities as ‘male bonding,’ which may, as in our society, be characterized by intense homophobia, fear, and hatred of homosexuality. To draw the ‘homosocial’ back into the orbit of ‘desire,’ of the potentially erotic, then, is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual.”

seven reads: “The Fan Who Kind of Seems to Maybe Be Crying a Little Bit.” The description of this fan type follows: “Do not try to talk to this fan. Just pretend you didn’t notice. In fact, let’s all agree to never speak of this again,” (McIndoe, 2013). What is clear from this example is just how significant the regulation of masculinity is to these forms of community. The mere suggestion of a broader definition of manhood that might include a wider range of tolerable forms of expression is untenable, for it undermines the very principle of homogeneity upon which the community is founded. It also gestures to the possibility that power might be distributed in a less hegemonic and concentrated form than is desirable to the bourgeois white masculine subjects whose norms structure and regulate these communities. Thus, crying, as an expression of sensitivity and vulnerability, invites ridicule and disdain.

Returning to McClintock, her work is also useful in the comprehensive way it explicates the mechanisms of the imagined community – how it is that such an ephemeral and tenuous notion of collectivity is reified through spectacular practice. She demonstrates that in 1918 South Africa, a white, male, bourgeois organization known as the *Broederbond* (Brotherhood) emerged which sought to bolster its social and economic interests as white business(men) by inventing a Boer nation that privileged these attributes. Earlier, I used the term ‘sports franchise’ to describe the norms that imagined athletic communities rally around. The word ‘franchise’ is crucial, for it indexes the fact that the invention of these communities, like that of the Boer nation, serves the interests of capital. They are, for all intents and purposes, the creation of a market for the commodity of professional sport. Debord (1994) warns us that it is through spectacle that capitalist subjects are taught to be consumers. The invention of the Boer nation was performed through the 1938 staging of the *Tweed Trek* (Second Trek) that commemorated the 1838 Great Trek away from the perceived tyranny of British law. It is important to note that the Great Trek

did not at the time signify the founding of a new nation, but rather was simply a pragmatic way to retain the practice of slavery which the British had outlawed. The insidious genius of the *Tweede Trek* was that it “invented white nationalist traditions and celebrated unity where none had existed before,” (McClintock, 1995, pp. 369-370).

We need look no further than the inaugural season of Toronto’s Major League Soccer franchise Toronto FC (TFC) to see that the imagined athletic community is similarly contrived. The birth of TFC is a useful case study because it lays bare a process that for most professional sports franchises is occluded by the mystifying effects of historical distance. That is, it reveals how institutions that come to seem natural and inherently meaningful are in fact fabricated as mechanisms for the production of capital. The intense desire for collective camaraderie in contemporary Toronto was revealed when the maximum number of season tickets available for sale, 14,000, sold out long before the season began. Likewise, single game tickets became nearly impossible to purchase due to intense demand. Much like the other imagined communities we have discussed, that of TFC fans swiftly took on a homosocial character, as evinced by the name of the team’s largest fan club, the Red Patch Boys (Shilton, 2007). From the beginning, the imagined community of TFC fans and the interests of capital were tightly imbricated. When the Red Patch Boys met in person for the first time—the club was established via internet chat rooms—five employees of TFC parent company Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment (MLSE) were in attendance. Later, prior to the team’s first game, MLSE sent out scarves to each of its 14,000 season ticket holders. This scheme was no doubt an effort to manufacture a sense of allegiance and belonging to the team through fetish objects and the spectacle that they create in the stadium. Confirmation of this comes from the founder of the Red Patch Boys, Mike Dubrick, who notes that, “They [the team—MLSE] want it to be a sort of European style, supporters with

scarves and the atmosphere and everything. And we're the vehicle for that. We legitimize the fan base a little bit," (Smith, 2007). Like the *Tweed Trek*, the spectacle created by the boisterous enthusiasm and iconic garb of the Red Patch Boys produces the sense of community that is so desirable in an atomistic society. Torontonians have been seduced by TFC and its inclusively carnivalesque atmosphere. Like the *Tweed Trek*, the establishment of this new community is facilitated and legitimized through the production of a sense of tradition. The "European style" of TFC's fetish spectacle creates the sense that the team is merely an extension of the famous clubs across the Atlantic that so many (im)migrant fans have long adored. In the process, MLSE reaps the pecuniary rewards. The birth of Toronto FC testifies to the fabricated nature of the imagined athletic community, the imbrication of that community with capital, and the fetish spectacle on which it relies. For all intents and purposes, the imagined athletic community is a spectacle orchestrated by capitalism to satisfy a market created by the sense of isolation which the system itself engenders.

For McClintock (1995), the "ploy" of inventing community through spectacle originated in the national spectacle cultivated by Nazi Germany. McClintock's critical insight here is that, unlike Anderson, she sees the invention of the nation as a product of commodity spectacle, not the proliferation of printed texts. "Fetish objects" such as "flags," "uniforms," "logos" and "anthems" come to represent the existence of the nation where no sense of solidarity previously existed (pp. 374-375). McClintock crucially defines fetish as representative of "crises in social value" that are "projected onto" "impassioned objects," rather than "purely phallic icons," (p. 375). There is little question that merchandise, memorabilia, and ritual play an important part in the experience of fans. *Dallas Morning News* writer Dave Tarrant speaks to the latter point,

writing on the subject of his support of the NFL's Pittsburgh Steelers in an exchange with Michael Kruse,

Last year, when the Steelers made it to the Super Bowl, I made a big batch of perogies, which are basically dumplings that are a big deal in Pittsburgh. I'm sure my kids thought I was a little weird, wearing my Rod Woodson jersey and serving them up a platter of perogies. But it helped me reconnect with the city of my youth, with friends I'd grown up with and moved away from and with a kind of gritty authenticity that I've always associated with Pittsburgh that can't be found in these newer cities in the South and Southwest. (2011)

For Tarrant, cheering the Steelers plays a central role in his identity as a member of an authentic Pittsburgh community. This identity is sustained through the ritual of wearing a jersey and preparing familiar food. Implicit, and suppressed, in this passage is the fact that were these rituals to cease, the very foundation of this ostensibly authentic identity would collapse and its arbitrariness would become apparent.

Another fetish ritual pivotal to the imagined athletic community is superstition. The fan is able to feel like s/he is actually part of the team—when in fact the relationship is obviously only imagined—by concocting rituals that ostensibly impact the team's performance. Hornby describes one such ritual:

Before each home game we all of us trooped into the sweet shop, purchased our mice, walked outside, bit the head off as though we were removing the pin from a grenade, and tossed the torsos under the wheels of oncoming cars... United, thus protected, remained unbeaten at the Abbey for months. (p. 102)

It is difficult to ignore the military imagery that Hornby uses to convey this incident; such figuration is both hyper-masculine and, as we shall soon see, a dangerous product of the Manichean terms in which sport is framed. Indeed, Dave Zirin makes it clear in the film *Not Just a Game* (Boulton, C., Earp, J., Morris, S. & Young, J., 2010) that sport is persistently figured in military terms by the mainstream media and those who participate as players and spectators. He

even recalls a particular baseball game he attended that was billed as a Military Appreciation Night and involved not only a full military spectacle, but even an explicit recruiting pitch that invited fans to sign up for service in the stadium.

The crisis in social value referred to by McClintock is the experience of the world as inherently meaningless, an experience that leads to the production of meaning in spectacular forms. Like nationalism, the crisis that precipitates the formation of imagined athletic communities is the atomization and isolation of the post-modern world produced by the advance of capitalism and the collapse of religion, developments that have been thoroughly chronicled by Hobsbawm (1990; 1992b). Yet, while Hobsbawm focuses on the growth of nationalism in the wake of religious crisis in the 19th century, in the 20th and 21st it is sport that is increasingly becoming perhaps *the* imagined community of choice in the North, and, in fact, much of the world. Again, although capitalism alone does not account for the popularity of sports spectatorship, in this era of globalization and neo-liberalism, the spectacle of sport and its attendant imagined communities have thrived because they have been commodified and appropriated by capital to its own ends, particularly the production of more capital and the social reproduction of labour power, but also spectacular distraction from the poverty and inequality generated by the system. Thus, sport has been disseminated to progressively more excessive degrees through the mediums of post-modern spectacle (television, radio, print media, the internet, bill board advertising, etc.) in this era. Paul Gilroy (2000) speaks to the spectacular effects of icons—what McClintock calls “impassioned objects”—in *Against Race*. Gilroy is particularly interested in the nationalism of Hitler’s Germany, a brand of nationalism that significantly influenced Boer nationalism in South Africa and can be seen as one of the foundational forms of the modern and post-modern Northern imagined community. Icons were important to the Nazi regime because

they expressed all the content of the written statement without the rational argument written discourse requires to be convincing. Gilroy also points out that this logo signification cancels out actual speech, thus silencing potential dissent in a given population. In this way, the imagined community is produced through what Gilroy calls “logo-solidarity,” (pp. 161-163). In effect, “logo-solidarity” simultaneously fabricates collective unity and quashes rational discourse. Gilroy’s “logo-solidarity,” combined with McClintock’s list of “impassioned objects,” provides a useful template for understanding how the imagined athletic community is formulated and rehearsed. The team logos on the merchandise worn by fans, from hats to t-shirts to jerseys to scarves to flags—not to mention the chants and songs often boisterously sung, or the banging of Thunder Stix—proliferate everywhere as signs of solidarity. Yet, these icons often stand in for any rational argument about why a given fan cheers for a given team. If a fan were to give serious thought to the fact that the team s/he supports is a capitalist endeavor designed to procure as much of her hard-earned income as possible; if s/he were to reflect on how irrational it is to passionately exhort individuals nominally representing the territory in which s/he lives even though those individuals do not even inhabit the same territory, it would be difficult indeed to sustain the experience of fandom. Logos, impassioned fetish objects, transform these rational insights into the simple and desirable logic that to purchase a hat is to be part of a team, and more fundamentally, the plenitude of collectivity. As with most imagined communities, there are serious ramifications to the imagined athletic community. Of course, these communities fill the interpersonal void created by capitalist society, focus attention on fetishistic meaning rather than radical politics and, quite simply, procure revenue for corporations. Yet, imagined communities have more perilous repercussions as well. Abdel-Shehid (2005) argues that nationalism responds to the differences that inevitably exist between the people in any given nation—be they class,

race, gender, sexuality, or so forth—by projecting all difference and the antipathy felt towards that difference onto some Other who exists outside the nation. All differences are distilled to one: us versus them. Thus, the nationalist-style thinking of the fan in the imagined athletic community is fundamentally Manichean. There is always another team that one is better than and opposed to, for by becoming a part of a particular imagined athletic community, one becomes the antagonist of all similar but opposing communities.

For these reasons, my emphasis is somewhat different than Abdel-Shehid's. He argues that "nations and sporting cultures... constantly attempt to produce conformity and sameness, and disavow difference and inequality," because his concern is with the way nationalism and sport dictate who can be a member of the nation, and under what circumstances (2005, p. 3). There is no doubt that this remains true today. One need not look beyond the Olympics to see the ways in which sport and the nation continue to be entwined. Indeed, I have written elsewhere on the ways in which sporting spectacle has been used to regulate national identity in Canada (Kalman-Lamb, 2012; Kalman-Lamb, 2013). Yet, it is also true that while contemporary Northern nations struggle to buttress and adapt their traditional identities in the face of migration and increased heterogeneity, the imagined athletic community provides precisely the possibility of sameness that once seemed to exist for the nation-state, but is increasingly lacking. This is not to say that difference is absent from spectatorial communities; rather, it means only that it is projected *outside* the community, onto some external Other against whom the community becomes defined. In this way, the imagined athletic community is able to shift the threat of otherness from inside the collective body, where it now exists for most nations, back outside, to where it is not only less destabilizing, but in fact actually serves as a coagulant. Thus, while it would be a mistake to lose sight of the persistent relationship between sport and the internal dynamics of the

nation, I am more concerned here with emphasizing that the imagined athletic community functions to magnify difference and promote inequality by aligning itself against something, and someone, else external to that community.⁶

The violent face of the imagined athletic community has lately manifested itself in the world of North American sport. On March 31, 2011, a San Francisco Giants fan was viciously assaulted by two Los Angeles Dodgers fans after a baseball game at Dodgers Stadium (“Giants Fan Brian Stow,” 2011). Not long after, on June 15, 2011, the Boston Bruins of the National Hockey League (NHL) defeated the Vancouver Canucks in the seventh game of their series to win the Stanley Cup. The game was held in Vancouver, and as the action on the ice came to a close, a riot ensued on the streets of Vancouver. One report suggested that the riot began when a stuffed bear (signifying the Boston Bruins) was lit on fire (“B.C. Premier Vows,” 2011).

⁶Since imagined athletic communities rely so strongly on icons such as uniforms or chants to identify members, and because they teach us to vilify those identified by different icons through the Manichean mentality they promote, such communities teach a phenomenological understanding of sameness and difference. This means that those conditioned by such communities become more likely to evaluate people based on how they look and sound, rather than how they act. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon describes the effect of the white gaze: “I sit down at the fire and I become aware of my uniform. I had not seen it. It is indeed ugly,” (1967, p. 114). Fanon’s powerful words speak to the destructively dehumanizing effect of the racist gaze. They also testify to the fact that his skin is a sort of “uniform” that signifies his identity to the white observer. This is precisely the threat posed by the imagined athletic community: it teaches us to interpret phenomenological differences—differences of appearance—as essential differences. There is nothing *natural* about perceiving the world through this lens. Gilroy remonstrates that “there is no raw, untrained perception dwelling in the body. The human sensorium has had to be educated to the appreciation of racial differences,” (2000, p. 42). The imagined communities of spectator sport are among the social institutions that participate in this sinister brand of pedagogy. Stuart Hall fleshes out this phenomenon still further. He argues that skin colour—like uniforms and other impassioned iconic objects, I would add—functions as a signifier of “a deeper code—the genetic—*which cannot be seen*,” (1996, p. 21). For Hall, it is not blackness that whites abhor, but that which it stands in for: a biological proclivity to poverty, savagery, physicality, and so on. Yet, dark skin is only read by the white gaze as emblematic of inferiority because that is how racist whites have been taught to understand it. Imagined athletic communities teach adherents to read external signifiers such as uniforms and skin as representative of that which is deeper and more profound, whether that imagined depth is the plenitude of human connection or the threat to that desire posed by the fragmented nature of our subjectivities and collectivities that is then projected onto an Other identified by a rival signifier.

Violence and looting occurred across the downtown of the city. Hospitals reported treating nearly one hundred and fifty people, including four stabbings and eight head wounds. Windows were broken in twenty-nine businesses (Matas, 2011). Targeted businesses included department store Sears, book retailer Chapters, and pharmacy London Drugs. Violence was also directed at the Boston Bruins. Fans chanted “Fuck Boston,” and lit Bruins memorabilia on fire. At least one Boston fan was subjected to physical violence: a man in a Bruins jersey was photographed lying on the street with blood seeping from his face (Lindsay, 2011). According to the mayor and police chief of Vancouver, the riots were instigated by anarchists and had little to do with hockey (Lee, 2011). However, this theory was refuted in a *Vancouver Sun* story that revealed that the rioters substantially deviated from typical anarchist tactics and targets (Law, 2011).

In the days after the riot, many of the participants were exposed through social networking. One looter who faced public scrutiny was a university student named Camille Cacnio. In response to his public excoriation, Cacnio issued a long public apology that was published in the *Vancouver Sun*. Cacnio’s explanation for his behavior sheds considerable light on the events of the riot and their connection to the concept of the imagined athletic community that I have been attempting to explore:

At the time, being a part of the riot was simply to fulfill the adrenaline rush I was looking and hoping for – an adrenaline rush that I previously got from post-winning games: hugging randoms, dancing on the streets, honking car horns non-stop, and high-fiving just about everybody. In the same way that everybody enjoyed collectively showing pride in our team, it was enjoyable to express my disappointment in a collective manner [sic]. (“Full Text of Original,” 2011)

What Cacnio wants is the sense of community provided by sports fandom, community he understands through the lens of fetish spectacle – the repetition of recognizable behaviors that signify membership in the imagined athletic community, in this case, of Vancouver Canucks fans. Yet, Cacnio also reveals the dark side of this form of community: Manichaeism. The

plenitude of this form of community relies upon the disavowal of the outsider. In this case, the Bruins and their fans represent difference. Thus, it is their memorabilia that must be burnt, and their bodies that are bludgeoned. The violence of the Vancouver riot is the logical consequence of the imagined athletic community's Manichean premises. It is not random nor is it the work of "anarchists." In fact, what is genuinely remarkable is that this sort of violence does not occur *more* often in the context of North American sports. This is a question that needs to be further explored. However, a provisional answer might gesture to the role of capital in mediating the imagined athletic community. As the above example of TFC demonstrated, these are communities fabricated for the purpose of producing capital. The violence and chaos (and, dare I say, anarchy) of Vancouver are antithetical to the systematic generation of capital through the exploitation of the labourer (athlete) and consumer (fan). It may be instructive, then, to linger, not on the image of the Bruins fan with blood streaming from his head, but, rather, angry mobs surging up against symbols of capital such as Sears and Chapters. Perhaps there is possibility in this for some different form of community.

In this chapter, I have been exploring the rationale, form, and dynamics of the imagined athletic community; that is to say, why it exists and how it works. As we conclude this theoretical exploration of fandom, however, it is vital that we return to the premise with which we began: the fact that the imagined athletic community is always predicated on the labour of athletes. Spectators draw meaning from athletic spectacle and leverage it into a form of pseudo-species-being in the face of a capitalist society that perpetually demands their labour but denies them the real thing. Yet, this meaning only exists because of the labour that athletes perform, labour that both produces the spectacle (through the very act of playing) and validates its significance (through the degree of risk and harm athletes are required to endure). While the

machinery of the imagined athletic community is itself sophisticated – in its rituals, superstitions, fetish-signifiers, etc. – and rife with its own forms of inequality and violence, this elaborate construct is ultimately balanced on the shoulders of athletes. A theorization of the full extent of the imagined athletic community is perhaps most vital because of what it reveals about the individuals tasked with the Atlas-like responsibility of supporting these communities of spectators. Once we grasp the full extent of the ideological and economic weight of professional sports fandom, it becomes impossible to conceptualize athletic labour as merely a game. We are forced instead to confront the reality that athletic labour is a form of social reproduction and that those who perform it must bear an almost impossibly-heavy physical and emotional burden. In the chapters that follow, I will explore the implications of this dynamic between athletes and spectators through interviews conducted with both. The interviews reveal much about the subjective experiences of social reproductive athletic labour and membership in the imagined community. They tell us a great deal, in fact, about lives lived in a capitalist society. They also raise significant questions about how it is possible for two groups of people (athletes, spectators) to be so closely, almost inextricably, linked, and yet, simultaneously, for such a chasm of understanding to exist between them. It is to this gulf I will ultimately return in the final chapter, as I attempt to imagine alternative, non-commodified visions for athletic labour and spectatorship.

Chapter 4: Methodology

There are two possible methodological approaches conducive to this project that I ultimately chose not to take. One such avenue would have been to follow a methodology I associate with the approach of cultural studies. That is, I could have pored through the internet, searching for the myriad cases in which athletes and spectators articulated the meanings they associated with sport and injury. This form of discourse analysis is a valid project in my estimation and could yield much worthwhile data. The other avenue I might have followed is to attempt to make this a quantitative project by building the largest sample I possibly could in an attempt to validate my theoretical propositions. As I have stated, neither of these approaches ultimately seemed optimal to me and so I settled on a third: qualitative, semi-structured interviews (Berg, 2004). In what follows, I shall elaborate on the reason for this choice.

First, I did not choose to conduct semi-structured interviews because I believed they would provide entirely comprehensive answers to the questions I raised. I am not convinced it is possible for any study, even one that is putatively quantitative and much less one that is qualitative, to provide definitive conclusions about the nature of social phenomena, for the actions and behaviours of human beings remain too varied and complex to be synthesized so neatly, particularly through the mechanism of specific structured lines of questioning, an approach necessary if the sample is to be large enough to be taken seriously as representative. Given these limitations of quantitative approaches, I was much more inclined towards a qualitative semi-structured interview methodology. What I hoped to achieve from my discussions was not an ultimate resolution to the theoretical problematics I was advancing -- although I believe they are highly suggestive in this regard -- but a thematic meditation upon

them that would provide a greater depth of understanding into why athletes and spectators behave as they do and what impact those experiences had in their lives. The interviews were never intended to provide definitive evidence for theoretical propositions advanced in the preceding chapters, for no empirical process can yield such unambiguous data, but rather to explore the subjective implications and experiences related to broader political economic forces.

This is very much in line with what Dorothy Smith (1987) has written about qualitative research:

The relation of the local and particular to generalized social relations is not a conceptual or methodological issue. The particular 'case' is not particular in the aspects that are of concern to the inquirer. Indeed, it is not a 'case' for it presents itself to us rather as a point of entry, the locus of an experiencing subject or subjects, into a larger social and economic process. The problematic of the everyday world arises precisely at the juncture of particular experience, with generalizing and abstracted forms of social relations organizing a division of labour in society at large. (p. 157)

As Smith suggests, the experience of every subject is inherently connected to the broader structures in which she lives. Thus, an exploration of the experience of any subject is an examination of the contours of the larger system. No individual subject can be imagined to exemplify the structure as a whole; each embodies some of its elements. Ultimately, this is perhaps the guiding principle of qualitative research: the experiences of every subject are immanently valuable and illuminating.

This is not to say that the interview testimony compiled in this study is somehow irrelevant to the theoretical propositions advanced above. Theory and method work together to reveal insights about the social world. Theory is not merely the product of abstract meditations divorced from a 'real' world that exists beyond its scope. Rather, social theory is built in dialogue with empirical observation. Social scientists examine the world and theorize the nature of social structures based on this study and analysis. This understanding of social structure in turn provides a framework for understanding new empirical observation, observation which can

and does in turn alter assumptions about the nature of structure. Moreover, reference to the work of earlier theorists is no mere token practice; it is shorthand for a body of research and scholarship grounded in empirical research and theoretical reflection. What this means is that the theoretical aspect of this project does not somehow rely on the empirical component for ultimate corroboration. That corroboration already exists to a significant extent in the scholarly lineage upon which it is built. This project extends that lineage into a new domain. This is the novel dimension of this work – and not an insignificant one – but it should be understood as the first word, not the last. It would be disingenuous to assert that one empirical project could produce any definitive theoretical conclusions, whether that theory claims to be grounded or not. This work does not make any such claim. What it does provide is a model for the way in which theory and empirical research can – and I would go so far as to hazard *should* – work in concert to advance our understanding of both the way that structural relations frame individual experiences and the way that individual experiences can enrich and broaden our understanding of the very nature of structure itself. Thus, my engagement with the testimony of the interview subjects who participated in this study is meant to be similarly dialectical and dialogical. I have provided lengthy excerpts of verbatim testimony rather than choosing to paraphrase, synthesize, or quantify it based on the premise that I do not hold the ultimate hermeneutic key that unlocks the meaning of these words. In the end, the athletes and spectators who participated in this study speak for themselves. What I offer is one particular theoretical (and thus interpretive) framework for understanding their testimony. I have provided the rationale for why I believe this approach is the most instructive and constructive way of reading the data at hand, but I am equally confident that others will wish to read it through a different lens and I have no desire to foreclose this

possibility. On the contrary, I hope that the inclusion of lengthy verbatim quotations means that the possibility for dialogue with and about the testimony in this study remains open-ended.

Second, the reasons for the selection of qualitative interviews rather than textual discourse analysis differ in significant ways according to the sample of athletes and spectators that I spoke with respectively. In the case of the athletes, I was concerned that the persona a professional athlete presents to the media is highly constrained by considerations outside the scope of the questions themselves. This assumption was underlined by some of the testimony I received in the study. Luc C., for example, explained:

By, by answering a question the wrong way can just make something escalate, something that now will big time affect the team and it's a.. uh... you know, these people are, are trying to sell newspapers and they're doing that on your back. So, it's, it's something that you, really, have to deal with as an athlete and it's not always fun.

Indeed, this was not merely a question of personal self-preservation. As Curtis U. made clear, players were explicitly trained to withhold candour from media interviews:

Then it became you, you went into media mode and you answered the question without really saying anything. We were coached and we were told, you know, specifically, not to en-, you know, not to give up too much information, not to say anything that would be posted on the opponents' wall as motivation for them. So, there is, there is sort of a code that when you interact with media, you're, and, and the guys are doing it better today than ever, you say, you answer the questions without saying anything at all.

For this reason, and because some of the issues I was interested in engaging ranged into very sensitive and personal areas, I determined that the ability to both offer anonymity and ask questions that would provoke the individuals I spoke with to explore areas they were not often asked to discuss in the media would yield more fruitful insights into the experience of high performance athletes. Anonymity is thus an integral methodological component of this project. In order to protect the identities of those interviewed, the names of interview subjects have all been changed. In some cases, identifying characteristics have also been subtly altered in order to

ensure that the identity of participants cannot be gleaned through detective work. In situations where the meaning of a participant's testimony was connected to identifying characteristics, I attempted to alter details in a way that would preserve the substance and meaning of the testimony.

With respect to the sample of spectators interviewed in the project, the considerations were of a somewhat different nature. Certainly, anonymity has been provided and its significance cannot be overstated for many of the same reasons discussed above. Yet, another consideration with regard to spectators is quite simply that far less testimony exists in the public sphere on the nature of fandom. Although particular high-profile writers have discussed the meaning of fandom in their lives (including Nick Hornby and Bill Simmons, discussed briefly in an early chapter), I was interested in engaging with a broader array of voices and experiences. After all, the vast majority of fans empowered to discuss the nature of their passion in the public realm occupy a subject position of considerable power and privilege. Although their experience is the experience of some fans, it is far from universal. While I am under no illusion that this study provides a complete picture of spectatorial experiences of all sorts, I did wish to provide a sampling of different voices and subject positions to the best of my ability. Scholars such as Giulianotti (2002) have created typologies of fandom that attempt to account for differences among fan positionalities, in effect defining degrees of fandom. Although it is self-evident that distinctions do exist among fans as a category of people, I am far more interested in what brings them together than what distinguishes them from one another. Thus, my sample of spectators includes individuals who would fall into a variety of different categories according a schema like Giulianotti's. I view this as a strength, not a weakness, of the sample because it offers a view of a breadth of experiences of fandom and allows us to explore how each operates in relation to the

imagined athletic community and the political economy of professional sport. Rather than impose my own definition of who does and does not qualify as an ‘authentic’ fan, I was more interested in attempting to unpack the ways in which the experiences of people who self-identified as “fans” intersected with these structural forces.

Third, semi-structured interviews were chosen rather than either structured interviews or unstructured interviews for particular reasons. I did not want to use fully structured interviews because my intention was to allow interview subjects some latitude to wander in their answers (Lofland & Lofland, 1995, p. 85). I was more interested in seeing their associations and connections than answers to direct or leading questions with which I would, in essence, constrain them by putting words in their mouths (p. 86). In fact, for this reason, often I was deliberately oblique in the form of my questions in order to allow the interviewee to take it in whatever direction seemed most intuitive to them. At the same time, I did not want to use unstructured interviews because I did have specific research and theoretical questions I wanted to explore. Well there would have been inherent value in providing players and spectators the opportunity to expand on the meanings of sport in their lives, doing so would have made it very difficult to address the theoretical issues at the root of this project. I felt that because the research questions I was posing were questions that have never truly been asked before, a significant imperative existed to prompt interview subjects to engage somewhat directly with the issues I hoped to raise. Thus, semi-structured interviews offered a balanced alternative that would allow for in-depth answers organized around the theoretical questions I was determined to ask.

The interview process itself also raised a number of important considerations, many of which I did not anticipate from the outset of the project. Initially I intended interview basketball and football players and spectators of those sports. I selected these sports because I was

interested in focusing on the two most popular, and thus, influential sports in North America as a whole. My intention was to select two sports in order to compare the experiences and expectations of players and fans in a highly violent sport with those in a sport often understood to be less violent (although extremely physically demanding, and sometimes, debilitating in its own ways). That focus turned to basketball and hockey once I found it easier to make connections with hockey players than football players. Ultimately, for this reason, the sole focus came to be on hockey. This is likely due to the prevalence of professional hockey players in Canada, the site of the study. Given the prevalence of professional hockey players in Canada relative to the size of the overall population, it was much easier to pursue connections in this sport than any other. While I did have a few leads on basketball players owing to burgeoning success of athletes from the Greater Toronto Area in the NBA, when these dried up there were few other avenues available for me to turn to. I had similar frustrations in the process of seeking out hockey players, but, because of the greater overall number of leads, I was able to flesh out a sample of players that met my goals at the outset of the study. Although I was initially disappointed to have to limit the scope in this way, I have ultimately come to feel that it was for the best, for it would be difficult to achieve an even mildly comprehensive picture of the culture and the effects of political economy in any one sport if too many were engaged simultaneously. Certainly, while this study in no way claims to have achieved a definitive portrait of social reproduction in professional hockey, it does provide a window into these dynamics and points the way for future scholarship in hockey and other athletic fields, including football – another sport marked by high levels of extreme violence – and basketball – a sport that puts a different sort of toll on the body.

The other original goal of my study that was thwarted due to methodological issues was an intention to interview both current and former players in order to gauge whether their attitudes changed over time as a function of distance from the game. However, again, it proved too difficult to make contact with any current players. Multiple initial leads failed to pan out, largely because of how many time constraints exist upon those currently labouring as professional athletes. While this was a disappointment, I don't think it compromised the most important elements of the study. Ultimately, former players are the ones with a greater degree of perspective that allows them to survey and situate their careers in the broader context of their lives as a whole. In fact, my suspicion is that current players may have too great an investment in the norms of professional hockey to challenge and interrogate them. After all, it is difficult to imagine how it would be possible to fully acknowledge one's own exploitation and the physical harm it was causing and then to continue performing the activity responsible.

Players were invited into the study using a snowball sampling approach. I was guided to particular individuals who in turn referred me to others. The majority of the players in the study were introduced to me in this manner. One of the players came from a completely different source, referred by an academic in the field. I attempted to contact other players using different gatekeepers and contacts, but was unsuccessful in this effort. It is important to make it clear that in some cases I was put in touch with players who did not participate in the study. In one case, based on information that was provided to me, it seems the interview request was denied because the player in question had not yet come to terms with the difficulty associated with the end of his career. In other cases, I was able to make initial contact, but interviews never ultimately came to fruition, as I was unable to follow up.

Players in the study come from a range of positions in professional hockey, from the major Juniors to Europe to the NHL. This evidently provides a wide range of contextual factors and limits the ability to make any sort of definitive generalizations. The advantage of this breadth, however, is that it testifies to the relevance of the themes in question. Regardless of location or professional level, each interview subject had meaningful and illuminating contributions to make that shed light on the issue of social reproduction in professional sport.

The question of subject position is an important one to address. First, there is the question of why no professional women appeared. The rationale for this is simply that the study is connected to the question of political economy, and, at this point in time, women's professional hockey has not developed as robust a political economy as men's. Nevertheless, it would have been valuable to have heard testimony from a woman. Unfortunately, none of my contacts was able to refer me to one.

In terms of race, I was very interested in hearing about the experiences of non-white and white players alike. Again, I was limited in my efforts by the connections my gatekeepers offered to me and by the decision of players I approached as to whether they wished to participate. I was very gratified to find two players who identified as non-white, particularly given the hegemony of whiteness in professional hockey.

My approach to developing a sample of spectators was somewhat different. My initial attempt was to solicit those who identified themselves strongly as fans by posting advertisements on a wide range of online message boards for Toronto teams. I did this for both basketball (the Toronto Raptors) and hockey (the Toronto Maple Leafs) and the result of this was that I ended up with a basketball fan (who turned out to be more of a baseball fan) as part of my sample despite the fact that the focus of the study was ultimately on hockey.

I was unable to achieve the full complement of spectator interviews I sought through this approach, so I ultimately switched to an attempt through social networking in which I posted similar ads through Twitter and Facebook. These ads were shared many times and ultimately I received interview offers from a number of people I was personally unacquainted with. I made a much stronger attempt to ensure that my sample of spectators included women at this stage since none of the spectators I was able to connect with through the message boards were women, and, especially because they were largely excluded from the professional player group. This attempt did prove considerably more successful in my second recruitment push through social networking.

In terms of race, my sample of spectators ultimately was predominantly white. This is representative of trends in hockey culture, but it is nevertheless something of a disappointment, as I would have preferred to see a greater diversity of subject positions reflected in my sample.

My optimal goal was to conduct interviews in person for a period of thirty to sixty minutes. Although I would have liked to potentially have longer or multiple interviews, my ability to do so was circumscribed by the difficulty of enticing players to speak with me given that they did not have much incentive to do so and were typically very busy in their lives. For this reason, and because geographical constraints often limited our ability to be in the same place, many of the interviews were conducted via telephone. In a couple of cases, this was also true for the spectatorship interviews, although these tended to be in person and longer. The shortest interview I conducted lasted merely a little longer than fifteen minutes. The longest interview occurred over a span of two hours. Interestingly, both of these interviews were with players. The spectator interviews tended to be longer and in most cases lasted between forty-five minutes and an hour and a quarter. Although the telephone could potentially be perceived as an

obstacle to free communication, I found that in many cases this was not the case. Indeed, it is possible that the mediation of the phone made it somewhat easier for the person to speak freely, without feeling encumbered by the physical presence of another human being. I transcribed each of the interviews in their entirety myself. As Loflond and Loflond (1995, p. 88) have explained, there is a significant advantage to this approach as it “stimulates *analysis*.” This was my experience, as the many hours I spent transcribing the interviews created an intimate familiarity with the content that ultimately made it much easier to see common themes that emerged among the interviews and unlikely resonances that sounded between them.

At this juncture it is important to foreground my own subject position. As Jonathan Rutherford (1988) has argued on the subject of masculinity, “It is an identity that is in continual struggle to assert its centrality in cultural life, yet it attempt to ensure its absence, and to evade becoming the object of discourse,” (p. 23). That is to say that categories of identity which confer power and privilege are able to remain persistently hegemonic in part through the notion that they do not exist at all. It is much more difficult to challenge a structural relation that is perceived to be natural and inherent than one that is understood to be a social construction. All of this is to say that there is a moral imperative for the researcher to acknowledge her or his own subject position, for this position inevitably comes to inform the text s/he produces. The need for such disclosure is all the more urgent in circumstances where the researcher is actively involved in the production of textual data (i.e. through ethnographic or interview-based fieldwork), for the identity of the researcher can have a significant impact on the type of data procured. With all this in mind, then, I will attempt to situate the way in which I perform myself. I am typically perceived to be a white, heterosexual, man. I was born in Toronto and speak with the local accent. I also am a long-time fan and follower of most sports, which provides me with a high

comfort level both in discussing sport-related issues and with locker room dynamics and jocularity (although, coincidentally, hockey is the one major sport I have ceased to follow in recent years). I think that these various categories of identity have significant implications for the interviews I conducted. With respect to the athletes I spoke to (in person, at least), I believe that my whiteness and masculinity, as well as my familiarity with sport, contributed to a relatively easy chemistry and comfort level. In short, I believe the players I spoke to, overall, felt more comfortable speaking with me because I superficially blended in with the relatively homogenous categories of identity that remain hegemonic in hockey culture (particularly whiteness and heterosexuality – given the gendered nature of the occupation, masculinity is a given in this respect). However, that being said, the fact that I presented myself to players as an academic, a fact that I know I confirmed on multiple occasions by inadvertently using language the player I was currently speaking to at the time was unfamiliar with, likely diminished that comfort level to at least some degree. With respect to the spectators I spoke with, the dynamics were undoubtedly different. As most identified as white, it is possible that my own whiteness was perceived to engender an assumed form of commonality. Given the dominant association of heterosexuality with male sports culture, my sexuality, too, although not explicitly stated at any time, may have created an implicit sympathy with my interview subjects. Most important to remark upon, however, is my gender in this regard. Three of the spectators I spoke with were women and I do not believe it is in any way a stretch to imagine that my masculinity may have affected their testimony. Indeed, in two cases, the women I spoke with explicitly cited gender dynamics as an area of discomfort in their experiences as fans. Although I am gratified that they were willing to discuss this topic with me, it does not seem at all unlikely that they may have been even more inclined to expand on the topic if their interviewer was a woman.

I would also like to make a note here on the way that language is employed throughout the remainder of the text (and, indeed, in the preceding theoretical discussions as well). Terms like “the fan” or “the player” are not used in order to make the obviously specious generalization that *all* fans or *all* players act or think in the same way. Rather, they are intended as an abstraction of the structural imperatives that confront fans and players. The political economies of professional hockey and capitalism place particular demands and expectations upon the individuals who live and work within them. Not every individual will respond to these constraints in the same manner – in fact, many will resist. Yet, the system posits an ideal fan and an ideal player, one who plays her or his role in the system in the optimal way. It is this structural or relational position within the larger system that is denoted by the abstractions “fan” and “player.”

Finally, it seems only appropriate to conclude this chapter on methodology with a discussion of the individuals who made this project possible: my interview subjects. As I have previously mentioned, the names and some identifying features of these individuals have been altered in order to ensure anonymity. Nevertheless, much in the mode of linguistic translation that seeks to represent the intended meaning rather than literal substance of an originary text, I have been careful to provide biographical details that capture the spirit of the way in which the interview subjects identified themselves to me if not the precise facts. Below, I have provided brief biographical sketches of each interview subject. In the chapters that follow, I will refer to these subjects by the names provided. For the reader, it may prove useful to flip back to this section in order to refamiliarize with these details as you proceed through the text.

Subject Biographical Sketches

Players:

Lawrence F.

Lawrence was a forty-six year old Canadian-born man of English and Scottish descent. He was married with three children and worked as a hockey instructor and motivational speaker in suburban Toronto.

Lawrence was a former professional hockey player who played in a number of different cities over the course of a lengthy career in the NHL. Although he was originally a goal-scorer in his junior hockey days, he became an “enforcer” in the NHL.

Vasil D.

Vasil was a thirty-nine year old Canadian-born man of Macedonian descent. He identified himself as Muslim but said that it was not a significant part of his identity. He was married with four children and resided in a small town in Southern Ontario. He worked as a hockey instructor.

Vasil was a former professional hockey player who had a decorated career as a goaltender in the OHL before being drafted into the NHL. He played a lengthy career in the American Hockey League, where he played in a few cities, both large and small markets, and attended a number of NHL training camps, although he never received a call to play in the NHL.

Sean O.

Sean was a thirty-seven year old Canadian-born man of Irish descent who identified with his Irish-Catholic upbringing. He was single and worked as a hockey instructor in Southern Ontario.

Sean was a former professional hockey player who played a seven-year professional career in the United Kingdom, where he found it easier to make a decent living, and the southern United States. He played as a “stay at home” defenceman.

Luc C.

Luc was a forty-nine year old Canadian-born man of French-Canadian descent. He lived in Quebec with his wife and two children and worked as the director of a hockey development program.

Luc was a former professional hockey player who had a fourteen-year career in the NHL. Early in his career he was a high-profile, scoring-focused offensive player. As his career advanced, due to injuries, he became a “vet” relied upon more for his “experience” and two-way play.

Darin K.

Darin was a forty-two year old Canadian-born man of Danish descent who identified as white. He was single and had one child. He lived in Alberta and worked as the director of a hockey development program.

Darin was a former professional hockey player who played thirteen years between the AHL and NHL. He played for seven NHL teams and a similar number of AHL teams over the course of his career. His role for the duration of his career was as an “enforcer,” tasked with protecting the other players on his team.

Chris M.

Chris was a twenty-five year old Canadian-born man of Jewish and English descent who consciously identified as Jewish in order to subvert stereotypes. He was single and lived in Toronto where he attended university.

Chris was a former semi-professional hockey player who played for four years in the OHL. His role on the team during that time was as a third or fourth-line “grinder,” a scoring player relatively low on the depth chart.

James I.

James was a thirty-two year old Canadian-born man who identified as having a multi-racial heritage. He was married and lived in the Toronto area working as the director of a hockey development program.

James was a former professional hockey player who played nine years in the AHL and NHL in the systems of two teams. He had been a goaltender whose role varied depending on whether he was on the minor league or NHL team. In the AHL he was a starter who carried significant

responsibility. In the NHL he was a third-string player perceived largely as a prospect to be developed.

Curtis U.

Curtis was a forty-two year old man who identified as Canadian. He was in the process of divorcing and had three children. He lived in Southern Ontario where he worked as the director of a hockey development program.

Curtis was a former NHL player who played two and a half years up and down between the NHL and AHL for two teams. He was drafted as an offensive defenceman – a role he had played as a junior player – but was converted to an enforcer in professional hockey, a role he never found to be as comfortable.

Spectators:

Tarik K.

Tarik was a twenty-five year old self-identified Arab man who had come to Canada at the age of eighteen. He was single and lived in Toronto working in a professional management position.

Tarik identified as a fan of the Toronto Raptors and Toronto Blue Jays, although he had recently become alienated from the former team and more heavily invested in the latter. He subscribed to MLB.tv for the purposes of watching games and had previously subscribed to cable television for the sole purpose of watching sports teams. He was also a very frequent attendee of Blue Jays

games, sharing one or more flex packs with some friends. He estimated that he spent fifteen hours a week watching games during the baseball season and an additional five hours reading about, analyzing, and discussing the teams he followed.

Thomas M.

Thomas was a twenty-two year old Canadian born man of English, Scottish, and German descent. He was single and attended university in Toronto.

Thomas identified as a fan of the Toronto Maple Leafs, although he also indicated that he had attachment to the Detroit Red Wings. He also listed himself as a fan of the Toronto Argonauts, Toronto Blue Jays, Oakland Athletics, Toronto Raptors, and Boston Celtics. His primary venue for watching games was at home, although he also occasionally watched at bars or at the homes of friends. Infrequently (due to cost constraints), he also attended in stadium. The previous year he had been to two Maple Leafs games. He attended the Blue Jays and Argonauts more frequently. He devoted approximately six hours a week to his fandom, half of that spent on watching games and the other half on engaging in conversation and online discussion and interaction about sports.

Mason T.

Mason was a twenty-three year old Canadian-born man who identified as white. He was single and worked as an analyst for a social media data-mining company in Guelph, Ontario.

Mason identified as an “almost” obsessive fan of the Toronto Maple Leafs, although he also counted himself a partial fan of Anaheim and San Jose. He typically watched games at his own home or that of his friends, although occasionally he would watch in a bar for “big games.” He seldom watched in person because of the large expense, although he did attend approximately two such games per season. He devoted between fifteen to twenty hours per week on fan activities, with about half that time spent watching the games and the other half spent watching highlights or following the team in other ways.

William D.

William was a fifty-two year old Canadian-born man of English descent. He was married with two children and lived in Toronto where he worked at home as a designer/illustrator.

William identified as a general sports fan, although hockey and soccer were at the top of his list. His favourite teams were the Montreal Canadiens and Manchester United. He usually watched games at home, although occasionally he would watch them in a bar. He had been to a few live hockey games in his life in Maple Leaf Gardens in Toronto and Buffalo, but had never been to see the Canadiens play in Montreal. He spent up to thirty-five hour a week following sports. Much of that time was spent watching games, although he also spent considerable time on internet media and social networking.

Maria I.

Maria was a thirty-eight year old Canadian woman who loosely identified with Italian ancestry. She was married with two children and lived in the Toronto area where she worked as a community recreation programmer.

Maria identified herself as having “total loyalty” to the Toronto Maple Leafs. Although she was a fan and player of many sports, she considered hockey to be her favourite “by far.” The primary venue for her spectatorship was her home owing in part to the difficulty of getting tickets to live games. However, this had not stopped her from travelling to attend games in other cities like Buffalo and Montreal. She also very occasionally watched games in bars. In a typical week she would spend approximately twelve hours following the team, the vast majority of that time devoted to actually watching the games.

Linda M.

Linda was a forty-four year old Canadian-born woman who identified herself as white. She was married and worked in the Toronto area as a lawyer.

Linda identified herself as a hockey fan in general and a Leafs fan more specifically, although she noted that this fandom was by “default” given where she lived. She also noted that she was a fan of Canadian Olympic and Junior hockey. She primarily watched games at a local “Hipster” bar or at home on her computer through a pirate site. She also noted that she would travel in Canada to attend World Junior hockey games in person. In a typical week she spent approximately five hours following her teams by watching games.

Paul D.

Paul was a sixty-five year old Canadian-born man of Scottish and English descent who identified himself as a WASP. He was married with two children and lived in Southern Ontario where he worked at a high-level position in a religious ministry.

Paul identified himself as a general sports fan who was particularly interested in hockey, followed by baseball, football, and golf. His most prominent affiliation as a fan was with the Toronto Maple Leafs, followed in turn by the Toronto Blue Jays. The primary location in which he watched games was at home, although he noted that he did not watch as many games as he once did. Previously, when his children were young, he had been a frequent attendee of Blue Jays games due to low cost. Cost generally prevented him from attending any games at present. He was not enthusiastic about viewing games in bars. At the time of the interview he spent approximately six hours a week following his teams, much of that time spent checking results and statistics on his mobile device. He noted that earlier in his life the amount of time spent was much greater.

Ashley L.

Ashley was a forty-eight year old American-born woman who identified as white. She was recently divorced and lived in Southern Ontario where she worked as a legal assistant/legal clerk.

Ashley identified herself as a fan of hockey, football, and basketball, with an emphasis on the first two. She had broad spectatorial affiliations and often enjoyed watching games even when she did not have a pre-determined rooting interest. She was a fan primarily of the AHL Hamilton

Bulldogs and the NFL Baltimore Ravens. Her primary venue for watching was at home. She also expressed particular enjoyment in watching games live and attended as frequently as she could through connections she was able to exploit. She was a regular attendee of Hamilton Bulldogs games because of the affordable prices. She spent approximately ten hours a week devoted to her fandom. Much of that time was spent watching games, although some was devoted to reading about topics related to her sporting interests.

Chapter 5: Professional Hockey, Political Economy, Labour, and Meaning

In this chapter I will explore some of the ways in which professional hockey players understand their own labour. I begin by discussing the ways in which playing professional hockey is perceived to be a form of productive labour that produces value for ownership. In this sense, players see their own labour as a commodity and consequently experience many of the hardships associated with commodified labour in a capitalist system, notably pressures from the reserve army of labour, exploitation, and alienation. Yet, as I have theorized in a preceding chapter, athletic labour is not merely productive labour. It also functions within the broader political economy as a form of social reproductive labour in that it reproduces the subjectivities of fans by generating meaning with which they can identify and around which they can form community. What becomes clear in the testimony of players is that they are conscious to varying degrees that this second level of exploitation is occurring. Although they may not put it in the terms I have, they are acutely conscious of the significance of their relationship to fans in the political economy of hockey. The connection to fans and awareness of the relation that they share affects both the way that players play and the decisions they make to play through pain and injury. In this sense, at times players consciously play for fans, knowingly giving them what they need. This is partly owing to the political economic conditions discussed above, but it is partly borne of a relationship that occurs between players and fans in which fans invest meaning in players and players mirror that meaning back to them, elevating themselves to the status of heroes/symbols and fans to membership in the team. Even as this happens, players are always aware that fans do not understand the genuine nature of the labour that is being done – they realize that fans do not know what they are putting their bodies through and the sacrifices that

they are making for them. Ultimately, what we see here is that athletes labour in order to produce a particular type of product: meaning for fans. This process is alienating, as we have seen, but it is also absorbing and temporarily empowering for athletes. The crucial point is that the athlete produces something beyond just a commodity (entertainment). He produces something that the spectator takes away from the game, something that nourishes and revitalizes her.

Athletic Labour as Labour

It is something of a common sense cliché to assert that professional athletes are paid too much to play games designed for children. There are myriad problems with such statements, notably the fact that these games are perhaps the most popular form of culture in North American society and the fact that those who engage in them are labouring as much as they are playing. My concern here is not with engaging in a philosophical distinction between work and play, however. Rather, I am more interested in examining the ways in which professional hockey players come to understand the nature of their own labour. That is, as we begin this journey through the productive and reproductive aspects of athletic labour, I wish to begin with an examination of the extent to which the players I interviewed understand their own labour as commodified.

I begin here with the testimony of James I. When asked about whether he felt as if he was playing a role or being himself when he played hockey in front of fans or interacted with them, he responded, “I mean, I was just playing, right? Like, I wasn’t really too concerned about fans or what anyone thought of me, I was just trying to get my job done.” Here, then, we begin with a matter of fact statement about the quotidian nature of athletic labour. It is simply a “job” to be done, not a dream or game. It was work and he did it. I moved on to ask him about whether he

noticed that spectators had expectations of him as an athlete. He replied, “Yeah, for sure, you know, they expect certain things, like, they expect you to talk to them. I mean, little kids are one thing, but once you got with the older people, it’s just, like, this is a little too much, right?” Again, he dispels the common-sense notion that athletic labour and the celebrity that accompanies it are anything but a job. He acknowledges a basic level of responsibility to children but delegitimizes the obligations he was compelled to honour for fans. It is in the next, much longer, exchange that he reveals the full extent of his attitudes toward athletic labour:

NKL: Okay, cool, so, how satisfying have you found your post-hockey work career to be compared to your career in hockey?

James I.: I mean, I didn’t really like playing, so...

NKL: Can you say that again?

James I.: I didn’t really like playing, so...

NKL: Oh? Why not? Can you tell me more about that?

James I.: It was... I don’t know, I, I, I couldn’t really put my finger on why, like, it was just, it was just became a job, right, like, it’s been a job for me since I was like fifteen, sixteen...

NKL: And you felt that way even before you were getting, even when you were in the OHL?

James I.: Yeah. When I was in the OHL, it was like, “This is my job, this is what I have to do.” And, you just kind of have the expectations you’re gonna play in the NHL and, like, if I’m gonna play in the NHL, then I’m gonna keep doing it, but it wasn’t like you were playing for fun type of thing, right?

NKL: And would you say that the reason you were doing it was because you had the athleticism and the skill that you could...

James I.: Yeah, I could get paid a lot of money to do it.

NKL: Okay, do you feel that was a common attitude amongst other players?

James I.: I mean, I think most of the guys I played with wouldn’t do it for free, right?

NKL: Okay, and would you want to keep playing hockey now as a leisure activity on the side, obviously, of an occupation, but is it something you find fun to go out and do?

James I.: No, I hav-, I haven't gotten on the ice once since I stopped, well, once or twice with my junior team just, like, because they wanted me out there, but I'm not gonna play men's league or do any of that stuff.

The first striking aspect of this testimony is actually not what James I. has to say, but my own response as an interviewer. When he tells me that he didn't really like to play at all, I initially ask him to repeat this answer – betraying disbelief – and then am unable to conceal a sense of surprise. It is evident from this that despite my own critical attitudes towards sport and its commodification of athletic bodies, I am nevertheless also invested in narratives around sport as play. This ideology is so naturalized that I am unable to step outside of it. The fact that I seem to have been caught off guard also speaks to the expectations that were produced for me through the interview process. I am in part taken aback because James I.'s answer does not line up with most of the interview subjects I spoke with. While they tended to feel a level of investment in the ideology that athletic success was inherently meaningful, much like fans – a point I will explore in much greater depth below – James I. has obviously resisted this narrative.

It is clear that James I. is conscious that athletic labour is in no way distinct from other forms of labour. He explicitly states that he has not felt it was a game since he was sixteen or seventeen years old, since, in other words, he has been paid to play. From the moment that his performance became a commodity, it evidently lost its appeal for him to such an extent that he is no longer willing to play even for leisure. James I. appears to be alienated from his own labour in much the same way that other workers are in a capitalist system. Because he is being paid to play for a team owned by someone else for the satisfaction of others, he no longer feels a connection to the game – it is no longer playful. This in turn changes the way that he sees hockey in general.

It has become mechanical and workmanlike and thus holds little interest for him. Although he is obviously not able to speak for other players, it is nevertheless interesting to see him say that “most of the guys [he] played with wouldn’t do it for free.” Evidently, while most players do tend to acknowledge that playing professional hockey is something of a dream, this does not preclude a simultaneous sense of alienation. Perhaps there is an abstract satisfaction to having achieved the goal of making the NHL even as that fulfilment is debased through the daily rigours of the job.

James I.’s understanding of athletic labour as commodified and alienating is echoed by Vasil D.:

Vasil D.: After my eighth year of professional hockey, I had an agent that ran a goalie school and the guy that ran that goalie school wanted to start a new goalie school. So, myself and him started Star Goaltending Academy. And, that summer, when we talked about it, I was thinking about still playing and playing Europe, and, but I thought, I just had my first child, and thinking about family and future, and, and to be honest with you, one day you could be a really good hockey player and the next day you can’t, so, you won’t be, so, contracts can come and go, right, so having a steady job was in the back of my mind and I was twenty-nine years old and a future for my family and if I went over to Europe, there’s really no health coverage and all that. So, you know, people don’t realize that. Yeah, it’s a great job and it’s fun and all that, but they don’t know the little things that happen to players that, if you don’t play well, or things like that, and you could be gone. So, started a goaltending school, which has become a huge thing now, training and eight years ago it wasn’t that big, with training, but personal training now has become a huge thing.

While his overall attitude towards professional hockey remains favourable, it is evident that beneath this veneer are significant concerns with the life of a professional player. Ultimately, he elected to stop playing the game because of the insecurity of the job owing to the constant pressures of the reserve army of labour in the form of other players vying to take his job and the precarious state of his health as a function of the game. He implicitly references the myth that

athletic labour is a dream to be aspired to (“Yeah, it’s a great job and it’s fun and all that”) and then refutes it, suggesting that most people – fans – “don’t realize” how arduous the job really is.

Although only a couple of the athletes interviewed spoke explicitly about the way in which their labour was commodified and alienated, the pressures of the reserve army (alluded to obliquely above by Vasil D.) were a persistent theme in their testimony. Karl Marx argues that the reserve army of labour, the surplus population of labourers who are willing and able to work but currently find themselves unemployed, is a necessary feature of capitalist accumulation because of the competitive stress it places upon employed workers. As Marx puts it, “The over-work of the employed part of the working class swells the ranks of its reserve, while, conversely, the greater pressure that the reserve by its competition exerts on the employed workers forces them to submit to over-work and subjects them to the dictates of capital,” (1976, p. 789).

Lawrence F. addressed this issue directly:

NKL: Yeah, I see what you’re saying. So, during your playing days, did you think it was important to play through injuries?

Lawrence F.: Oh yeah.

NKL: Can you tell me why?

Lawrence F.: Well, if I, if I, if I didn’t play, they’d call somebody up, which is always a chance that that guy takes your job. So, if I, if I, if I was, if I was to say, “Oh, my groin’s hurt a bit,” right, they call Sean O. up and Sean O. plays great that night, all of a sudden Sean O. stays and I’m being sent to the minors. So, I would always have to play hurt unless it was a broken bone or something.

Darrin K. had a similar experience:

NKL: During your playing... I mean, obviously an injury like that, you’re not going to be able to play through, that’s obvious, but more generally, there are different types of injuries it is possible to play through, obviously, during your playing days, did you think it was important to play through injuries if you could?

Darin K.: Well, for me it was because I was always on one-year contracts and I was a fourth-line player. So, the more time you miss out of the line-up, the harder it is to get back in.

For both men, playing hurt was an inherent function of the profession enforced by the industrial reserve army. The relation between the reserve army and injury is especially germane because it reveals that the subjection of the body to harm is a necessary part of the occupation for all but the most indispensable players. Whether or not management, other players, or fans expect athletes to play through injury, the competitive structure of the profession, with countless individuals aspiring to a precious few roster spots in the professional ranks, forces those occupying those spots to guard them in any way they can. Allowing the body to recover from injury is simply not a risk they can afford to take.

Vasil D. makes a similar admission. After being asked about whether players are afraid to talk amongst themselves about their experiences with injury, he says:

Vasil D.: Yeah, yeah. I don't think that they're afraid to talk about it. Especially ex-players. I don't know about players playing right now. But, players after their careers talk about it a lot more. They don't like to talk about it during the season because I guess they don't want people to know and they gotta sign contracts and they got families, and, you know, so that's why it's really confidential, but after the season they like to talk about it a lot more.

Active players are unable to speak with one another about their experiences with injury because of the fear that they will lose their jobs. They cannot afford to reveal any weaknesses to themselves or management, for they have families they need to feed. It is only in retrospect that they are freed to speak up about what they have endured, at which point the concerns become a relatively ubiquitous topic of discussion.

If the pressures of the reserve army are a common theme in the experiences of athletic labour for the players I interviewed, the sense of being commodified by management is nearly a

universal one. Lawrence F. makes this point particularly vividly speaking of professional hockey players:

Lawrence F.: They're like wrestlers. They're like, you saw the movie *The Wrestler* with Mickey Rourke?

NKL: I did see that, yes.

Lawrence F.: You're a piece of meat. You're a piece of meat, and once you're no good, you're no good.

This is a description of minor league professionals specifically, but it testifies to a broader point about athletic labour: once the athlete's body is sapped of its physical capacity to perform, it is discarded and replaced. The imagery of a "piece of meat" neatly serves as a metaphor for commodification, for it indexes the way in which the athlete, like an animal sent to slaughter, is reduced to an object that can be sold at market. The athlete's value as a commodity is tied to his ability to play. Once he loses this ability due to age or injury, he no longer has market value and is thus discarded. For the most elite players, sufficient compensation may have already been received at this point. This does not hold for the vast majority of those who labour in the professional and semi-professional ranks, however. Moreover, what he does not expand on here is the fact that the athlete *must* be treated as a "piece of meat" for the system to function. The athlete must be willing to treat his physical body in an instrumental way as a kind of externality, an object he is willing to destroy in order to fulfil his duty to the team. This is the body he is left with at the end of his career for the remainder of his life, even as the team simply moves on to a new, fresh piece of meat. This is, in a sense the realization of Jean-Marie Brohm's injunction, in his critique of capitalist sport, that "the specialists in this sporting Gulag stop at no human sacrifice in their drive to push back the limits of human capacity and transcend biological barriers," (1978, p. 19). Michael Robidoux writes of this phenomenon, "Like a finely tuned

engine, the player's body is driven to exhaustion, and, once the body expires, it becomes superfluous. Thus, the professional hockey player – more than any other labourer – is dependant on his body for productivity in his occupational domain,” (2001, p. 28). The fact that some professional athletes are able to leave their careers with bodies they consider fully functional does little to mitigate the fact that all have to risk those bodies during nearly every moment they perform athletic labour. It is in this sense that bodily sacrifice is a structural component of professional hockey.

In the lengthy passage that follows, Vasil D. expands on the way in which management treats players as commodities by pressuring them to play through injury:

NKL: Okay. During your playing days, did you think it was important to play through injuries?

Vasil D.: I have played through injuries. You feel, you, as a player, you feel pressure from the management above you.

NKL: Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Vasil D.: Sure, yeah, and I think a lot of players are afraid to admit it but there is pressure from management, you know, especially if it's not a bad, real bad, injury, you feel pressure to play, especially the guys that are making a ton of money, right, they're expected to produce and play games and, and the reason why they're getting paid all that money is because they need them there and, yeah, above, the management might not say, say it to the media and be more vocal about it, but players know that, that they expect that from them.

NKL: Is that sort of an unspoken thing?

Vasil D.: It is. Kind of an unwritten rule, kind of thing, I guess, but, yeah, I guarantee you there's at least a hundred players in the NHL right now that are playing through injury.

NKL: Sure. Do you feel like there's pressure also from fellow teammates?

Vasil D.: Yeah, yeah. Because, well, one, one as, being a hockey player, you're noticed as a tough [slight pause] athlete and, usually with these small injuries, you kind of get picked on, I guess. Or, or, yeah, guys will pick on you, especially if you're out for a

couple weeks and, you know, it drags on, and, and, uh, but yeah, players too, especially in big games and playoffs, they expect you to, to fight through it.

NKL: Yeah, and what about fans, did you feel any expectations from fans about playing through injury?

Vasil D.: No, not really, no, they never... fans are pretty, pretty much on your side always. They're pretty good, majority of them. I'm sure there are some that, uh, that would say a few things, but majority of them know that speed and level and, and, and the commitment that these guys put into the sport with injuries that come, there's nothing that you can really do about it. Especially the real bad ones.

NKL: Okay, interesting. So, would you say, in your own mind at the time, that playing through injuries was something you expected of yourself, or did you feel that it was the pressure from out, sort of all these other outside sources that you've been telling me about, that made you want to do it?

Vasil D.: I, I think more about the outside, the management. I, I pushed myself through injuries too because I wanted to be there, and I wanted to play so I pushed myself to do it, but, you're expected, like I said, you feel pressure, there's a lot of pressure from, from management and players and all that that people really don't talk about. But, so, I think it's more about that.

In this passage, Vasil D. elaborates on where he understood the pressure to play through injury came from. His immediate response, unprompted, is to locate the pressure upon players to play through injury with management. Like Lawrence F., he suggests that it is widely understood that players are commodities who are expected to sacrifice their bodies in return for their wages. It is clear that for him masculinity and a sense of reciprocal obligation to one another also inform the sense of pressure players feel to play. He is not alone in this, as Sean O. identifies a similar phenomenon:

NKL: Okay. So, during your playing days, did you think it was important to play through injuries?

Sean O.: Ah, in the U.S. I did. Um, I found, in the U.S., because you're so close to Canada, you know, you can, what I say, you can find another, get another guy, get another guy. You know, and, again, depending on what the injuries was, um, you know, obviously, if I couldn't literally skate or I couldn't literally do something, but I never had an injury like that. But, you know, high, sprained ankles and bad shoulders, where, you

know, yeah, you probably should take, you know, a week or two off to, to, to fix the problem, you know, I wasn't good enough where I could afford to give up my position, you know what I mean? So, any little thing, you know, I, any, I just, it was just show no weakness, right, you know, they always used to say, "a long way from your heart," guys used to take a puck in the ankle, and, you'd get a badly bruised ankle, and they'd be like, "yeah, a long way from your heart."

NKL: Who would say that?

Sean O.: Your own teammates. It's a long way from your heart. Sometimes they'd be just joking around but, you know, as a player, you always, just, you know, you didn't want to show that sign, you know, and, unless you were severely, severely banged up, right? And, if, the one thing I remember them saying, "If no one saw it. If no one saw it." Like, if you blocked a shot and no one saw it, you couldn't get away with it. You kind of had to play through the injury, you know, you have to. But, if you blocked a shot hard and everyone kind of stood up and cheered and everyone saw it, it would kind of give you more cred, right? You know, a guy's slashed in the back of the leg, or whatever, right, if no one saw it, then it was kind of like, they'd question you why you're not at practice next, and not even games, practice. "Why weren't you at practice today?" "Well, my, you know, I took a high-." Wouldn't happen. And that was from junior all the way up. So, yeah, and those state of minds, it wasn't always, it wasn't the best, it wasn't the best way to be, but, you know, I, I'm glad, kind of, the game is changed a little bit where they take a little more, they take that a little bit more seriously, but at the same time, there was guys who were real good that milked stuff like that all the time and it would get to you as a player. Like, what, again, if you score fifty goals, you can get away with things like that. If you were just a guy, you know, moved the puck here and there really well and [laughs] play in your own zone, they didn't care. Those guys couldn't do that.

It is important to keep in mind that this culture of masculinity is honed over years of socialization within a hockey system that demands that players must play through pain for reasons ultimately stemming back to political economy. That is, hockey culture itself becomes organized according to the model promoted by professional sport. This has everything to do with political economy at the professional level, for management requires players to give their all in order to make the game meaningful for fans. At lower levels, this political economy continues to exert an indirect influence, for players and coaches emulate the behaviour they see at the higher ranks. Thus, although a culture of masculinity may appear to exist independent of questions of commodification, in fact its roots are embedded in the same earth. Yet, it is crucial to note that

for Sean O., the reserve army is ultimately the starting point of any discussion of playing through injury. He notes that the culture of playing through pain was much more deeply entrenched in North America, where a large industrial reserve army exists, than in England, where it does not. Of course, he also makes it clear that the pressures of the reserve army are felt more strongly by those deemed more dispensable than those considered to be stars.

Although there is evidently a significant ideological dimension to the fact that the idea that playing through pain is necessary is adopted by players as their own mantra separate from the forces of political economy and enforced upon one another, it is noteworthy that Vasil D., much like James I. earlier, seems to have largely resisted interpellation. He retains the perspective that the pressure to play was externally imposed. This is a relevant point, because it suggests that he, like James I., Lawrence F., and, perhaps, “at least a hundred players in the NHL right now that are playing through injury,” experienced alienation as a fundamental part of his athletic labour. Even as these players played through injury, they remained aware that they were doing so because they were compelled to do so in the interests of others. As a consequence of this, there is little question that they were subjected to a process of alienation from their own bodies, which became instruments working on behalf of management rather than themselves. In athletic labour, the athlete functions as both labour-power and the means of production, for the commodity that is produced is the athlete’s own performance. Thus, unlike the technical instruments used by factory workers, when the athlete’s body ultimately breaks down as a function of its labour, it cannot simply be replaced through the outlay of further investment in means of production. Well, not for the worker, that is. Because the labourer and means of production are in a sense one and the same, management can simply replace the latter by replacing the former.

For all these reasons, and because of the pressures of the reserve army, the athlete is compelled to play through pain and injury. Indeed, to do so is normalized as part of the athlete's job requirements. Thus, for Luc C. it was hardly noteworthy that he had to play through a broken jaw and concussion symptoms:

Luc C.: ...So that was, that was the first time and it's, uh, you just feel it right away and then my jaw was, was fractured at, at three different places, right? So, uh, I was like, and, obviously, when you get a broken jaw, I mean, the chances are you, you prob-, you are probably concussion. [Laughs]

NKL: And were you thinking about that even then?

Luc C.: There was so much focus put on the, on the broken jaw, nobody worried too much about concussion symptoms. So, two weeks later, I was back on the ice, practicing and playing, wearing a big, big protector.

Incredibly, two weeks after having his jaw broken and incurring a concussion, he was trotted back out onto the ice to play. This is a testament to what athletes are forced to put their bodies through. The fact that he actually laughed in describing it speaks to the banality of this event within hockey culture.

The most disturbing testimony on this subject comes from Curtis U. I quote at great length here because the narrative he recounts functions as an incisive statement about the way in which the athlete is commodified and discarded in the business of professional hockey. Curtis U. recalls what happened to him after he suffered a grievous knee injury:

NKL: So, initially they made it seem like it was something that you would absolutely be able to overcome?

Curtis U.: Yeah, oh yeah, absolutely. I, initially, the injury happened in March and I was told I would be ready for training camp, which happens in September.

NKL: Sure, okay.

Curtis U.: So, they just said, “You know what? We’ll do the surgery, get some rehab going, you know, work out this summer, and you’ll be back for training camp.” They didn’t make it out to be a big deal, so I didn’t make it out to be a big deal. I showed up in September and still could not function and, and still couldn’t move, then, then they said, “Well, you know what, this type of injury really takes about nine months to recover.” So, you know, come Christmas time, then it became, “Well, you know what, this injury is really, a, you know, a year-long process.” So, they kept extending when they, when I should be ready. So, you know, after a year, and I was still having issues with the knee, like, swelling and pain, then I bec-, I started to become alarmed that something was not right and so then there was follow-up surgeries and everything else and it’s a long story, if you’ve got time I’ll give you the...

NKL: I do, absolutely. I’m interested.

Curtis U.: [Laughs.] So, basically, yeah, they did the surgery, the, what the surgery was supposed to be, I tore the ACL, the MCL, the LCL, and the meniscus with the cartilage. So, it was, it was, everything was torn, blown, everything. So, they repaired the ligaments. They used what was called a, a “ligament augmentation device,” they used a plastic ligament to replace the ACL that had torn. And, what is supposed to happen is that the scar tissue is supposed to surround the LAD, the ligament augmentation device. Eventually, that plastic dissolves and then the scar tissue becomes your new ligament, so you basically, it’s a process to rebuild the ligament in your knee.

NKL: Okay, I see.

Curtis U.: Okay? And that ligament, after a year, that LAD starts to dissolve on its own. And, what was happening was the scar tissue had not adhered to the ligament, so this plastic was floating around in my knee. Okay? But, I wasn’t told that, but they knew about it, because they did a scope on my knee a year after surgery. Actually, it was about a year and a half after surgery, because they kept saying I’m okay, just keep going, and I’m, I mean, I had massive swelling, I had pain, and it, but, they just said, “You know what? It’s just, it’s just a bad injury.” That’s what they were saying. Well, they did a scope on it and they did find that I had an exposed LAD. They didn’t tell me. So, they just told me to go back and keep rehabbing and keep going. The reason all this transpired was because you’ve gotta remember that back in ’94, there was a lockout.

NKL: Yeah, okay.

Curtis U.: Okay? So, I was injured during the lockout. I was doing rehab, this was Christmas-time ’94, I read in the newspaper, that, from [our general manager], there was a quote that said, “Curtis U. is healthy, we’re going to clear him to play and his paycheques are going to stop at the end of the week.” That was in the newspaper. And, this was, yeah, this, so, my injury was in March of ’94, this was Christmas-time. So they, they effectively cleared me to play during the lockout so that they would stop my paycheques. I come back from the lockout, I can’t play, but now they’re screwed, now they can’t say, “Well, no.” [Laughs.] Now they force me to play. I go down to the minors, and this is, you know, where, you know, I’m trying to play and do all these

things, I can't play, they're shooting it with cortisone, they're draining it, I'm not practicing, I'm only playing games every third day because I can't even walk in between. They call me back up to do another scope, they clear it out, you know, this is where they're draining it and sucking all the plastic out. They, they make note in the doctor's notes that there's an exposed LAD which is, which is a problem, because this LAD is dissolving, but it, you know, it, this, the plastic just keeps floating around. So, they're aware of the issue but they don't say anything to anybody. It doesn't come up until two-and-a-half years later, so, like, two-and-a-half years after the surg-, after my knee injury, I go to see another doctor, a specialist in [another city], because now I can't even walk, I can't play, I can't, I, I effectively leave the team because now I know there's something seriously wrong. I leave the team, I go see [that city's NHL team] doctor, he wants to do a total knee reconstruction, tells me my career is over. I then go to, I get a second opinion from [a CFL team's] doctor and the first words out of his mouth are, "They screwed you, didn't they?" And I said, "What do you mean?" And he says, "They knew a year and a half ago that this surgery didn't work and they were covering up." I said, "How do you know?" He says, "Right here," and he points it out. And, now, you and I could read medical notes and we wouldn't make heads or tails of them, it had to be explained to me what an exposed LAD means. He says, "Right here in the medical notes, from that surgery, from that scope when they went in and checked it, they found the problem." And he said, "They knew back then." And I said, "Okay, well, now what?" He says, "Well, we've gotta take it out," he says, "We, you have to take it out, otherwise it's gonna keep irritating you," he says, "Yeah, but your career is over." And, and so, this is how it all unfolded. It, it, you know, it really pissed me off, that, basically, I was treated as a piece of meat when they, when they knew that I wasn't going to recover from this injury, they dropped me and, basically, you know, was not given any assistance at that moment.

NKL: Absolutely, I mean, that's so devastating to hear about. First of all, can you just expand a little bit more, I mean, I can only imagine how you felt as you were going through this process, because, you describe what happened and it's so chilling to hear about, you know, like, what was going through your mind? It must have been so difficult to kind of, I mean, this is your career, you know, your livelihood...

Curtis U.: Well, you felt, I felt, initially I felt positive because I had a support team around me on the team, like, the doctors and trainers were supporting me and, you know, working through the process. And then, what happened over time was the trainers and doctors just, basically, left you alone, to go and deal with it on your own, they didn't want to deal with you anymore, the team didn't want to deal with me anymore. You felt isolated and you didn't know where to turn. You didn't want to be that player that became the cancer in the room or, you know, up-, upset the cart or anything like that, you just, you know, you try to go along with it as much as you can, but eventually, yeah, what happened was, I wasn't getting the answers I needed from [the team doctors]. They wanted me to keep playing through, they kept pu-, they kept forcing me to go down into the minors on these, what do they call, rehab assignments. So, these rehab assignments, they last two weeks. So, every two weeks, they would reinstate me for another two weeks of rehab assignment and, and, after a while, even, like, even the doctors... on the farm team said, "You know what, you shouldn't be here. There's something going on." [He

laughs.] They, and they weren't aware. But, they were the ones draining the knee and, and shooting the, like, cortisone [inaudible] I was told, cortisone should last three, three months, it should, should take the pain away for three months and, you know, grease the joint, and, you know, that should last. Cortisone, for me, lasted three days. Just enough to get through the next game and then as soon as the game is over, I'm, you know, I'm on the table, I'm icing it, I'm not practicing the next day, they're draining fluid out of the knee and, after a while, like, eventually, you go, "You know what, this isn't right." And, but, even back then, my agent was like, "You know what? Just play along, we're..." because I'm in the last year of my contract, now, right? So, there's a lot of outside factors that go into how you handle the situation. I'm sure if I had a long-term deal, you know, I could have handled it a little bit differently, but here I am, I'm trying to get a contract, you know, I have to play along, and, but, eventually, after, I think it was after the second or third scope I had [at the team medical facility], oh, what they would do, is after a month or so, they would call me back up to go see the doctors, I'd get another scope, that's where they'd clean out the knee again, they'd suck all the, you know, plastics out and so on, and then they'd want to re-assign me back to the minors. And, on one-, one of these occasions, I finally said, "No, I'm not going. There's something wrong. I know there's something wrong, but I, I can't prove it, I don't, I'm not a medical guy, I don't have the history with all the surgeries and everything, I just knew that there was something wrong." So, that's, that's when I left the team and, I sa-, you know, "I've gotta go see somebody else." And, I went home, and, you know, it was near the end of another season and, you know, it was just a, it was a long ordeal to finally get to the truth. When I finally got to the truth, I felt relieved that I finally had another doctor say, "Yes, this, I've seen this before, this is what they did to you." And, I said, "Absolutely, thank you, I'm not going crazy." That's basically how I felt at that moment, because it, it wa-, was a positive experience turned real negative and I was getting, I was really pissed off at the end of everything, and finally it, be, then there was relief, to, to, I finally had somebody understand what was going on and it wasn't just me, I actually had proof now of this.

This extended passage speaks deafeningly about the way in which athletes and their bodies are treated in the realm of professional sport. This is evidence of a level of exploitation that is seldom appreciated by those who follow the games from the outside. It is salient to note that Curtis U. feels himself to have been treated like a "piece of meat" as well. The recurrence of this metaphor suggests that it has significant currency in the locker rooms of professional hockey. Ultimately, Curtis U.'s story is an extreme study in what it means to be a "piece of meat" in professional hockey – an athletic labourer. The team and its management demonstrates no regard for his health or wellbeing as a person. Their only concern is for the production he can provide them on the ice. Likewise, there is no consideration of the long-term implications for his health,

even with respect to his capacity to provide labour for the team. Given the wealth of replacement options proffered by the teeming reserve army of athletic labourers, the team is unconcerned by the possibility that they will overtax his body. Rather, their interest is in squeezing every bit of labour-power they can out of him before his body fully breaks down. This is precisely the advantage that wage-labour provides in capitalism: it is eminently disposable. The capitalist is most interested in a flexible source of labour. Professional sport offers contracts often too lengthy to satisfy this desire in the way that management would prefer (owing to hard-won gains made through the struggles of players' unions). Thus, it is little wonder that in this instance management seeks to wring all the labour-power it can from a player while he remains under contract in order to provide a maximum return on investment. For these reasons, it is vital to see that Curtis U.'s experience, while extreme, is not exceptional. What it offers us is a window into the overarching principle of the commodification of athletic labour taken to its logical conclusion. Curtis U. was unlucky that team doctors botched his surgery, for clearly it was in their interest to get it right; it was entirely logical within the system, however, once that occurred that the team would do everything it could to avoid paying him (during the lockout) and maximize the amount of production he provided to the team while still under contract. Again, for those players privileged enough to be deemed indispensable by management (as represented by longer-term contracts), the pressure to perform through injury is lessened. For those who play in the minor leagues or at the edge of the NHL, injury is a constant struggle.

After his long narrative, I asked Curtis U. to reflect on what had happened:

NKL: Yeah, okay, well that says it all. So, now, looking back at it, I mean, you've told me this whole saga you've gone through, I mean, do you feel like if you had the perspective you have now that is obviously based on experiences you've had, more information, more information about concussions, right, there is a whole list of things, do you feel differently about it? Would you have made different types of choices, do you

think, now? Or, do you almost have regrets about how you acted, not that you made the wrong choices at the time, but, maybe you would have acted differently with the information now available?

Curtis U.: [Long pause, thinking.] I don't know, I mean [pause], I think, I don't know if I would have done anything differently, because we all did what we thought was best at the time. I don't think, I don't think if I, if I had to go through it again, I don't know that much would have changed, to be honest with you. Because, I think guys are still going through it today, I think it's the same thing. Guys are so, you can't rock the boat, you can't, you can't speak out if you don't, a) if you don't have proof or evidence or something, or if you're being told something by the trainers and doctors, you just have to follow suit. You're, you're not a human being, you're a number, you're, you're, you know, you're a product, you're, you know, you are an asset as long as you can perform. If you can't perform, then you're a liability and they'll drop you.

It is painfully striking to hear someone who clearly loved the experience of being a professional athlete – for Curtis U. makes it clear elsewhere in his testimony that it was his dream and something that he loved dearly – speak about being completely dehumanized through the experience. Ultimately, *this* is the toll taken on most players by the productive and social reproductive processes of athletic labour. At the end of the day, the typical athlete, like other labourers in a capitalist system, is “not a human being, you're a number, you're... a product, you're... an asset as long as you can perform. If you can't perform, then you're a liability and they'll drop you.”

Players do not play hurt because they feel compelled to by fans. That is an oft-repeated point. It is evident that there is not a direct relationship here in terms of how social reproduction operates. Rather, players endure injury because they feel that their very employment is at stake if they do not. Due to the pressures of the industrial reserve army, they will lose their jobs if they are not stoical about injuries. Nevertheless, there are some connections to the process of social reproduction that must still be made here. First, from a structural perspective, it is in the interest of professional hockey as a capitalist institution to have players play through injuries, because it enables the sport to market itself as a site of toughness. Indeed, this is how hockey comes to

distinguish itself from other sports like soccer – it is the sport where players put themselves through anything. Fans, in turn, come to the games because they identify with this toughness and sacrifice. This is what makes an arbitrary game seem real and meaningful and important. Thus, the labour and stoicism of the athletes indirectly does reproductive work for the fans by validating and legitimizing their investment, even if it is not directly done for this reason, but rather, because there is an employment imperative to do so. Second, it also needs to be added that even the pressure that players place on one another is connected to this. Years of socialization within the system of high performance hockey have instilled the notion that toughness is an important badge of honour and part of being a good teammate. Yet, the pedagogy behind this ideology is predicated on an understanding on the part of management that players, especially top players, need to be on the ice in order to satisfy fans and also to demonstrate that playing is important enough that it will not be undermined by pain and discomfort alone.

Athletic Labour and Fandom

As I have established, players understand their labour to be informed by various conventional elements of the capitalist order, namely in the form of commodification by management and pressure to play through pain and injury as a function of the industrial reserve army. They do not perceive their labour to be significantly informed by the demands and expectations of fans. However, this is not to say that fans do not enter into their experience at all. In fact, most players acknowledged the ubiquity of fans as part of their experience of athletic labour. Indeed, much like retail workers who are confronted by consumers at their jobs every day, athletes encounter fans as a quotidian element in their professional lives.

For Lawrence F., fans are inextricably-linked to the experience of athletic labour:

NKL: So, the first thing is, most basically, to what extent were you aware of fans during your career? And, I mean, both when you were on the ice and also when you were off the ice.

Lawrence F.: Well, you're, you're, you're always aware of them, because they're there when you're off the ice. When you warm up in the warm up, you see them in the stands. When the game starts, you know, you're concentrating on the game, but you're also seeing people in the stands, right? So, they're always part of, they're part of your life. The fans are part of the pro hockey life.

NKL: What did you think of them?

Lawrence F.: Well, some, some you, you, you became, you know, pretty close with. There's fans where, you know, they're fans of yours, so they talk to you after every game, and there's hecklers that you had no time for. So, you had, you know, you had different people, different personalities that, that make it a lot of fun, or, you know, in a city like Toronto, if you're not doing well and you get booed everywhere you go, it's not fun to be here. Right? So, my career, I never had any problems with any fans, except in Edmonton when I got traded from Edmonton back to St. Louis, I had a fight against, actually, a friend of mine and I got booed out of the arena and they said a bunch of bad things in the newspaper, just because, you know, the ex-teammate and, kind of, they felt I was a villain. But, that was it, my whole career.

For Lawrence F., fans are by turns energizing and troublesome, but never irrelevant. Ultimately, they are part of the fabric of the “pro hockey life.” His experienced is echoed in the testimony of Luc C.:

NKL: So, the first thing is, just very generally, to what extent would you say you were aware of fans during your career, and I mean both while you were on the ice playing and also off the ice?

Luc C.: Well, pretty much all the time. You know, at home, playing in [an original six] city, obviously you're very aware of the fans. Finishing my career in [an original six city] was obviously the same. You know, different cities, like, one year I played in [the southern U.S.], so it was obviously not, not the same. Hockey was not even close to what it was in [the original six cities]. In the mid-nineties, when I got traded [to a city in the U.S. south], [it] was really at the stage where, you know, hockey was in development, you know what I mean?

Although the nature and magnitude of fandom varied in different cities, he makes it clear that fans were a consistent part of the experience of being a professional athlete. Although the ubiquity of fans might be expected in the NHL, it is present even in less prestigious professional hockey contexts. Vasil D., for instance, experienced it in the AHL (a professional minor league to the NHL) as well:

NKL: What about in the AHL? Was there much of a fan-base for the teams you were playing for?

Vasil D.: Oh, for sure... I think we were getting twelve to fifteen thousand fans a game... So, it was really, really popular for fans waiting for you guys outside for autographs and signing hockey cards. I also had hockey cards starting in the OHL, so you signed a lot of those too as well.

Again, as discussed above, although players suggested that they were not specifically thinking about the desires of fans when they chose to play through injury, this does not mean that they were oblivious to the critical place of fandom in the political economy of professional sport. In fact, most players were aware to at least some degree that the reason they had jobs as athletes was because fans were willing to pay to come watch them play. Chris M., who played in the semi-professional OHL (out of which players are drafted into the NHL, among other minor leagues) was adamant that the significance of fans to the broader political economy of professional hockey was instilled in players from their earliest years playing the game in a high-performance setting:

Chris M.: So, it's all about the fans, and yeah, it a-, it's true, it's all about making, you learn that there, you don't realize that when you're young, your coaches tell you and you're like, "What? Like, I'm just doing this for fun. I'm doing this because it's fun for me and my parents, I want to..." They say, "No, you're playing for each and every fan in this..." and you don't realize that, but then you sort of...

NKL: And your coaches are telling you that in the OHL?

Chris M.: They're telling you that in minor hockey.

Evidently, this lesson was not confined to Chris M. alone, as other players gestured to a similar understanding of the significance of fandom to their livelihoods. Vasil D., for instance, was particularly clear on this point:

NKL: What did you make of fans, what did you think of them?

Vasil D.: Oh, I loved it. I was a very outgoing guy and you know, they, the reason why you're there is a big part because of them...

NKL: What do you mean by that?

Vasil D.: Well, without them watching your games, you don't have a hockey career, right? The excitement, the passion, right, it's tough to find people that are really passionate for teams and ones that are there day in, day out, right? But [where I played], there was, it was huge support like that.

Similarly, although his attitude towards fans was very different, Luc C., too, understood that interactions with fans were an inevitable part of the experience because of their place in the broader political economy of the game:

NKL: What did you think of fans? I know that's a general question, but what were your impressions?

Luc C.: Well, obviously fans are... if there's no fans, there's no professional sports. It's that simple. I mean, you don't just play in front of, of cameras for tv, you play in big arenas with sometimes twenty thousand people there, so, anyways, fans are very, very important and, you know, when you play as, as a professional athlete, it's, it's, you have to respect that in the first place. People are coming there to, to watch you play and perform and watch you, your team win, hopefully, and, so, yeah, you're going and you have to know that and respect that. People are paying big prices to, to go see your performance. So, that's the first thing.

Evidently, he is acutely conscious of the connection between fandom and political economy.

More than this, he is aware of the implications of that connection: the fact that satisfying fans is fundamentally important. Thus, although he elsewhere denies that the expectations of fans

influenced the way he played or the decision to play through injury, the fact that he is aware of the significance of fans suggests that on one level he cannot avoid playing for them to some extent.

Outside of the NHL, in lower level leagues, with more precarious political economies, the significance of satisfying fans is even greater, a fact not lost on players in these contexts. Sean O., who played in England, was under no illusion about the connection between his job and the people buying tickets to watch him play:

NKL: Did you have any interactions with fans off the ice?

Sean O.: It was huge. After every home game, you'd have to go to the supporter's club. And, supporters that helped with meals on the road, and stuff like that, and they would do things, you know, for your apartment, or your flat in England. You needed a tv, they were always there to provide stuff for the team. So, after games, there was always a lot of interaction with the paren-, sorry, the supporters. So, lots of times you would go in there, you would have a quick beer with them, and you'd do other things. So, it was always, uh, it was always huge to get the supporters on your side to make sure the gates would keep coming up, right, so it was a big part of interacting, and the school visits, and all the other stuff you'd have to do, right?

The obligations placed on players at this level extended well beyond their contributions on the ice. Players worked off the ice to engender the investment from fans necessary to keep the whole operation afloat. If this meant the players had to cultivate superficial relationships with the fans, then so be it. That became a part of their responsibility as athletic labourers. The players were expected to give spectators exactly what they needed in order to stay interested. Chris M. speaks to a similar phenomenon in the OHL and teases out some of the implications of all this for players of different status on the team:

Chris M.: So, it's more about the, the management of the team is more conscious of the crowd, because crowds bring in dollars and, num-, just total revenue and, like, the food and whatever, the beers. If the team's not performing, nobody's showing up, season tickets go down, no one's getting booze, popcorn and whatever, now there's trouble, kids

are getting cut, they're bringing in new kids, trying to sa-, trying to hope that something will happen. So, the fans are the driving catalyst of it.

NKL: And as a player you're aware of that?

Chris M.: Ye-, I mean, you are aware of that and you want to be, it's true, you want to be in the fans' good favour. So, the worse you are, the nicer you are to the fans. That's what I will say. So, the best players were the most, like, disgusted in the fans. Because, number one, the fans are more all over them. And, then, the players who were just trying to, like, get a good name and kind of fit in, are, like, so nice to the fans and, like, will talk to them and will chat with them after practice and stuff. The good players are like, "Aw, like," and then the good players will say, like, "Why that? What the f- are you talking to them for? What's the matter with you?" But, they don't realize what it's like to have to schmooze your way in the, kind of, community, because they're just, like, there on pure skills, pure talent and they're going, they're going places, you know what I mean, like, within a year or two. So, everything is about the fans because everything's about the money, and the fans bring the money.

There is little doubt that at the OHL level, players are vividly aware of the significance of fans to their jobs. Much like in England, this has particular implications for the way in which players must perform their jobs. Chris M. clearly demonstrates that players with less job security feel it is incumbent upon them to do this additional work in the hopes that it will buttress their standing with the team. Whether or not this work does have an impact on their status on the team, what is evident here is that the pressures of the reserve army inform how players understand their own responsibilities to the team including those pertaining to fans.

Despite the obvious significance of fans to the political economy of hockey in their role as consumers upon whose ability to satisfy effective demand the entire system relies, many players suggested they did not care what fans thought of them. Luc C. is representative of this position:

NKL: Would you say that when you were playing in games, or just interacting with people – you're describing a lot of different types of interactions – did you feel like you were having to play a role for fans, or did you feel like you were able to be yourself during your career?

Luc C.: No, you don't try that. I mean, personally, I, I never, I never did that. I mean it's, you, yeah, you play the way you play. I mean, you play the way you're supposed to play under your, your team system and stuff like that. I mean, you don't play, you know, when you step on the ice, I mean, you know the fans are there, but you don't play, you know, how can I say that, like it's, yeah, you play to win. And, if you win, you know that you make fans happy, but, in other words, when you play, you play for your team, you play for your teammates. That's, that's, that's what it comes down to. You know, you don't play for people watching, you know, they're, they're watching, and it's great. That's, that's the approach I had. I mean, it's not like I was going on the ice to, to, to do a show, you know what I mean?

NKL: Uh huh, I see.

Luc C.: I was on the ice to, to perform, to do my best, and help my teammates, help my team to, to win, to achieve something. And, if all goes well, well the fans and everybody else is happy. But, I don't think you should go on the ice worried about playing for the people watching.

He is explicit here that his ultimate motivation is to play for his teammates and he assumes that the indirect benefit of playing well will be satisfaction enough for fans. If fans seek an imagined community in sport precisely because they do not feel that sort of community in their own lives, players, on the other hand, live an extremely anomalous form of existence within capitalism as members of a community that spends much of its time together. This is a community that is deeply inflected by capitalism in terms of the competition that exists within it, but it is a community nonetheless. It should hardly be perceived as surprising if players “play for [their] team,... play for [their teammates],” that is, that they ultimately esteem the opinions of members of this community over those of outsiders who they perceive to be external and only contingently relevant. Indeed, the sense of externality in this relationship is critical to the way in which most players seem to view fans and begins to bring us nearer to an understanding of the dynamics of athletic labour as social reproduction.

Yet, before we develop this point further, it is incumbent to acknowledge that for some players, the experience of being around fans was a genuine pleasure. For these individuals, it

validated the narrative they had of their own lives that playing professional hockey was the pinnacle of meaning and accomplishment. This understanding is ideological and is connected to the broader processes of social reproduction, something I will discuss in much greater depth in a later chapter. Darin K. fell very much into this camp:

NKL: And what did you make of those interactions?

Darin K.: Oh, I loved it. I mean, I was a fan too at one point, you know, I was a kid. So, for me, it was, I took every fan and every autograph very humble and very grateful.

Curtis U. also received a tremendous amount of gratification from being acknowledged by fans, as he himself had once been a fan of professional hockey:

NKL: Sure, okay. And what did you think of fans? What were your impressions? And, also, maybe if it was different between [the U.S. and Canada], I would also be interested in that.

Curtis U.: I loved ‘em. I loved the interaction, I, I, I, I thought it was a privilege to, to speak to them and deal with them and, you know, sign the autographs. Some people found them to be annoying, and, I guess, at some points maybe they were, but, you know, for, for me, ninety-nine percent of the time I was grateful and wanted to speak and interact with them and things like that, so, and, because, really, I was, I was just breaking into the league myself, so I was still a fan [laughs], you know what I mean? I was playing with the people that I saw on tv and so whe-, when someone asked for my autograph, I was flattered, so that’s, and I wanted to make them feel that that was their friend rather than, you know, putting me on a pedestal I, you know, had conversations with them or I spent time with them, or I’d visit... You know, to give you an example, I had one fan in [Canada] ask me to attend his son’s birthday party and, so, I threw on my jersey, hopped in the car and surprised the group. And, I got just as big a kick out of it as the kids did [laughs]. So, you know, that, that, to me, I mean, I remember that, obviously, and I’m sure the child remembers that as a special moment, so, I appreciated those moments.

Yet, most other players responded to the persistent presence of fans in their lives much less favourably, articulating instead a sense of discomfort, as if the interactions they felt compelled to have were somehow unnatural. Luc C. fell into this category:

Luc C.: You know, you, you [fans] want them to win, you follow in the news, on tv, and all that stuff. I mean, you care about, about the players, about them. You want them to win and all that stuff. So, as an athlete, you feel that.

NKL: Yeah, and how is that? How do you feel that? What makes you aware of that?

Luc C.: Well, just the atmosphere. I mean, when you show up, like, this big, in the big hockey cities, if you show up, especially when you get down the stretch getting close to playoffs, and stuff like that, like, you see, like, the energy change, the people at the practice rink, just there when players arrive, or before games, and things like that. Um, yeah, so, uh... You know, the tough part, maybe that was one of your questions coming, the tough part is that, um, um, it's, it's very hard to, to develop good relationships with fans. I mean, they are so many, you know, or, it's like being idolized, so you, say you, you are meet-, you pull up at, at the arena and there are fans there and, and, you know, they want your autograph and it's, it's a really, really special situation. I mean, people are there just, you know, to take a picture with you, to take your autographs, but it's not really a, you know, like a personal relationship. It's, it's really weird. It's something that personally, I was never comfortable with as a player.

Initially, Luc C. seems to speak of fans in a favourable sense. He is distinctly aware of the fact that they care about players and hold them in high regard. Yet, despite the heightened “energy” they bring to the arena, he quickly changes tack. Unprompted, he shifts to a discussion of what is difficult about the relation to fans, even assuming that this is the topic of a future question. He describes interactions with fans as “weird” and “never comfortable.” Even his choice of the term “idolized” as a way of describing how he is perceived by fans – rather than, say ‘loved’ or ‘adored’ – suggests artificiality, as if it is only a facsimile of himself, mere artifice in his image, that is being worshipped, or, even, that the player is in some sense a false idol never worthy of the adulation. As he proceeds, this sense of strain in the relation to fans is elaborated further:

NKL: And can you just tell me a little bit about why that was?

Luc C.: Why?

NKL: Yeah, what you felt? What made you uncomfortable?

Luc C.: Well, you don't know these people.

NKL: Yes.

Luc C.: And then these people don't really know you. All they really know is, is you as a hockey player, you know, like, your number, and they've read stuff about, about you in different medias or heard stories on tvs, or whatever, but, they don't know you. You know, it's like, in the summertime, you know, sometimes, like, I live on the lake, and sometimes I had people just pulling on the boat in front of my house and filming, and taking pictures, so it's, it's, it's really, really weird. So, it's, it's tough to, when you, when you're dealing with that, to, to develop, develop relationships with, with people. You know, I'm not saying all fans are like that...

NKL: No, I understand.

Luc C.: There are, there are fans that are really fanatics. In a bad way, yeah [laughs].

Unlike most of the players I spoke with, he demonstrates a real awareness here of how fabricated the imagined athletic community is. He points to the fact that the relationships are not real, yet he is constantly under scrutiny. What he seems to be getting at, perhaps, is the way in which players are the object on which the community affixes its investment. This leaves him with a "weird" feeling, because there is something unnatural about the whole process that he has difficulty putting his finger on. Yet, he feels it and is never comfortable with it.

Chris M., too, finds aspects of the dynamic between players and spectators disquieting when asked about his experience with fans off the ice. He says,

Chris M.: So, yeah, off the ice is a bit, it's more annoying. I mean, you'd have to come after the game and there'd be a table of things you'd have to sign, and it's like, you don't know these people. I mean, the kids, yeah, it's nice for the kids, but, there are some, there's a booster club, right, who's supposed to boost the team, but I don't know, like, there's some people who are like pedophil-, like, you know, like registered sex offenders and stuff. I don't know, I thought some of them had mental problems. The teams would call, the team would call them "the critters." You know, it's the booster club, and they were supposed to be there for us, and, but, they'd be called, we'd call them "the critters." You know, and they would add you on Facebook and all this stuff and, like, just, like, think that they were so involved in your life, like commenting and whatever. It's funny, like, I see, guys that I know that actually did make the NHL, the same critters... are, like, bombarding them with messages, like, comments on, like, Facebook, as if, like, they, like, know them. Like, "way to go, like, Damon," like, you know, this guy who plays [in the NHL], Damon Daniels. And I see all these, and I'm like, "Oh my God, these fans are

still at it.” And, and, the thing is, they, they sort of latch on to the ones who make the NHL. So, I’ll see the few of them that will post on that guy’s wall, like, “Congratulations to this guy, this guy, and this guy for their great seasons,” and stuff. And I’m like, “Whoa, that’s just like....” I don’t know. There has to be, there’s something weird there. I mean, that’s just my perception, right? You’d have like a fan, some lady, you know, middle-aged or above middle-aged, lady who’d come to every single practice with her little dog and just sit there and watch. And, like, I mean, sure, it gives a lot of people meaning, and that’s fine, but as a player, they love you, and you’re like, “Oh my God, like, ugh.” You know, so, that’s the interesting part. But, I mean, it’s just fanfare, right? They’re fanatics and, I mean, it gets kind of weird when they’re fanatics about you as an individual. The other side of the coin is that, you know, when you’re good, they love you, but when you’re bad, you know, it’s in the newspaper, you know, “What’s he doing here? He should be on the bubble. He should be gone.” You know? “Why’s he? He can’t score...” So, it comes with the territory, I guess.

There is a tremendous amount going on in this passage. On the surface, it is noteworthy just how irritated he is by fans and the obligation players have to them. What makes this particularly interesting, though, is the way he characterizes the experience as artificial. Although fans “think they were so involved in your life,” to him they were not. This meant that although his play was giving “a lot of people meaning,” the process through which he did so nevertheless felt absurd. Indeed, more significantly, the reference to pedophilia and “mental problems” connotes particularly just how unnatural this dynamic seemed to him (there is certainly an ableist dimension to the suggestion that mental illness is unnatural, but this appears to be his intended meaning). Finally, he also demonstrates a consciousness that the fans had an impact on his livelihood. If they liked him, his life was easier. If not, it had the potential to drive him from a job. This “love”-hate relationship is entirely predicated on his performance; it is, in other words, the furthest thing from unconditional.

James I. shared Chris M.’s sense of unease with fans:

NKL: So, let’s talk about fans. First, to what extent were you aware of fans during your career, you know, while you were on the ice?

James I.: On the ice?

NKL: Yeah.

James I.: I mean, you don't really notice them on the ice. When we [I was in the AHL], we were a pretty bad team so you kind of, you know what's going on, like, you're getting booed and stuff, like, but, so. But, other than that, you don't really notice them.

NKL: You don't really notice them? What about off the ice?

James I.: I mean, you've got fans that wait for you after the game, autographs, that type of thing, you have player appearances.

NKL: Okay. What did you think of them?

James I.: I mean, I wasn't the biggest fan of the fans, but, it was just kind of...

NKL: Why is that?

James I.: It's like, you know, these people, they don't know you but they think they know you type of thing. Like, they're all over you, like, especially social media and stuff, like, they can harass you a little bit, eh, right? Just tried to get into your life type of thing.

His impression of fans accords with that of Chris M. There is a sense here that something is unnatural and forced about the relationship between players and fans, a feeling that they are insinuating themselves into aspects of his life in which they do not belong nor have a right.

When prompted, he elaborates further:

NKL: Yeah, okay. And, what kind of expectations do you think they had?

James I.: You know, like, they would invite you for dinners and stuff, like, hang out with them, do this with them. And you were just like, you know, like, "It's not like we're friends."

I highlight this section because his reference to friendship underlines the fact that he understands the relationship between spectators and players to be superficial and, perhaps, artificial. It also suggests that he feels like fans perceived the dynamic quite differently than he did as a player.

That fact that some players find engagement with fans to be an unnatural and uncomfortable experience indexes the exchange nature of the relationship – the relationship

between labourer and consumer discussed above – but it also indicates that there may be something above and beyond typical alienation that is going on. In other words, what we can observe in these gestures of unease is a window into the process of social reproduction that occurs through the labour that players perform on behalf of fans (while simultaneously producing surplus-value, capital, for owners). The statements of uneasiness made by players indicate the discomfort that this process causes them. There is something else taking place in this political economy beyond simply the production of surplus value. The fact that players repeatedly frame fandom as something superficial and external to their experience is particularly notable. They acknowledge that they must pander to fans – and in this gesture to a vague awareness of how the political economy of the sport is organized – but generally suggest that they do not pay attention to fans (other than when they acknowledge they receive a rush from the feeling of succeeding in front of a multitude, something I will explore in a later chapter). In a certain sense, then, being compelled to acknowledge the presence of fans, they experience a form of alienation – their labour is not their own, but rather, for someone else. Their very resistance to acknowledging that they care about what fans think or want – while simultaneously revealing a partial awareness of the significance of fans to the political economy of the game – can be read as protesting too much. They insist that they are *not* playing for the fans, even as they do, precisely because they are trying to defend their own sovereignty over their labour, their autonomy from a process of social reproduction they are nevertheless fundamentally imbricated in.

Another element of the commodification experienced by players is found in the way in which fans support the teams of their choosing. That is, spectators tend to cheer for teams (i.e. the Montreal Canadiens) more than individual players (i.e. P.K. Subban). When asked whether

fans cared more about the team than individual players, Darin K. remarks, “Oh yeah, for sure. Yeah. I mean, fans have their, their favourite players that they cheer for, but, all and all, they want their team to win.” Despite his feeling of connection to the fans, he is very clear on the fact that they care more about the team than him personally. This fact creates the sense that players are simply the vessels for the meaning of fans to be readily discarded when a new and perhaps superior body is recruited to the task. Players are acutely aware of this instrumental approach to their labour, one that figures them as eminently disposable and replaceable. In a lengthier meditation on the theme, Luc C. reveals that he too has internalized the idea that the team *should* come before the player in the affections of fans:

NKL: Do you think that fans care more about the teams they cheer for, or the players?

Luc C.: It depends what market you are in. I remember, like, again, in a market like in [in the U.S. south], where people are really not knowledgeable about the sport, about hockey. I mean, people were big time fans of a, say, a [star player], and meanwhile the team is, is just an average team, you know? It seems like in some of the markets, especially in the States, where the mentality is, is like having your big, big star while people are, are kind of like developing their own stars. So, anyway, that market in [the U.S. south] was very much around the [stars] and meanwhile, it's, as a team, you didn't feel that it's, a, it was like a fan [of the team], it was more like a specific individual's fan. Which, which is not, it's not good, you know what I mean?

NKL: Yeah.

Luc C.: And that's, that's a problem, very often, in some of those cities where, you know, they're not really big hockey cities. Like, you know, like, you'll play in Canada, yes you'll have more highlights around certain players, but fans are, are more knowledgeable and, and fans are a team, you know, a team fan and not, you know, say, you know, back then, when I was playing, you know, you had the, the effect of, say, a Wayne Gretzky going to L.A. or, you know, when Mario Lemieux came to Pittsburgh, you know, people just got drawn to those teams because now big all-stars were in those markets.

The salient aspect of this extend discussion of the sociology of hockey fandom is the way in which he reveals himself to have internalized the notion of the imagined athletic community. He

is chagrined to find that many fans in markets where hockey did not have a historical hold (markets where the imagined athletic community has not yet fully taken root) are more interested in particular players rather than the team as an abstract entity. In this sense he is actually endorsing an understanding of fandom that sees players as relatively anonymous and interchangeable figures through whom the imagined community is given life. This fact testifies to the ideological power and scope of the imagined athletic community. Players are socialized to believe in its existence in their youth and then come to socially reproduce its logic through their professional labour. This does not preclude the possibility that in particular contexts (such as L.A and Pittsburgh in his examples) the imperatives of capital demand an initial focus on star player rather than team before the logic of the imagined athletic community has fully taken root. In this sense the star player helps build and consolidate a market for the imagined athletic community, paving the way for his ultimate obsolescence once the community becomes fully entrenched.

Although he does not say so explicitly, there is another even more significant premise underlying Luc C.'s analysis: the political economy of hockey thrives when fans are invested in teams rather than players. If fans are only interested in watching particular stars, they will simply show up to the games when those players are involved and neglect to purchase tickets or watch games on television at other times. This in turn leaves cities whose teams lack signature players with very little enticement to draw fans aside from the few occasions on which stars come to town. Conversely, if fans invest in the team above all, they have incentive to show up regardless of who is employed. Thus, it is in the rational economic interest of the team to engender enthusiasm for the abstract imagined athletic community rather than individual players. It is the logical consequence of the political economy of the sport – and the imagined athletic community – that players are dehumanized, commodified, and instrumentalized.

Yet, although the logic of the system dictates that fans support teams more ardently than individual athletes, this does not prevent them from turning against individual players rather than the team as a whole when things go awry. The violence of this reversal suggests the level of meaning being produced. Because fans come to identify with the team, when the team loses/fails, the fan must displace her own sense of failure back on the player, symbolically expelling the player from the team. The consequence of this is that players often experience vitriolic abuse at the hands of spectators. Sean O. witnessed an extreme form of this phenomenon in his experience playing in England:

Sean O.: Theoren Fleury came over there, ex-NHLer, and he was playing against Coventry. Now, Coventry fans were very, very, very, very, very hostile and very crazy and they went at him pretty hard, like with his drug abuse, his alcoholism and they had, they didn't even cut back at all. And there was actually a picture, maybe you can find it, where Fleury was up over the glass and he was yelling at the crowd. Now, I wasn't there, but, I wasn't out on the ice, but it was all over the, the media, the UK media, and, I actually felt pretty bad for him, you know, like here's a guy that's trying to move on with his life and, you know, that was being brought up. But, as far as for me, I mean, I wasn't impactful enough, I don't think, as a player, to, they just get me off my game, right, so, you know, I was pretty much left alone and I was kind of like, I was kind of a player where if you didn't notice me on the ice, I was doing my job, if that makes sense.

The more successful the athlete is at generating meaning for the fan in the form of the imagined athletic community – that is, the more impact a player has on the game – the more potential he creates for this abuse, for he reifies the imagined community into something that is concrete and real. This in turn produces the potential for violent response, as the fan becomes inclined to displace the frustrations s/he experiences in life onto the enemy of the imagined athletic community (who now appears to be very much a real enemy). The enemy, broadly speaking and in the abstract, is the other team. Yet, the other team is embodied in the corporeal form of the individual athlete, and it is he who bears the burden of this malice.

Darin K. experienced the wrath of opposing fans personally, as he elaborates upon being asked if he had any interactions with fans: “Yeah, but that’s just the normal stuff where you go to the penalty box, they’re screaming at you, getting at you, and you’re... maybe you’ll say something back or you’ll take a water bottle and spray them, but no fights or swinging or anything.” It is notable how banal the experience of being screamed at by fans is for him – it is “normal.” This abuse is part of what players must endure in their jobs and it is something that assuredly must impact them. Curtis U. makes a similar point after being asked whether fans care more about the team they cheer for or the players on the team: “That’s a good question. I think it depends on how the team’s performing. You know, if, if the team is performing well, they cheer for the team and they love everybody. If the team’s performing poorly, I think they start to go after the individual.” In general, winning and losing is an important part of the imagined athletic community experience. Winning knits the community together; losing produces fissures. Some communities bond over the losing, others fragment. It is only logical that players would bear the brunt of the latter scenario, as they become targets for the displacement of the frustration of fans over the disintegration of the construct that gave them meaning and purpose. There are many aspects of sacrifice that the athlete experiences as a consequence of social reproductive labour that extend beyond simple exploitation. One is injury and the crisis of identity that can follow. A second is the plenitude and loss experienced as a consequence of serving as the vessel for the meaning of fandom. Both of these topics will be explored at length in a later chapter, for they help account for the full cost of socially reproductive athletic labour. However, there is a third form of sacrifice as well that is evident in the experiences of Sean O., Darin K., and Curtis U.: by generating meaning for fans, the athlete becomes a target of abuse. As the physical embodiment of the antagonist to the imagined community, he becomes a source of hatred and vitriol, and

these emotions are channeled towards him during the game and after. This has the potential to be deeply destabilizing (as evinced, for example, by the experience of Theoren Fleury).

There is another side to these dynamics which was raised by only one of the players, Chris M., likely because he was the youngest of the sample and the only one to have been raised in an era when social media was already ubiquitous. That is the question of how the passion fans feel for the imagined athletic community translates into obsessive analysis of young prospects who may one day become players in the NHL and vessels for the imagined community. This is something that Chris M. experienced and which evidently took a significant toll upon his psychological and emotional development. I quote at length:

Chris M.: Even when, like, when I was young, for instance, I was even, like in Toronto, I had even more success than I did in the OHL, I was in the newspaper when I was thirteen years old for being, like, a top-scorer in the GTHL, AAA, and all that stuff. And I, I, it freaked me out to think that all these people that I don't know think they know me and are making comments about me and I'm like, and I didn't understand that, like, anyone can say anything, doesn't make it true. I would, I would be thirteen and people would be, random people would be, like, blogging about me on the internet, and I just was like, "You know what? I don't want to play hockey anymore. This is just weird. This just got like, like...." Even people I never met, under the anonymous, like, they'd be like, "Yeah, this effing whatever, like, you know...." Just, like, just people are, like, the way people comment, especially with the internet, it's gotten worse. Everyone's a reporter, everyone's, right? And, there's such anon-, anon-ymity? Is that right?

NKL: Anonymity, yeah, exactly.

Chris M.: Anonymity, yeah. And so, everyone feels so, like, strong and comfortable to say, just crap, you know, like? So, it's not like, "Oh, okay, this article's by this guy with his face right there," and there's a bit of accountability there. Especially for young people, when you don't understand that, like. So, that, honestly, I found, you know, it gets worse, and its, you know, Twitter, look at, you know, like, you know, I, I played when I was younger a lot with this, you know, that kid on Montreal, Subban, I don't know if you know...

NKL: Yeah, sure.

Chris M.: Scores the winning goal against Boston, and it's like, "Effing [lowers his voice] nigger," and all this stuff, like, "Oh this, that." And, like, so, you know, I'm sure

he has, like, people who really can talk to him and say, “You don’t worry about that.” But when you’re young, you’re, you’re not worth any money yet, right so there’s no, like, there’s no, like, person that they’re willing to pay to, kind of, train, you know what I mean? It’s like, it’s that commodification again, it’s like, “Okay, well I’ve invested this many dollars in you, so if your head gets screwed up, then that, my whole investment goes in the garbage, so I’ll pay this guy a frac-, like, sixty grand a year to just basically coach you mentally in and out the whole team.” But, when you’re young, and you have to deal with that, you don’t get that. And, at the same time, like I said before, maybe the people who were stronger mentally when they were young are the ones who made it to the next level. Because, at the next level, the bombardment of media and social media is just, it’s insane, right? So, and, like, the scale just amplifies so that I think that no human can deal with that, because it’s unnatural.

In this extended discussion he describes a harrowing experience. Players become celebrities upon whom the attention of fans and media is fixated. This comes with a high degree of vitriol, even at a young age. For Chris M., there was a clear psychological consequence to this, as it caused him to question himself. Elsewhere in his testimony, he speaks of the nightmares that haunted him throughout his career playing hockey. It is no great psychoanalytic leap to suggest that these youthful experiences were scarring in terms of their contribution to his sense of self which was evidently shaken. His analysis is that this is almost a weeding process in terms of who is able to advance to the professional ranks. If this is indeed so, what it means is that only those who are emotionally and intellectually calloused are able to advance through this gauntlet. These sorts of calluses must undoubtedly impact players after their careers ended, for they are a sort of emotional wall against the other. In other words, by becoming the locus of meaning for so many people, athletes become compelled to isolate themselves from the social realm. Even as they reproduce others, they stunt themselves.

The Influence of Spectatorship on Athletic Labour

The connection between players and fans through the production of the imagined athletic community by the former for the latter that makes the political economy of hockey possible affects both the way that players play and the decisions they make to play through pain and injury. In this sense, although, as we have seen, many players disavow that they are influenced by the expectations of fans, at other times players consciously acknowledge that they do play for fans, knowingly giving them what they need. This is partly owing to the political economic conditions discussed above, but it is partly borne of a dialectical process that occurs between players and fans in which fans invest meaning in players and players mirror that meaning back to them, elevating themselves to the status of heroes/symbols and fans to membership in the team. Darin K., for instance, explicitly acknowledges the impact the expectations of fans had on his performance:

NKL: And, do you feel like the expectations of fans influenced how you behaved as an athlete? So, in order to fulfil the enforcer role, was that just the role the team expected of you, or do you feel like the fans' expectations of how you were going protect your teammates or perform in a fight, did that influence how you went about doing your job?

Darin K.: Oh yeah, sure. Because, they'd react to a hit or a cheap shot and they would go crazy, and then that would get me going. So, it sort of worked hand-in-hand.

NKL: I see, okay. And did it matter to you a great deal what the fans thought of you?

Darin K.: Well, I think, not the, the away fans, but your own home fans, yeah, sure. You know, you want to be, you'd want to be respected by them and, and, and liked by your home fans. But the away fans, I didn't really care about.

Evidently the nature of the way in which he performed was shaped by the reaction of fans to the performance. He understood that he was a locus of the meaning surrounding the team and sought

to fulfil that responsibility by giving his “home fans” exactly what they were paying to see.

Lawrence F. had a very similar experience:

NKL: So, I was just going to ask, because we were talking about the attitudes that fans have, you were telling me that there were different attitudes that fans have, fifty percent rock ‘em, sock ‘em, fifty percent want to go with their family, do you feel like the expectations of fans ever influenced your own decision to play through injury? Or, to engage in behaviour that would make you more likely to get hurt?

Lawrence F.: Well, yeah, because it becomes, it becomes, you know, have you ever watched the movie *The Gladiator*?

NKL: Yup.

Lawrence F.: Okay, so it’s like, the, the, Colosseum, and people are cheering for them, and, when you’re a player, and you’re at home especially, they’re cheer, they’re your life-line. You make a big hit, they cheer for you, you score a goal, they cheer for you, you get in a good fight, they cheer for you. So, they influence you, they give you, you know, energy to say, “I want to be out there.” They’re a big part of why we play. Right? Twenty thousand people screaming for you gives you, you know, it’s like a, you know, this power, if you will, right?

This passage speaks even more evocatively to the symbiotic relationship between fans and players. The performance of the player rejuvenates the fan, who in turn redirects that “energy” back to the players in a feedback loop that ultimately serves to animate the imagined athletic community. Indeed, Vasil D. explains that even when players publicly state that they are impervious to the expectations of fans, this is seldom the reality:

NKL: Okay, and did you feel more pressure as a consequence, of the fan expectations? In your day-to-day experience of being a professional, is the way the fans looked at you...

Vasil D.: Oh, for sure. Everybody’s got pressure. Don’t let players fool you, they try to, try to play it off a little bit that, that they don’t feel the pressure. But, when fans and the media are on them, then they’re definitely at home thinking about it, right? And, a lot of players say they don’t, but in the back of their head they’re thinking that they want to do well for those reasons too as well, right?

He speaks here to the awareness that players have of fans and what fans are thinking of them.

The “pressure” he describes can be understood, perhaps, as a sense of responsibility to fulfil the expectations of fans, expectations that have to do with effort and investment as much as performance. Again, Lawrence F. is similarly conscious of these expectations:

NKL: Did you have a sense that fans had an expectation of the type of player you or anyone should be?

Lawrence F.: Oh yeah. Sure. Well, my role, and I, you know, let’s face it, as the fourth liner, they know when you step on the ice things are going to happen physically. So, when we would get out there, and they would be cheering and screaming, and, you know, in a sense, looking for blood, then, you know, that was the way it was. It was different when Gretzky stepped on the ice, right?

NKL: And you could actually hear them?

Lawrence F.: Oh yeah. When we’d line up against the other fourth line, you could hear the anticipation of who was going to fight. Sure you do.

What is noteworthy here is how conscious and aware he is of the fans and their expectations of him. In a sense, he was fulfilling their requirements by performing his pugilistic role.

The above passages paint the expectations of fans in a somewhat favourable light, suggesting that they were to some extent energizing and motivating. Yet, this was not always the case. Sometimes players were unable to satisfy the expectations of fans – expectations they were acutely aware of – and this resulted in a significant sense of impotence and failure:

NKL: So, how much did it matter to you what those fans thought of you? Clearly, you were aware of the expectations, did that play into your experience much?

Curtis U.: It was only in that moment, prior to my knee injury, I didn’t, you know, it wasn’t a factor what fans said, and mostly, I mean, there wasn’t, you know, there wasn’t a lot of negative awareness, on me, for me, anyways, any negative awareness from fans, especially when you’re on the road, you expect fans to boo and, you know, do all of those things, it doesn’t matter, but this was my home crowd, in my home arena and this one, again, just one particular fan who just would not let up, and you kind of wanted to look up at him and say, “Hey, you know what, I’m trying. I’m dealing with something you’re

not, you have no idea about.” And, that was the only time I felt frustrated. But, the, but I shared his frustration about how I was playing, because I couldn’t play. I mean, he was right, I couldn’t play, but it was, you know, I, I, I guess the home, I wanted my hometown crowd to back me in support as opposed to, you know, giving me the thumbs down, I guess.

Even more significantly, players tended to be highly aware of the expectations of fans about whether they should through pain and injury. While this may not always have been as critical a factor in the decision to persevere through bodily harm to stay on the ice as a desire to stay a step ahead of the reserve army of labour and to remain in the good graces of teammates, it nevertheless seems inevitable that such a clear conception of expectation must have informed the decision-making of some players. Lawrence F. and Sean O. were two of many players to demonstrate that they were attuned to the requirements of fans on this subject:

NKL: So now I just want to bring it back to the fan angle, but this time fans related to injury. So, one question that emerged out of what both you guys were saying is, you talked about how the air comes out of the arena when there’s some kind of gruesome injury, let’s say, do you feel like fans bounce back... do players bounce back more quickly or less quickly than fans when it comes to that?

Lawrence F.: Oh yeah.

NKL: How fast do fans get over it versus players?

Lawrence F.: Well, I think, I think the fans get over it quicker because...

Sean O.: There’s no connection to the players.

Lawrence F.: There’s no connection. They’re just drinking their beer or they’re there as a game, okay, that’s over with. No you got two other guys fighting here in the corner, it’s a great stand-up fight and they’re cheering again, whereas the player’s are going, “who’s the next to get hurt?”

Here we have a clear and incisive statement of the difference between the way players and fans experience injury and violence. For fans, as the players are aware, it is a minor blip, quickly forgotten. For players, it is a crushing reminder of the dangers they experience everyday in

playing. It is also noteworthy to see just how conscious these players are of how expendable they are to fans. Lawrence F. goes on:

NKL: Okay, so, just generally speaking, building on that, what do you feel like fans' attitude is to injuries of players?

Lawrence F.: Well, here's what I see...

NKL: Please.

Lawrence F.: The Don Cherry⁷ fans of the Rock 'em, Sock 'em blood bath, they go there, they drink their beer, they wanna see blood. They should be watching UFC. I take my family, my kids there, I don't want to see him lying on the ground shaking from a seizure with blood pouring out of his face. I want to see Crosby to Malkin, Malkin goal. You got fifty percent want to see hockey, fifty percent want to see blood. The percentages may have changed with all the violence, so maybe sixty-five, forty-five, or maybe seventy-thirty. I don't know what the percentage would be today, but it's not, it's not pro-fighting so much anymore, right?

This testimony is most revealing when taken in the abstract: players are acutely aware of what it is that fans want to see. Inevitably, that awareness comes to inform the decisions and behaviour of players. If a player knows a fan wants to see blood, he is more likely to provide it, whether it is his own or someone else's. Sean O. adds, in the same conversation,

Sean O.: In a minor pro environment, I remember playing in Texas, in San Angelo, and, we had, like Lawrence F. was talking about before, about like booster fans that come down and talk to you. And, you know, usually, they would set up, you know, these little, you know, meetings after the game. You got up and you have a drink with the owners, the sponsors, the people that were putting in money towards it. And they, the questions would be like, the question this one lady asked me was, "When does the referee tell you that it's okay to fight?" Or, "When do they cue you to fight?" Like, just so on that aspect of things, they just have no idea about, they don't even know if it's real. They don't even know if it is really a guy getting hurt, is it really somebody losing a job over this?

⁷Don Cherry is a former NHL head coach and long time television analyst for CBC's *Hockey Night in Canada*. He is notorious for his advocacy of violence in hockey and his criticism of European players, who he claims play a less physical style than Canadian and American players.

Again, we see here just how different the experience is for fans and players. Sean O. reveals that it was clear to him that fans had no conception of just how serious the stakes were for players. Although fans were entertained and found meaning in the games, they gave little or no thought to what players actually had to go through to make that possible. Vasil D. made similar observations in a separate conversation:

NKL: And, do you feel like it's easier for the fans to move on after an injury like that happens then for players... I'm not trying to say... obviously, if that happens to you...

Vasil D.: No, I understand, yeah. Well, I think that the thing with fans is that there's new players every year. Seven, ten, twelve new players every year, so, they don't forget about the players, but, also, there's, within ten years, you're probably gonna go through hundreds of players, right? So, you're not forget, you're not forget, they don't forget you, but, that injury will always be in the back of everyone's minds in that organization and whoever was coaching, and the fans, but, because he, he recovered from it, kind of, I think it was a little easier, but...

NKL: So, you feel like, if I understand you correctly, fans are more invested in the team than the players?

Vasil D.: Of course. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I think they're more about the team and team winning. It's, you know, it's small towns and it's a big thing. Same thing as the Olympics, you know. We're all cheering Can-, for Canada, so if you're from a small town, a professional hockey team, you're basically cheering on your team more than individual players.

This is a remarkably clear statement of who fans care about and why. The reason why it is so important is that it demonstrates that players are fully conscious of the fact that most fans don't empathize with them personally. This is a realization no doubt born of years of experience observing how quickly fans are able to move on from and forget about specific players and the sometimes traumatic experiences that they have.

For Luc C., what fans do not understand is the cumulative toll of the physical harm players experience over the course of an entire season:

Luc C.: Just referring towards the end of my career... dealing with a, at one, at one point I had a really, really bad cold and bronchitis and on top of it I was dealing with, with really, really bad lower back pain. So here, here it is, right, I have this back pain and on top of it I have a tough time breathing and performing at high intensity and, and when you play, like I was in a role where I had to play against the number one lines and centres of the other team, trying to do a good job defensively and, so it, it's really hard. So, and, meanwhile, the fans, they, most of them don't know. So, they're expecting you to be, you know, to be healthy, to be fine and all that stuff, but it's really, really the facts, especially at the end of the season.

Although this might at first appear to be a somewhat banal description of the aches and pains players go through at the end of the season, it is in fact a particularly enlightening window into the experience of the professional athlete. Indeed, the fact that Luc C. remembers this experience so many years later indexes its significance. The issue here is that even when ostensibly healthy, players typically toil through all sorts of physical injuries. Yet, there is never an acknowledgment from fans of this reality. So, players are faced with the double challenge of playing through the pain and attempting to play at the level they are capable of when healthy. Otherwise, they must face not only physical discomfort, but the approbation of the fan base, as we saw earlier. James I. makes a similar observation:

NKL: Do you have a sense of what sort of attitude you feel like fans had towards players playing through injuries? Is there a sense of what fans expectations were?

James I.: I mean, what, fans always expect the same thing, right? And, a lot of the time, they won't know that you're hurt, because, like...

NKL: And, what is that thing they expect?

James I.: They expect you to play at the same level that you when you're not hurt, right, like, playing at a high level. And, most of the time, they have no idea what's going on. Unless it's a serious injury where you miss a significant amount of time, they won't know. Like, if you're just bumped and bruised up a little bit, like, slight muscle pull, or whatever it may be, they'll have no idea.

Curtis U. experienced the same thing in a more extreme form:

NKL: Do you feel like spec-, the fans, spectators, had expectations for how you should behave as an athlete? Was that something that played into your experience? How much did it matter what they thought of you?

Curtis U.: Yeah. And, and I'll give you an example. I mean, my, my career ended with a knee injury: I, I blew all the ligaments in the knee and, and I need a reconstruction...

NKL: Okay, brutal.

Curtis U.: And, I was trying to, you know, in my comeback, I was playing in the minors... and there was a particular fan who didn't appreciate the way I was playing, but he didn't know that I had gone through, you know, really, it, it was about a year, year and a half of rehab and, and multiple knee surgeries and everything else, so their expectation was that if I'm on the ice, I should be able to perform, you know, as well, or, you know as I had before, but, I don't think they understand, I don't think most fans understand the physical demands, the physical beatings that players take and that rea-, you know, that affects their play. People don't see that. You know, they see the athlete, they see them on the field or on the, on the ice, and they expect that performance to be there every night and sometimes the player is dealing with something, it could be emotional, but most times it's physical, that would limit them from performing at their best. And, so, I mean, players don't make excuses for it, we, because we all do our best every time that we're on the ice, but sometimes there are limitations that people don't know about.

This is very significant because it speaks to the burden placed upon athletes that is unacknowledged by fans. It is a sacrifice that is not rewarded through remuneration (they are paid to play when healthy) or through esteem from spectators. It is what players *must* put themselves through – it is demanded by fans that they play – but the effects of doing so are largely ignored. Thus, even as players breathe meaning into the imagined athletic community through their labour and willingness to sacrifice their bodies, they are always aware that fans do not understand the genuine nature of the labour that is being done – they realize that fans do not know what they are putting their bodies through and the sacrifices that they are making for them.

What I have been arguing in this chapter is that athletes labour in order to indirectly produce a particular type of product: meaning for fans. This process is alienating, but it is also absorbing and temporarily empowering for athletes. The crucial point is that the athlete produces something beyond just a commodity (entertainment). He produces something that the spectator

takes away from the game, something that nourishes and revitalizes her. In the chapters that follow, we will examine this process from the standpoint of the spectator in order to explore precisely how the fan experiences the imagined athletic community and why they desire to participate in it. Ultimately, we will return to the athlete in order to get a better grasp of how they experience the physical and subjective consequences of their social reproductive labour.

Chapter 6: Spectatorship, Meaning and the Rejection of Political Economy

In the preceding chapter I explained the ways in which athletes understand their labour to be part of a broader political economy predicated on the production of meaning for fans and how this process ultimately leads to the alienation and commodification of their labour. In this chapter I will examine the same phenomena from the other side of the dynamic. That is, I will explore the ways in which fans understand the meaning they draw from athletic spectacle. In chapter three I theorized that the reason why spectators are drawn to professional sport is because they seek a sense of collective meaning that is absent in a capitalist society which persistently atomizes and alienates its labouring subjects. Fans turn to sport because they are able to experience a sense of camaraderie and purpose that allows them to transcend their quotidian lives for a few hours and become part of something larger than themselves. In what follows I will examine the ways in which spectators understand their own participation in sporting cultures. Whereas athletes view their labour as fundamentally linked to a broader political economy, spectators tend to reject this notion, figuring sport as a site of play and inherent meaning unsullied by the realm of capital. This is not at all surprising when one considers that the meaning of the imagined athletic community is linked to an understanding that the community is profoundly *real*, not merely the construct of corporate capital.

Professional Sport as Meaning

Although the response is not universal and does contain nuance and variation, the spectators I interviewed overwhelmingly rejected the notion that athletic labour is connected to fan desire. Whereas athletes are well aware that they must ultimately endure injury to create the

meaning fans seek, fans understand the game to be fundamentally about play, and, in this sense, feel like they are not complicit in a political economy. The salient point is that fans perceive sport to be a natural and inherent institution, not one they are responsible for propping up through their interest. This fact is demonstrated in the testimony of fans about their reactions to athletic injury. Rather than identifying any personal sense of complicity in the harm done to athletes – in that these injuries would not occur if fans were not willing consumers of these games – fans tended to act as if professional sport was simply a timeless institution. Thomas M. exemplifies this attitude:

NKL: Do you ever feel as a fan guilty or responsible when a player is hurt?

Thomas M.: Um, as, as, a, like, a fan of a team, I feel bad, but do I feel personally responsible? No. I'm not responsible for the injury myself, I'm not responsible for how that player acts on the ice, and I'm not responsible for his decisions, but, I feel bad as a fan because part of me is like, "I don't want to root for you right now." But I still like the team and I still like the player. So, it's, it's more like a mixed feeling where if I had a Phil Kessel jersey and he went and slashed a player in the face and injured them for three weeks, probably wouldn't wear my Kessel jersey the next day [laughs]. Would I wear it eventually? Probably, yeah. I would still wear it, I wouldn't throw it away, I wouldn't go on the internet and be like, "I hate Phil Kessel," and stuff like that. But, yeah, it would, it would kind of upset me, but I don't take it personally, I don't sit there in my room at the end of the day when I'm trying to fall asleep and just, like, ball over in my head how I'm responsible for that player's injury, right? I'm not *that* connected to the team.

Ultimately, Thomas M. does not feel that as a fan he shares any culpability for athletic injury. He is unequivocal in his refusal to see that fans have any responsibility for injuries to players. This position is noteworthy, for it means that he has not considered the fact that players would not be placed in a position to be hurt if fans did not attend athletic spectacles. This is interesting because it is the general response of nearly every fan interviewed, in some form or another. What this seems to suggest is that fans have a much less finely-tuned understanding of the political economy of the game than players. Players are aware that ultimately their job comes down to putting fans in the seats. Fans, on the other hand, seem to feel as if they are watching a game that

would be happening even if they weren't present. I contend that it is precisely this attitude that makes the imagined athletic community possible. If fans viewed professional sport simply as an exchange relation, it would be difficult to affix much in the way of meaning to it. It is only by imagining sport as a realm that transcends capital that it can become the locus for fantasies of collective identification. Mason T. expresses a similar sentiment:

NKL: Do you actually feel any guilt or responsibility if a player is hurt in a game that you're watching?

Mason T.: No, I wouldn't say I would.

NKL: Could you just expand on that a little bit, sort of like what you think about that question?...

Mason T.: I think the reasoning is, it's kind of like, they under-, they understood the risks going into it. Myself, playing hockey, I understood that things could happen, it's never anyone's real fault. Like, there are the injuries that someone's being an idiot on the ice and will attack you in a certain way, but most of the time people are out there to win and, and do what they can for themselves. It's not a, "I'm going to take this other guy out." So, knowing that they know the risks going into the game that injuries can happen and will happen, I, I, I wouldn't say I feel bad for the injury itself, like for them, for them being like they didn't know what they were getting into. It does, I do feel bad in that sense that it sucks that it happened, it really, I'd like it if no one really got injured but, um, but it's, to me it's just part of the game, so I don't feel too bad about it.

Mason T.'s contention that injuries are "just part of the game" speaks to the prevailing attitude amongst fans that sport is natural and normal. The notion that injuries are "just part of the game" serves to absolve fans of any responsibility for harm that is done to players. William D. makes a comparable argument:

NKL: So, when serious injuries happen, injuries like that, do you ever feel a sense of guilt or responsibility when a player is hurt?

William D.: No. I, I feel, I feel for the family and, and the player. I don't feel guilt because they're doing something they are passionate about. It's, it's their, it's their goal in life. I mean, I know how much work it is. That's what I feel, I feel, like, for a football player, when they get a, a, what they call, I mean, knee injuries in football used to be

career-ending, they still can be, although there's a lot more the doctors can do to rebuild knees and that sort of thing. Those, you think about a college player who's that close to getting to professional football, which is their goal, their, their ambition in life, and, you just feel for, I feel sad for the, that player and the family and that, I mean... We went through a situation a few months, you know, the beginning of the year, a friend of my son's, he didn't know, he met him through friends of his, close friends of his. He played hockey for [snaps his fingers three times] the Michigan team... Saginaw. He got cut from the team [claps a couple times] and that was his goal in life, was to, he committed suicide.

NKL: Oh wow.

William D.: So, I mean, that, that's their ambition, that's, to, to get to a stage where you realize, they realize that they're not going to be able to make, reach that goal, you know, if it's career-ending, you know. So, yeah, that's what I feel. I don't feel guilt because it's no different than any other job. I, I just feel upset for all their, their work, the hard wor-, I know how much work it is, I mean, we spent hours with our kids and I, that was their goal, but, you know at some point you realize, okay, well, you know, it's, this is for fun. And, and he still plays, and she still swam up until this year, she swam for, she goes to college down in, my daughter this is, goes to college down in [the States]... And, they happen to have a swim team, so, she swam for two years, but then they, they only allow them to swim your first two years and then you have to do something else, so she was debating whether she should go to track and field or, but, it's, so I know how much is involved, how much time they put into it. And, when you get to that level, it's even more time, so I can, I can't imagine you, you focus on that goal and then it, it's, if you, if it's a slow let down, then you're prepared for it, if you, one day, someone, you know, literally takes your legs out from under you, then you just, you know what they're going through and you understand. That's, that's, that's what, more what I feel rather than, you know, the guilt of enjoying a competition, because I know they're there for, I mean, that's their passion, it's not me driving them there, although, you know, I guess, if you ever looked at it in a roundabout way it is, the fans and that, but, there's still passion there.

This extended passage is quite interesting. William D. refuses to acknowledge guilt *per se* (or responsibility) as a fan for what players endure. Yet, at the same time, he points to a devastating example of how traumatic the sports world can be (the suicide of a young man cut from a junior hockey team). Indeed, at the end of the passage he suggests that the fans may be responsible for harm to players “in a roundabout way.” There is the suggestion here that he is on some level cognizant of the insidiousness of the political economy of sport he participates in, even as he evades a direct confrontation with such an idea. And, of course, it is necessary for him to

emphasize the “passion” of athletes over the ways in which they are exploited in order to sustain the meaning he receives from professional sport. Finally, we have Linda M.:

NKL: Do you ever feel a sense of responsibility when a player is hurt, as a fan?

Linda M.: No. Absolutely not. [Laughs] No. These are, these are people who, I mean, there’s an assumed risk, and I think the level of assumed risk varies based on that person’s individual investment, and here, players’ individual investment is high. This is their job. In the higher leagues they get paid, well, I mean, in the NHL they get paid extremely well to do their job. With the understanding, this implied consent to some, some physicality that is likely to result in injury. So, no, I think it’s, they’ve, they’ve assumed that risk. There’s times were they don’t, and I will feel bad for them. And, I’ll go back to the Bertuzzi-Moore hit, nobody, nobody assumed that risk. That was not, it wasn’t considered an appropriate part of the game and it wasn’t something he was asking for and it wasn’t, you know, it wasn’t knee-on-knee incidental contact, it wasn’t a check gone wrong. But, I still don’t even feel responsible in those situations because, you know, just like nobody feels responsible about what happens in my day-to-day professional career. There are certain risks that we assume.

This is perhaps the most vehement denial of responsibility yet, for she completely dismisses the notion that fans have any responsibility. Indeed, her laughter suggests that she considers the very premise of the question to be absurd. Again, what is absent from her analysis is a conception of the political economy of the game. She is able to make an analogy to her own work as an attorney because she considers the level of responsibility that fans have to athletes to be equivalent to the level of responsibility that any random person has to any other for what happens at their jobs. This equivalency completely elides the very real exchange relation that exists between athletes and spectators as producers and consumers of sport and it does so, I argue, because fans *must* misconstrue this relationship in order to derive satisfaction from professional sport.

Although many spectators refuse to see themselves as complicit in athletic injury, as we have seen, this is not a universal position. It is important to acknowledge the diversity within the sample of spectators, for no ideology is all-encompassing. Some people are able to watch and

draw meaning from sport without losing perspective on the political economy that fuels it. Paul D. is such a spectator:

NKL: And, do you ever actually feel, would you go so far as to say you actually feel, as a fan, some responsibility when a player is hurt?

Paul D.: Well, yeah, I mean, if, if, if the, the hype to win is such that they feel the responsibility to get out there even although their instincts tell them that they are actually, could be putting themselves and their life, their life, you know, their long-term life, in jeopardy. I mean, why would take steroids, you know, and, and all of that, I do feel a measure of responsibility. Because, I don't think anybody, you know, does things which are detrimental to their body, unless, well, I guess it's, self-serving in the sense that they want to do well and make, make as much money, and, and get the pride of winning, but there's also a lot of, you know, weight of responsibility of the fans to, "Get out there, you bum," you know? And, and so, I think, I do feel, you know, I don't think about it a lot, but I have to say that I do feel some measure of responsibility. And, you know, I respected, I don't know if I'm a big Sidney Crosby fan, I don't think I am, but I, I, I admire him a lot and I must say that I think that the way he conducted himself with his head injuries was, was, was impressive for a young man to have the... Now, he, he already had succeeded immeasurably, so, but, I mean, to have a life ahead where, you know, everything's in the past is tough for a guy, so I think he wants to keep playing and I think he will and is, but I, I've been impressed in the way he has, I think he's been balanced, he's insisted on the best care and he's had a right to. He's also challenged the sport on it and, so, I, I, I, in short, I do feel a measure of responsibility and, and, you know, when, when, I guess, when teams encourage athletes to do what's unhealthy for them, ultimately, they're doing it because they think it's good for business, i.e. the fans want them to do it.

He demonstrates here a real consciousness of the political economy of hockey and a sense of responsibility for what happens to players. Maria I. also picks up Sidney Crosby as example of athletic injury. She is very clear that players like Crosby are exhorted to play through injuries such as concussions because of the economic implications of their presence on the ice:

Maria I: And, who was it, Crosby coming back too early with his concussion didn't do well for him. So, I think, I think you kind of behind the scenes have this, this battle going on with coaches and managers and people who are invested with money want players back, with fans to get them, but doctors are kind of saying, "Hmmm, not quite." And so you've got this battle going on with players stuck in the middle and it's come back, don't come back. And some careers have ended, some have not, you know?

Evidently, she is attuned to the dynamic of professional sport in which fans want players to play through injury for the benefit of the team, even when it is not in their best interest to do so, and the league wants to make fans happy. Later, she expands on the question of responsibility for fans, demonstrating some ambivalence on the subject:

NKL: Do you ever actually feel, go so far as to feel, maybe, responsibility when a player is hurt as a fan?

Maria I.: Good question. I don't know if it is so much a responsibility personally, but more of a re-, I don't even know if responsibility is the right word that I want to use, but more like as a fandom, if we didn't want fighting, if we didn't want body checking, or we could better handle this situation, then it wouldn't have happened. You know, and other times, responsibility isn't even with the fandom wanting something, like, you've got Don Cherry's Rock 'em, Sock 'em hockey, like, God knows what number now, and fans want that, they eat it up. But, also when you look at a replay and you see what a player has done. You know, because sometimes they'll turn themselves just to get a penalty drawn for the other team, but they don't realize that if they turn, they now really put themselves in danger, and you get upset with them, but then is that part of what the rule change, like, is it a direct result of the rule change, you know? Do we need automatic icing, is there a penalty, like, it, it is, it's so funny now with the NHL right now and with their rule changes and what Bettman's implemented since he's gotten in and I'm not a fan of his. I'll be glad the day he's gone because I think he, he ruined hockey. You know, it's, I don't wanna say it's, it's not what it was, but I'm not meaning in the sense of the fighting, and the, you know, and it just, I think it's all part of the bigger picture, it's not necessarily us. It's managers, it's coaches saying, "Get out there and hurt someone." Because, you don't know where that injury started in the sense of, did the coach say, "I want you to hit him." So, in that sense I don't feel responsible, but I feel respons-, and, again, I'm not sure if "responsible" is the right word. I feel bad for the mentality of the sport and the way it's been fostered and been allowed to develop to that point, right?

This testimony is fascinating. It is evident that on a rational level, she understands that fans are complicit in athletic injury due to the political economy of the sport. Yet, nevertheless, she has difficulty stating this definitively and unequivocally. Again and again she struggles with the word "responsible," as if she knows it is applicable and yet cannot bring herself to use it. Indeed, she ends up delivering an extended meditation on the culture of the sport and her antipathy towards its commissioner as a way of circumventing the question of spectatorial culpability.

Ultimately, Maria I.'s testimony here speaks to the fundamental tension faced by fans, even those who are cognizant of and sensitive to the costs of violence in sport. While she is aware that some fans crave this violence and subsidize it through the money they funnel into the game – and feels uncomfortable with that – she is ultimately unable to fully acknowledge this reality by naming it as the “responsibility” of fans, I posit, because to do so would undermine the precarious foundation upon which sports fandom is constructed: the idea that the game is inherently meaningful.

So, the next question we are faced with is just how much meaning do fans ascribe to professional sport? I have explained that sports fandom functions as an imagined athletic community, in which fans come to see other fans as members of a large network of people who share a common bond through their investment in and support of a professional sports team. I will explore how some of the mechanisms of this community play out for fans below, but first it is worth beginning with a discussion of what that investment and support look like. Anderson wrote that members of a nation were “willing to die” for the abstract entity they came to identify themselves with. It is little surprise, then, to see the intense level of enthusiasm fans feel for their teams. This enthusiasm is completely incommensurate with any notion that they are simply enjoying a commodity or spectacle, and this accounts for their rejection of complicity in political economy. No, they experience sports fandom as relatively unmediated and unmitigated meaning.

For Tarik K., a love of the Toronto Raptors provided inspiration for a move to Toronto in the first place. He says: “Raptors was one of the main reasons, well, not one of the main reasons, but a very strong reason why I moved to Toronto. I was very into the, into team and I had an opportunity here and, I was like, ‘Oh, yeah I get to go and see Raptors games now.’” Although

the move was not exclusively about the team, it ultimately allowed him to justify the decision to himself:

Tarik K.: So, I eventually moved to this city. I..., a love interest brought me over here but one of the reasons why I was able to justify it, moving here and not to, you know, Egypt or, my mother lives in Los Angeles, which is also another great sports city, was that, but, one of the reasons was the Toronto Raptors. I was very excited about that. I believe the first time I came to the city to visit it was a Toronto Raptors game and I fell in love with the city, obviously, and fell in love with the skyline and the team.

Later, Tarik K. elaborates on the type of affection he feels for his favourite teams by discussing what it would be like if one of those teams moved to another city:

Tarik K.: So, like, if I was a Montreal Expos fan, and, say I'm, I'm a Toronto Blue Jays fan and the franchise folds and they move away, I'd be devastated, like, I'd be really depressed. And, I think, reading critics or, or sports journalists or general comments online about the Expos can really support that claim that, you know, like, a city would be devastated losing something as iconic as their baseball team and I would be in, in that group of people being devastated. Very much like, if you want to bring that word 'love' back into it, it's a very subjective word, but...

NKL: Yes, it is.

Tarik K.: But, say you love your girlfriend and she leaves you for another city, or, for another, you know, partner, or whatever, you'd be devastated and I think it would be similar, I don't know if it would be as much, but it would be similar. Yeah.

This is a very strong, and thoughtful assertion. Although saying that one "loves" one's team is something that many would do in passing, he has taken the care to flesh out exactly what that means in practice by equating his love for his team to the love he might have for a partner. There are material implications to this passion. In order to sustain his interest in the team, he has had to make a significant outlay: "I, I used to have cable for the sole purpose of watching the Raptors and that was something I had in university and something I brought with me when I was here, but I eventually cancelled that in favour of going to more live games and Blue Jays games and there was kind of like an opportunity cost there, obviously." He adds later that he has an

expensive television for the sole purpose of watching sports. Ultimately, for Tarik K., “the Blue Jays are, not the centre-piece, but are definitely one of the jewels in the crown, like, of my love for the city. So, them leaving definitely would have an impact on my fandom, would definitely have an impact on my social life, would definitely have an impact on my overall happiness, obviously that’s negative.” Although he thinks he would likely be able to transfer his allegiance to the Dodgers, another team he has a connection to, if the Jays were to leave Toronto, this does not change the fact that he feels like it would have a significant impact on his “overall happiness” if the Blue Jays were to no longer exist.

Thomas M. describes his passion for the Toronto Maple Leafs in different terms:

NKL: Alright, so, can you tell me sort of, and this is sort of a general question, so I’m interested to hear what you would say in answer to this, how strongly would you say you feel about the Leafs?

Thomas M.: [Thinks] I mean, I’m, I’m a passionate Leafs fan, but I try not to get too, too emotionally-involved in terms of, like, how some people get, like, really, like, physically upset and, like, put, like, extreme rants and stuff on the internet or like getting into bar fights and stuff. I like to see them win, I don’t really like to see them lose, but I don’t get too upset about it. But, I do have a passion. Like, I follow individual players, I, like, take into account when they make line changes, when the coaches make trades, stuff like that. So, I mean, I’m passionate but I try not to get too, like, upset or too, like, angry about things in sports, I guess, if that makes sense?

What is notable about this response is that he assumes that the typical sports fan is “too emotionally-involved” to the extent that they “get... physically upset and... put... extreme rants and stuff on the internet or... [get] into bar fights and stuff.” Although he doesn’t identify with these particular behaviours, he nevertheless sees himself as “passionate” and identifies these characteristics with “some people” – evidently these are other fans he has observed. While he views some other fans as “too emotionally-involved,” this does not mean he does not feel a significant degree of investment himself:

NKL: So, basically, what do you get out of the experience of being a fan? Why do you care?

Thomas M.: It, it's gonna sound kind of cheesy, but, when your team does well, you kind of feel like you do well. I don't really carry that over into, like, every aspect of my life, where if the Leafs are doing well, everything in my life is going great, but, I feel like, if I go to a Leaf game, because I'm invested in the team, and I like to see them win, when they win I feel like I'm a winner. And, that may be kind of weird, it may be kind of sad, in a sense, that that's how you equate happiness in your life, but, I don't know, that's kind of what I get out of it. I feel happiness when they win. And, I don't really know where that comes from. There's probably some sort of psychological explanation for when you feel good when your sports team wins, but, yeah, it just happens. I just, I feel good when my team does well. I feel good when my favourite player scores. And, I feel bad when a player I don't like scores against my favourite team [Laughs]. I mean, that's just kind of what it is. You feel like you're invested in the team, like, the team is almost a part of you. Right?

This is about as clear and succinct a statement of the meaning of fandom as one can possibly provide. He is filled with gratification and meaning through his investment in the team. It makes him feel like part of something larger and more successful than himself and this makes him feel better about his life. Like Tarik K., he is asked to meditate on what it would mean to him if he were deprived of access to his favourite team:

NKL: Do you think if you were deprived of access to your favourite – so, I mean, you've told me that you have two favourite hockey teams to a certain extent, so I can kind of imagine that partly, if you took away the Leafs maybe you'd become a bigger Red Wings fan, so let's take a more extreme situation, let's say we took away both the Leafs and the Red Wings – do you see yourself switching allegiance to another team?

Thomas M.: Um, yeah, I could do that. It, it wouldn't be the same. But, if I, in, in some weird circumstance, I'm not allowed to watch Leaf games and I'm not allowed to watch, watch Red Wing games, I could probably see myself following another team just to kind of fill that void. It would not be as intense. I probably would not be that involved in the team, but, I could see, I could see myself filling that void only because having a team to root for when you watch sports makes things more interesting. It makes it so that you can watch other teams because other teams in different divisions and conferences, they'll affect each other. If one team wins, then, like, they get points, other teams don't get points, the standings get switched around, it just, it, it makes it more interesting to follow, if you follow a team. That's why I'm into hockey more than, say, football, because I don't pay attention to any specific teams, especially for, like, the NFL, so, I don't, I don't

feel that invested in it. But, for hockey, I mean, I follow teams other than the Leafs and the Red Wings. I like the LA Kings, there's a few other teams I like as well, so I could see myself jumping ship to another team. I wouldn't, it's not just, "Oh, I'm a Leafs fan and that's it, I could never root for any other team." I could definitely see myself rooting for other teams if, if the circumstances were right.

Some of the phrasing here in his response is salient. First, he characterizes the idea of not having a team to root for as producing a "void" that would ultimately need to be filled in his life. This imagery, deliberately or not, connotes how large a place inside himself is filled by sports fandom. It is also notable that he says it would "not be as intense," for this testifies to the intensity of his current experience and also suggests that he sees it as something more than just an arbitrary affiliation.

Like Thomas M., Mason T. identifies as a fervent fan of the Toronto Maple Leafs:

NKL: Can you tell me, then, about your favourite teams, which specific teams you follow, and then how strongly you feel about them?

Mason T.: So, my go-to hockey team is Toronto Maple Leafs. Again, born and raised into it living in Markham, which is a suburb of Toronto. Honestly, it's, it's funny, because over the last, probably, five, five to ten years, it's gone from, you know, just watching and not thinking too much about it to, al-, like, almost an obsession, it's really, it's really kind of bad at times. But just, um, just, like, because the team struggles now and then, and then, thinking, "Okay, maybe I'll not watch hockey or not watch, not follow it as much." But, I just, you know, I kind of have to watch it, I kind of have to keep cheering for them, can't really switch teams. So, Toronto would probably be my favourite team and I have a couple of West coast teams because they're not really in competition with the Leafs. It would be Anaheim and San Jose.

It is noteworthy that his fandom has actually accelerated in "the last...five to ten years." This is the period in which he has ascended to adulthood, inheriting more of the burdens faced by capitalist subjects. This corresponds with the idea that the imagined athletic community serves to fill a void produced by the alienation and isolation of capitalist society. Participating in the imagined athletic community provides an affective rejuvenation or reproduction for the spectator who is then better equipped to serve the required role of labouring capitalist subject. It is also

worth remarking upon the fact that his “obsession” with the Leafs is something of a compulsion: “I kind of have to watch it, I kind of have to keep cheering for them.” This evinces the seemingly-inherent nature of the imagined athletic community. The interpellated subject feels that her or his fandom is innate, much as in the traditional nation. Yet, again, it is very possible that it is the desperation of the need produced by capitalism that is actually responsible for the depth and strength of the craving – “obsession” – for the imagined athletic community. Recall that for Deleuze and Guattari (1983), desire is not the function of an inherent sense of lack, but rather of the material conditions produced by the mode of production: (in this context) capitalism. Indeed, Mason T. acknowledges that the allure of fandom is being a part of a community:

NKL: So, that is, what do you get out of the experience of being a fan? Why do you care?

Mason T.: So, I, I think, well, the, the idea of not knowing exactly where I truly became a fan kind of would help to answer that, but I can’t really help with that because we, the, the, the passion that I kind of feel when, you know, Leafs win, or if, uh, getting into the playoffs, and stuff like that, being part of that community, that pride of your, your team, that’s something I’ve never experienced before. And, I think that a lot of that comes from being part of a hockey team myself since I was five years old. Having, having that, you know, the closeness with those guys out, you know, throw their, throw their bodies in front of a flying puck just to help you out or, you know, having the teammates that will do anything for you, and, and understanding that passion for the game and knowing that these guys go out there day and day-night with that same passion to try and win for the city is, is something that I truly respect. So, then, knowing, like, they’re fighting for that, being able to cheer them on, whether it helps them or not, but [laughs] I’d like to think that it does, like, when they’re, people are in the crowd, screaming at them, being part of that audience that truly loves them is just an amazing feeling.

He equates his feelings as a fan to those he has as a member of a team, for it is belonging that he seems to seek. What is most interesting here is that he considers the “passion” he feels for the Leafs to be “something I’ve never experienced before.” What is implicit in this is that it is

something that has been missing from his life that feels satisfying and necessary. The Leafs play such a pivotal role in his life that he cannot imagine ever giving them up for anything:

NKL: Okay. Can you imagine a voluntary circumstance in which you would give up watching sports?

Mason T.: [Thinks] Do you [laughs]... honestly, nothing really comes to mind but I guess [laughs] it really depends on... So, you said voluntary, right, so...

NKL: That's right, that's right.

Mason T.: Yeah. Honestly, no. [laughs] I don't think I would give it up.

He also cannot fathom the prospect of switching allegiance to a different team:

NKL: Now, if you were deprived of access to the Leafs, do you think you would compensate by becoming a fan of a different team? Now, this is a hypothetical scenario...

Mason T.: Yeah, absolutely. Well, I have, honestly, I, actually, I had a discussion with my friends about this a couple of days ago because, I had a few people kind of switch, say they were switching teams to cheer for, I honestly don't think I could ever do that. I, I don't really have logic behind it, I just, because I have grown up being a fan, switching teams just seems impossible for me because I would always try and find a way to figure out how the Leafs did, or, even if I, if I had no contact with them but I knew they were there, I wouldn't be able to, I wouldn't be able to cheer against them. [Laughs]

His pleasure, it seems, does not come simply from cheering for *a* team; it comes from supporting *his* team.

William D. was considerably older than Tarik K., Thomas M., or Mason T., yet he shared a similar devotion to his imagined athletic communities of choice. Indeed, in the very lengthy passage below, he explains why communities built around professional sport are actually more profound than those organized around the traditional nation when it comes to sport:

NKL: Why would you say that might be different than hockey? Is there a distinction in terms of, is it more fun in the soccer?

William D.: Well, they can, they can get, yeah, I think with the World Cup, it's, it's, club matches, if you go wearing your colours into someone else's club, you might have a

problem. If you go, I think the World Cup is a little different, because there's, there's not that, I mean, they're, they're passionate, you know, it's national pride, if you're Brazilian or Italian, but it seems to be a little more, because I, I, I wouldn't mind going to, to actually go to a country where the, the World Cup's being held. Not necessarily to go to the games, because they're really expensive, but to, to, say, in Rio, in the next couple weeks, to be on Copacabana beach where they have the big screens. A buddy of mine has gone a few times and he said it's a, it's a, it's a, big, you mingle with tea-, people from all over the world, and they're wearing their colours, and, I think it's a lot more, there, there's that pride, but the, the, the, there's not that [claps] clash that you get with the club, club games.

NKL: Okay, that's interesting.

William D.: You know, when you, you go into Turkey and if you're a Man. United fan, you may not come out without [laughs] without being in a, in a scuffle of some sort. Unfortunately, it's that passionate. I don't think it, it, there's the passion's there, but it's a different type of passion with the World Cup and that type of thing.

NKL: And, I'm pushing down a different line, but do you have a sense of why people care in that way about their clubs differently than their national teams?

William D.: They don't see the national team as often and there's no attach-, there's an attachment, it's more national pride. Obviously, when it gets down to the nitty-gritty, you know, the final game, if it's the Italians and the Germans, or the Eng-, the Brits and the, the English team and the... If it was England-Scotland, there might be a little more, you know, because there's political, you know, background there [laughs]. So, there might be a little more that way. But, if it's England-Brazil, it's not quite...

NKL: It's not the same.

William D.: Yeah. I think it's because the club soccer, you're watching them day-in-day-out, you're watching them every week and every year and you have that, that, that deep, deeper attachment to your club.

NKL: And, do you feel any similarities with hockey clubs in terms of the dynamics you are talking about? Or is it...

William D.: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, I, again, I don't get into, I don't have that hate, but there are a lot of people that do. You know, my sister-in-law despises the Bruins, despises anyone that's associated...

NKL: And is she a Habs fan?

William D.: She's a Habs fan. Yeah. She's born and raised in Montreal. So, and, and, I, nah, I, you know, I, I don't have that hatred. I do if someone's nasty to me. Then I, then I dig in. But, I have to be provoked into it. I don't have that, if I see a Bruins fan, if I go to

Boston and sit in a Bruins bar as a Habs fan, I may not wear my colours, but it would be fascinating to talk to them, you know.

In this extended discussion of the differences between international and club competition, he suggests that emotional attachment is actually deeper when it comes to the club side. This is counter-intuitive given that the nation is the original imagined community people are willing to die for (as per Anderson). Implicit in William D.'s testimony is the suggestion that the imagined athletic community may even offer a more satiating form of meaning than the nation itself. The constant rehearsal of its rituals and the visceral pleasure of competition and potential vicarious victory at its heart seems to provide a more concentrated form of much of what the nation offers. The imagined community of the professional team provides the normality and stability of daily or weekly play during much of the year every year and has come to offer plenty of opportunities in the off-season as well. The advent of electronic media has made the free agency periods of the off-season a frenzy of excitement and uncertainty that captivates fans nearly as much as the games themselves. This constant immersion in the imagined athletic community of professional sport serves to reify it. The very fact of its banality produces an illusion of timelessness and immanence. It is always here, therefore it must always have been here. This in turn produces a profound sense of identity, one that leads to a Manichean lens for the world. The fan comes to hate the other (the Bruins fan, for instance), because s/he represents that which the community is aligned against. Because there is so little tangible substance to the imagined athletic community – it is based on little more than dressing in common signifiers and cheering on a team of employees – the other against whom the community is defined becomes all the more important. If the fan does not know exactly who s/he is, what s/he does know is who s/he is not: a Bruins fan, in this case. William D. goes on to elaborate the nature of the meaning he draws from his fandom:

NKL: Oh, I was asking if you thought sports took up too much time...

William D.: Yeah, it, it, you know, I remember my, my Mom saying before I got married, she said, “You’re never going to find someone who loves sports as much as you, you know, you gotta slow down because you’re never going to find anyone and it’s, you’re going to ruin any relationship you’re in because you, you watch too much sports.” And, I know a lot of guys that do, that probably watch more than I do, but I could watch a curling match if, if it’s on and I just feel like watching a game. And, as I said, sometimes I put it in the background. So, when the World Cup starts, obviously, business, I work from home, business comes first [sighs], so, I might have it on in the background, and if it’s a game I want to watch, I, I’ll tape it and watch it later, so, I’ll do that too. If I’m away at the cottage, I’ll, I’ll tape it, but I may, I’ll take the laptop up to the cottage [laughs] and see if I can...

Here we see the way in which sport becomes the primary affective source in the life of the fan. In a sense, it functions as social reproductive work contracted outside the home (even if consumed within it). Fulfillment is found through the vicarious experience of watching games and connecting impersonally with fans over social media rather than through interactions with the family or even friends (who, as we have heard, are for the most part not fans themselves). Upon probing, he further explains the way in which his affective needs are satiated by fandom:

NKL: So, you know, you may have, you may be going through some kind of trauma in your personal life, does that make you more or less likely to watch sports, let’s say, or watch your favourite team? Or, if things are going really well, in other areas...

William D.: It might. Sometimes, yeah, it might. Although, you know, it might be the opposite, where, I, I, I might watch just to kind of take my mind off things. I may not be as excited and that. Although, in a sort of reversed way, my family, especially, it seems, with the soccer, because I don’t see the Habs games all the time because they’re not broadcasted, but every weekend I watch, every Saturday or Sunday, I watch my Man. United games, and they claim, and it’s probably true to some extent, that I’m miserable if they lose. So, so, you know, if, sometimes mid-week they’re, they have a Champions League game and I’ll be watching and if they come home later and I’m kind of quiet, and that, “What, United lose?” [Laughs.] And I say, “Is it that obvious?” So, yeah, in a sort of reverse way, it does, I think it affects, so, I guess, if I watched and I’m already in a, in a, kind of a, bit of a mood, shall we say, or things aren’t going well in my life, if they were to lose, it may affect me [laughs] a bit more. But, I don’t know. Yeah, it does affect me. I’m sure it does. Ask my family [laughs].

This is an interesting moment. It appears at first that he is going to say that sport is a form of spectacle (he “might watch just to kind of take my mind off things”). However, his line of thinking quickly turns in a quite different direction. Instead, what he reveals is that it is his fandom that influences his other social relations. This is one of the most compelling moments of testimony in terms of the power of fandom as a substitute for social relations. His emotions, he says, are *primarily* influenced by sport, not by interactions with loved ones and, indeed, he finds it largely impossible to prevent the ebbs and flows of his emotions about the game from affecting those other relations. This is perhaps testament to the fact that sport reproduces a very particular type of subjectivity, namely one that is alienated. Although investment in the team temporarily fills the void caused by the atomizing nature of capitalism, it also actively prevents that void from being filled more organically (and counter-hegemonically) by other forms of social relations. This means that it becomes very difficult for him to miss even one significant game:

NKL: Did you ever feel a tug for missing a, like, if you were missing a Habs game because you were at your son’s game? I imagine you were excited to see your son’s game...

William D.: Yeah, somewhat. It depends. It depends on what the game was. If it was the playoffs, although, they don’t necessarily overlap as much, but yeah, yeah. I mean, I’ve, I’ve felt that way with the, the United games as well. But, not to the point where I’d be miserable or upset. I’d tape it and watch it later. I’d skim through it and if it’s not going well, I’d just shut it off. [Laughs.] That’s very convenient. “Oh, I don’t need to waste two hours on that. Yeah, they’re gonna lose.” And, if they came back and won, I’d go over it again and see how they did it [laughs].

This is a strong statement of devotion to the team rather than simply sport more broadly. If he was a fan of sport more than anything (as he has at times implied in this interview), one might assume that this enthusiasm would be more than satiated by the experience of watching his children play – this is, after all, a more directly vicarious form of fandom. Yet, he cannot help acknowledging that even as he watched his own children compete, he still felt pangs of regret not

to be watching his primary club team. This was true, despite the fact that he *was recording the game to watch later* – he was not going to miss it. The persistent need to remain connected to his teams emerges again as the interview progresses:

NKL: Now, if you were for some reason deprived of access to your favourite teams, so let's say the Habs or United, we can imagine a hypothetical scenario in which the team moved or something, so then you were forced to not be able to cheer for them as a consequence, would you compensate by becoming a fan of a different team?

William D.: I might, yeah. Let's say I moved to, although, it, it's a little more accessible now with the internet and that sort of thing you can always follow things, let's say I moved out of the country say to Asia or something where, or we were just down in Costa Rica last month and, you know, you can't find hockey much down there, so. Soccer is a different story, but... Yeah, I think I would. I probably, you know, let's say, let's, for example, Costa Rica, I'd probably follow their local soccer team. I'd still watch United, but I might, you know, gain a new passion too, for another team, you know.

NKL: Sure, okay.

William D.: I'm, I'm, you know, I'm, I watch as much as I can, but I, I don't think I'd miss it if I, I, me-, I've been away for a couple weeks and not watched anything, but, you know, again, when I was down in Costa Rica... Oh, that's not true, that's not true. The Habs were playing and I was sitting, it was perfect, it was perfect, because, like, your afternoon siesta, so at about four or five o'clock, the Habs game came on, and they were playing Tampa, so they, they....

It does not take a particularly sophisticated Derridean reading to see that although he wishes to articulate a more disposable relationship with his team – he could replace, or at least supplement, it if he had too – when he actually attempts to make this case he cannot help disclosing the fact that even in the example selected to illustrate his ability to separate from his team while on an idyllic beach vacation, in fact he could not actually tear himself away and watched the games during siesta while his wife slept. Again, his fandom intrudes upon his personal social relations. This is his ultimate form of social reproduction. Not even a vacation can match it. The interview continues from the same point:

NKL: Is it a different time zone?

William D.: Yeah, it's kind of like the Mountain time. Not the B.C. time, the Pacific time, but Mountain time, so a couple hours. So, yeah, the game started at seven so we were into our room at about five o'clock after a day on the beach or the pool, or whatever we did, and so, my wife likes a little siesta nap and, and I would just kind of turn the computer on, hook up, and watch the game, and then we'd go out for dinner. So, yeah, I guess I'm a bit of a fan. But, I, I, I feel I could, kind of, drop it if I was given, sort of a ultimatum, or, or, or was cut off or whatever, I think I, I could live without it. You know, there's other competitions [laughs].

Again, even as he asserts that he can step away from sport if absolutely necessary, he cannot help but provide the final, subversive rejoinder: "You know, there's other competitions."

Maria I. was perhaps the most passionate of all of the spectators interviewed. When asked how strongly she felt about the Toronto Maple Leafs, she responds: "Oh, oh, total loyalty. Doesn't matter, like, win, lose. I started watching way back when with the Harold Ballard and they pretty much sucked, but been with them for a very long time and won't change. [Laughs.]" Evidently, this is an unequivocal statement of allegiance. It is little wonder, then, that her rituals for watching games involve total concentration interrupted only by exclamations delivered at the screen:

NKL: Can you just describe, then, when you're watching at home, the typical experience of watching a game, kind of like, if you just take me through what you might be doing...

Maria I.: You really want to know what I'm doing?

NKL: Sure, absolutely!

Maria I.: I'm swearing at the tv! [Laughs] I'm totally swearing at the tv if my kids are not around, if they're in bed. I will PVR from the beginning and watch from the beginning, I don't want to know the score. I don't know. Yeah, just yelling a lot at the tv, watching it, talking with my husband about it.

NKL: Yeah, so when you're watching, it's not like it's in the background, you're watching the game?

Maria I.: It will not be in the background. It's never in the background for me, no.

Her experience of watching a game is one of total engagement and interaction. Her passion ultimately leads her to communicate with the screen, as if it could be a conduit to the players themselves. Thus, she is completely unwilling even to entertain the possibility of being deprived of the ability to watch her team:

NKL: Do you think if you were deprived of access to the Leafs...

Maria I.: Yeah, don't even [laughs], I don't even know if you can finish that question!

NKL: Would you compensate by becoming the fan of a different team do you think?

Maria I.: No, no, no. I will find it on the computer, I will find it through satellite, through whatever the means is. I will not, I, I st-, I think it would affect me that I wouldn't even move out of the city, or if I was to move, I would see if they have access to, you know? Yeah, no, no. I will not change, ever. [Laughs]

This is the strongest response to this question delivered by any of the spectators. She is definitive in her assertion that she would never switch teams. Equally relevant, though, is the statement that she would likely make a major life decision such as where to reside based on the location of the team. This is not the first time I encountered this sentiment, as we saw with Tarik K. It is clear that fandom is more than simply a hobby in her life:

NKL: Okay, so how important would you say being a fan of the Leafs is compared to other leisure activities or hobbies you might have? Is it just another hobby, or is it something different than that?

Maria I.: No. It's, wow. Trying to think how to explain that or even to answer that. It's definitely more. I'm not even sure how to answer that. Like, I don't know if you can put into words... [long silence while thinking] It's, it's, I don't know. That's a crazy question to ask, like, I've never thought about. I don't know. Maybe we can come back to that question? Like, I'm totally not even sure how to answer that because it's been so much a part of me for so long that you, I almost don't give it a second thought. It's like breathing, like, it just, it just happens. It's, the Leafs are, yeah, I have no idea, that's crazy! [Laughs]

Her complete inability to articulate what distinguishes her fandom from other hobbies speaks volumes. She sees it ultimately as a natural part of herself and her life, “It’s like breathing, like, it just, it just happens.” This is a crucial element of the imagined community that cannot be overstated: it takes on a life of its own as something real and essential, a fundamental part of a person’s identity. Thus, there are no circumstances under which she can imagine giving up hockey fandom from her life:

NKL: Is it possible that injuries or maybe new information about injuries might ever get to the point that it would stop you from watching hockey?

Maria I.: Stop me from watching hockey?

NKL: Stop you from watching hockey, yeah.

Maria I.: No, I don’t think so. Like, if you can stop a guy from getting a concussion, then I’m all for it. You know, like, I don’t know, thicker helmets or, or whatever the case is. It wouldn’t stop me from watching it, I don’t think anything really would stop me from watching hockey.

Eduardo Galeano has remarked that sport is the only religion without atheists. I have argued in an earlier chapter that the rise of professional sport as a site of meaning coincided with the decline of religion in the West as a palliative for the unhappiness caused by industrial capitalism. Yet, it is perhaps unnecessary to suggest that the decline of religion was necessary for the rise of sport; Galeano may have it right: sport may in fact hold an even greater allure even than religion itself. This, at least, is suggested by the sentiments of Paul D., a pastor and high ranking religious official:

NKL: How strongly would you say you feel about them?

Paul D.: Well, you know, you joke about it and, and, but I would be lying if I didn’t say that sometimes emotionally it does impact [laughs], I, jokingly, this is years ago – you know what I do? You know I’m a pastor? You know that?

NKL: Yes.

Paul D.: Yeah, okay, so, you know, one time, you know, a dismal Leaf game on a Saturday night and, going to bed, and I say to my wife, “I don’t know if I can preach tomorrow after that game.” You know? [Laughs] So, I mean, it was, it was a joke, but it was al-, there was some truth to it in the sense that I, you know, I, you live and die at some level with the team and so, even at this stage, years later, having gone through all the roller coasters, I just hated last year when, you know, they made a Western swing and they actually won some games and beat L.A. and I thought we were on the way to post-season and then, you know, they went into the tank and, yeah, it was a dismal [laughs] month or so watching it happen. So, so it’s, it’s, you know, as, as much as I would like to be more mature and say that it doesn’t affect me at all, it does.

He is not the first person to use the language of life and death to describe how he feels about a team, even if it is partly in jest. There is a rhetorical tenor to his language that evinces how deeply invested he is in the team, as he uses diction such as “hated” and “dismal” to describe the emotional “roller coasters” he went through in the last season, a season, it should be added, he later makes note he was less invested in than many that preceded it. Even when he chooses not to watch games, it seems, it is more a function of how *much* he cares than how little:

Paul D.: Actually, honestly, right now, I don’t watch a lot of games. I, I just, but, for instance, I got up early, early in the morning, first thing I do is I going on my cell phone and look at the scores and, and [laughs] that’s kind of the way that I start the day. So, so, the interest is there. I, I mean, one of the things that’s interesting, my wife believe that I can’t stand the pressure anymore because I actually find, you know, when, when, whatever the sport, things go negatively in a serious way, I immediately want to turn it off because I can’t handle watching it unfold any further and then maybe I’ll turn it on hoping that there’s been some turn-around and sometimes there is but most times there hasn’t been.

In this discussion of where he watches games he turns of his own volition to this explanation of why he no longer watches as much as he once did. His wife’s rationale is interesting because it suggests just how deeply he experiences the ups and downs of his team’s performance. In the following lengthy passage, he elaborates the nature of the affect he experiences from sport and the meaning it holds in his life:

NKL: Okay, let me pick up on that point you were just making, because that was a question I was going to ask in a minute anyway. I mean, is it possible for you to describe any more for me what it is you are actually thinking and feeling in those moments? Because, the question I was going to ask is how would you say these games affect your mood? And, you're obviously gesturing at that directly here. You know, why is it that you want to turn off the television? What are you feeling in those moments?

Paul D.: Well, I mean, I think, I think in general I'm relatively optimistic about life things, but in sports I'm a *huge* pessimist and I know things are going to go badly, and so, and I hate to be, you know, supervise and watch them unfold and, and so, if I feel what I think is a trend, it's no surprise to me, and a negative trend I'm talking about, it's no surprise to me because I was expecting it to happen anyway. And then, when it does appear to be happening, I'm sad, feel somewhat, you know, I knew it, you know, that kind of, and, and, and a little bit mad, you know. Those guys. Wha-? Wha-? I, you know, you do wonder. I don't know how much will has to do in sports, but there certainly seems to be times where there's capitulation on the part of the team that I'm cheering for and, and that, you know, makes me mad.

NKL: Okay, and that stays with, there's a lingering sense of that after the game's over?

Paul D.: Yeah, I mean, it's, it's, it's, you know, I, it doesn't, you know, when I get up the next morning, I'm not still usually, you know, in, in that state. I fortunately did not see the famous game with the Leafs in Boston. Again, but I've heard it's the worst experience in people's lives, and so on. And, and, I can believe it. I mean, four to one, and whatever number of minutes left in the game, that should have been a done deal. So, I think I would have, that might have carried over to the next day. I, you know, there is regret, especially, now that we're into the playoffs, I, even one game, even a Wild Card game, at this stage, it would have been fun if the Jays could have been there, and I, I think I would have managed to watch the whole game, if I'd had the time, you know, and, and, would have been loyal enough to stick with them through thick and thin. But, but anyway, look, they were eighty-three wins whereas, you know, Kansas City, what were they, eighty-eight and here they are, they won last night, and all that stuff. So, I, there's some lingering, it would have been grand if they'd done better.

He elaborates here on why he feels the way he does. What is most striking is the intense pessimism of his attitude to his team, something that differs dramatically from his general disposition towards the world. Although it is very much an inference, I would posit that one element of this feeling may be borne of the fact that fandom fills such an essential place in the lives of fans. The alienation of capitalist society produces a powerful sense of need for meaning and surrogate community, one that fans attempt to satiate through sports fandom. This creates a

tremendous sense of anxiety and urgency for the process of fandom. Although this urgency is often articulated in terms of investment in the wins and losses of the team, I suggest that the reproductive capacity of the imagined athletic community is actually connected to neither. Competition, like athletic labour, is part of the armature of the imagined athletic community, but it is not the ultimate source of fulfilment, for the residual emotions connected to wins and losses are relatively fleeting. Rather, it is the persistent connection to the team itself and a broader sense of community that actually provide the meaning that fans seek. Now, it should be noted that a pastor is an unlikely candidate for this predicament since he holds a position that is in fact pre-capitalist. Moreover, his job is one that is at the very centre of what can only be described as a genuine form of community. It is possible, however, that his *increased* difficulty at watching games may be a function of the fact that his role in the church has become increasingly administrative, abstracted from the particularity of his own congregation and in turn producing a greater sense of isolation and alienation. Regardless, like other spectators interviewed, he finds it difficult to conceive of the possibility of transferring his allegiance from one team to another:

NKL: So, say you are deprived of access to the Leafs for some reason, do you imagine yourself compensating by becoming the fan of a different team in the NHL?

Paul D.: Probably, probably. I, I'm trying to think, I lived in Vancouver for three years, but they were low years in terms of, I don't think, I don't remember, I mean, it was during the era, when, of course, the famous Russia-Canada series. And, I do remember student teaching and when the Paul Henderson goal was scored and all that. But, I don't remember ever watching an NHL game during that, that era. So, I think maybe I just squeezed it out of my life because I wasn't at home and didn't have access to the Leafs. So, so maybe not. When, when we moved from Quebec to Ontario, fairly quickly I changed from being an Ottawa Roughriders fan to a Toronto Argos fan and I've been an Argos fan ever since [laughs] again with all the, well, there have been a few ups along the way. So, I think that, you know, we were in Europe at one point... and I had a friend who sent me the sports page every weekend so that I could read the in-depth stories of, of, of the Leafs and the Jays in that era... So, so, it was, I loved that, I mean, that was, that was a happy day when the newspaper arrived and I could, and I, of course, on-line was not a

reality, I mean, I guess it maybe existed, but it certainly wasn't for me. So, I, this, this was the only way I could keep up.

This testimony provides a window into the nature of his fandom. Although he initially believes he would probably switch team allegiance if it came down to it, he realizes that when confronted with that opportunity earlier in life, he instead preferred to separate himself from the game altogether. Later, access to information about his team when he was abroad proved to be one of his chief pleasures, “a happy day when the newspaper arrived.”

Ashley L. provides a window into the depth and power of fandom in recounting a rift that developed between her and a friend over the experience of attending a sporting event:

NKL: That's a good question. I think what I was imagining is whether or not [fandom] was the starting point, it's the primary substance, it becomes the primary substance of the relationship.

Ashley L.: Right, right. It's almost been the ending point.

NKL: Oh, explain!

Ashley L.: [Laughs]

NKL: Please tell me, I'm interested in what that means.

Ashley L.: A friend of mine back in college, he and his family had box seats for the Orioles. And, always, I guess, his pare-, his mother's family and his father's family, had had neighbourhood box seats that were close to each other, so the families throughout the years got to know each other and the mother and father eventually, you know, had fallen in love as, as young people and gotten married. And, so, I was friends with the one son, and he was so excited, he said, “I've got, you know, my family has, historically, these box seats. The game's coming up, my family's not going, would you like to go?” And I said, “Sure,” because we were very good friends. And, we went, they were excellent seats, and I don't care for baseball. So, I sat there, and at one point, something very exci-, and I understand baseball, like, I can follow the game, I understand the rules, better than I do for some other sports, but I'm not a fan. And so, I sat there, and he was getting very into it, and, at one point, the ball almost came our way, and he jumped up to catch it, and it, it grazed his hands. And, he turned to me, delighted that he'd had this experience, and I was reading a, a book. I was reading a novel. And he literally, he was so angry and frustrated, he was literally jumping up and down in, in sort of anger and sort of disbelief that, you know, “Here you are, not only at the game, in these excellent seats that have this history, with me, as a fan, stuff's happening,” and I was totally disengaged. Totally

disengaged. So, there, I think my inability to sort of play along on any level of fandom really was difficult for him. And, it did impact our friendship. I mean, we only, we'd only been friends, there was no romantic connection, but it, it did really impact that because that was something he really liked to do and he was very hurt, very hurt at my behaviour and my, my disinterest in his fandom.

This is, in a general sense, a very revealing statement about the nature and power of fandom. It was possible for a very close, intimate relationship to be disrupted based on a failure to perform the necessary rituals of spectatorship. In this case, it is not her own emotion that is on display, but that of her friend. Yet, instead of dismissing him as irrational or absurd in the way he behaved, she seems to empathize with him, as if she might feel similarly if the situation were only slightly altered. This is perhaps because she can relate to the feeling that sport has inherent meaning, that it is something more than just spectacle in her life:

NKL: Now, here's another one of those big questions, and you've been answering it all the way through, but just to try to get at the heart of it all, what is it you get out of the experience of being a fan? Why do you care?

Ashley L.: That's a good question. Sometimes I ask myself that after I've watched three hours of a game and I think, "I could have been doing something else quote productive." [Whispers] That's a very good question. What do I get out of it? Because, I do, if I put on a hockey game, if I put, especially a football game, I find it very pleasurable. Like, I am content. I will, my body language, you know, I'm on my couch, my feet are up, I have my cat, I have my teapot. Like, I am content. And, there are plenty of other things, like, you know, in terms of just simple relaxation, there are ways to be occupied, right? I could put on any show on tv, but I don't feel, you know, there are one or two shows I'm sort of crazy about, but in general I'm not a real tv-watcher, I don't, you know, think, "It's Tuesday at eight, my shows are on," I'm not that person, so – with one or two notable exceptions – but, so, I often, if I sit and watch a tv show just for the hell of it, just because I don't have something else on the go, I often feel guilty, I feel like I should be doing something productive, I'm wasting my time just watching this show, who cares, mmm. You know, and at the end of it I think, "Why didn't I do something else? I could have read a book, I could have mopped the floor, I could have done a hundred and one other things, and why did I spend my time?" I don't feel that way when I watch sports and I'm not sure why. I'm really not sure why. I, your question's sort of plaguing me now because I can't answer it. I find it enjoyable, I find it pleasurable, but more often than not, if I'm watching sports I'm by myself. So, I don't know if it's just easier for me to sort of justify the fact that, yes, I'm occupied doing something, somehow this is more justifiable. But I'm not sure how I would articulate why that's so.

She finds it difficult to articulate why, but ultimately feels that in watching sports she is doing something that does not waste her time, even though her time is something that she values. It does not seem like a reach to say that this is because sports spectatorship fills an essential need, whether it is by reconnecting her to her grandfather or a broader sense of community, it makes her feel like a part of something. Thus, unlike television, which simply occupies her leisure time, sports watching reproduces her as a human being, something that is essential, not wasteful. This is a feeling shared by nearly every one of the spectators interviewed. Sport is not mere distraction, but a profound source of meaning. It fills a void that most find it difficult to put their finger on, but nevertheless acknowledge is there.

Reifying the Imagined Athletic Community

In order for athletic spectacle to transcend the logic of exchange and commodity, the fan's vicarious membership in the team must be reified. This is done through the performance of ritual and the acquisition and fetishization of impassioned objects. After all, fans are not born with the knowledge that they are members of imagined athletic communities. They must be socialized into these factories of meaning and this socialization involves making the abstract concrete. The idea that one is part of a team becomes reality when one dons the uniform or other fetish signifier of the team and then performs one's membership in public, amongst other members. In these moments, a reification occurs. The fan receives recognition from her peers and offers reciprocal recognition in return. The imagined community is rehearsed through

clothing and cheers, much as the recitation of a national anthem reasserts the existence of the nation.

Tarik K. describes how rituals shape his experience of fandom for the Toronto Blue Jays:

Tarik K.: You start off, there's a build up, obviously, you talk about, like, the, the starters, who's pitching that day. We'll both have gear on, I think, I'll bring my jersey, my hat. He has his jersey and he has this old school, one of those, like, '80s parachute jackets. And, that's when you know it's game day, that's when people say, "Oh, you're going to the Jays tonight." Like, they know. Usually we have a couple of beers before and then we have to have a specific, like, a hot dog from a specific vendor, this really good vendor, after gate five. A nice lady, she calls everyone, 'babe.' It's part of the experience. She, she understands that.

NKL: Would you say that's superstition? Or just that you've worked out which vendor you enjoy going to and you go back to that?

Tarik K.: No, there's no superstition. I don't, I don't really believe that. We kid around about the superstition, but that's something completely different. No, it's just a great vendor and we try to patronize vendors that, you know, give something back to the people and are not just profit... I'm pretty sure she's profit-driven, but there's a secondary feeling that this is a, an experience and I want to be part of the experience, you know what I mean?

NKL: Yup.

Tarik K.: Very much like the, like the drummer, the Blue Jays drummer outside, he hasn't shown up for a long time or the people that sell different, I think it's illegal, but Jays stuff outside. Like, I appreciate their existence there, they add to the game. I'll tip the musicians, I won't buy the, you know, knock-off paraphernalia or whatever. So, yeah, we usually enter, go to our seats, and it's, we have kind of like a, it's something that's kind of died away, but we used to have like a jumbo beer per three inning kind of rit-, it wasn't a, it was a ritual, it wasn't for superstition, it was just, you know, you do that. Try not to get any food in there because it's extremely expensive. And, recently, I've cut out the beer from, from that because of the expense. There is a ritual, actually, that I do with other friends, not this one, particular one. You go to, it's called, it's like the porch in the outfield and you have to see first pitch from there to see if the pitcher is on or not. It's like a direct view to the catcher, it's such a vantage point where, like, you can call the pitch from that angle. And it's, um, you don't have to pay for standing there, you just do it.

He describes at length here many of the rituals he has associated with attending games. It is interesting that he makes a distinction between these rituals and superstition, which he considers

irrational. He does not believe that these rituals will affect the outcome of the game. However, they are an important part of the “experience” of attending. This is notable, because it speaks to the meaning being generated through the social experience of attending and bonding with other fans rather than simply being invested in the outcome of the game, as a more traditional superstition might be.

Ritual is also an important part of the experience for William D.:

NKL: How connected would you say you feel to other fans of the Canadiens, including those you don't know personally?

William D.: Actually, with social media, I feel a lot more connected. But, you know, I, obviously, if I run into a, a, another Habs fan, you know, there's a connection. There, there, there, I mean, yeah, especially if they're more my age, or even if they aren't. I've, I've talked to some younger fans who didn't see the, the Habs in the '70s, which, they, they were a, you know, a dynasty. I mean, they won, what, five years in a row the Stanley Cup? And they, they had incredible seasons and, and a fun team to watch, and the history. So, when I talk to younger fans about the history and that, it's kind of, it's kind of neat to see their reaction, if they, because they weren't there. If you're talking to a twenty or a thirty year old, they, they weren't there in the '70s, or weren't old enough to, to see some of those teams.

History is crucial to the invention of community, for it gives the community a lineage that makes it seem venerable and distinguished rather than arbitrary. Thus, William D. considers it significant to ensure that the younger generation of fans is versed in the history of the Canadiens and takes it upon himself to educate them. In doing so, he fleshes out the identity of his imagined athletic community, giving it a concrete reality. He echoes the importance of tradition again in this passage describing what it was that drew him to the Canadiens in the first place:

NKL: Okay, well, how about this: I'm curious about how you became a Habs fan growing up in Toronto.

William D.: Well, that, that goes back to the, the, the teams that they had and the history. And, and, you have to bear in mind, I'm not, I don't know if you're familiar with the situation in Toronto in those days? Harold Ballard?

NKL: Okay, sure, yeah.

William D.: And, his, and this is part of it, his, um, he never really brought the history into the Gardens as, as much as, like, the Habs always had nights for players who had retired, they hung banners, Ballard didn't seem to, and, you know, guys like David Keon never really went back to the, the, the rink and that because of some of the politics with Ballard. But the teams, the Montreal teams back then, were, were incredible. I mean, they, they were fun to watch, really good hockey and, and never disappointed. And, I guess that's the same with Man. United in soccer. Because, they've always had, you know, teams at the top. They were the Yankees of British soccer winning a lot of championships. I, that, that kind of goes to, my, my grandfather, my mom and my grandfather, are both from Stockport, which is just outside of Manchester, it's like a suburb, it's like Mississauga to Toronto. And, so, he was always a United fan and so he kind of got me into that and I started watching and I thought, they're fun to watch too...

What he gestures to here, perhaps somewhat obliquely, is, again, the importance of tradition to him even as a nascent fan. The pomp, ceremony, and grandeur of the Habs lured him away from a more likely allegiance to his hometown Leafs.

While ritual and history certainly provide depth to the imagined athletic community, superstition provides an even greater surfeit of meaning as it functions as a sort of fetishized form of these phenomena. In a sense, superstition is ritual endowed gravity and purpose.

Whereas the ritual is simply a form of tradition and history, the superstition pushes into a different realm, in which the actions of the fan are actually understood to impact the outcome of the team. Superstition, then, is fandom taken to its logical conclusion: the players become simply avatars for the desires of fans:

NKL: Can you just describe the typical experience of watching a game for you, you know, what you're doing, thinking, what goes into that? I know it's not always the same...

William D.: There's some superstition...

NKL: Okay, sure, I'm interested to hear about that...

William D.: Yeah. Where I sit, what I wear. I find if I wear my colours, they don't do well. I, it's just, it's weird. It's the same with soccer, you know, every time I put on my

Giggs jersey, they come out playing lousy, so, I think, “Okay, I’ll wear it either the day before or the day after.” Superstitions. [Laughs] And sometimes, if, it, it’s crazy, I mean, how a person would think that’s going to affect the whole outcome of the game because of where you’re sitting [laughs] or what you’re wearing half way across the world, but, nonetheless, there are superstitions with... Same with the Habs chair. I, the times I, if I move it up to the front of the tv, they don’t do well. So, it’s just, silly little things like that, you know.

NKL: Yeah, okay, interesting.

William D.: It, it’s surprising that people, but, yeah, yeah, superstitions are, are there. Now, I wouldn’t go as far as doing the, the beard, the beard thing, you know, playoff beard. Only for fun. Say, and, you know, but, but that’s, that’s it. I’ve found sometimes wearing the colours, I just, it sounds silly, but, yeah, and some rituals, some rituals.

Although she did not expand upon it in her interview, Maria I. also told me in passing at the end of her interview that superstition was an important part of her experience of fandom.

Just as ritual, history, and superstition allow fans to perform fandom, animating it through their beliefs and traditions, so too are impassioned objects a requisite part of what makes the imagined athletic community real. Again, William D. demonstrates the significance of this:

NKL: Do you have any merchandise, you know, like hats, uniforms, shirts, that sort of thing, related to...?

William D.: Yup. Lots, lots.

NKL: So, the whole, kind of, array?

William D.: I even have a Montreal Forum⁸ chair.

NKL: Oh, do you?

William D.: So, when the Forum shut down and they moved to the Bell Centre, they were auctioning off the, the chairs, so I got... I’ve got a Leaf chair as well. But, you know...

⁸The Montreal Forum was the home of the Montreal Canadiens hockey team from 1926-1996. Today the Canadiens play at the Bell Centre.

NKL: From Maple Leaf Gardens.⁹

The chairs are important signifiers of his identity as a fan of the team. They are a way of preserving the history of the team, but perhaps also of creating an important spatial connection. Hornby wrote of the importance of being in the terraces for his fandom. Perhaps, in an increasingly digital era, this is an effort to bring the terraces into the home. In doing so, he is able to connect not just with the place, but the people who have previously occupied it, his fellow fans.

The construction of meaning for fans is based on the premise that the team extends beyond the players who ultimately represent only the physical embodiment of the team – it's avatars, as I have put it. Thus, fans' allegiance extends to the team itself above and beyond the players who comprise it. They see themselves as part of the Toronto Maple Leafs, broadly-speaking, not as cheerleaders for the individuals who wear the jersey. Even as those individuals will change over time, fans remain constant in their devotion to the franchise itself. For instance, in answer to the question of whether he has favourite players or is ultimately more connected to the team itself, Tarik K. replies, "I, I don't think I can... I live here and there is something about a home team mentality that is very important for, for me being a fan. If Bautista or, or Encarnacion were traded, I would be very upset, you know, it's not a life-ender, I don't think it would take me off the team." Although he values and feels connected to particular players, he does not hold them above the team. Ultimately, the team still comes first. Thomas M. has a very similar reaction to the question: "Okay, so, if Phil Kessel got traded to the Ottawa Senators, or something, I would still be a Leafs fan. I probably wouldn't root for Phil Kessel because he's on a team I don't like. And, I would still be a fan in that sense." While he goes on to elaborate that

⁹Maple Leaf Gardens was home of the Toronto Maple Leafs hockey team from 1931-1999. Today the Maple Leafs play at the Air Canada Centre.

there are situations in which he is more of a fan of a player than a team, it is most important to note that when it comes to his primary affiliation, the team trumps all else. In fact, he seems to suggest that if he felt differently, he would not still be a fan. Because this is how he feels, “I would still be a fan in that sense.” William D. elaborates on this question as well:

NKL: Okay, so let’s talk a little bit about specific players now. Would you say that you have favourite players?

William D.: I do, I do. Yeah. I mean, in soccer, I have Giggs, who’s just retired, but, yeah, there’s a couple guys on, on the Habs that I really enjoy watching.

NKL: Would you say your allegiance would ever switch in terms of the teams you follow based on player movement?

William D.: Umm...

NKL: Or is it more that you’re invested in the team?

William D.: A bit of both. I mean, I might, I might if I, see, I, the type of player I like are the ones that are loyal to a team, so Giggs never left United. He said, he swore he’d never play for another team. The only other team he played for was Wales, because he was Welsh.

While he does note that there are players he likes more than others, it is precisely because they are “loyal to a team.” In other words, the team comes first for him and he believes the players should feel the same way. Implicit in this is the fact that he does not see the players as workers or professionals. Rather, the team is something more sacred and profound, worthy of their steadfast devotion. In the following extended passage on the subject of Ray Rice of the Baltimore Ravens, Ashley L. too comes to see that the team is ultimately of significantly greater importance to her than any players plying their trade on it:

NKL: And, you know what, this is a digression, but I want to focus on it for a second, because I’m struck immediately that, of course, Baltimore is the team you follow in the NFL...

Ashley L.: [Laughs]

NKL: I very much am following it myself, just on the level of how you feel and then how that intersects with all these ideas you have, what does it feel to be the fan of that team, in this situation?

Ashley L.: Good question. Right, that's under the spotlight for a player with this criticism...

NKL: Precisely, exactly.

Ashley L.: Yeah, I was going to say, do I feel somehow personally besmirched by that because I'm a fan?

NKL: Yeah, exactly, I mean, whatever it is.

Ashley L.: That's a good question. Yeah, a little bit, yeah. I was recently in Maryland, in the Washington D.C. area visiting my mother and so everything is Ravens purple, purple everywhere, and a lot of people were talking about it, the news, the local news, was a lot of talk about it. Yeah, I do feel a bit awkward that it's a fandom, a fandom that I have some closer investment and connection to. But, at the same time, it's tricky, right, because we know, I think most people realize, that you have your fandom, and that sort of sits above everything, right, it sort of hovers above, you've got your team and their team colours, and the mascot, and all that kind sort of stuff. And then you have the players certainly constitute the team, but they're not static, right? It's not like you've got these, you know, x amount of people that are always Ravens, all the time and, you know, you sign with them and you're there forever until your career ends. They're constantly moving in and out, right? So, I think it was a bit of, one hesitates to say black eye, for the fandom, but it was more on the player. I saw it more as a, as a personal or a character issue with the player because I find it really, and this, this affects my ability to be a good fan, the players keep changing. So, sometimes in a season, I get really interested in a player's progression, or devaluation, depending, right, and, all of a sudden they're traded, and then it sort of changes the experience of the game for me, I'm not saying better or worse, it's just different, right, so, or, you know, you have a particular team of people together, again, we're talking football and professional hockey, so guys, and they sort of come together in a certain way and so I, I find that compelling, and then, all of a sudden, if that is broken up, I'm a little less compelled. It takes me a while to sort of re-gel with new players. So, I think, I have more of an affinity with the team at that level of name and location and colour and mascot, as opposed to individual players, because, I'll be honest with you, initially, when this whole story broke, I had heard sort of dribs and drabs before I started really reading it properly and the initial drips and drabs I had heard the player's name but he was nobody to me, I didn't recognize him as a Ravens player, it was just some NFL guy, right, so that sort of affected my reaction too, I think. Later, I found out it was the Ravens and it was like, "Ooh," it hit me a little close to home, right, a little bit embarrassed that way, but my initial was, "I don't know who this guys is," I couldn't place him.

This is a lengthy and somewhat meandering discussion, but what it ultimately attests to is the fact that her investment lies in the team above and beyond individual players. She was not even able to place Ray Rice initially because of her frustration with the fluid nature of roster construction. Her connection is to the “colours” above all. This means that the players themselves can be disposable, but also that perhaps the greater part of her enthusiasm is reserved for those people who wear the colours alongside her and thus share in her community of spectatorship. She goes on to describe how interchangeable players ultimately are for her:

NKL: So, let’s talk a little bit more now about players and how you perceive players because you’ve mentioned how you’ve perceived players and it’s quite interesting, you were talking about being a fan of the shirt to a certain extent, but that was nuanced a little bit by some of the points you were making about some of the narratives that particular players have and so forth. So, I mean, would you say that you generally have favourite players, and, if so, does your allegiance to players switch based on movement relative to team, you know what I mean? Like, do you continue to follow them as they make their journey around the league?

Ashley L.: Right, right. That’s a good question. That’s a very good question. I tend to pay less attention to sort of non-pro string players. So, if I’m watching a Marlies game, I have no idea who’s on the ice. If I’m watching a Bulldogs game, again, couldn’t tell you who’s on the ice, no real investment. Unless, unless people come out and go, “Oh my God, Joe Blow is amazing, we’re really keeping an eye on Joe Blow.” I’ll be like, “Okay, who’s Joe Blow? Okay, what’s he doing, okay.” But, if he doesn’t end up stepping up, then that goes. For, for actual pro teams, that’s interesting. I find, yes, within seasons. So, as the season goes on, I’ll be like, “Okay,” you know, I’ll sit, I’ll come home, I don’t really keep tabs on the players, I don’t really know the players. You know how some people really watch the draft, and they’re just like, “Oh my God, who’s going, oh my God, did you see who was traded, oh my God.” Never an interest because I’m not that invested in them personally until they get to be sort of big names. And you’ve got all those guys on the field, or, on the ice, and they’re not all going to be big names, right?

Despite her earnest enthusiasm for watching and for cheering for particular teams, she feels minimal allegiance to players, who seem to function in an almost generic, interchangeable way for her. This testimony reveals how wide a range of experiences of fandom can yield significant meanings. Ashley L.’s admission that she is not attentive to the nuances of roster management

would no doubt yield a disdainful response from many fans, particularly of the more misogynistic order. Yet, what she demonstrates is that although she does not fit the conventional mould of fandom, she nevertheless experiences a similar degree of affective renewal and satisfaction as a function of her participation in imagined athletic communities.

A Necessary Sacrifice

Much as ritual and tradition are necessary for the reification of the imagined athletic community, so too is the conviction that players themselves believe the community is worth dying for, in the words of Anderson. That is, it is essential, from the perspective of fans, for players to play through pain and risk the sacrifice of their bodies, for in doing so they make the stakes of the game real. Their potential sacrifice testifies to the inherent meaning of the sport. It is here that a very significant theoretical distinction emerges between my analysis and more conventional approaches to athletic labour. Feminist approaches to masculinity underline the way in which sport encourages an instrumental approach to the body that ultimately has some considerable affective consequences for the athlete. Yet, what this approach fails to acknowledge is the connection between this instrumental approach to the body and political economy. This analysis does not tend to emphasize the fact that this approach to the game is *necessary* for its popularity. Not just because fans want to see fighting, but, more essentially, because fans want to see that players *care*. Players internalize these strictures – reproducing themselves in this sense – which gives the appearance that it is a masculine ethos that is the root cause. In fact, I contend, it is more of a by-product.

Let us examine the testimony of spectators on the importance they ascribe to athletes playing through pain and risking injury, for what it reveals is that they consistently view it as a desirable attribute. Mason T., for instance, admires athletes willing to endure pain in order to produce for their team:

NKL: How important is it to you that players play through injuries?

Mason T.: For me, I wouldn't say it's, it's important, but I think it's, it's very interesting that, kind of, hockey's one of those sports where, you know, you get an injury or you hear about all these injuries happening, about people playing through them. It's, it's kind of seen as one of the, I, I don't want to say, like, tougher sports, but it's, it's kind of seen as the ones you kind of play through the pain. I wouldn't say that's, that's important to me, but it, it, it shows the players' passion that they have, that they want to keep striving. Like, if you get injured on the ice, you're kind of raised, you're, when you're raised to play hockey, if you get a slap shot in the knee, and you can't really stand on it, you're told to stay on the ice until, like, the whistle kind of goes. You're not told to lie down or, or, or skate over to the bench, you're going to play through the pain. And so that, to me, it's not important, but it's, it's, kind of, it's awesome to see people still have that passion throughout their lives for the game to really want to support their team and not give up.

Although he does not want to say that it's "important" to him that people play through injuries, it becomes evident in his testimony that a willingness to do so is something he admires in hockey players, one of the things that makes him care about the sport. Mason T. appreciates the game precisely because of the sacrifice players are willing to make; it seems possible that his enthusiasm for hockey would be diminished if players did not "play through the pain." This becomes even more evident in his description of an injury he witnessed to the player Steve Stamkos:

NKL: Yeah, Do you remember anything – I mean, probably, since you were there in person, nothing can kind of quite reach that intensity – but do you remember a moment now that stood out to you watching the NHL?

Mason T.: Most recently, there've been Steve Stamkos – I don't know if you, I don't know if you follow hockey at all...

NKL: Yeah, sure.

Mason T.: ...or what you do, but, yeah, um, Steve Stamkos broke his tibia. He, obviously, going into the, going into the post at full speed and just snapping his tibia, that was [sound cuts out] one thing, because, again, the injury, the type of, the type of hockey player he is, he breaks his tibia, you break your, you broke your, you pretty much broke your leg and he's still trying to stand up to skate off the ice or skate off the pain. You watch that and you understand that these guys are giving one hundred and ten percent. But, watching that, you really understand how dangerous the game kind of is, and, and what you kind of put your body through and sacrifice to, for, for this entertainment, for themselves as well as for the fans. I actually grew up in the same city as Steve Stamkos and played with him a few times, so knowing him as a person as well I think affected me a little bit more too, knowing that potentially his career was over because of this injury. But, just kind of hoping he's okay and be able to just walk again, let alone, like, no one cares, once you get injured, people don't care if you're going to play hockey again, they're, they're more concerned, is this guy going to be okay for the rest of his life and that's, that's the scariest moment, is when you see these guys go down and go, "Holy crap, like, they may not be able to walk again." But, um, so, that was, that was definitely the most recent injury-wise that really hit me.

While he describes being disturbed by the injury and the concern that the player might not be able to play again, what also shines through this testimony is his admiration. Rather than be alienated by the danger and sacrifice, his description reads more as an endorsement of the stakes of professional hockey.

For William D., player loyalty to a team is prized as an attribute in the athletes he follows. Like the willingness to play through pain, this sort of loyalty speaks to the inherent value of the imagined athletic community. If players are loyal, there must be a reason for this, namely that the team is in some way sacred:

William D.: There's a couple of guys on the Habs, but, one of the guys, he's only been playing for a couple of years – Gallagher. And, I just like his style of play and he's not a big guy and he, he just plays like a big guy. And, I think part of my, one of the reasons I pick a player is, is, is more than just their, their, because they can score goals or, it, it, it has to do with personality and loyalty and not someone who is just there for, for the money. You know, some of the guys, it's, it's all about them and some of the guys, it's all about the team. And, there are a couple of guys on United who've, like Scholes and Giggs, who have since retired, but they, they played, they went through the whole system of United, played for United, didn't play for anyone else. And, and, to me that's, I, I

respect that, that's the type of player I like. You know, there's some guys that played for the Habs back in the day that never played for anyone else. You know, not Guy Lafleur, he played for New York and Quebec. But, you know, you wonder if, like, Carey Price will stay with Montreal for, for, for the long term. You know, a guy like Gallagher, lots of people like him, but he's, he's young and new to the team. You don't see it as often, but when you do, it's, it's, it's really refreshing because... One of the reasons, my son watches a lot of sports, not as much as me, he played a lot of sports too, but, he enjoys college ball, whether it's basketball, football, hockey. The reason he likes that is because they're more, it's more raw. And, those guys are, they're, they're not professionals and they're playing, of course, to become professional and make a, a, a good, salary, but, but their goals are slightly different than professionals, I think. Professionals, it's, it's, the game changes, I think, somewhat, at, at least in his, that's his point of view. He doesn't enjoy watching the NFL as much, or the NHL, or NBA because of the fact that there's money involved and it seems to change their, their attitude. "Oh, I've made it," so to speak.

The broader narrative here is about how the team transcends the mundane world of capital. The team is framed as something that should be sacred; professional sports become a sort of defacement of this beautiful dream. It is not difficult to see how the context of neoliberal capital frames this sort of way of thinking. In a world defined by the bottom line, fans are desperate for something more meaningful and profound. Players who remind them of the corporate nature of sport shatter this myth, much like the athlete who refuses to play while hurt. Conversely, those who sacrifice themselves for the team are deified as heroes and exemplars. It is thus wholly consistent with this mentality that William D. also places particular value on the willingness to play through pain:

NKL: So, how important is it to you that players play through injuries?

William D.: Well, it depends on the injury, right? You know, there's some guys that, that seem injury-prone or get a little, they have, they have a low pain tolerance or threshold [chuckles], they seem to, and they, they have little nagging injuries, I mean, you, you really can't tell whether it's bad or not, but, and again, there's others where you think, "Well, maybe they should sit out." It depends. It depends on the, the type of injury...

NKL: And when you think...

William D.: It's interesting, because, I watch soccer and then I watch hockey and, you know, I've seen, you know, a guy take, they're wearing shin guards and he takes a, takes

a little knock in the shin and he goes down like he's been shot, rolls around and gets stretchered off, all to draw, you know, a foul, maybe a card, or whatever, then I watch hockey, and a guy takes a hundred mile an hour slap shot on the ankle and finishes the play and skates off, and he's got a fractured, you know, ankle, or, whatever, foot, but he finishes the play, doesn't get stretchered off, generally. You know, those guys kind of hobble off and then they find out, "Oh yeah, it's a, you know, small fracture in his foot," or, whatever, or a deep contusion, or, or something like that. And, so, you know, it's, it's, I guess it's all relative, it's, it's all theatrics in soccer and unfortunately it's starting to creep into hockey but, it's one of those things where you don't want to see it too often. I wish they, kind of, cracked down on it in soccer because it's a bit farcical at times, where you think, "What if a guy's really hurt?" You know? Some of those guys [The phone rings]...

There is a general expectation that athletes should play through pain. A traditional feminist analysis of this passage might suggest that this is a question of masculinity. Although I accept that masculinity is at play here, the more salient factor is the willingness to sacrifice for the construct of the imagined athletic community. William D. cannot abide "the theatrics" of soccer that are "starting to creep into hockey" because they threaten the necessary fiction that the sport is more than just a game. Overly dramatic and implausible behaviour in response to physical contact ("theatrics") spoil the illusion that sport is contested for life-and-death stakes. Instead, it is the players who play through leg fractures who sustain this construct and they are consequently the ones he admires. This perspective is shared by Linda M.. When asked which characteristics she admires in a player, she responds, "Somebody who's more of a grinder, or, you know, gets in and gets dirty goals and is persistent and things like, those things I appreciate, because that's a very, that's a high level of compete, and that's where I'm excited, that's what I like to see." She gravitates towards players who are "a grinder," who are "persistent," who demonstrate "a high level of compete." This all accords to the fact that fans are interested in seeing players who are perceived to try hard, because in doing so they legitimize the value and meaning of the games they are contesting. To not try is to reveal the arbitrary nature of the activity. Paul D. has much the same take when asked how athletes should behave: "Well, I, I like

whole-heartedness, I like them to really try hard. I don't expect them to deliver always. So, I, I, you know, I, I, you know, the get-it-done sort of mentality, I don't care how you do it."

Ultimately, it is effort more than results that matter, for it is effort that validates the entire exercise. He goes on:

Paul D.: So, as to, how, you know, I, I expect them to, to try. I, I don't like to see a guy, you know, jog down to first base. I want to see him run it out, you know, you never know what's going to happen. And, I love to see guys dive for balls, or , or, or whatever, extend themselves, put themselves in harm's way, even, in order to, for the sake of the, of the doing what's required. I, I like guys who are journeymen, who dig it out in the corners and don't necessarily score the goals, you know, so, I think trying, whole-heartedness is, is big in my view.

Win or lose, it is the effort of the athlete that produces the imagined athletic community and it is the existence of the community, more than the satisfaction of vicarious triumph, that provides the fan with a sense of meaning and purpose. Thus, fans like Paul D. valorize players who "extend themselves, put themselves in harm's way... for the sake of... doing what's required." The harder players try, the more real the imagined community becomes.

Ashley L. provides the lengthiest and most self-reflective meditation on the relationship between fandom and athletic effort. She demonstrates a visceral sense of frustration at the prospect of a player not playing as hard as he can when she has paid money to attend a game:

Ashley L.: I remember, we had tickets once, they were two-hundred-and-fifty dollar tickets, far beyond what I could ever afford at this point, and it was an awful game. It was shameful. I mean, you really felt like... It's one thing to see people making an effort and you know they've just been bested by the other team. That's a skill thing and I don't, I don't become frustrated in them. I become disappointed for the team, I become a little embarrassed for the team, but I, I'm not disappointed. I don't think, "Oh, I, I've wasted my money or my time," or anything like that. But when you're sitting there and you get the feeling that the team just really doesn't give a damn or they're not, as I said earlier, hungry, that they're not committed to being there or whatever. That's when I start to really disengage and get frustrated and annoyed. It's not simply, "I paid my money, I want my experience." It's, I want, I think, on some level, to share in that hunger. I want, I want to be able to sort of, you know, project myself as that athlete on the ice and enjoy

that challenge and when they're not really, or when I perceive that they're not committed or they seem lazy or slow, or just, like, distracted. You know, every now and then you see a guy on the ice and the puck goes right by him and you're like, "You were not even looking! You were looking, you, you, you twinkled out for a minute, right, what happened?" That drives me wild. Like, I just, I feel almost a little personally offended, you know? Like, you are professional, you are getting, in most cases, a really good pay cheque, I realize it's a tough game, I realize, you know, physically your body some days is just not at a hundred percent, whatever, and we're all aging [laughs], all that kind of stuff, but, at least, give good game, you know? And, if I don't feel I've been given good game, I'm, yeah, I'm frustrated, I'm frustrated. There's only been one time that my friend Brittany and I, we left early because we were like, "You guys, you're bringing nothing. You're bringing nothing." And, you can feel all the fans get angry, everybody gets angry. And, I don't think it's necessarily because they're losing. It's because you're sitting there going, "For God's sake shoot the puck, stop passing it, stop passing the puck," and they just do it and you're just like, "Well, there goes the puck to the other team, great." Right? See, I'm even getting frustrated now just talking, thinking about it!

She becomes increasingly agitated as she recalls the experience of watching a game in which players did not evince the effort that she expects of them. Perhaps the most revealing line here is when she says, "It's not simply, 'I paid my money, I want my experience.' It's, I want, I think, on some level, to share in that hunger." If the player does not play as if they are hungry, the game starts to feel meaningless. This is not just an issue of being cheated out of the cost of admission. It is an issue of undermining the very fabric of the game and the community devoted to it. She elaborates further in this next lengthy passage:

NKL: You also touched on this: is it important to you that players play through injuries.

Ashley L.: [Thinks and then makes an exaggerated thinking noise.] That almost sort of goes to how I construct masculinity, which is a huge question [laughs].

NKL: Well, maybe if you could provide me a thumbnail sketch of that...

Ashley L.: Yeah, I'm thinking you're probably not looking for that. If it's a sport like football or ice hockey where, you know, certainly, certainly, certainly there has to be a degree of intelligence, mental tenacity, I mean, a lot of people that are coaches say that's, that really is all the game, right, if you don't have the mental tenacity, it doesn't matter how big or strong you are or what your skills are, but I do expect that they are athletes, so I expect them to be properly trained and I expect them to look after themselves, I expect them to do whatever they're supposed to do to prevent injuries in terms of their training,

not just to know the plays and the games and stuff like that. So, going into the game, stuff happens. When it's, yeah, it's really complex, how do I feel about that [sighs]. I don't like to see players injured, period. Partly, you know, I fret about them. And it also, it also stops the game and it sort of takes you out of that, right, so that is a little, I don't want to say frustrating, but a little frustrating, because it is, it becomes a distraction, right? "What's going on, what's going on with Bob on the sidelines," right? And then it changes the dynamic of the team and the special teams and stuff like that because all of a sudden you've lost somebody, so things, you can see all the guys coming on and off and everybody's sort of talking into their wrists, and saying, "What are we doing now?" So, I find, I find that just a little distracting. But, how do I feel about really playing through an injury? If it's minor, I think I'm okay with that. Because I think we've all done that, like, if you stub your toe, you still have to, you know, walk from the bus to your house, you just can't check out on the bus [laughs].

NKL: Now, you say you're okay with it, but do you, in fact, desire it, in that situation?

Ashley L.: Do I desire it? [Laughs]

NKL: Is that part of your expectation for what makes an athlete in a certain sense?

Ashley L.: I think it's part of my expectation insofar as when I first encountered football, which would have been in the '70s with my grandfather, the real thing was play through the pain. It didn't matter what happened, we have some steroids here and we're gonna, you know, we're gonna get you ready, and off you go. So, I saw that happen so often, I think I got the impression that, you know, [laughs] with steroids, anything is possible. So, if they just pumped you enough that you could make it through and that that was okay because you were an athlete and you were committed, right, you had follow-through, you weren't a quitter, right, nobody likes a quitter. So, I think that played into some sort of framework that I already had about character-building and, you know, how, how you live your life and that sort of thing. So, I, I think I found that appealing that they would play through the pain because I thought, "Wow, they are so dedicated and strong," and I do think that formed some of my opinions about how masculinity can be constructed, that, you know, what are men, well they're strong, they're strong, they don't cry, they don't come off the field, they certainly don't, you know, if it's a bump or a scratch, okay, they just, they just tough it out, right, that's what real men do, look at them, right [laughs], big, off they go to get hurt again, right? So, I think that's all in play, so I think I do have a tacit approval of that, to be honest, I think about that, I do think there's an underlying tacit approval. Do I find that pleasurable? I find it satisfying, I wouldn't say pleasurable, I do find it satisfying. There is something about seeing someone male who seems to be performing, because I think a lot of it is performative, strength in a traditionally male way, which is, "I'm gonna beat the crap out of this other guy," right, or, "I'm going to neutralize this other, this other male player," there is something deeply satisfying about that that I, I can't deny as a female I find kind of thrilling, right? Does that mean I want to see them, you know, butchered and bloodied and that sort of thing? Absolutely not. Like, again, with the, the Theismann break, he couldn't play, right, but I wouldn't have wanted, like, that level of injury, God, no, I was horrified, I still am, I still am. People say, "You wanna see the?" "No, I don't want to see the tape. I watched it. I don't. No, no, no, no,

not interested.” So, for really gruesome injuries, like where people are, you know, down on the ice or something like that, no, I’m horrified, I’m absolutely horrified, but for more minor injuries, yeah, I think I do expect them to play through, yeah, yeah, now that we’re sort of talking about it, yeah, and I do find it satisfying.

In this very lengthy, extended passage, she provides greater context for her earlier comments.

First, she reveals that although she feels empathy for injured players, this is not the only reason she dislikes injury. In fact, one element of her “frustration” is that it disrupts the flow of the game and also affects a team’s ability to perform. In this sense, her feelings are more in line with her general thoughts about the interchangeability of players. Further, it becomes apparent that through socialization, she has come to value and extract some measure of pleasure from sacrifice up to the point of horrific injury, which she makes clear is something she abhors. What she does like is for players to play through pain up to the point of excruciation. This is in line with her feelings about the hunger of players. Ultimately, it becomes clear that she does expect a significant (albeit not absolute) level of sacrifice from players in order to reify the meaning of the imagined athletic community.

Concomitant with the desire for players to play through pain is the greater level of concern many spectators feel for the fate of the team rather than player when a player is injured. Indeed, the meaning of fandom is so profound that it causes members to abandon the moral compass they are typically guided by. The fate of the team and the meaning of the game come to trump all ethical considerations. Tarik K. exemplifies this attitude in his various comments about Jose Reyes’ severe ankle injury in 2013:

Tarik K.: I’m thinking of the Jose Reyes ankle injury. It’s one of those things, it’s like an accident that you can’t, you know, pull your eyes away, there’s just something in us that wants to see it. I think his name is Kevin Ware or something, the one who had that horrific, what’s it called, compound fracture? Jesus. That’s horrible. Or, Anderson Silva. I watch some of that too. I didn’t actually see the match, I saw the injury. Both, both of the last two ones I just saw the injury. Yeah. I’m horrified. Like, it’s horrific to see that

happen to someone partaking in sports, even if it's a violent sport or if it's a non-violent sport, like in Jose Reyes' or Kevin Ware's case. In, if it's someone I really like like Jose Reyes—when he came to the team it was like a breath of fresh air and I was really excited for him being traded here—when it happened I was at my friend's house and we saw it and I saw it happen, and my reaction was, “Oh, fuck, no, he's done for the season,” and my friend was like, “Calm down, we'll be fine,” and I said, “No, no, his ankle is fractured, like, he's done for the season.” Now, obviously the caveat is that I would still watch the season, I'd still enjoy it, but we weren't going to win the World Series, we weren't going to go to the playoffs with this, this was such a derailment in my eyes that I definitely lamented over it and, and was very vocal about how it was horrific and how I thought it was disgusting and, his ankle just all mangled up under him and too about the value that was just lost there to me as a fan and to the franchise economically speaking. And, we obviously know what happened to that season.

Although he begins with the horror of witnessing injury, it is interesting how swiftly he segues into a discussion of the implications of those injuries for the team. Even the statement that he is ““Done for the season,”” focalizes what has occurred around the interests of the team rather than the player (for whom the greater concerns may be a shortened career and long-term pain/diminished ability). This point is hammered home when he adds, “this was such a derailment,” to the prospects of the team he had just been discussing. When asked about how he followed up on the injury after it occurred, he adds, “Jose Reyes, I knew it was just his ankle and followed up just at a topical level, just knowing when he was game-ready and what he was doing to fix his ankle.” In describing how he followed the aftermath of Reyes' injury, he mentions that he was waiting to determine when the player was “game-ready.” Again, this terminology highlights a preoccupation with the player's utility to the team rather than his well-being for his own sake.

Thomas M. demonstrates a similar outlook when asked how much attention he pays to injury as a sports fan: “Actually, quite a bit, because injuries really affect the team in terms of how they, how well they do on and off the ice. If a captain gets injured, usually the team isn't playing at its peak performance because the captain is such a huge part of the team.” This is a

revealing initial comment, for the remainder of his testimony on the subject is about how concerned he is about injury and how he prefers to see players sit out then play through it. Yet, despite an extended disputation on these themes, the first thing that comes to his mind is the impact on team performance of injury. This speaks to how deeply-rooted this attitude is for fans. Even for those who care more than most about the individual well-being of players, there is something inherent in fandom that brings them back to the question of team performance first. He goes on:

NKL: And, you've already started to answer my next question, but just to follow up on it, how important is it to you that players play through injuries?

Thomas M.: It's important that players play through injuries that they can play on. I personally feel that if a player is hopped up full of pain-killers and, say, their ankle is wrapped up if they have, like, an ankle injury or a leg injury, that they shouldn't be playing on it, because not only are they damaging their body, but they're risking the well-being of the team. And, there are a lot of legal complications with that as well. And, as someone who has looked into a little bit of that, players who play injured risk losing their entire career if they mess up. A lot of these players have dedicated their entire lives to playing hockey and one ankle injury is the difference between sitting out half a season and becoming a construction worker because they can't skate. So, it's a big deal to me that players don't play injured, because sports injuries are different than other injuries. If I roll my ankle, then I do less, like, I might go to work one less shift because my ankle hurts. But, if Sidney Crosby rolls his ankle, he shouldn't be skating the next day, because that's his career. This is my job, right? It's different.

Again, although this account demonstrates a very high degree of empathy for what players go through, it is notable that he inserts the caveat that it is "risking the well-being of the team." The inclusion of this point speaks to the fact that this is always paramount in his mind.

William D. shares a similar preoccupation with the welfare of the team, albeit with a considerably smaller dose of empathy for the players who are injured. When asked how much attention he pays to injury when watching sports, he replies, "Well, obviously, with this last, the last playoff round with the Habs, they lost their number one goalie. So, you pay a lot of attention

to it because, it depends on, well, I shouldn't say, [laughs] it depends on who gets injured. If that's what you mean..." Again, it is clear that the focus is on the *team*. Injuries are worthy of attention when they affect crucial members of the team because the absence of stars jeopardizes the team's performance. His laughter here likely indexes an awareness that this may be a callous way of thinking about damage to the body, but it does not prevent him from acknowledging how he feels. This is a clear assertion of the theoretical point that the body of the athlete is a vessel for meaning that can swiftly be transmitted to another person. This transmission is complicated when there is no suitable replacement at hand to carry the burden of surrogacy for the fan's vicarious aspirations. The conversation continues:

NKL: I'm interested in whatever you're thinking...

William D.: Yeah, it affects, how it affects the game, it's, it's importa-, you know, because, that series, although, Tokarski, the young guy that came in and replaced Price in net, he did really well and they have something to think about over, in the off-season, what they're going to do with him and Budaj, obviously they're keeping Price, but, they have some options, they could... anyways, but, yeah, it affects, I mean it, I, I pay a, a lot of attention. I mean, going into a game, and going to soccer, you know, I look at the line-up going in because it makes a difference. Moreso in soccer, because those guys play, you know, three-quarters of the game, whoever starts the game and, and if you don't start the right people, or you don't have the people to start, then you just worry about how that might affect the outcome of the game, so if Rooney is not playing, or Giggs wasn't playing or there was an injury to the goalie, I mean, the keeper is, is important too. I, I mean, if that's what you mean.

Here too we see the clear echo of the fact that the primary concern around injury is "if you don't start the right people, or you don't have the people to start, then you just worry about how that might affect the outcome of the game." He concludes with a utilitarian rationale for why players should at times resist playing through injury:

NKL: So, you actually said that there were certain situations in which you would be more inclined to see a player not play through injuries, what kind of situations do you

have in mind there? What are the times when you think the players shouldn't be playing through?

William D.: Well there's, there's, there's a type of thing, like, in hockey there's groin pulls and that sort of thing, that's one of those nagging things that if you don't deal with it initially, it could get worse, it could get stretched where they're off indefinitely. And, in soccer, there's the same sort of thing where there's hamstrings, you know, where they get to the point where there's, there's a little nag in, in, in the back of their leg and they play on and all of a sudden they do, you know, a, a full sprint and you see them pull up and they've ripped, you know, the back of their quad and they're out, you know, for a couple months. Right? So, it's, it's one of those things where you understand if, if they, if they're, like a goalie with a groin injury, you know, my, my son, had, he played goalie when he was younger and he played double 'A' goalie and early in the season, he, he twigged his groin and he played through, and by the end of the season it was just every, every game it was severe pain to the point where the other goalie, excuse me, the other goalie had to, to kind of, finish up. He didn't stretch it or, or stay off it, or, I don't know what, there's not a whole lot you can do, you just have to stay off it. So...

The notion that players should at times resist playing through injury in no way challenges the original premise that it is necessary for players to persevere through pain, for it is framed through the lens of the instrumental needs of the team. If resting during an injury benefits the team's long-term outlook, then the player should rest. The individual needs of the player as a human being independent of this collective – indeed, *his* long-term well-being – are seemingly irrelevant to the equation. Maria I. echoes this attitude:

NKL: So, how much attention do you pay to injuries when you're following a game? Is it something that you're really conscious of, not so much...?

Maria I.: Yeah, yeah, I mean, it affects the team, it really does. Because, the team has its line-ups, the team has its players that they work well with and if that piece of the puzzle is missing, then sometimes it really affects either the morale of the team or it affects the way a line is played, or if you bring a third-liner up to second line then he might not be ready for that. So, it, it, I follow it pretty closely and want to know when the guy's coming back. Some players I don't even want them to come back because without them, the Leafs have a funny thing about players who are good on the Marlies, instead of bringing them up they'll put him down there and once a person's injured they'll bring the guy up and he'll score his goals, get some assists and do really well and work really well with someone, but the minute the injured guy comes back, he's down. I get it. It's contractual, it's my spot on the team, etc. But, you've got to take notice [phone starts ringing in the office] and sometimes just, maybe throw him on the fourth line, maybe

keep him up a little bit longer, you know, and maybe the coaching staff is more on he needs to develop, great, but, I'm like, "Just give the guy a chance," you know, like, I just want, I just think when a team is working, if it's not broken, don't fix it, you know? Because the fans want it. The fans want a team in the playoffs, the fan, the fans want wins, they don't want losses all the time, so, you know, and injuries either make it bet-, make them better or make them worse. So...

Her focus in answering this question is entirely on the needs of the team from the perspective of a fan. She does not even touch on the harm actually done to players. Rather, her attention is completely attuned to the fact that injuries affect the ability of a team to win in a variety of ways and "the fans want wins, they don't want losses all the time, so, you know, and injuries either make it bet-, make them better or make them worse."

Linda M.'s perspective is perhaps more striking precisely because she identifies less strongly as a fan of any particular professional team. Despite this general attitude, her approach to injury nevertheless favours the interests of the team almost entirely over the well-being of the player:

NKL: Okay. So, let's talk now a little bit about injuries, and you were already getting at that a little bit before, so, just building on that, how much attention do you pay to injuries when you're following sport as a spectator?

Linda M.: I'm, I'd say just a moderate amount insofar that, especially when I look at a team like the Leafs, because they're my default team by geography, and they're not a particularly deep team physically, so they've got, they've got a terrific first line, they've got a pretty good second line, and then their next two lines are really quite weak [laughs]. So, losing a player to an injury really has an impact on that team, especially when it's somebody out of those first two lines. But, I think it's sort of at the moment of losing, I have the, "Oh shit, here it goes," moment, then there's the, "Oh, let's see how long they're going to be out," and then I don't give it a lot of thought until sort of the period where they start talking about, "Maybe they're going to be back," you know, "So-and-so's coming back," and now it's like, "Oh right, let's see how long it is until they get injured again," is sort of always in the back of my mind. And that's also, just the, growing up with, I have a friend of mine who's, actually, had a good NHL career, but was, it was plagued by injuries. So, I'm a little more personally sympathetic to how frustrating that is.

Despite the fact that she is less invested in the team than most of the spectators I spoke with and despite the fact that she has personal connections to professional players in her own life, something she cites at the end of this passage, nevertheless, her approach to injury is almost entirely utilitarian from the perspective of the team. Her concern is for how long a player will be out and how that will affect the depth of the team. Thus, although she resists the idea of players playing through injuries, it is not because she worries about what the implications of doing so will be for their lives:

NKL: Okay. How important is it for you that players play through injuries?

Linda M.: Oh, not at all, not at all. If you're injured, you're in-, I mean, there's being sore and tired and a bit strained, and then there's being injured. No, they're investments. Like, these, players are a business commodity, so I understand that playing through some injuries is acceptable, depending on what they are, but you also, I mean, teams protect their investments. There's a reason people are out for significant periods of time, you know, even after a concussion you think, "Well, maybe, maybe they can come back." I do appreciate that, and I said with the NHL, because lower levels and other, other areas, you know, if you're looking at the Olympics and things like that, tend to take injuries a lot more seriously. Because, with the Olympics, these are NHL commodities, so they're not going to sacrifice them for that. And, with the lower levels, they just treat it, they treat it with more seriousness because I think that we've developed a culture where we understand now how devastating concussions and things like that can be. So, I don't think it's that important. I think it's ultimately it's probably more important to build a stronger team so that an injury or two doesn't devastate and you can have people rehabilitate properly. So, I'm going to say not at all.

Although she is unequivocally resistant to the idea of players playing through injuries, her reasons for this are grounded in the logic that teams should protect their "investments" since players "are a business commodity," not out of regard for a player's well-being. She has seemingly internalized the instrumental (and capitalist) logic of the imagined athletic community, even as she resists full membership within one.

In the course of conversations with spectators, it became clear that in general, investment in the imagined athletic community often confronts fans with ethical dilemmas. Because they are

invested in the team and community, their primary interest is in the team's success, that is, winning. Yet, sometimes, the players tasked with representing the imagined athletic community do not live up to the ethical standards of fans. This places fans in the position of having to cheer for someone they find morally dubious. What is noteworthy about this dilemma is that fans consistently seemed to resolve it by ultimately choosing to support the player and team. When push comes to shove, the imagined athletic community is too important to sacrifice to external notions of morality. Thomas M. articulated this struggle in his response to the player Todd Bertuzzi:

NKL: So, you definitely started to answer this question as well, but just to follow up and maybe think of a different example, I was gonna ask you, can you think of an injury you witnessed or tell the story of a particular injury you remember happening in a game you were watching. So, you already started by telling me one before, but, so if you want to pick up that one again, or something else, but I would be interested just to go through literally what you are thinking in those moments as you are watching that.

Thomas M.: Okay. I haven't seen an injury at a Leafs game, not personally, like being there...

NKL: Sure, but even on tv.

Thomas M.: Okay. There was a huge injury that happened a long time ago. There's a player, Todd Bertuzzi, who checked from behind this other player, Shawn Moore, and he paralyzed him. And there was a huge issue with that. And I remember watching that game live. When I was watching it, I mean, I was, maybe nine or ten years old, maybe eleven, and I remember being upset because I liked Todd Bertuzzi and as soon as that happened I started to think, "Wow, this player isn't the person I thought he was. He's not that kind of, that kind of role model, kind of upstanding player, he, he does things like this. I'm not sure if I like him now." And, I remember feeling upset for the other guy, Shawn Moore, because as soon as he went down and didn't get up I had this feeling, like in the pit of my stomach, "This guy's not okay. This guy's seriously injured." And, as the legal battle kind of continued, and the players were in the media, I remember developing this really big disliking for Todd Bertuzzi for, for doing that hit, because as the replays showed, there was absolutely no reason for him to hit him aside for just being angry. And, it's kind of a side note, but now, Todd Bertuzzi is part of the Red Wings. And, I have mixed feelings about that as a Red Wings fan, because part of me is like, "He's a good player. Minus all of the bad stuff that he has done, he's a, bottom line, he's a good player, he puts up points, he's really good, he fits in with the team." But, I can't ignore

the fact that he should be in jail for what he did. So, I mean, there, there's mixed feelings about those kind of injuries, right? And, I guess I feel personally connected to that because I did watch it personally, whereas other injuries that I might have just heard about or seen a replay of, it doesn't really affect me the same, because when you're watching it live happen, it's different, you witness every single second of it. Whereas, if I see a clip online, it's like, "Oh, okay, that was a thirty second clip of someone getting hit. I want to watch another one now." So, you don't feel connected to it, right?

This is a very interesting and honest piece of self-reflection. It gestures to the difficulty confronting a fan in navigating the individual identity of players on a team that s/he cheers for. On the one hand, he deplores Bertuzzi as a human being for what he did. Yet, "minus all of the bad stuff that he has done, he's a, bottom line, he's a good player, he puts up points, he's really good, he fits with the team." Ultimately, the interests of the team weigh at least as heavily as his general philosophy and ethics. This, again, speaks to the surfeit of meaning provided by sports fandom. On an affective level, it becomes more important than other considerations. Mason T. comes to a similar resolution on the issue of concussions, which he understands to be a significant health risk to athletes:

NKL: Now, is it possible that injuries or new information about injuries would ever stop you from watching hockey?

Mason T.: I'd say at the current state, no. But, I think, I think, depending on, because they're, they're trying to, they're really talking about concussions a lot more in the last five years, about how it affects players, and, and especially the, the fighters of the league, how there's been about three, three suicides in the last five years, about, kind of, the brute forces of the league, and, and, and the sacrifices that they make mentally and physically, I think, over time, if things really start, you know, you know, the information about this really starts growing at, at the exponential rate that it is, it, it could, down the line, really just affect the league in general, not just me, but how the game is kind of played. And, so I can, I can see that maybe affecting me. If the sport is on, I know I won't turn away from it, but I think over time the game is going to be changing and that may turn me, uh, you know, if the game is not the same game anymore, that might happen, but right now I don't really see that happening.

Despite the damning literature on concussions, and his awareness that this has led people to take their own lives, he is not able to turn off the games, for they provide him with too much meaning to simply relinquish. William D. responds to this issue in much the same spirit:

NKL: Okay, so is it possible that injuries or new information about injuries might ever stop you from watching the sports you now watch?

William D.: No, I don't think so. I don't think so at all. I would hope that, that, you know, they're going through the concussion thing for, for a lot of sports. Re-, uh, um, uh, kind of, re-thinking all the, the rules and, and, and equipment and, for example, with hockey, they have that, the quiet room where they, if they, if they're a little wobbly on the ice, they take them off and they have to, they have to examine them and then get a professional to, kind of, look them over and, whereas before the, and same with football, coach says, "You okay to go?" You know? "Come on, hurry up, we need you back on the field!" [Chuckles] That sort of thing. There, there's none of that anymore, I mean, they, they, they take it a lot more seriously because, you know, guys were getting five or six concussions over their career and now they're, kind of, um, um, I won't say brain dead, but they're, they're kind of complicated, um, um problems, you know, with their, not just headaches, but, you know, severe, um, um, over the years, they, it's deteriorating. If, so, I, I think, just, you, you kind of hope they, they keep, they keep re-inventing the, the equipment so that it protects the players and, you know, I hope they continue to do and play as they are, you know. I think with hockey it's getting faster and the guys are bigger, so they have to adapt the, the, the rules and equipment and, and, and they're doing that, you just hope they speed up the process so that, that, you know, but I think the players are more protected now than they were. It's just catching up.

In this last response we see the full extent of the power of the imagined athletic community.

Although he appears acquainted with recent discourse on injury and sport, he continues to accept the legitimacy of sport as an institution.

It is important to conclude this chapter by acknowledging that not all fans are willing to privilege the meaning they draw from the imagined athletic community over the health and safety of the athletes who animate it. Indeed, for some, the well-being of athletic labourers in the face of a sport and culture that demand them to sacrifice their bodies is a source of significant ambivalence and consternation. Paul D. expresses this sentiment clearly:

NKL: Yeah, and, actually, let me just follow up on that last point, I was going to ask, how important is it to you that players play through injuries.

Paul D.: No. I, I, you know, I, I'm very touched by the whole head injury thing. I don't like it when it appears, and I saw a game recently, I forgot what sport, but it sure appeared to me that the person had been, had a concussion and they were out and I couldn't believe it that, you know... I mean, I think there was a lot of ignorance, and certainly, you know, getting your bell rung was a saying in hockey and, and you expected it, and you expected to play through and, and, you know, we loved it when Bobby Bonn scored, scored a goal with a broken foot, you know, and stuff. So, but I, I would say that my attitudes have changed quite a bit in that regard. I think maybe I did, in earlier years, admire the playing through the injury. At this stage, I, I, you know, a) I feel it's the responsibility of the team to not allow a person to try to do that; b) I think the, the, the athletes should be honest. I realize that their big fear is that, you know, that somebody else is going to come up and they'll never get back. So, there's, and I feel bad about that. I mean, one of the things I noticed about the Canadiens over the years, is all the goalies came up in the playoffs when somebody else got injured and, and the other one never got to play, back, you know? Just, all, there's a long run of goalies in the Canadiens, now, I didn't cheer for them, but I still didn't, didn't like it, I felt badly for the guy who got squeezed out. So, I think, I guess I'm a little bit conflicted, I, I want the person to get better, but I'd like them to have a chance to play again and I, I don't really love it when a team never lets them back.

This is perhaps the clearest and most honest statement of empathy for what players go through that I encountered in the course of my interviews with spectators. He admits to the inclination of wanting them to return, but ultimately suggests that he does not think that is for the best and feels real concern for what happens to them as a result of playing through injury, a point he elaborates when asked about whether he would ever give up watching sports because of injury:

Paul D.: I think, if I, I guess if I was watching a game and a fight broke out and I saw a guy get hit and his head went, he hit his head, and he was killed, I think that would have a profound effect on me. Now, it's come close and, and I'm still watching. But, I was, I was grossed out, I mean, I was appalled and, and, and I think that, that might, I mean, I, I've never been a person who, for instance, the fact that strikes, you know, seasons are cancelled and so on, I, I don't vow that I'll never watch again, because I know I will, so... But, I think if something happened which was related to an injury when in fact the sport had the capacity to prevent it and didn't, and actually seemed to, in a way, promote this kind of activity, that might cause me to, to decide I can't watch this, even although I love it. You know, I might have to decide not to.

He is really the only spectator willing to concede that he probably would stop watching the games if something truly grievous were to occur. There is a non-fetishistic level of empathy and understanding evident here. He does not seem to instrumentalize or commodify players.

Ashley L. displays a similar degree of empathy, despite her earlier comments extolling players who are willing to play through pain:

NKL: So, just, first, if you just want to expand a little bit, the question was how much attention do you pay to injuries in sports?

Ashley L.: Lots [laughs].

NKL: Okay, so tell me a little bit about that.

Ashley L.: I find it really upsetting. I don't know, I think my own nature is, is somewhat e-, e-, empathetic, so, I think that's at play, but I worry, I fret. And, I don't know why, because it's not like it's my, you know, my son or my husband or my friend on the ice, there, or on the, on the field. It's not like, also, you know, like, a manager might be concerned, like, "Oh, there's my meal ticket," right? I don't have that sort of investment. It's just, it's just enjoyment and entertainment. But, yeah, I do, I do hate to see someone hurt. And, some of the injuries are quite gruesome, you know? Every now and then you see someone and you can tell that they're, you know, they took a bad hit or they're injured, but they're not injured badly, right, and that, I mean, I'm concerned but I'm not disturbed. But, sometimes you'll see injuries where these guys are really hurt, or you don't know, or they're knocked out and you just don't know, you know, or they're bleeding on the ice and I think, "Oh, that's really nasty, like, what's going on?" And, sometimes they play through it and, yeah, I don't know how they do that. I j-, yeah, I just find it disturbing. I think I'm worried they're going to get more hurt, I think I worry about their future, because if they're really badly injured, then there goes their meal ticket.

Like Paul D., she demonstrates genuine concern for players who are injured in sport. Although she sees players are relatively interchangeable generally, this does not change the fact that she empathizes with them when they are hurt. This is quite an unusual response, for it means that although she demands players to be hungry, and relishes the imagined athletic community, this does not cause her to lose sight of the ultimate fact that a complete sacrifice of the athlete's body is not justified by these pursuits.

Yet, what these exceptions prove more than anything is the rule that for the most part, spectators feel little concern over injuries to the athletes they follow. Indeed, very often they relish the pain and harm that athletes are subjected to because it validates the overarching

meaning and purpose associated with professional sport. For fans, sport is something more than spectacle or distraction. It is a site of profound meaning and purpose that enriches their lives. The question that we must now engage is precisely what form this meaning takes. Why is it that professional sport is able to provide the surfeit of meaning that is able to engender such unwavering devotion, devotion that far exceeds any more prosaic form of brand or consumer loyalty? The answer to this question has everything to do with the imagined athletic community and the sense of collective membership and connection associated with it, connection that is exceptionally difficult to achieve in the isolating and alienating conditions of contemporary capitalism. It is this sense of connectedness that we will explore in the next chapter.

Chapter 7: Fandom and Imagined Community

The nature of the meaning generated for fans is inextricably linked to a sense of community that compensates for the isolation of capitalist life (this atomistic existence is socialized as natural, so people do not see it as lacking, instead noticing particular pleasure in community when it emerges). This is why there is such a surfeit of meaning associated with fandom: the team provides the scaffolding for the construction of an imagine community. Yet, the imagined athletic community is hardly immune to the problems that mar all imagined communities, namely Manichaeism, gendering, and racism. Ultimately, there is, fundamentally, a fetishism inherent to the imagined athletic community. Although it produces a sense of meaning and connection in the face of capitalist isolation and alienation, it does not tend to provide the foundation for genuine relationships or political solidarity that might lead to structural change. Instead, it functions in a spectacular manner to sustain the capitalist system by providing its subjects with just enough affective sustenance to reproduce themselves as a productive labour force.

Fandom as Connection

For nearly every spectator interviewed, one of the principal sources of satisfaction derived from fandom was a sense of connection to other fans of their chosen team. Let us begin with Thomas M.:

NKL: How connected would you say you feel to other fans of your team? Including those you don't know personally...

Thomas M.: Well, I feel connected to pretty much every Leaf fan because we've all pretty much experienced the same thing. I mean, they haven't won in, like, forty odd years, so there's this kind of, like, solidarity with Leaf fans where it's like, you know, "this is our year," like, you just, we want to see them win so bad. In terms of Red Wing fans, I only really know like two or three others personally, so I don't really feel that kind of connection. But, when I went to a game in Detroit I felt this, kind of, this connection that I hadn't experienced with that team because all of these people who are, maybe, maybe they're not locals, but they all came to the game, they're wearing jerseys and hats, you kind of feel, you kind of feel connected to that. There's kind of this like, this like, energy, right?

This is an extremely revealing passage. First, he emphasizes that he feels a very strong level of connection to other fans because of a shared experience of cheering for the same team, something he describes as "solidarity" – it is worth adding that this diction appropriates the language of political causes, evincing the way in which sports fandom as spectacle not only provides surrogate species-being, but also comes to replace political activism or other forms of community making. Second, his elaboration on Red Wings fandom is even more instructive, for it illustrates how it is possible to feel connected despite a lack of personal relations. Although he is barely acquainted with other Red Wings fans, he comes to feel connected with others precisely through the fetish signifiers that they wear (a topic I will develop further below). Most significantly, what he ultimately comes to feel is a sense of "energy." He is re-animated by the sense of connection he feels to other fans. The connotation of rejuvenation in his diction is crucial because it speaks to the way in which the imagined athletic community provides something that is lacking. David McNally (2011) has written about the way in which capitalism produces popular culture metaphors around zombie-ism, reflecting the way in which the system attempts to reduce its subjects to something akin to mindless drones. Thomas M. derives an antidote to this structural discipline from his fandom, a sense of revitalization. This, of course, serves the system itself, for it ultimately receives more productive labour from its more vigorous

subjects. As he goes on, Thomas M. further explains the centrality of community to his experience of fandom:

NKL: Do you remember how you came to be a sports fan?

Thomas M.: Um, yeah. I guess, I guess part of it was growing up with my dad and my two older brothers watching a lot of sports, so I kind of got into it that way. I remember when I was little, my dad got me, like, one of my brother's old hockey sticks and, like, sawed it off so that I could actually use it and play around in the driveway. I played baseball as a little kid, like I started off playing t-ball when I was like four or five years old. My dad took me to, like, Blue Jay games and Toronto Argonaut games because back in the early '90s tickets were extremely cheap, like you could sit in, like, the 500 section for like five bucks or six bucks or something [laughs]. So, stuff like that. And then, because I started to enjoy it, I started to like go on my own. So, nowadays I'll go with, I'll go with my friends. We'll take the Go bus down and we'll go, like, see a Blue Jay game because I've had fun with those kind of experiences.

This is an emblematic narrative of nascent fandom. He is socialized into his love for the teams he supports by his older male relatives who watched and played the games with him. The experience of attending games as a child plants a seed that blossoms in his own adulthood, when he attempts to reproduce the meaningful experiences he had as a child. This is important because it shows how connection to a physical community of fans is an important part of the development of the young fan. The community is what makes the experience of fandom particularly compelling. While this first entails a concrete relation to his actually nuclear family, ultimately he seeks a fetishistic substitute in the community of fans that inhabit the stadiums of professional sport. This community is important enough to him that it is worth making a somewhat arduous trek on the Go bus from his home in Brampton into downtown Toronto.

For Mason T., community and connection are also central to the experience of fandom:

NKL: Okay, and, do you have any personal relationships with people, let's say outside of Reddit, that are primarily based on your team?

Mason T.: Absolutely, actually, yeah. Recently, in the last eight months, I've joined a couple different hockey teams and found people who are Leafs fans and ended up, just, talking to them a bit more because of that and ended up, a lot of the relationship with them is actually just going to watch the games, have a few beers, and stuff like that, and then that's pretty much it. So, the relationship is almost solely based upon our kind of connection through hockey.

NKL: And would you say that at this point a large proportion of the relationships in your life are those kind of relationships?

Mason T.: I'd say that it's, it's a small proportion, like, maybe, twenty-five percent tops, but it's, but it, it's, those are kind of newer ones, but it's about twenty-five percent, I'd say.

Although he considers fellow fans to comprise only about a quarter of his friendships, this number is on the rise (“those are kind of newer ones”), suggesting that these dynamics are changing as he ages and becomes more passionate about the team. There is, perhaps, a greater urgency to form these sorts of connections as he becomes an adult and is increasingly submerged in the dynamics of capitalism. However, it is equally salient to note the discrepancy – found in most of the spectator interviews – between the number of friendships predicated on sports fandom and the significance of fandom in their lives. That is, although he is passionately devoted to the team, he does not consider a particularly high proportion of his actual relationships to be related to this enthusiasm. It is the team and its *imagined community* that are an integral part of his sense of self and meaning, yet very few other members of this imagined community actually participate in his life. Sport thus seems to function as a palliative for another form of lack that exists in the lives of most capitalist subjects, one based on an organization of social relations predicated on exchange rather than co-dependence. Mason T.'s early socialization as a fan is markedly similar to that of Thomas M.:

NKL: Do you have any memories associated with the Leafs now, specifically?

Mason T.: The team itself?

NKL: Yeah?

Mason T.: [Thinks] Um, hmm, honestly, from, like, because you're, you're asking from me when I first started becoming a fan, right?

NKL: Yeah, but, you know what, if there are later moments where you felt like your – because you told me your sort of level of investment changed, so if you have any memories associated with that, that's also very interesting to me.

Mason T.: Yeah, so I think, I think from me, when I became a fan, it just always seemed like I always just was one since my fam-, like my dad and mom always watched it, so that one I don't have, the kind of, vague memories, I just remember, you know, waking up, or, watching the game and then staying up late to watch the rest of it, but when I truly, when I truly remember becoming a fan, kind of, like, on my own, was when the Leafs did their playoff run in, I think, in '98 or '99, and we were just up at my cottage watching the game, and all, all my cousins and stuff were running around playing [laughs] and I wanted to watch the game and I dressed up in all blue and white and, and dyed my hair and so, yeah, it was just, it was the playoff run that really kind of got me going and, like, looking up facts a bit more on the players and the excitement of the playoffs really got me into the game a lot more. That's when I think I feel I really kind of turned on the jets when it came to becoming a Leafs fan.

This is a relatively typical narrative for a burgeoning fan: he was socialized by his parents to watch the game. Indeed, he has few specific memories, for it was something that just seemed to be natural and normal. What stands out, though, is that the moment in which his fandom coalesced was one in which he shared the experience of watching with a house full of excited people. It was sharing an experience with a community of spectators that “turned on the jets when it came to becoming a Leaf fan.” It is no surprise, therefore, that Mason T.'s experience of fandom as an adult is defined by the way in which he is able to share his passion with others:

Mason T.: So, we kind of go fact-checking and, and, kind of, I don't know, talk, talk about our intelligence of the sport and that been, we're kind of on an equal level so we can all kind of relate on that, so it's very, what, what you would see in, kind of, movies and tv shows at times, where they're yelling at the game and, and, and getting really frustrated and, and, kind of, shooting shit back-and-forth, that's, that's kind of what it's like with, with most of my core group of friends who watch hockey.

His experience of fandom is highly social. He watches most games with his friends and engages in banter and various aspects of bonding related to their common devotion to the team.

For William D., too, the experience of fandom is ultimately defined by membership in an ephemeral collective of fellow spectators:

NKL: Is there anything extra that you get in terms of how you feel out of watching a team like the Habs that you're a fan of beyond that competition?

William D.: Yeah, there's a sense of, um, being a part of a team. I guess there's that sense of, I don't know if it's community or, um, it's a, a pride. There's an attachment, because I've been a fan so long, I've just kind of, it, it hurts when they lose, but, and it, and it's really satisfying when they win. If I'm watching a good game, I don't really care who wins. I might pick a side, but there's a little more, it's a little more deep-rooted, I guess, if, if that makes sense.

Here he locates for himself the primal appeal of fandom: "community" and "attachment." He juxtaposes these elements, which provide him with perpetual satisfaction, to winning and losing, which, although important as a catalyst for the imagined athletic community, are in the end secondary to the experience of being part of something larger than himself, something invested with a sense of tradition, inherent meaning, and community. Maria I. sees the allure of fandom in similar terms:

NKL: Okay, so you were just actually mentioning this community notion, so how connected do you feel to fans, other fans, of your team, including those you don't know personally. Like, do you have a sense of connectedness amongst a...

Maria I.: Yeah, of course, I'm trying to think of an example. Like, you know, you're with them, you cheer, you get rallied up, you get pumped up, you get excited and it's really good to, kind of, feel that with other people, especially strangers that you don't know and just having that, that connectedness, like, and, that rally behind your team, win or lose, of course. Because I know, like, Leaf fans are so die hard that it doesn't matter. Like, you get into a crowd and you're going to be cheering and you're going to be shouting and it's just, you defend them totally, right to the death.

The language she uses is extremely telling. First, she suggests that it is especially satisfying to share in fandom “with other people, especially strangers that you don’t know.” This is the power of the imagined athletic community. It creates a sense of connection to an enormous (and largely abstract) anonymous community that one can participate as a member in. The imagined athletic community replaces the feeling of isolation prevalent in capitalist society with a sense that one has an identity as a member of a group that is large and important. This feeling of membership endows each participant in the community with a feeling that s/he is significant, powerful, and most important, not alone. Second, like William D., she emphasizes that it is the sense of community that matters more than winning or losing. Although the pain of a loss is temporary, the sense of empowerment that comes from membership in the community is considerably more lasting. Finally, although it is obviously an extreme and likely rhetorically hyperbolic statement, it is nevertheless salient that unbidden she uses the expression, “you defend them totally, right to the death.” As Anderson has stated, the imagined community is something that many people come to feel a willingness to die for. As the interview progresses, she further elaborates how membership in the imagined athletic community makes her feel:

NKL: What do you feel like you get out of the experience of being a fan? And, that’s distinct from playing, because you’ve been telling me about the experience of playing sports too, which I understand too and we could potentially focus on that as a different thing, so just focusing on it from the spectator side, what do you get out of being a fan, why do you care about it, do you think?

Maria I.: Hmmm. That’s a good question. I don’t know, like, as a fan you get, you have something, yeah, how do I say this? You almost have something to latch on to, something to brag about, to be proud about. It’s, it’s a bigger part of, of, you know, you and the city. Toronto fans are crazy, like, we’ll pay ridiculous amounts of money to go watch them lose, but it doesn’t matter. I don’t know, it just, pride, maybe, just saying that you’re a fan and not caring that other people think that it’s just ridiculous, and knowing other people are there to kind of back you up. I don’t know, it’s weird to explain why you would like a sport or how you feel as a fan, because you, you never think about it, you just are, it’s just part of you. Yeah, I don’t know, I don’t know what more I can add to that...

What she seems to be getting at here is that fandom gives her something larger than herself to care about and feel a part of. It is also salient that fandom feels a part of her, as if it is something innate rather than arbitrary or external. Like Thomas M. and Mason T., Maria I.'s early socialization as a fan was informed by the allure of collective investment:

NKL: You were also getting at this a little, but I'm curious, do you remember how you came to be a sports fan? Like, do you have specific memories about when you first started to like the Leafs, why, how they started to come together?

Maria I.: I'm not even sure... I'm trying to think way back. [Laughs]

NKL: Absolutely.

Maria I.: Playing hockey, I think, in the schoolyard with friends. And then just, I guess it's, it domino effected from there and then they start, they would talk about Leafs and we, and then I would get into it. And then you just continue liking it. You know, like I said, it, it's also that group mentality that, you know, one person and then everybody kind of gets in on it. Always played hockey, always played sports.

It is striking that although she considers herself devoted utterly to the Leafs, it is and has always been a question of community for her. She sees her socialization in the team as part of a "group mentality." What she wanted more than anything was to participate in the collective phenomenon that was occurring amongst her friends and acquaintances.

Although Linda M. does not identify as a passionate fan of a professional hockey team, she nevertheless betrays a similar impulse towards membership in an imagined athletic community in the way that she approaches her fandom to the Olympic hockey tournament and World Juniors. She says, "During playoffs and the Olympics and Juniors it's almost exclusively in bars. It's very much seeking out that sort of, that heightened community excitement thing. But, the bars we go to, as opposed to the games, tend to be places where I would say people that I'm sort of a little bit more like-minded to congregate. It's a little more mine." Despite the fact

that she has been describing a sort of outsider experience of fandom, here she reveals that she too craves “that heightened community excitement thing.” For her, this is connected to the Olympics and Juniors, not the NHL, and leads her to gravitate towards sites where “like-minded” people congregate. While the community that she seeks may superficially appear somewhat different than a typical imagined athletic community, the desire to find membership and connectedness appears to be much the same.

Similarly, although Paul D. is also discriminating in his taste for whom he is comfortable sharing spectatorial connection with, he too yearns to share the experience of fandom with other people he feels kinship towards:

Paul D.: I, I would say I, I do like it if I’m with somebody. I don’t, you know, and so, you know, it’s just myself and my wife at home now, so she does get roped in but doesn’t really love it, and, and is bold to say, and may have mentioned it [laughs]. So, and so, you know, some of the group enjoyment is gone. So, I mean, if [my son’s] home, I love that. You know, if my son’s there, and we’re watching the game, and, and he’s so avid and so knowledgeable, it’s, it’s really fun because, that’s the other thing, I do find it, if, if, if I’m with a group where they obviously don’t know the sport I, I find that a little bit irritating. You know, if there, by the questions they ask or the comments they make, they show that they don’t have, in my mind, even a minimal understanding of the sport, which is ridiculous, but anyway, that’s just an attitude which I have to admit I have.

It becomes clear through his testimony that the collective experience is a significant part of what gives him satisfaction when he watches. The absence of his son has caused him to watch fewer games. Yet, he segues from this point to a commentary on the people he does not like to watch with. This is equally salient, because it indexes a standard that exists in his mind for membership in the imagined athletic community. Only people who are in the know belong among the people he is willing to share sport with. This produces a clear demarcation between insider and outsider status. Insider status – membership – *is* important to him; the difficulty is finding people who qualify for this exclusive position.

Finally, Ashley L. speaks resoundingly to the satisfaction of membership in the imagined athletic community. For her, like so many of the others interviewed, but perhaps even moreso, it is collective membership that animates her investment in fandom:

Ashley L.: The Bulldogs games. They always have, like, little ancillary things, like, there's a fifty-fifty draw or there's some little something for some charity, there's always something. And, so, for those, I love to participate because it's just so homespun. It's just, it's not slick, it's not sophisticated, it's sweet. It's really sweet. It's just really localized and I, I get a real kick out of that. I, I really love that. So, if it's fifty-fifty I'll definitely participate just because I live in hope [laughs]. And, then, depending on the other things. As you go up, like, if I go to a Marlies game and they have things like that, sure, I'll participate. If I go to a Leafs game, no I won't. Because I feel like they don't need my money.

This observation provides a window into what she is looking for out of fandom: a sense of community. When she attends the games of smaller scale teams, she feels connected to the “homespun” feel. She has the sense that it's “not sophisticated, it's sweet. It's really sweet.” That feeling makes her want to contribute and participate in the rituals of the game. When she attends larger scale NHL games, however, that feeling is lost. It feels too impersonal and corporate. She won't “participate” because she feels “like they don't need my money.” What this also suggests is that she does not feel like there is authenticity to being a fan of a team on that scale. For the construct of the imagined athletic community to be realized, she requires a more personal scale that better approximates a genuine community. As she goes on to articulate a narrative around the development of her fandom, it becomes still more evident how significant a sense of membership in the imagined athletic community was to her burgeoning personal notion of identity:

Ashley L.: Went to college, moreso, then, living on my own, and then after I moved to Canada, did graduate work for far too many years, and that's when, like, really sort of being my own person, my own woman, sort of fully coming into my adulthood, my young adulthood at the time, I, I really, really felt a draw and would, you know, again,

my apartment, turn on the tv, and go like, “Ah, a sports game on, I think I’ll leave this on,” or a hockey game. And, also, being surrounded by more people who were actively interested in going to hockey games or football games, I would go all the time. Most of the people in my program at grad school were guys and they loved to go to the hockey games, and they loved to go to the Ti-cat games and you could get really inexpensive tickets, even as a graduate student. And they’d always say, “Who wants to go?” and I was, “I want to go, let’s go,” right? So, it was a way to spend more time with people that I, I already really liked. But, I think that sort of fueled my fandom because you’d go and you’d, the more you’d participate, the more you’d want to participate, right? And it, it helped me get to know these guys a bit better, my colleagues a bit better, because they were rabid fans, and vice-versa, you know? It was sort of a neat way to sort of negotiate some aspects of our friendship.

What she highlights here is that fandom become integral to the formation of her own personal identity. It was at the time that she first struck out on her own that she fully came to embrace membership in imagined athletic communities. Doing so made her feel like part of a broader community and also provided her with cultural capital in masculine settings.

Given that a sense of membership and connection is pivotal to the investment and meaning that most fans derive from spectatorship of professional sport, it is only logical that the actual experience of watching games has come to be increasingly informed by social media. Social networking platforms allow spectators to reach out and connect with other fans – whether or not they are personally acquainted – as they watch games. This in turn has the effect of simultaneously reifying the community by giving it a sense of reality and also satisfying a need for connection. It is a comforting reminder that other fans are out there feeling the same emotions for the same reasons at the same time. In this way it provides reassurance that the fan is no longer isolated and alone. S/he is a part of a community. While many spectators gestured to this experience in the testimony we have already seen (Tarik K., Mason T., and William D., for example), Thomas M. provides perhaps the clearest statement of the role of social media in his experiences as a spectator:

NKL: Is it possible to try to describe the typical experience of watching a game, like, what you're doing, what you're thinking, what you're feeling, kind of just generally?

Thomas M.: Okay. Well, typically, I'm just sitting in my living room. Television, television's on. Maybe, if I'm having a good night, there may be a beer or two out. Usually I'm watching alone, unless it's like a really big game, like some rivalry or something, I'm not typically watching with my dad. And, my mom doesn't really follow sports, so I'm typically watching by myself. Um, I mean, the atmosphere, it depends on the game, really. But, it's either, there's a lot of energy, like I'm kind of like on the edge of my seat watching, or if it's just kind of like a laid-back game, I'm just kind of sitting on the couch, maybe my feet will be up. Um, because of social media, usually my phone is nearby. Sometimes I'll be texting my friends or I'll be on, like, Twitter, or like Tumblr or Facebook or something. And, sometimes, if I miss something, like the score has changed, I immediately go to my phone to check what people are saying, and sometimes things can get heated that way, because, I mean, everyone has a lot of different opinions about things. So, yeah, I mean, that's normally the atmosphere.

There is something quite striking about this experience of spectatorship, an experience that I believe is relatively quotidian. He watches the game alone (although the act of doing so makes him feel connected to others – this is the fetishistic element of the experience), yet, he does attempt to stay connected through social media (a form of interaction he earlier described as somewhat distorted). This is an interesting metaphor for fandom writ large. Fans feel connected to one another even as they ultimately ontologically remain alone.

There is little question that the apotheosis of the experience of fandom is to be found in attending live games. For, to be in the presence of up to tens of thousands of other like-minded spectators is to realize the fullest reification of the imagined athletic community possible. The very fact of so many people cheering for the same team concretizes the sense of membership and identity that fans seek in sports fandom. It is their ultimate validation. Again, Thomas M. provides us with a vivid description of what this feels like:

NKL: What about, and I know it's much less common, but, if you're going to a game in the stadium, maybe if you could think about your experiences last year, since you said you went to a couple of Leafs games, can you take me a little bit through what an experience like that might be like?

Thomas M.: Okay. Well, usually there's a lot of energy. Leaf home games usually sell out, so there's usually not a lot of empty seats. And, most of the time, unless it's, like, a game against, like Ottawa, or Buffalo, or another, like, kind of big rivalry-type team, usually it's mostly Leaf fans, so the energy is pretty, is pretty much like positive, like "Go Leafs." When the Leafs score at home, the stadium just completely erupts. When someone scores on the Leafs, the stadium, you could hear a pin drop, there's absolutely no noise at all. When they win, it's the same kind of thing, just the energy carries over all the way home. Sometimes you can even feel it the next day, because you just remember how awesome it was to just be there. And when they lose, typically, you're on your way home, you're already thinking about what you're going to be doing when you get home. If you're gonna take a shower, you're gonna make your lunch tomorrow, whatever. So, yeah.

As he recounts his experience of attending an average game, he returns again and again to the term "energy" as a descriptor. What this indicates is that the experience of being in a crowd is the ultimate realization of his fandom. It is a place where all of the habits and motivations of the imagined athletic community are condensed into one place at one time. He is amongst others who brandish the same fetish signifiers for the same cause. The experience of being there provides a lingering sense of rejuvenation, as "sometimes you can even feel it the next day, because you just remember how awesome it was to just be there." This is a further vital point, for it testifies to the role of the imagined athletic community as a form of social reproduction. Many spectators receive such a jolt of "energy" from participating in the physical performance and embodiment of this otherwise abstract community with which they identify that they carry the sensation back with them into the all-too-often (given the structural demands of capitalism) banal experience of their everyday lives. The embodied experience of participation in the imagined athletic community provides a validating sense of meaning and purpose that serves to counteract the typically rigid, routinized, and heavily structured and disciplined experience of capitalist life. This is what it means to say that the imagined athletic community functions as a form of social reproduction.

Mason T. echoes these sentiments in an almost uncanny way:

NKL: Okay. How often would you say you actually get to live games?

Mason T.: Twi-, maybe twice a season.

NKL: Maybe twice a season? Okay, yeah, so can you give me a sense of what the experience is like on those occasions? Like, what you do, you know, even before the game, during the game, after the game?

Mason T.: So, it's, yeah, it's a whole, totally different experience. Kind of, we, we like to go, usually when I go, I like to go a little earlier so I can get a, like, a beer or food in the city, kind of take in the life, because, you know, when it's game, when it's game day, there's, you know, a whole kind of buzz throughout the whole day in the city, everyone's wearing blue and white, so it's awesome to just be down there, feel the energy and then, so, getting there a little earlier, walking around the arena, watching them prep the ice and, and all the videos going up, it's, again, taking in so much more energy than you would just be at home. And then, actually sitting in the game, you get, you sit in a crowd and, and that's, this is the aspect that's kind of like at home, where you have all these fans, but instead of just five or six of them in a living room, you've got hundreds surrounding you who have, share the same excitement, and, and being part of the loud noise, I, I don't think there's anything in my life that's quite like it, that has that kind of energy and, and, and cheering squad that you can have at, at a live game. Whether it be hockey or whatever, but, but having that kind of energy is absolutely unbelievable and, seeing the pace of it, I think, the other exciting part is seeing the actual raw talent and, and speed that you see, because on tv it kind of seems, you don't get the full effect, but going to the game, you actually get to understand how strong and tough these guys really are, so that's the other exciting part, is you get to see the raw talent.

The similarity between this testimony and that of Thomas M. is profound. Like his fellow fan, Mason T. is moved by the “energy” he experiences while in the stadium. Indeed, he returns to the word four different times in this relatively short passage. It is hard to deny the sense that it is this experience of fandom that functions as a primary source of emotional revitalization and propulsion in his life. Further, he compares the experience of watching in a stadium to that of watching at home with friends. What is notable about this is that in both places, it is the *shared* energy and excitement that make the experience so meaningful. The stadium is simply the home writ large. Both provide the fuel that animates his life.

For the imagined athletic community to achieve its full realization as an antidote for alienation and source of meaning for spectators, it must be concretized as much as possible as something real. Given that there is little in the way of rational explanation that can account for the investment of meaning in what is ultimately a form of consumer spectacle produced entirely for the purpose of generating corporate capital, justification must come instead from an irrational identification with what McClintock has referred to as fetish signifiers and impassioned objects. As Gilroy has further elaborated, such visual signifiers obliterate the need for rational argument by attesting in an immediate and visceral way to the legitimacy of an imagined community. Simply by witnessing others wearing clothing adorned with the signifiers that represent the imagined community (logos, for instance), a sense of solidarity is swiftly engendered. Indeed, any objects that signify the existence of the team – and imagined community that supports it – come to be invested as the vessels for the meaning connected to the community.

Thomas M. explains why the Toronto Maple Leafs and Detroit Red Wings memorabilia he owns are an important aspect of his experience of fandom, particularly when he attends live games:

NKL: Do you have any merchandise, you know, hats, uniforms, shirts, etc., related to your favourite teams?

Thomas M.: Yeah. When I was a kid, I got a couple Leafs jerseys. They're pretty old, I think they're from 2003 or 2004. I have a relatively-modern Red Wings jersey. I have a couple Blue Jays hats. I got a Detroit Red Wings toque when I went to a game a couple winters ago. And I have one of the Toronto Maple Leaf Winter Classic toques – you've probably seen them around campus – yeah, okay, you know the ones. And, I mean, I have some other random sports merchandise. Like, my brother gave me a Mighty Ducks hockey jersey when they used to be the Anaheim Mighty Ducks, like the cartoon. And, some, some stuff like that. Like, I have a random Vancouver Canucks t-shirt, but...

NKL: Okay, so how important would you say that stuff is to your experience of being a fan?

Thomas M.: While, I mean, it's, it's kind of important to me because I want to feel like I'm participating by, like, wearing a jersey and a hat, and a lot of these things I've actually got at games, so there's kind of that sentimental thing where, like, you go to a game, you buy a t-shirt, you buy a hat, you wear it back to the next game. I guess I'm part of that cycle of fandom, if you want to put it that way. [Laughs]

Merchandise is a significant part of his experience, not only because it is something that he collects, but because it makes him “feel like I'm participating.” That is, wearing memorabilia seems to make him feel as if he is part of the team. This experience of membership is evidently significantly meaningful, because it lingers in the form of nostalgia that becomes condensed in the form of the memorabilia itself: “a lot of these things I've actually got at games, so there's kind of that sentimental thing where, like, you go to a game, you buy a t-shirt, you buy a hat, you wear it back to the next game.” It follows logically from this that wearing some type of team signifier is an essential part of the rituals associated with attending games:

NKL: Do you tend to, when you go to games, bring some kind of merchandise, some kind of memorabilia?

Thomas M.: I suppose, yeah. If it's snowing out, usually I'll wear, like, a toque. I have like a really old Leaf toque that I'll wear sometimes or I have a Leafs, like a snapback, like a regular kind of fitted hat, that I'll wear if it's not. Sometimes I wear a jersey, sometimes I don't. Most of the time I'll wear team colours if I'm lazy because sometimes I'll be coming from school so I'll just know, okay, I'm going to a Blue Jay game, I'll just find the first blue t-shirt I can find. So, I mean, sometimes I do. And, if I've got some extra money, sometimes I'll just buy something there. So, if I see, like, a cool Leaf shirt in the Leaf shop, I just might pick it up there.

What stands out here is that even when he feels too “lazy” to make an effort, he still makes a point of wearing team colours. Indeed, on some occasions he is even willing to spend the exorbitant amounts of money associated with purchasing team merchandise in the stadium. This suggests that fetish signifiers are a vital part of the experience for him, even when he takes them for granted.

Mason T. understands the significance of team fetish signifiers in much the same way:

NKL: How important [is merchandise] to you?

Mason T.: I wouldn't say, you know, the idea of having them is, is too important to me. It's just more of the idea of being able to, you know, when I go to a game wearing a jersey, stuff like that. It's not, it's not the be-all, end-all by any means, but it's nice to just have, being able to show the colours while I'm supporting them.

NKL: And why does that feel important?

Mason T.: Um. Let me think about that one.

NKL: Please do.

Mason T.: You know, honestly, it's probably just like, it's probably the, like, camaraderie of, like, whole group of people being able to sh-, to, like, you know, kind of show what team you cheer for instead of just being there in, in regular clothes watching the game. Being able to show pride in your team among other people who have pride in the team, that's, that's kind of important to me.

NKL: Okay, right, and that actually segues right into the next question I was going to ask, which is, how connected do you feel to other fans of your team, including those you don't know personally?

Mason T.: Extremely connected. Obviously, being on, on Reddit and being a subscriber to r-Leafs and r-Hockey, I think those, you know, I've never met majority of people on any of these sub-reddits but it's all an awesome community of people who all share the same passion and, and so I feel really close to the community of fans.

This extended passage is crucial. Fetish objects, including uniforms and team colours, are an important part of the experience, for they aid in the performance of membership in the community, allowing for reciprocal acknowledgment among fans (a necessity in an imagined community, for members do not actually have social relations with one another). He has never met the other members of the community, yet describes them as “awesome” and confidently asserts that they “share the same passion.” In the end, he feels “really close to the community of fans.” It is not difficult to see the importance of this connection in his life, attenuated as it may be. Fetish signifiers are a significant tool in the process of identity formation and performance.

For all these reasons, wearing team signifiers is a central part of the ritual of watching games, sometimes even when he is just watching at his own home:

NKL: When it comes to going to the games, does the merchandise you have around the team, does that come into the experience more, when you're going to game?

Mason T.: Yes.

NKL: And, also, when you're watching with friends at home, do you tend to wear stuff?

Mason T.: I tend to wear that stuff, but it's not, it, I, if I'm going to the game, I'll definitely be doing what I can to show blue and white, but if I'm, if I'm at home, it's not, it's not as, it's not every game, kind of thing, but, but when I'm going to the game, you definitely go, I definitely go all out, yeah.

Although he does not expand on why, it is clear that wearing fetish signifiers is an important part of the experience of attending a game, no doubt because it is a way of signalling his membership in the imagined community. Yet, the fact that he is sometimes inclined to wear the colours in his house indicates the salience of team merchandise in his experience of fandom. He is fetishistically able to tap into the satisfaction he derives from membership in the imagined athletic community – a community comprised of fans connected through logo-solidarity manifest in jerseys, hats, and other signifiers – through the simple act of wearing these signifiers, even when he is alone. The merchandise of fandom must be understood as impassioned objects precisely because they become imbued with the meaning associated with the imagined community. When the community is physically absent, they still provide a fetishistic substitute that is able to invoke its presence and the sense of membership that is so vital to the experience of fandom.

Maria I.'s investment in these objects is so great that she resorts to particularly hyperbolic language in order to account for the place they hold in her life:

NKL: Do you have any merchandise, you know, like hats, uniforms, shirts, that sort of thing...

Maria I.: What don't I have, seriously? I've got jerseys, I've got limited edition jerseys with certificate of atten-, of authenticities, I've got a Gardens chair, hats, jackets, winter coats, scarves... Oh my God [sighs], I've got the banners, like, little replica banners of the Stanley Cup wins, programs, tickets still, some autographs, some jerseys that have autographs on it, I'm sure I've have more stuff. Like, I've got a box.

NKL: How important is that stuff to you?

Maria I.: Very important.

NKL: Can you try to describe why...

Maria I.: Like, if the house is on fire, I'd be carrying it on my back important [laughs], after my kids, of course, but it's that important.

Evidently, fetish signifiers are essential to her experience of fandom. Although she is being somewhat humorous, the example she uses to demonstrate the significance of these items in her life is telling. Again, her language evokes Anderson's injunction that the imagined community is worth dying for. Maria I. sees her memorabilia as sacred and worth sacrificing for because of what it represents: the sense of connection to a community that makes her life feel significant, purposeful, and shared. This becomes still more apparent as she proceeds:

NKL: And, do you have a sense of why, like what it is about that stuff that...

Maria I.: I don't know why, I, trying to think...

NKL: Sure, no problem...

Maria I.: I'm not sure. Nostalgia, maybe. I don't know, like, just sense of community. I don't know, it's just, it's something that I've built up...

Although she struggles to articulate why these items are important to her, the fact that she ultimately settles on the notion that they produce "just a sense of community" speaks volumes about how important the imagined athletic community is in her life. The signifiers that indicate

her membership are so important that she claims she would run into a burning building to save them.

Ashley L's perspective is slightly different, for she does not actually own any team merchandise. Yet, this does not mean that it is insignificant to her experience of fandom. Quite the contrary, in fact:

NKL: Do you have any merchandise, then, related to the teams you like, you know, hats, uniforms, shirts, anything like that?

Ashley L.: No, I don't, but I would love to. I would love to have a hockey jersey, yeah.

NKL: Okay, interesting. The follow up question was going to be how important is that to you...

Ashley L.: I would, I would lo-, well, just back it up for one second, I am a fan of the Hamilton Bulldogs, so I do tend to go to their games and the reason why, they tend to be good games, but they're more affordable for me – price point is an issue. And, I would love to have some of their merchandise....

NKL: Why is that? Why would you like to?

Ashley L.: Why would I like to go to the games physically?

NKL: Sorry, no, get a uniform or a hat, or shirt, or some kind of memorabilia?

Ashley L.: Community. It's fun, it's belonging, it's identification. You know, this sort of a, you can see other people who sort of share your fandom. So, that's sort of fun, you sort of connect, even on, at a really subtle level, you know, you just sort of see, "Okay, I'm wearing this colour, you're wearing this colour, we have something in common," and, it, it helps create community. Whereas, you see someone in the other colours, you're not necessarily disinterested in them but you don't feel like you have as much in common, right? So, with someone, yeah, if we're wearing the same jersey, I already feel like we're connected in some way.

She demonstrates perhaps the highest degree of self-reflection among all the fans interviewed in the way that she analyzes the reasons for her affective responses. Here, she demonstrates an explicit awareness that she desires fetish signifiers precisely because they will contribute to her sense of "community," "belonging," and "identification." Indeed, she even elaborates the process

through which the spectator makes the visual connection between the sight of the fetish signifier and the leap to a sense of commonality. She goes on to further explain the significance of investment in team merchandise to the invention of community:

NKL: Okay, that's actually the exact direction I was going to go in. I was going to ask how connected you feel to other fans of your team...

Ashley L.: Yeah, way connected, *way* connected. If I go to, let's just say, a game in Hamilton and I see other fans, even though I'm not wearing merchandise, I can see all the people and it enhances the experience because you can tell people's literal investment, that you know people have gone and purchased something and they're wearing it, and, you know, they've got their faces painted and they've got a hat, or some people have every single possible bit of merchandise on: they've got a hat and a scarf and mittens and a sign and a jersey and a pin and a, you know, and a coffee holder, you know, all these things [laughs]. So, I think that makes it kind of fun. It just, visually it's exciting to see everybody in the colours, and, yeah, I think it fosters community. You already feel connected, you already feel like you share an interest. But, it's not just an interest; I mean, if we're all sitting at the game, obviously we're interested, right? It's just as easy to sit at home, and cheaper, and less effort trying to get somewhere and commute or get a parking space or whatever. So, why would you actually want to go there? Something really exciting happens when you're with the people at the live event and the clothing and the outfits is part of that. So, I, I find that sort of thrilling to be around other people that are actually dressed up and having fun.

She makes two more really important observations here. First, there is the sense that investing in merchandise is a “literal investment,” in a monetary sense, in fandom of the team. Seeing people in the “colours” of the team concretizes what might otherwise remain an abstract affiliation – it reifies fandom for her, even if she is not wearing a fetish signifier herself. Second, the language she uses to describe how she feels in this context is significant because it links up with the experiences of some of the other fans who described the “energy” they felt in fan communities. Although her diction is different, she uses the terms “really exciting” and even “thrilling” to capture how she feels about the sense of collective euphoria around the imagined athletic community.

Tarik K. is also preoccupied with the role of fetish signifiers in the imagined athletic community. Like Ashley L., he sees the way in which fans choose to perform themselves as members of the community as important to his experience of fandom:

Tarik K.: Now it's not the same for me with basketball but I do like collecting baseball jerseys because, um, Skydome, Rogers Centre, that experience is, is not secondary to the game, it's complementary and that experience is very important just like the game to me is very important. You know, there are certain rituals that you develop and one of them is, obviously, wearing the hat and getting the jerseys. I have jerseys from like when I, like the old, not throwbacks, like original jerseys from the last Blue Jays branding, you know what I mean, like the one.

NKL: Yes.

Tarik K.: Like, the jersey that Bautista wore when he hit 55, Encarnacion came in, that era. I have those because I like those more and kind of the nostalgia factor of having those kind of reaffirms my fandom to players, to people who have been fans of the Blue Jays longer than I have. Do you know what I mean?

NKL: Yes.

Tarik K.: Kind of stake my claim, because I missed '91 and '92, I missed the, you know, the big Blue Jays wave.

This is a dense and very significant passage. He explicitly states that the experience of attending games is “not secondary” and “very important.” That experience is connected to the way in which he is perceived by other fans and members of the imagined community. Having older jerseys “kind of reaffirms [his] fandom to players, to people who have been fans of the Blue Jays longer than [he has].” This allows him to “stake [his] claim” to the team. This passage provides a window into the internal politics of fandom, revealing the importance that status can have within the imagined athletic community. In the eyes of some fans, membership is not automatic; it must be earned through credibility. Such a notion of authenticity, rehearsed through the “rituals” of fandom, reinforces the gravity of the community.

Capitalism and the Imagined Athletic Community

Generally, the imagined athletic community plays an almost functionalist role in capitalism by distracting subjects from the exploitation and inequality inherent in the system and satisfying the sense of isolation and emptiness it produces (Debord, 1994). These two functions buttress capitalism by preserving the status quo and ensuring that its labour force is sufficiently affectively reproduced to provide the labour necessary for its operation. Occasionally however, fandom can become *too* obsessive for the system and potentially interferes with the labouring potential of the fan. Tarik K. explains how this has occurred in his own life:

NKL: My next question was, do you ever feel like sports take up too much time or infringe upon your other responsibilities?

Tarik K.: Yeah, I do. I've had girlfriends throughout being into sports and it's always, like, "you watch too much sports." But not to a ridiculous amount, like, they understand like it is the summer and it is a fun activity and they are always involved somehow, like I find a way to involve them, so. But yeah, like, it does... [long pause] Yeah, I haven't thought about the, the correlation between not going to, not applying to Master's programs and stuff, which was my ambition to do in the last couple of years, to this thing in the summer, because it's only the summer, but it is a possibility that I don't study as much because I do kill a lot of time watching sports and following that.

Unlike some of the other interview subjects, he does feel as if his fandom interferes with his life in a significant way, actually preventing him from devoting time and energy to professional development he would be otherwise interested in pursuing. Yet, there is a way in which this too serves the broader purposes of capitalism. By siphoning the energy and attention of spectators away from other ambitions in life, the imagined athletic community also breeds a form of complacency that is useful to a system that seeks a docile labour force.

Indeed, by and large, what the imagined athletic community serves to do is provide distraction and comfort from the difficulties of life in a way that reproduces the labouring potential of the capitalist subject. Tarik K. exemplifies this experience as well:

NKL: So, the first question is, and you can sort of take this wherever you might see, but do the circumstances in your life affect the level of interest in your team. So, what I mean by that is—I know that can be kind of confusing—if you are going through a difficult period, let’s say, do you find yourself spending more or less time thinking about sports, watching sports, etc, things like that. Or, if you are feeling a lot of fulfillment in other areas, maybe you’re spending less time watching sports.

Tarik K.: I wouldn’t... [Long pause.] I don’t know if it has any effect. Like, I, I went through a very big break-up a couple of years back, and, I’d still go to the games, I’d still watch. Maybe I wasn’t as involved mentally because, obviously my mind was on something else, but I’d still, it still was part of my life. And, there is some escapism, if that’s what you are going after. It does give you an opportunity to, to not think about things for a while. Even if you just go and you’re a blank canvas, you’re blank-minded, you know what I mean? Just being there, just doing the rituals. Just investing the time not thinking about something bad in your life, that could be, that could be something that I’ve done. Getting out, like, if I’m going through a tough period of time, you don’t want to be holed up at your desk or at your house or whatever, so I think it is beneficial during periods like that and I don’t think it affects the amount, the investment I have in sport, you know what I mean? Is it fine to put it that way?

He initially assumes my question is asking him whether he paid less attention to sports during difficult periods and has trouble providing an affirmative response. As he warms to that theme, he seems to come to realize that in fact he turns more to sport – what he terms “escapism” – when he feels that things are “tough” in his life. The “rituals” of membership in the community provide a distraction and a site of meaning and investment that offer the spectator at least temporarily distraction from the difficult conditions of her or his life, whether these are caused by relationship trauma or any financial or work-based struggles.

Sports fandom plays a very similar role as a coping mechanism in the life of Thomas M.:

NKL: Do the specific circumstances in your life at a given period in time affect the level of your interest in sports on in your teams?

Thomas M.: Um, yeah. Depending on what's going on. I mean, if I'm in a really, like, kind of, negative place, I might try and, like, fill a void in my life by watching a lot of sports and getting really invested in it. Or, vice-versa. If there's something going on in my life, and it might be sports-related, maybe, I might not watch sports for a while. I know that there was a, there was a period in high school, where I was going through some stuff and I didn't watch any sports for a while because that was just, that kind of made me think about a part of my life that I didn't want to be a part of at that point. But, yeah, I mean, I, earlier, I guess, in university, probably a couple of years ago, I went through a really bad break up and I invested the rest of my summer into following the Blue Jays. So, every day, I was watching their games online or finding out the scores, talking to friends, stuff like that. So, yeah I guess...

Here he demonstrates how sports fandom comes to serve as a coping mechanism for other problems in his life. Most significantly, it is in the context of the fragmentation of his most intimate personal relationship that he comes to invest more heavily into sport and the imagined athletic community. By immersing himself in this community he is able to compensate for the meaning that he has lost elsewhere.

For Mason T., fandom helps to revitalize him precisely when his life becomes at its busiest and most overwhelming. He explains:

NKL: Okay, now, where you are now as a fan, sort of in this moment in your life, is there an ebb-and-flow to your level passion and the amount of time your spending paying attention to the team based on other things happening in your life?

Mason T.: Yeah, there definitely, there definitely has been. There have been a lot of times where, yeah, like having, having, being in school, like, when I, I graduated last year but what, being in school, certain classes, can't watch the game, or, you know, really focus on certain things, I kind of got to shut out the entire life when I'm studying for exams, there are definitely times when it's up-and-down depending on circumstances, but, most of the time I find that, if I'm so busy doing one thing and I need an escape, hockey will be my go to as my, okay, I need a break to do something, so I'll watch the Leaf game or I'll go play hockey. So, there's definitely ups and downs, and absolutely, and that, that does happen.

Hockey is his "escape" from the rest of his life, whether that entails studying for exams or simply the tedium of daily work. His diction here is important. The choice of the word "escape" connotes a sense of liberation or freedom in his fandom. There may be the suggestion in this that

he feels constrained by the structural discipline of a system that regulates his daily labour and life.

The experience of Ashley L. is much the same. The more difficulties she is confronted with in her life, the more readily she turns to her fandom:

Ashley L.: I'm trying to think because in the past, in the space of the past year, my husband and I have separated, so, obviously, a, a challenging time emotionally, financially, you name it, right, right across the board. And, and work is always challenging just by its very nature. So, so I'm trying to think, in that period, have I watched more sports or less? I have watched tonnes more. I have watched tonnes more. Part of it, part of it is a reflection of the fact that my ex simply wasn't interested and was not a fan of anything. So, that's part of it. But, now, yeah, I feel like I have the freedom to just indulge myself and watch whatever games I want to and go to whatever games I can afford to. And, so, yeah, like, the evenings, you know, there's a game on, great, Monday night, super, great, Wednesday, awesome, weekends, super, there's another one. Yeah, whenever it's on, it's on.

Evidently, her consumption of sports spectatorship increased dramatically when she was confronted with personal (difficulty) and work stress. This is an important observation because it is in some ways counterintuitive. One might expect that in periods of higher work load and diminished leisure time, there would be less time to devote to a hobby such as sports spectatorship. Yet, what becomes increasingly clear in each successive interview is that these are precisely the moments in which fans do turn to sport, for fandom provides them with the rejuvenation that their chaotic, stressful, emotionally-draining lives demand. The imagined athletic community offers them subjective renewal in the moments they need it most. This becomes all the more clear from Ashley L.'s testimony as she expands on the nature of her employment and the toll it takes on her emotional well-being:

NKL: Okay, and can you just tell me a little bit about your occupation?

Ashley L.: I'm a legal assistant slash legal clerk, I work at a law firm. My training was as a specialist in... [the humanities], so that's what I did my graduate work in.

Unfortunately, there are no jobs in that area, so, after a lot of soul-searching, I decided to try for a career, career-switch. So, currently I've moved into law, so I work as a legal assistant and a law clerk. I am, I have completed all the courses to become a paralegal, which is, you have to be licensed, so that's the next step for me, to actually write the licensing exam and become a licensed paralegal.

NKL: And, would you say that you find the work, you know, time-consuming, demanding, satisfying, any or all of the above?

Ashley L.: I find the work, because of my background as an academic and an intellectual, I find the work under-stimulating. What assistants and clerks do is very much process-oriented, so if something needs to get to court, you need to get it there. You watch timelines, you generate documents, you proof-read. I'm often generating things that need to be bound and, you know, so, photocopying, binding, punching little holes in things, making big or small booklets. I find that work soul-crushing, to be perfectly candid. I find, I find there's very little intellectual stimulation, which is partly why I wanted to move into the paralegal field because at least then you get to do some research, you get to actually represent people. I, it seems a bit more stimulating to me. But, no, in general I find the work that I do important work, it is integral to the process, so I take a certain pride in that and I think I do it well, but it bores me to tears and it asks nothing of any sort of intellectual gift I have.

Again, her candour here reveals more than in any of the other spectator interviews that her occupation and the stressful yet stultifying rigours of capitalism have taken a significant toll upon her. The "soul-crushing," alienating character of her labour puts her fandom into clearer context. It is precisely because it offers her purpose and meaning lacking in the daily life of a capitalist subject that she invests so much of herself in it.

I have focused so far on the fetishistic way in which the imagined athletic community comes to function as surrogate for real connection in the face of personal struggles and the alienation of advanced capitalism. This phenomenon, however, is cast into even clearer relief when juxtaposed to the experience of someone who participates in what I might refer to as a more authentic form of hockey community. That is, a community predicated on concrete as opposed to abstract relations. For those who participate in such a community, the imagined

athletic community seems to offer a significantly less seductive allure. Linda M. describes her experience growing up in a small hockey-obsessed town in British Columbia:

NKL: So then, just, slightly switching gears, although we'll come back to this, do you remember how you became a hockey fan?

Linda M.: I grew up in it. I absolutely grew up in it. I was, my brother was a hockey player, my father was an announcer, my mother ran the booster club. My parents were very involved in fundraising with, for minor hockey. They had a junior AA team where I grew up, and they had a men's, I can't remember what the name of the league was...

NKL: Was this in Toronto?

Linda M.: No, it was in [small-town British Columbia]. I sang anthems. We went to, we went to almost every game growing up. I, you know, I went to school with guys who ended up in the NHL, I was babysat by guys who ended up in the NHL, like, we were a hockey family. You know, my brother played up through university, so, it just, we'd always done it. Most of my memories of being a little kid are Friday, Saturday nights at the rink watching the [local junior team] play. So...

NKL: So then, it sounds like...

Linda M.: It's organic at this point.

NKL: So, your experience of spectatorship sounds like it's very much not mediated by a television screen, it sounds like you grew up at the rink.

Linda M.: I grew up watching it. Like, that's what we did. And then, you know, we, we had the tv and they started broadcasting Canucks games, because I think, I mean, the Canucks were, the Canucks were, I think, the year I was born, because that was in '70. So, like, we watched the Canucks. But, it was very much, you know, I look at guys like Tiger Williams who would come in the summer to, like, the bike-a-thon that my folks would run for the [local] scholarship fund. So, these were like, it was a very in-personal experience that didn't actually involve playing hockey.

Again, I dwell on this section at length because it suggests something potentially very significant about the imagined athletic community and that is that it seems to hold less appeal for someone who was raised within a more concrete hockey community. Linda M. describes being raised in a family immersed in hockey culture. Yet, this culture did not involve watching hockey on television until much later. It meant being at the rink, singing anthems, going to school with

people who played. As she puts it, “it was a very in-personal experience that didn’t actually involve playing hockey.” That is, unlike other spectators who grew up playing and graduated to watching, she grew up watching in a different, more “organic” type of way, one that evidently did not prove to be conducive to membership in an imagined athletic community.

Implications of the Imagined Athletic Community

Up to this point, I have been preoccupied with explaining why the imagined athletic community exists and how it operates. These are, of course, important questions and I hope I have provided an adequate initial accounting of them. Before I conclude this chapter, however, I would like to turn to the question of what impact the imagined athletic community has. For, although the tenor of my analysis no doubt implies a sense of disquiet with this form of community, if nothing else for its role in sustaining a capitalist system founded on exploitation, one could certainly suggest that if people find solace in sports fandom for the hardship they experience in their lives, this is something to applaud, not condemn. There may be a kernel of truth to this line of thinking. Yet, there are insidious dimensions to the imagined athletic community that extend beyond the reproduction of capitalist labour and the first and perhaps most troublesome of these is the way in which it produces a Manichean way of confronting the world. For, in forming a community based on an abstract notion of sameness, fans simultaneously position themselves in opposition to an equally abstract conception of otherness. The problem with this is that although the foundation of this configuration is abstract, the consequences are solidly concrete and contain the potential for real harm.

For Thomas M., the Manichaeism of sports fandom ultimately resulted in the destruction of personal friendships:

Thomas M.: So, growing up, I had these three really close friends who lived in my neighbourhood, right? And, the, pretty much the reason we were friends is because we lived in such a, like, close proximity to each other, right? And, when we all grew up, we all ended up being part of, like, different, like, hockey fans. So, my one friend Mitch, he became a Vancouver Canucks fan. He just started, he really like Roberto Luongo, and he just started following this team. And, my two other friends, who were very much like, almost the same person, kind of like that, they really followed the Washington Capitals because they really liked Alexander Ovechkin, like the way he played, and everything like that. And, I grew up a Leaf fan and I also kind of liked the Red Wings as well. So, every once in a while, we'd get into arguments about hockey and stuff like that and eventually, when we stopped kind of like playing hockey as well, like road hockey, a little bit of ice hockey, and stuff, the friendship completely fizzled out because there was literally nothing left.

NKL: Right, okay, gotcha, sure.

Thomas M.: And, like, I mean, maybe it's too personal, but honestly, I haven't talked to these guys in almost a couple of years now, because there's, there's, there's nothing left. Like, I've sat down and tried to figure it out and there's, there's nothing. It was that.

In William D's account, sports fandom comes to draw a wedge between strangers, creating antagonistic interactions that would not otherwise exist, especially through the vehicle of social media:

William D.: With social media, it's made the world smaller, but it's also brought in, how do I put it, the conflict, you know... You know, other fans, that support other teams have a hate for your team.

NKL: And I just wanted to ask you next...

William D.: So a Leaf fan, a Leaf fan despises Habs fans, or despises the Habs and if you're associated with the Habs. There's... but, it's funny how social media has brought that a little closer, so you don't, you know, if you walk down the street, if you're not wearing a Habs jersey, a Leafs fan wouldn't know, right? But, if you've got, if you're on the Habs site and you're supporting your team, you can get a lot of a negative, you know, there's a lot of trolls out there, just, just bombard you with nasty, nasty stuff.

In this interesting meditation on the evolution of fandom in the digital age, we see that although one might assume that fan dynamics would become attenuated when migrated from physical to virtual spaces, in fact the opposite seems to occur. Antagonisms are heightened and crystallized. Social media magnifies the Manichaeism of the imagined athletic community and creates an arena for conflict that would not otherwise exist. Yet, at the root, it is the fan community itself that inspires this conflict, for it positions unacquainted individuals who support different teams in immediate opposition with one another so that the very terms of their relations are defined by difference rather than the potential for solidarity.

The fundamental nature of this Manichean relation is perhaps most clearly evinced in the testimony of Paul D., for he is unable to suppress it despite the fact that it diametrically opposes his personal and professional moral code:

NKL: Okay. And do you have any strong feelings about fans of other teams?

Paul D.: Well that's interesting. In hockey, because, because an area of my responsibility obviously, for instance, [is] Ottawa [laughs] and, and, so, I mean, I actually went to a Senators game with one of our clergy last year and tried really hard to cheer for the Senators because it seemed like the right thing. But it was, but it was very hard to do. They were playing the Islanders, so I didn't really care. But, when the Islanders won in the shoot-out at the end, I, you know, I quietly cheered in my heart. I mean, I think that, yeah, I mean, I, I, I, I mean, I think that I know that those are sane people that cheer for the Senators and they feel the same way as I do about the Leafs and, and, I also, you know, I have, the, actually, the guy who took me to the game, his two favourite teams are, are, are the Senators and the Canucks, both of which would be at the bottom of the list for me in terms of, so, I mean, I respect him, I like him [laughs], but we, you know, we have this sparring relationship where we don't talk about it a whole lot, because as soon as you go a little ways, you discover that you actually feel it a little bit more than you should. [Laughs]

This is quite a revealing passage, for despite his best attempts to put his fandom aside, “in [his] heart” he cannot overcome his distaste for opposing teams. He is aware that this dislike is irrational, but it does not change the way that he feels.

While imagined athletic communities are structurally organized around a generalized Manichean us-against-them dichotomy, the definition of who can be included in this community is often further regulated according to more conventional notions of inclusion and exclusion. That is to say that just as society at large in North America privileges white, male, heterosexuality, so too does the imagined athletic community. This creates an uncomfortable dynamic for those who seek membership in the community but recognize themselves not to fit within its homogenous logic. Linda M. articulates this sense of unease:

Linda M.: I mean, we were at a game last night, and I find myself looking around and going, like, “Wow,” like, it’s a lot of, it’s sort of the, there’s a bit of the white bubba culture to it.

NKL: Okay, can you just expand on what you mean by that?

Linda M.: Yeah, not without sounding like a jerk, but, yeah, it’s, it’s a, a more aggressive, it seems sort of, I mean, it seems sort of a lower income, which is bizarre because hockey games are so incredibly expensive to attend, lower-educated, suburban, all of the things that sort of reformed Hipsters like myself don’t necessarily find attractive in a group of people or an audience or a crowd. It’s very white. It tends to be fairly male. I would sa-, that sort of, so that’s a bit of a turn-off for me at times. There’s a little bit of rabidness to it that I also kind of find a turn-off, which is probably the reason I never really got into football as much, because I find it’s even moreso, and I find it, I find it a little jarring.

It is noteworthy, with regard to placing this passage in context, to acknowledge that Linda M. is the one spectator interviewed who consistently positioned herself as a relative outsider to any imagined athletic community. This analysis of spectatorial demographics suggests that this may have a great deal to do with the political nature of the composition of the community. She critiques the community for its homogenous whiteness and also its generally male character. The masculine nature of the community is not simply a comment on sex, however, for she particularly highlights the “aggressive” “rabidness” of the members, hallmarks of hegemonic masculinity. It is a very particular version of masculinity that governs the spectatorship of these

games, one that is evidently uncomfortable for those who don't identify with this mode of behaviour. As she elaborates further, it becomes still more apparent that it is the patriarchal nature of the gender relations embedded in the imagined athletic community that makes it so difficult for her to invest:

NKL: Interesting, so, if I can just read a little into what you're saying, the games appeal to you quite a bit, the fan culture is actually the thing that's more alienating.

Linda M.: The fan culture is more alienating, the, it's, it's a little, it's, I mean, this is all kind of timely, there's also the, the way that women are incorporated into the game I don't find appealing. I was, I was just on a fairly long Facebook rant with some friends this morning about how we went to the game last night and they've incorporated ice girls (and that's my term, that's, that's certainly not theirs) but it's, you know, a bunch of young women, and they're all good-looking women who can skate very, very well wearing crop tops with flowing hair and tiny little skirts dry-scraping the ice between plays and commercial breaks. And, I couldn't help but think to myself, it's like, it's kind of like having cheerleaders without having cheerleaders. They're clearly all very good skaters. They're clearly, I mean, they're wearing hockey skates so they're clearly young women who've, I'm assuming played hockey at some point in time, because hockey skates are a real switch from figure skates, and I couldn't help think to myself, put some damn pants on, and maybe incorporate, like, junior teams and women's teams. If you really want to incorporate women into this, do it in a way that isn't, and, I mean, you've used the word "alienating" and I, I can adopt that, use, that isn't alienating or doesn't feel sexist or doesn't feel objectifying. But, of course, that's, I'm over-thinking it by half already, and these are, I'm not the audience, so, you know, otherwise they'd just have a bunch of dudes in, in sweatpants and warm ups dry scraping the ice. So, the fact that you see things like, I mean, the NHL right now, or, sorry, the NFL, very aggressively trying to incorporate women into their fan base, or to repair some of the damage that's happened because of recent incidents, whether it was domestic violence or child abuse, and, and what have you. And then I see them come out, the NHL with their pink jerseys and their, you know, their ice girls and I think, wow that's, you know, that's not the way to sell it to me. That's, maybe, that's the way to sell it to, you know, a woman who needs to see the glamour in the sport or is, you know, the pink jersey is someone who is sort of adopting the sport as an activity because they've got a partner who is actually a fan, but it doesn't include me, those moves. So, I find the whole thing a little bit odd.

This is a thorough critique of the gender dynamics in hockey fandom. It is salient that she recognizes that she is "not the audience," that is, not the intended or assumed audience. The imagined communities of hockey fandom are not designed for women. They are engineered by

the corporations that own the professional sports teams that inspire them and these corporations assume that membership to be exclusively straight men who enjoy the objectification of women's bodies. When women enter these spaces, they are expected to interpellate conventional gender roles by donning "pink jerseys." What is most interesting about this extended discussion of the gendered nature of hockey fandom, aside from the overall critique of patriarchy, is the fact that it may well be that she has been unable to fully assimilate herself to the imagined athletic community precisely because of a sense of alienation from its gender dynamics. After all, she is an avid, lifelong hockey fan who enjoys watching games, yet she has not fully immersed herself in the community of any team. Indeed, perhaps she feels a greater connection to Olympic hockey because it is associated with the Canadian nation, a nation that superficially performs itself as liberal in its gender politics (which is more than can be said of professional hockey).

Linda M. is not the only woman to find the imagined communities of hockey to be hyper-masculine spaces. Ashley L. articulates what it felt like for her to grow up in the American south:

NKL: Do the circumstances in your life outside the realm of sport, you know, in various ways, family, work, anything, do they affect your level of investment in the teams you follow and sports fandom in general?

Ashley L.: Yes. Yes. I think largely because I myself am not particularly athletic, never have been, the fact that I enjoy watching sports, my family's always found peculiar, that it doesn't fit. I also grew up at a time, you know, my adolescence, at a time and in a place, I grew up in the U.S. south, where it was a bit more conservative in terms of views towards women and there was very much a sense that I was, I was being brought up as a lady and that ladies certainly could be fans, but you'd never really, I mean, you would be a fan because your, your partner would be a fan, of course that's, you know, you'd make sandwiches for the men and they would enjoy the game, but you would never sit there and cheer a team on, because it just wasn't lady-like.

As a general comment about gendered fan dynamics, this is very revealing. Her fandom was very much a counter-story to the hegemonic rule that the imagined athletic community was not a place in which women could be members (although their labour was essential to its function).

Like Linda M.'s testimony, Ashley L. reveals that there is a role for women in the world of fandom, but it is one that is predicated on traditional gender dynamics. Women can exist peripherally to the imagined athletic community as long as they accentuate the experience of the men who are its authentic members, whether that is by objectifying themselves as "ice girls," labouring to provide refreshment, or simply performing themselves as dutifully cis-gendered women in pink jerseys. This is not the only dimension to gender dynamics, however. Ashley L. also describes the way in which hegemonic masculinity comes to pervade the spaces in which fans congregate:

Ashley L.: I find when it gets less than friendly that I actually get quite anxious because I'm in a crowd and, sort of, I worry that maybe a mob mentality could take over very quickly and so I do, I do find those moments unpleasant.

NKL: And, have you had any particular experiences...

Ashley L.: Yeah, yeah.

NKL: You've had moments like that?

Ashley L.: I had an experience where, it was a Bulldogs game, and there was one guy seated around us with his buddies and just progressively got more and more inebriated, so, and it happens, right, but he just basically was a nasty drunk and so just started picking on people in the, the opposite team and he was picking on the players and he was just picking on other people and just, and he was making it really uncomfortable. And, again, you know, you're in a crowd with, at least that evening seemed to be predominantly men, and many of them were drinking and so you could see it was just escalating, because even the other men who were being picked on who weren't as inebriated as this guy felt the need to sort of rise to the challenge and put this guy in his place and then he was just so far gone that he just kept going and going. You know, finally security showed up and was sort of like, "You need to, you need to leave now or just calm down."

Here we see the way in which hegemonic masculinity comes to function as the predominant form of gender expression in these sites. This is not only an issue because this is a form of gender expression Ashley L. does not personally identify with; it is also problematic because this performance of gender by others in the crowd makes her feel significantly uncomfortable. She

describes an environment in which increasingly intoxicated men aggressively vie with one another to prove who is the most masculine. A “mob mentality” ensues that leaves her literally anxious for her own safety. No less than the pink jerseys and “ice girls” of Linda M.’s narrative, this macho behaviour demonstrates who is and is not welcome within the imagined athletic community. This is a community designed for men who identify with conventional and constraining notions of gender and sexuality. If women are to participate, they must align themselves with the same gender logic – indeed, they must participate in their own objectification – or they will be made to feel uncomfortable and unwelcome.

In this chapter, I have attempted to explore the various ways in which fans articulate their experience of the imagined athletic community. It is evident from their comments that this community is a principal site of meaning and purpose in their lives, particularly in the face of personal trauma and the rigours of life in an advanced capitalist society. Yet, the imagined athletic community is not a panacea. Membership requires the cultivation of a Manichean way of perceiving the world that leads to further division and antagonism. Nor is it equally available for everyone. For women fans, for instance, membership is predicated on a willingness to subordinate their marginalized identities to the injunctions of the community. Hegemonic masculinity and whiteness remain the dominant modes of identity and homogeneity reigns. In the chapter that follows, I will turn back to the individuals who animate the imagined athletic community: the athletes who sacrifice their bodies in order to imbue it with meaning. As we shall see, the cost of the imagined athletic community is substantial and that burden is borne most heavily by players.

Chapter 8: The Consequences of Athletic Social Reproductive Labour

In the last chapter I explored the ways in which spectators derive meaning from the imagined athletic community. That meaning is entirely contingent on the labour provided by athletes. I have characterized this athletic labour as a form of social reproductive labour precisely because it is labour that produces a sense of subjective revitalization for spectators. The labour of athletes generates the foundation for a sense of community amongst fans who otherwise experience the isolating and alienating effects of advanced capitalism. The imagined athletic community provides a temporary palliative for this atomization by providing a sense of affective renewal that allows spectators to continue to function as productive capitalist subjects. What remains unexplored, however, is the cost of this social reproductive process that is borne by the athletic labourers. That is, beyond the exploitation that is inherent to the capitalist labor process, what are the consequences for athletes of producing a source of meaning so profound that spectators are able to craft entire identities around it? For, such meaning is only possible when the stakes transcend those of a simple game. It is only in the context of a competition that seems to approach the level of life and death that the imagined athletic community can be born. Ultimately, it is the athlete who bears the responsibility for producing the requisite level of passion, urgency, and desperation that makes this possible. There is a cost to this and it is one that cannot simply be classed as exploitation. In the chapter that follows, I will return to the testimony of former professional hockey players in order to explore the various ways in which the social reproductive labour of professional athletes results in a level of harm not typically accounted for in critiques of the exploitative effects of athletic labour.

In the chapter that follows, I will trace the various consequences of athletic social reproductive labour through the testimony of the athletes I spoke to. I will begin by examining the way that the role that players must play to enact social reproduction ultimately causes myriad consequences for players above and beyond typical exploitation, including the fact that this role feels unnatural. I then move to explore the emotional vacuum that social reproductive work creates for players, as the process leaves them empty and discarded where once they were vessels for a surfeit of meaning. Finally, I will conclude by examining the role of injury in social reproduction and the costs injuries exact upon players both physically and emotionally as they move beyond their professional hockey careers.

Professional Hockey as Role Playing

Fundamentally, to work as a professional athlete is to play a role. This is because athletes must perform the part that is demanded of them by spectators. Ultimately, what this means is that they must act in a manner that generates meaning for fans. This is what the entire political economy of sport relies upon. The act of playing a role thus requires the distortion of subjectivity so that it fits the contours demanded by the imagined athletic community. Many players spoke about the experience of how it felt for them to play a role. Sean O. explains:

Sean O.: I mean, most, most tough guys that I ever met and liked, when your parents meet them or somebody meets them away, he goes, “Wow, I thought you’d be a real a-hole off the ice,” right, but really and truly, he’s just playing his role and he’s just, again, he’s like a bad guy in wrestling, right? If he’s a bad guy, he’s probably the guy that’s giving the most to charity and giving his time to func-, you know, to functions and different events, right, so... But no, outside of the game, like, no, you want to have your name as being a good person and being a good guy in society.

What he articulates here is the necessity of playing a role, and how little relation there is between that role and the actual personalities of players. Lawrence F. elaborates why working as a professional athlete necessitates playing a role:

NKL: Okay. So, when you were playing in professional games, in front of fans, or interacting with fans, to what extent would you say you felt like you were performing a role, or would you say you were being yourself?

Lawrence F.: [Quickly and decisively.] Performing a role.

NKL: Can you expand on that, just, like, what you mean?

Lawrence F.: Well, because, I'm not a violent man. I, I'm not about violence. I'm about, you know, I'm a passive man who comes from a loving family and I got put in this role of violence, you know, fighting, protecting my teammates. You know, it wasn't me. I hated it. So, you know, when, when, you know, it was a thing where it wasn't me. It was, just, it was almost like, you know, I was almost like a WWE wrestler in a more violent sense. They're different people when they're at home with their kids than they are when they put their trunks on and going into the ring. I put my equipment on and became a different person.

It is apparent that Lawrence F. is fully conscious of the way that he was compelled to play a part, particularly in his role as enforcer, a role that required him to instigate and engage in violence on the ice. Indeed, his reference to a "WWE wrestler" suggests that he understands the spectacular nature of the proceedings (particularly given that he is comparing himself to a form of entertainment that is entirely artifice). Although he does not make the connection that he is actually doing this for fans – giving them something they need or want – he reveals how alienating it was for him to be cast into this role, to be someone he felt he was not. He goes on:

NKL: Okay, that's really interesting. Is it possible to expand a little bit more on how that felt?

Lawrence F.: Well, how it felt was, it wasn't a good feeling because I was fighting 6'6 monsters every night. So, the feeling of fear was terrible. The feeling that if I lose badly I'm out of hockey. So, you're not only fighting, but, your, your, your, your life's in

danger, your career's in danger, your paycheque's in danger. So, when, when, you know, when you go out there, as much entertainment as people thinks it is, if I was to go out and get knocked out severely, bad concussion and then end up getting sent to the minors, then, here I am, out of, out of, you know, my whole dream is gone. So, it was a terrible feeling. I, I, I don't use the word "hate" strongly, I hated it. I hated my role in hockey.

There is little elaboration required here in order to grasp the impact this had on him as a person. He was subjected to a tremendous emotional strain, evident in his diction – “the feeling of fear was terrible,” “it was a terrible feeling,” “I hated it,” – and in his delivery, for on three separate occasions in this short passage he repeats his words, as if he is too agitated to get his ideas out directly. What is crucial to note is that the emotional turmoil he felt is directly connected to the role he had to play, a role that was, in effect, designed to satiate the need of fans for violence that could legitimize their investment in professional hockey by underlining the depth of antagonism between one imagined athletic community and another.

At another point in the same interview, while discussing the lessons he learned over the course of his career in terms of how to interact with the media, Lawrence F. provides further insight into the roles he was compelled to perform in order to fulfil his duties as a professional hockey player:

Lawrence F.: Yeah, and I also learned when I got beat twice. A guy named Larry K. beat me up twice in Madison Square Gardens. And it bothered me *so* much that the fans, who were yelling, “Larr-y, Larr-y,” and like this whole circus atmosphere, and it bothered me for the longest time. And then, as I got more educated with the fighting role, it was almost like it helped me because of the entertainment value. It was all over ESPN and Sports Desk and I'm looking at it like, “Oh my Gosh, look at this,” but it was actually helped me, because people were going, “Hey did you see, even though you lost, you're this...” So, you've got to look out through the, the win or the losses of what it did for my career.

There are a couple things going on in this passage simultaneously. On one level he is telling us both that he was frustrated by the fans turning against him but that he learned to appreciate that fact, for it boosted his status as an entertainer. On another level, though, although he attests to

have come to understand better – to be “more educated” about his role – the strongest sentiment he expresses is how he is “bothered” “so much,” and how that stayed with him “the longest time.” In fact, even though he was told, it seems, right after the event that it would be beneficial to his career, the impact of the moment lingered with him far longer than that. This entire passage testifies to the way in which players come to interpellate the logic of the game that tells them it is their responsibility to play a role, while at the same time struggling with the way they feel about that role. As much as he came to know it was in the best pecuniary interest of himself and the league to be a villain and, sometimes, a loser, he could not help feeling uncomfortable with the role he was cast in. It is also worth adding that his discomfort with the role of villain speaks to the power of the crowd’s adulation. It was something to be fought for, a reward in its own right. Its removal left him “bothered.” One can only wonder at what the permanent removal of this powerful intoxicant would have felt like for every player exposed to it, something I will discuss further below. Finally, this passage also speaks to the difficulty of being cast as a villain. Although he may have learned to embrace it because he had to, this does not mean that it didn’t cause him pain and discomfort.

Like Lawrence F., Darin K. struggled with the burden of fulfilling the role of enforcer:

NKL: How about being an enforcer? Did you feel like that was a role you had to force yourself to fit in or did it come to you kind of naturally, did it feel comfortable to play that part?

Darin K.: Well I think that it wasn’t, it was nat-, I was naturally good at it, it kept me a job, but my demeanour was, was not really a mean guy. So, for me it was more, turn the switch off, or, turn the switch on when you get to the rink and turn it off when you leave.

He does not elaborate on this point in the way that Lawrence F. did, but he speaks to a similar phenomenon: the role of enforcer was one he had to force himself to play, not one he wanted to.

The notion of turning a “switch” “on” and “off” is a metaphor that connotes a fundamental change in who he had to be. The experience of Curtis U. was much the same:

NKL: How would you describe your role on the team?

Curtis U.: In, there's, my role changed a lot. When I was in junior, I was a, I was a high draft pick, I was an offensive defenceman, a power play guy, you know, and logged a lot of minutes. And when I turned pro, they wanted, they wanted me to play a tougher role, I was a, you know, I'm 6'4 , they wanted me to change my style and play more aggressive more tough, you know, bang more, fight more, do all that sort of stuff. So, it chang-, my role changed when I got to the NHL.

NKL: Okay, interesting, interesting. And, how did you, was that a frustrating change for you? Was it satisfying?

Curtis U.: No, I, I didn't like it because it's not, it wasn't me, it wasn't my style, it wasn't, you know, why, you know, I assumed I was drafted on based on what I had done, so, you know, the, that, that changed, so, you know, it, that's what they wanted, I, I, you know, I just did what I was told to do, basically, at that point.

It's important to note that he did not feel comfortable in the role he was cast in. The most revealing statement is that he says, “It wasn't me.” This means that he was compelled to perform himself in a particular way in order to give the team, and fans, what they wanted. There is little question that the pressures of the industrial reserve army are at play in forcing players like Curtis U., Darin K., and Lawrence F. to perform a role they do not enjoy or identify with. For, there is always an awareness that if they evince any reluctance whatsoever, they can lose their position in an instant to one of the myriad other aspiring professional hockey players willing to do whatever it takes to take their place.

The sense that to work as a professional hockey player is to take on an alienating role is not limited to those who labour as enforcers. Luc C., who enjoyed a more privileged position in the ranks of professional hockey, obliquely meditates on a similar theme:

Luc C.: And then, after that, you know, depending of the, the results, if, if things go well, obviously it facilitates the relations between the athletes and the, and the fans, where everybody is happy. Where it becomes complicated is when, when the team is not doing well or, or when you as a player is not performing for different reasons, right? So, and they are different reasons why an athlete is not performing all the time and, and very often, I would say most of the time, fans don't really know the, the real reasons why the athletes are not performing. You're watching the games and what you think is that, you know, all the athletes are on the same page and all feeling good, all have lives without problems, but it's, it's never the fact, you know? There's always, always a player on a team, at least, that is going through different issues. It could be, you know, health, it could be injuries, it could be something related to, to his home life, you know, his family and things like that and, and people are not aware of that. You know, I remember at the end of my career, when I was last couple years dealing with lots, lot of injuries, but people are not really aware that you're fighting through all that, that stuff. So, for an athlete, it's very hard to, to perform at its normal level dealing with all that stuff, but, meanwhile, the effort and the sacrifice to play is, is out of this world and it's something that, that people don't know. You go and watch a game and you see a hockey player step on the ice that doesn't have a good game, while, meanwhile, possibly that athlete is, is going through a really tough time, you know, dealing with issues. So anyway, that's...

Reading between the lines, what he is describing here is the frustration of constantly being in the spotlight, asked to perform a role for fans. His tremendous awareness of the attitudes and ideas of fans speaks to the strain that he was under to give them what they wanted. It is evident from his testimony that fans envisioned players to be a species of supermen, unencumbered by the frailties that afflict average people such as pain and exhaustion. It is into these supermen that spectators invest their hopes and aspirations and upon their foundation that they build the imagined athletic community. This is the role that Luc C. found it so difficult to play no doubt because it is a role no actual human being could authentically satisfy to a precise degree.

For other players, it was easier to fulfil the roles they were asked to play. This was the case for Vasil D., for instance:

NKL: Now, when you were playing in professional games, in front of fans or interacting with fans, to what extent would you say you were performing a role, or would you say you were being yourself?

Vasil D.: [Thinks] I, I... A funny story, actually. My first year of professional hockey, I was named the first star, I think, in my third game, and when I skated out to be the first star, I skated out as fast as I can and I dove on the ice, right? And the fans, ever since that day, I became a fan favourite because of that reason, right? Because they, I think they probably knew that I was doing it for them than for anything else. There are a lot of hockey players that keep to themselves compared to other sports. Hockey players seem to be a little more quiet and, you know, keep to themselves, but I was a little bit more outgoing, and the fans really, really enjoyed that.

NKL: And did you feel comfortable in that...

Vasil D.: Always. I always felt comfortable. I guess maybe I like, I like the spotlight a little bit too as well, but any place I played, if you look through the teams, I was a popular player because of that reason, because I engaged myself with the fans.

The experience described here is quite different from those discussed above. In this case, Vasil D. clearly revels in his role as a fan favourite. Yet, what is common between this and the earlier stories is an awareness that players are expected to play a role for fans. It is this awareness that causes the player to experience both a plenitude of meaning during his career and the evacuation of that meaning once it is over. Again, this is a subject which will be elaborated further below.

In fact, Sean O.'s experience, with which I began this section, is also more in line with that of Vasil D. than with those players who struggled to satisfy the roles demanded of them. He further remarks here,

NKL: So, when you were playing in professional games in front of fans, or interacting with fans, to what extent would you say that you were kind of performing a role, or were you just being yourself?

Sean O.: Um, depending on what, you know, after, there were a couple of seasons where I'd been around for a while, and people had got to know me, again, like, in a smaller town, they'd see you getting groceries. You know, and depending on what it is, you never know. Especially, the interaction with female fans, too, you gotta be careful, you know, maybe take things the wrong way, and next, you know, whatever. So, sometimes you're playing a role. You're, what I'd say, you weren't playing a role, you were just supporting, you were just being, you were just a promoter of your club, right, so you want to, you know, be an outstanding guy to support your club. You didn't want to act like an a-hole because then your reflection of yourself would be to the club. So, most of the times it was just, you know, just always just being a nice person to what it was. Not fake, I don't want

to say fake, but at the end of the day, like, these are people that you really don't know, you know what I mean? They don't know your family, they don't know your past history. So, most of the time, you're just kind of just being polite and, you know, asking questions.

Although he does not appear to have found it to be particularly unpleasant, he does acknowledge that he was playing a role. Again, although the role on the ice might be to play as hard as possible, off the ice the role that was expected of him was also one designed to appease fans. For, as he makes clear, if he were to “act like an a-hole,” it might be more difficult for fans to invest in the team. So, it was necessary for him to perform pleasantness at all times. This comment also provides valuable context to the testimony of all of the players, for it reveals that the compulsion to play a role was not merely limited to the moments when they were technically at work on the ice in front of fans. In their capacity as public figures, players are always in the spotlight to at least some degree which means that they are never completely able to turn off their performances.

Vessels of Meaning

In order to play the part of social reproductive labour, athletes, in essence, become the vessel for the meaning for fans. At its most basic level, the imagined athletic community builds its sense of identity around a team of players playing a sport. Thus, each of these players becomes the physical embodiment of that community and all of its hopes and aspirations. This means that players experience a remarkable sense of plenitude and empowerment as they

become the locus for meaning of thousands of people in the course of their work. However, once the career ends, or once the athlete becomes injured and unable to labour on behalf of the community, he is discarded and forgotten, left only with the scars of the meaning he once bore but will never bear again. This is a significant affective trauma experienced by the athlete as social reproductive labourer.

Sean O. explains what it felt like to be the centre of the crowd's adulation, even at the relatively lower level of European professional hockey. He begins to discourse on this subject despite being questioned about another topic:

NKL: What about when you were on the ice? You mentioned you grew up around professional wrestling. Do you feel like you were that kind of entertainer when you were on the ice?

Sean O.: There were some games when it kicked off and it got a little bit, you know, some fights would happen, you know. Let's say, for example, like, I wasn't a big time heavy fighter or something, but, there would be a game if someone would run your goalie, you know, you'd have to drop your gloves a bit and next thing you'd get kicked off the ice. And, if you were on the road, soon as they would kick you off, they were cheering, booing, this and that and it made me feel... special. It made me feel like, like I was something bigger than what the game was, you know what I mean? And, I know fighters that used to, used to, couldn't wait, it was almost better to fight away so that they could get booed and, you know, it was almost cooler on that side of things, right, that everyone hated you. So, when it happened to me, occasionally, I used to think it was the coolest thing in the world.

This is a fascinating passage, for it reveals something of what it feels like to be at the centre of meaning-production for a stadium full of people. It made him "feel... special," "like [he] was something bigger than what the game was." In short, he "used to think it was the coolest thing in the world." It is the sudden absence of this feeling that makes the end of the career so difficult to handle. When prompted, Sean O. goes on to elaborate further:

NKL: Yeah, and you said earlier that they made you feel special, can you expand on how you felt in those moments?

Sean O.: Yeah, there was times where you'd score, you felt like a million bucks. There was times, for me, I didn't score much, but I could break up a two-on-one, and they'd *react* and you'd just, you'd just, you'd just get lifted. You didn't, anything, I mean, somebody could be dying and you wouldn't, you just felt so good, you know what I mean. You just felt like you wanted that to happen again every, every, every time. For me, those kind of plays that I would do would come along every, maybe, eight games, like it wouldn't, you know, because of the way I played, I was just a steady bee, and no one's reacting, by, good stick on puck, or winning a battle in the corner, you're not going to get a reaction as a goal-scorer would, but, you know, once in a while you'd, block a shot, and, you know, sacrifice your body to block it and the fans would react and, you know, you didn't get it all the time, so when you did get it, you really felt, you know, special. It was like, it was the best feeling in the world. You didn't care about anything else, but in that moment, so, yeah.

What he describes here is absolute euphoria. This is the pinnacle of the moment where the player becomes the vessel for the meaning of fans. The player scores and is showered in adulation so powerful that “somebody could be dying and you wouldn't [care], you just felt so good.” These moments were so intoxicating that they seem to have validated the entire experience of labour in professional hockey. Later, in a portion of the interview focusing on whether he felt pressure from fans to play through injury, he again returns to a discussion of what it felt like to be the focal point of meaning for an entire community of people:

Sean O.: I wouldn't think it would be so much the pressure side of the fans to go out there and, you know, risk injury to improve, but just that stage, that whole, I mean, again, it's hard for me to explain because it was, no one [laughs] really may-, mattered if I was there or not, but, that whole rush, that whole energy rush that you go out there and you, you can put twelve hundred people or four thousand people on their st-, on their, on their feet, you know, by your play, you know, that, sure, that's gotta be some kind of want and excitement. That's what, ke-, keeps guys going in the off-season is can't wait to hear the roar of the fans. The fans help them go, the, the fans are the ones that, that ener-, that keep them energized and keep them focused and keep them, you know, the whole reason why you keep going and playing this game, right?

This is a revealing digression. He moves from a question asking about if he felt pressure from fans to play through injury – he acknowledges that he did feel some pressure to impress fans, as that would have material consequences on his quality of life as a semi-professional in a small

European league – to an unprovoked meditation on the emotional gratification he received from playing in front of fans. This sense of purpose seems to have been a primary form of compensation he received for his efforts and served to motivate him throughout his career. Finally, he reflects on what it feels like to no longer be the focal point for the production of meaning:

NKL: So, now that your career is over, do you miss the experience of playing in front of a crowd regularly?

Sean O.: Yeah. Yeah.

NKL: Can you tell me about that a little bit?

Sean O.: Yeah, no, every day. I think, ah, you know, I was down in Elmira, New York for a division three college game and there was probably about two thousand people there, and it brings you back, doesn't matter where you are in the game, it brings you back to when you played. You know, a certain song can hit on, on, on the sound system and you can remember just taking a face-off to the song or being somewhere, identifying, because I identify a lot of stuff in hockey to music, too, because certain warm up songs, like, they'd play, like "Small Town" by John Cougar, I mean, they used to play that in Slough every time you'd go on the ice and it was just a cool warm up song and, yeah, every time, you'll always miss it. You'll never ever, I mean, you could be fifty years old and still playing and you could retire at fifty-one, at fifty-two you're going to miss it. You know, like, you always will, right? Because, not to say you're not important, but, you know, there was an, you know, you know, there was an, again, because of the fans, because of the fans and the way they reacted to you, was the reason why you missed it.

There is a tremendous sense of nostalgia here for the experience of playing – he points to somatic details that trigger powerful memories. Ultimately, for him, this is not about just camaraderie with teammates, but “because of the fans and the way they reacted to you was the reason why you missed it.” Remarkably, the sense of loss began almost the instant that his career ended. This is the reality of being a professional athlete. The moment a player ceases to be the embodiment of the imagined athletic community, he is forgotten and another takes his place.

Whether this is because of injury or the ultimate end of a career, the transition is instantaneous and ruthless.

For Darin K., although he denies that he would alter the nature of his performance for fans, he cannot dispute the stimulation he personally felt from being the object of their focus:

NKL: Now, when you were playing in games in front of fans or interacting with them, did you feel like you were performing a role for them, or did you feel like you were being yourself?

Darin K.: No, I, I, I pretty much was myself pretty much the whole time, I mean, you can play off the fans, I mean, as far as getting, getting energy and adrenaline and they can, they get you going, you know. But I wouldn't change my game for them, no.

Although this is something of a passing comment, it is worth dwelling on because he makes reference to the “energy and adrenaline” he receives from the crowd. This speaks on one level to the way in which players become vessels for a surfeit of meaning. On another, it testifies to a fascinating feedback loop in which players and fans dialectically supply one another with “energy.” Unfortunately, although this process may appear mutually beneficial, in the end it sucks the player dry, as we will see. As the interview progresses, Darin K. expands on what it feels like to no longer be the object of the crowd's affections:

NKL: So, do you miss the experience of regularly playing in front of a crowd now that your career is over?

Darin K.: Well, nobody, you know, it's been nine years since I've played in front of a crowd like that and, you know, it's hard to explain, I guess, it's one of the most, or, the biggest thrills a person can have, you know, so, when you don't have it anymore, you look back and really sort of go, “Wow, it was pretty awesome to do that.”

In a way, Darin K.'s struggle to find a way to articulate the nature of his experience at the heart of the imagined athletic community signifies more than any words could. It reveals the

overwhelming magnitude of the experience of being the repository of meaning for thousands and thousands of people. At the end of the interview, he returns to this theme one more time:

NKL: I was just going to say, how satisfying have you found your post-hockey career work to be compared to your professional hockey career?

Darin K.: Um, it was a journey. It was an eye-opening journey. You know, moving on from hockey and trying to figure out what you wanted to do. I was pretty fortunate, about four years ago, getting a job that I get to try and help kids out and run a hockey academy. So, I, very good job that I'm fortunate enough to have. But, the first couple of years were tough.

NKL: Okay. And, do you mind telling me just a little bit about why those first couple of years were tough?

Darin K.: You just feel, you sort of feel lost without, without what you had since you were five. You know, I mean, you knew you wanted to be a hockey player every day and then all of a sudden, when the hockey's done, you're not really su-, you know, you just miss it, you miss the game.

He emphasizes that what he has lost is his identity as an athlete, but it is hard not to think that part of this is also being the locus for so much meaning.

Lawrence F. remarks upon the power of this tremendous sense of plenitude in his own interview:

NKL: Do you miss the experience of playing regularly in front of a crowd?

Lawrence F.: Oh, Gosh, yeah.

NKL: Yeah? And why? What was the feeling, what is it that you miss about it?

Lawrence F.: Well, when you look back, and you, and you think that there's twenty thousand people there, it's entertainment. And, when it goes, when it leaves, you realize how special it was that twenty thousand people paid to come watch you. [We are interrupted by the news that there is a power failure in the facility.] So the question was?

NKL: We were talking about missing the crowd.

Lawrence F.: Yeah. So, it's one of those things where, you're an entertainer, you've got all these people there screaming and cheering for you, and then when you retire, it's gone. Right, like, it's over.

NKL: Do you find yourself thinking about that?

Lawrence F.: Oh yeah. Like, you know, when I go out and play... in NHL alumni games now, and there's, you know, a thousand people, it's still entertaining for them to say, "hey, we remember you," right? So...

This testimony is yet another iteration of the subjective, affective impact of playing in front of a crowd and being the object of attention and enthusiasm for thousands of people. What is particularly salient about Lawrence F.'s version, though, is the way that he highlights the transition from the feeling of having "people there screaming and cheering for you, and then when you retire, it's gone. Right, like, it's over." He indexes the abrupt transition from being the locus of meaning and desire to the emptiness that comes from the transfer of that meaning to other bodies. It is little wonder that he wishes to feel remembered in alumni games, for the process of retiring is the process of being discarded and forgotten.

For Vasil D., although he is nostalgic about the experience of playing in front of a crowd, what he misses still more is the camaraderie of playing with teammates:

NKL: Okay. Do you miss the experience of playing regularly in front of a crowd?

Vasil D.: Um, I do, I do. I, the fans kind of pumped me up too as well. You know, the national anthem and, and the fans screaming and the goaltender is the most focused player on the ice, so you make a big save, the fans love you, right, or you make, win games for the team, the fans love you. But also, on the other side, you know, you can, you can let in a few goals and they're on you too as well, right? So, there's a little bit of both, but you can either be, be the hero or the dog, and, unfortunately, sometimes I was the dog. There's teams I played for that you struggled and there's teams that fans loved you because you couldn't do anything wrong.

NKL: Sure, so do you think, in your day-to-day life now after your career is over, do you think about ever what it was like?

Vasil D.: No, yeah, I have, not really. The biggest thing I, that I miss the most is just being in the dressing room with the players. You know, you're a tight family. You're with them every single day. I lived with a couple of players too during the season. So, it's more that, the bus rides and the enjoyment of that, right?

It is interesting that although he very much acknowledges the loss that comes with the end of a career and the loss of the connection to fans, he is ultimately quick to say that it is the experience with fellow players that is the biggest loss. Perhaps that should be unsurprising: if the very thing that fans seek in sport is a fleeting sense of community and togetherness, it is no wonder that a player would most miss the experience of such community in one of its most authentic forms, the team. Yet, as the interview continues, it becomes clear that the adulation of fans is something he misses in his daily life, whether he thinks about it consciously or not:

NKL: How satisfying would you say that this goalie school training you're doing right now is compared to your playing career?

Vasil D.: I think, I think it... the reason why I don't miss the game as much right now is because I'm still involved in the game. So, I think it's just as satisfying. The only thing is I guess you don't get the recognition sometimes of being a professional hockey player. The highlight, and all the fans being around you. You're not as popular. But, you know, it's just as satisfying being on the ice, being with hockey players, being in the sport.

Although he feels he was right to end his career at the point that he did – and, clearly, this is an individual with tremendous perspective, so it is not altogether surprising that this is the case – he cannot help missing “the fans” and being “popular.”

Even James I., who evinced a general dislike and distaste for the culture of spectatorship surrounding professional hockey, somewhat grudgingly acknowledges the satisfaction he derived from playing in front of a crowd:

NKL: Do you miss the experience of regularly playing in front of a crowd?

James I.: [Thinks about it.] From time to time, like, you, you kind of miss the attention, right, like, just being the centre of attention out there, everyone knows who you are. But, other than that, no, I don't really miss it.

This is interesting, given his somewhat cynical general attitude to fandom, that he nevertheless acknowledges, albeit in a somewhat taciturn and circumspect way, that he does sometimes miss the experience of playing in front of a crowd. Evidently, the power of the emotional lift of playing before legions of fans is hard to deny or resist, even for the most reluctant participant.

Not all players interviewed found it difficult to recover from the experience of playing in front of an adoring crowd, however. For Luc C., for instance, years of functioning as an avatar for the imagined athletic community ultimately caused him to feel inured to the experience:

NKL: Now that your career's over, would you say that you miss the experience of regularly playing in front of a crowd?

Luc C.: No.

NKL: Okay.

Luc C.: No, no, I've done, you know, I've done enough. I mean, if... it's, it's, you know, pretty cool, when you start your career, the first few games, like, I remember, like, when I went to college, it was the first time that I was really playing constantly against, in front of cr-, crowds of five thousand people and, and then, you know, you get to the NHL and it's fifteen, twenty thousand people. I mean, at first it's, it's pretty special, but, eventually, you don't even think about that.

It is interesting to see this divergent take on the crowd. Although he does acknowledge that it was exciting for him initially, he describes a sort of banality that comes with familiarity.

Ultimately he did not even think about playing in front of spectators.

For Chris M., it was actually an immense relief to no longer be the focal point of the imagined athletic community:

NKL: Do you miss the experience of playing in front of a crowd?

Chris M.: [Thinks] Not really. I never liked it, to be honest with you. I, I don't know if, see, I'm not, I am extroverted, but not too extroverted. I'd rather have a small group than be in front of a large, impersonal group. So, for me, I don't miss it. I still have anxious dreams about, it's been, it's been years since I've played hockey and I still wake up, like, terrified that, like, the game's about to start but, like, I can't find my skates. Or, like, really, like, things like this, like, really messe-, or, like, I get on the ice, but I, I can't find my footing and, like, it's in front, it's, like, an important thing in front, and it's just weird that, and it's, it's not my, it has nothing to do with my minor hockey experience where you pull in parents, you don't pull in crowds, or the CIS experience, where you don't pull in, you pull in friends and maybe a few people who just, sort of, like hockey in the area, and they're watching, but it's coupled with school and it's not your number one priority anymore. Which is like, so, it's all, because, and, the reason I can tell is the colours of the jersey and the socks I'm wearing in my, in these dreams and, so, I don't miss it, because for me, that was, it's a, it's a, actually, almost, like, a hellish experience, to be honest with you. Some people love the crowd and they thrive off of it.

NKL: Can you tell me just a little bit more about that? About what makes it hellish for you, because that's very interesting to me?

Chris M.: I, I just, I don't like, I don't like judgment based on people who don't know me. So, I mean, even if I'm going to, like, a, because, the crowd comes to judge you. They're not coming to meet you and make an educated judgment based on your personality and everything. They're coming to see how you perform and they're either going to spit on you or, it's like really polar extremes. It's like, "Ah, they're noth-!" you either are something great, or you're nothing, you know, you're, you're a plug, you're a this, you're... So, I mean, there's a, this idea that there are these stars, you know what I mean? So, they all kind of love the stars and then there's, like, the rest. And the rest are interchangeable and these are, like, you know, these are fi-, these are a maximum of a five-year window and they see people come and go and they talk about the people of old who have made it. But the people who just come through and don't make it anywhere, maybe their billets, like, talk about them and say, "Oh, we had him and he was a good guy," because they know your personality. I mean, it's not too many fans... well, here's a, you know, scoring a goal in the London Knights arena, yeah, when you score, and you hear the crowd, yeah, you miss that, that's for sure. Like, the roar of, like, when you actually do something good in front of the crowd, so, people who are good and successful, I'm sure, will miss the crowd. The ones who just kind of go around and once in a while you'll get a goal and you get that small experience every now and again or do something well, like, then, yeah, you're pumped up.

There is much going on in this passage. First, he indicates how taxing it is to constantly be confronted by judgment from a crowd – judgment that feels unjust because it is based on a tiny sample of performance and nothing else. Then, too, there is the sense that most players are “interchangeable,” generic, and soon forgotten. This is something he was aware of even at the

time. Then, finally, there is an acknowledgment of the power of the crowd to infuse a player with energy and meaning in celebration of his feats. In a sense, what he is showing is a bipolar experience of playing in front of a crowd. It is deifying or effacing; either way it is dehumanizing, for it imbues the player with meaning that far transcends the capacities of any individual human being.

Injury

In the preceding section, I examined some of the affective consequences of performing as an athletic social reproductive labourer, particularly the transition from being the vessel and focal point for the meaning generated by the imagined athletic community to the experience of being discarded by that community as unnecessary and effectively worthless. This is an obvious aspect of the cost of athletic social reproductive labour, but it is far from the only one. In this section, I will examine the various ways in which injury can be understood as a necessary and yet devastating consequence of this form of labour. Injury will be considered from a variety of dimensions, for it comes to shape the experiences of athletes during and after their careers in both subjective and physical – often inextricably linked – ways.

Before delving into the implications and consequences of injuries, it is worth reflecting on the role of injury as an idea upon the experience of players. For, injuries have an effect even before they occur, haunting athletes as an anxiety-provoking spectre of what might happen to them any time they set their skates upon the ice. For, of course, injury means the end of the career and the loss of earning potential and the role as the centre of meaning. It also means the

potential loss of physical agency, a fundamental element of the athlete's identity. Lawrence F. remarks upon the way he conceptualized this threat during his playing career:

NKL: So, during your playing career, how much did you think about the possibility of being injured? How much was it on your mind in a general sense?

Lawrence F.: Well, in my, in my case, all the time, because I was a fighter. So, every guy that I fought, whether he was a lefty, a righty, I was always worried that if I get hit the wrong way and get knocked out, get my jaw broken, you know, my eye socket broken, and I'm going to be injured for a long time, that means they bring another guy up to do my job. If he does good, I don't have a job anymore. So, for me, every game.

Very simply, the fear of being hurt and losing his job was with him all the time. The psychological toll of his social reproductive work was inextricably linked in this way to the labour process. The visceral terror players often must live with is even more clearly rendered in an exchange between Lawrence F. and Sean O.:

Lawrence F.: And of all the games and all the minutes and all the minutes that everyone's played, right, it's, uh, it's tough. Right, those are really, really hard injuries, right? The Malarchuk one especially, I mean, I was a kid watching that in Buffalo, and, funny enough, I was coaching with a former captain of the Leafs who played in that game and he said that the third period was the worst period of hockey that anyone played because no one wanted to engage...

NKL: Okay, I was just going to ask about how you can get back out...

Sean O.: No one wanted to engage after, it was a very stalled, stalled game.

Lawrence F.: Well...

Sean O.: No one was hitting anybody, skating away from checks, for the fans it couldn't have been very fun to watch.

Lawrence F.: Yeah, no, and that's what happens when you see something gruesome, it just takes the sting out of it, right?

This exchange between the two interview subjects reveals the stakes of professional sports like hockey for players. After the dreadful injury they witnessed, players were unable to shake an awareness of their own mortality and vulnerability. Although Sean O. has just described this

event as fluky, as something “that could have easily have happened playing ball hockey as a kid,” his testimony here suggests something different – a heightened consciousness shared by the players on the ice that this is the risk that they all take. Further, this moment is one of the few in which a player makes a direct connection between the sacrifice of the athlete’s body and the interest of fans. Instead of arguing that no one should have to play in such circumstances, or appealing to the humanity of spectators, he says that “for the fans it couldn’t have been very fun to watch.” Implicit here is a concession that the players play and endure fear and pain to produce “fun” for the fans. In playing passively after the injury, the players actually failed to perform the roles they were tasked with for fans. The labour they performed in those moments was not of the social reproductive variety (as it customarily is). Lawrence F.’s final comments on the subject of the psychological toll of playing professional hockey are the most chilling, for they demonstrate the constant emotional sacrifice he was forced to make in order to fulfil the function of social reproductive athletic labourer. That is, in order to animate the imagined athletic community by proving the high stakes of professional hockey through a willingness to engage in physical violence, he was forced to live with a constant fear of injury and failure that completely undermined his ability to take satisfaction from his work. He explains:

NKL: Okay, okay. But now you say that you’re in a different period, you say it’s more peaceful, do you actually feel more satisfaction from the current period than when you were playing?

Lawrence F.: My NHL career was a blur. The road to get to the NHL was memorable. I call it “the journey.” Once I got there, it was, it was, believe me, it was a nightmare. Because it was a nightmare to stay there, it was a nightmare to fight, it was a nightmare, everything, like, it wasn’t fun. In the summer time, I’d be at my cottage and August would come and I’d say, “I’m about a month out from bare-knuckle fighting.” How much fun is that? So, here I am, supposed to be enjoying the off-season, and I’m sitting there going, you know, I was on pins-and-needles not even sleeping. First exhibition game was

against Philadelphia. Already knew I got three fights in that game. If I don't do well, I'm not making the [team]. How much fun is that? You, you, you live it every minute.

This is a fascinating conclusion. He hammers home the degree of trauma he experienced as an NHL player and toll it took on him during his career to satiate the general desire for violence in hockey. Lawrence F.'s testimony here powerfully refutes the hegemonic narrative that playing professional sport is a dream everyone should aspire to and feel grateful to achieve. Instead, he recasts the experience as a form of prolonged emotional abuse, in which he was forced to constantly anticipate the "nightmare" of having to subject himself and others to physical violence in front of thousands of on-lookers.

Although his testimony is perhaps the most striking, Lawrence F. was not the only player interviewed to acknowledge the subjective toll of playing professional hockey and fearing the possibility of injury. Vasil D. speaks to this issue:

NKL: Is there any stress associated with it, in terms of your job or...

Vasil D.: Yeah, a little bit. Well, I was getting paid at the professional hockey league level and goaltending, like I said, players get called up, sent down, so, if a goalie gets called up and he plays really well, well guess what, there's a pretty good chance he's gonna keep playing because everything's going pretty well and then when you come back, now all of a sudden, you could be sent down, right, to the, to the, to a lower level, and that's happened many times. It's happened to me and it's happened to other goaltending, so, yeah, you think about your contracts, that you sign, and, and, you know, you're getting paid money to do it but, yeah, of course, you've given an opportunity for someone else to step in.

NKL: Yeah, would you say you'd spend a lot of time thinking about those sort of things in those periods, or was it something that you kind of pushed aside?

Vasil D.: No you can't [sighs], you try not to do that but yeah, there's, I pushed it aside sometimes because you have no control over it, right, but definitely, it's, it's in your mind, for sure. It's probably one of the top things in your mind that you think about every day, of course.

This is particularly interesting coming from a player who initially began the interview by saying that injuries were not a significant concern for someone who plays his position (goaltender). Now he acknowledges that the prospect of being hurt is something that stays with a player constantly. This, of course, is connected to issues around the reserve army of labour and the threat of losing his job. Still, it is important to note the strain that is placed on players even by the very possibility, let alone fact of, injury. Similarly, Sean O. was constantly vigilant about the possibility of getting hurt while playing:

Sean O.: And, any, anything with my head, I was kind of, you know, I remember going to the bench lots of times too and, just, you know, when I would take a hit, and they'd say, "hey, you okay?" "Just check the eyes," just, I used to always say, "Just check the eyes. How's the head?" That's all I ever cared about, right, at that, at, you know, because I wasn't playing at a level where, you know, you know, millions and millions of dollars were at stake, too, right? You're playing at a thing where, you know, you're almost, I don't want to say pay cheque to pay cheque, but pretty much you know, you were, and if you took that away, the whole mystique of playing, like, playing pro, or minor pro, which you always wanted to do, that could be taken away from you pretty quick if you're, if you're showing that kind of stuff.

Here he reveals that he would have been unwilling to play through head injuries – indeed, that he was constantly worried about such injuries, always asking to make sure he didn't have a concussion. It is also worth highlighting the observation he makes about the difference in level of professional hockey. For the player at the lower or semi-pro level, the implications of injury are even more disquieting, for there is less infrastructure and patience allotted to recovery; to be hurt is, in a very real sense, to lose one's job. Still, although the consequences of injury may be steepest at the lowest levels, they remain significant even at the highest, as Luc C. demonstrates when discussing the fact that opposing players would deliberately attempt to injure offensively-oriented players like him:

NKL: And was it stressful to think about that, to know that that was happening?

Luc C.: Well, it's, yeah, it's obviously something that you, you think about, when you prepare for games. When you, when you get dressed, like, you know that some games are going to be tougher than others, depending who you're playing against and stuff like that. So, yeah, it is something you are very conscious about.

Although he does not expand at length upon the nature of his consciousness – perhaps unsurprising given the code of hegemonic masculinity that governs violent sports such as hockey – even the admission that it is something he thought about is illuminating. Darin K. provides further elaboration, echoing the “nightmare” experience of Lawrence F.:

NKL: Was the possibility of being hurt, the potential of being hurt something that entered your mind while you were playing?

Darin K.: Oh, every, every game. Every fight.

NKL: Oh, really. Can you try to walk me through a little bit how that would work?

Darin K.: Well I think that you've just got to put yourself in our shoes. I mean, if you were to walk outside tonight in front of twenty-thousand people and square off with a big guy, I'm sure you'd have fear about getting injured.

NKL: Sure, yes.

Darin K.: You know, but, it's no different for us.

NKL: No, of course. And, was that fear a question of humiliation in front of the fans? Was it about losing your livelihood?

Darin K.: Humiliation, getting hurt, losing your job, letting your teammates down.

NKL: Okay, all those things.

Darin K.: Yeah.

This is a particularly telling extended passage, one that I did not probe too hard because I had the sense that Darin K. was not altogether comfortable elaborating on the subject. The gist of the point is evident, however. There are two levels to it, both crucial. First, part of the psychological toll of his job was the constant anxiety he experienced about the possibility of being seriously

hurt, something we saw in the testimony of Lawrence F. Second, he also lived with the constant fear of being humiliated in front of “twenty-thousand people.” He was acutely aware that the nature of his work was spectacular and was similarly conscious of the implications of that – the fact that he would be reviled and discarded for failing to fulfil his role.

It is evident that although athletes across the spectrum of professional hockey, from semi-pro to the NHL, goaltenders to scorers, experience subjective trauma at the prospect of potentially being injured in the process of producing meaning for spectators as social reproductive labourers, this experience is particularly heightened for those filling the role of enforcer. Both Lawrence F. and Darin K. demonstrate the remarkable strain of knowing that they will be compelled to sacrifice their bodies each and every time they take the ice. On the surface, it may appear that these players play a role that is incidental to the game itself, one that renders their experiences exceptional rather than exemplary. This is a mistaken chain of logic, however, for it fails to account for the context of political economy. Professional hockey is a game, but it is a game played for a very particular purpose: to generate profit. In order for professional hockey to be profitable, it must engender fandom; it must create the illusion of inherent meaning and purpose for its proceedings. The construction of the imagined athletic community relies on the illusion that the game is something more than a game. This is where the enforcer enters: by engaging in gladiatorial combat on behalf of his team, the enforcer validates the very sport itself as something worth fighting for. It is this violence that makes the sport meaningful for the fan on a profound level, one that justifies building an entire identity around. Thus, the enforcer is the ultimate social reproductive labourer in the sphere of professional hockey. As such, he bears the greatest burden, both emotional and physical, of this work. I will now move to discuss the physical dimensions of this sacrifice.

Nearly every player I spoke with suffered some form of injury over the course of his professional hockey career, in most cases at least one of a very severe nature. Before examining the implications of these injuries on a physical and psychological level, and the lasting impact they have had in the lives of these former players, it is worth cataloguing the specific nature of many of these injuries, for the mere act of doing so paints a profound picture of the pervasiveness of injury in professional hockey. It is worth remarking that the following discussion includes injuries to the body and injuries to the head (concussions). With respect to the latter, it is worth providing some initial context for the ensuing comments. It has been estimated that the total number of sports-related concussions per year is somewhere between 1.6-3.8 million (Stern et al, 2011, p. S460). This number is so uncertain because most concussions continue to be unreported. Although all concussions are dangerous, the greatest risk comes from repetitive injury. In cases of singular injury, no more than 15% of people experience symptoms after a year (S461). Of course, professional athletes in contact sports seldom fall into this category since they are extremely likely to experience repeated concussions. The prognosis for those who fall into this category is much different: “Recent research results have demonstrated neuropathologic evidence of CTE in participants of many sports outside of boxing, including American football, professional hockey, and professional wrestling,” (S461). CTE stands for chronic traumatic encephalopathy and its symptoms include, “impairments in cognition..., mood..., and behavior,” (p. S464). These mood and behavioural symptoms include, “depressed mood and/or apathy, emotional instability, suicidal ideation and behavior, and problems with impulse control, especially having a ‘short fuse.’ Substance abuse (sometimes fatal) and suicide are not uncommon,” (p. S464). As the disease worsens, the effects are especially felt in terms of

memory impairment, ability to plan and organize, language difficulties, aggression, and apathy. (p. S464) As of yet, there is still no broad enough study on who gets it, but risk factors appear to be associated with more severe trauma and more frequent traumas (p. S461). Evidently, the health implications of concussions are significant. It is worth keeping this in perspective as we advance to a discussion of the injuries suffered by the hockey players I interviewed, for what becomes clear from their testimony is that concussions are a ubiquitous part of the world of professional hockey.

Vasil D. provides an insightful overview of the place of injury in professional hockey:

NKL: So, during your playing career, most generally, how much did you think about the possibility of being injured? How much was it on your mind day-to-day?

Vasil D.: Um, honestly, not as, not too much. Being a goaltender, I think there's a chance of injury that's a lot less compared to as a player. I think hitting from behind for a player was the biggest concern for me watching players that I played with. The game is at just such high speeds that anything can happen. But, being a goaltender, just pucks being shot at you, you just, there's no real risk of injury. The equipment was great too as well. But, most of my injuries were had to do with my shoulders or knees or hips or stuff like that rather than the real big ones that players can face a lot more than goaltenders.

This analysis is interesting for a couple of reasons. First, he demonstrates why, structurally speaking, injury is an inherent part of the experience of non-goaltenders. The speed and nature of the game create situations that will inevitably lead to injury. Thus, injuries must be understood as an inherent part of professional hockey, not something that is merely incidental or even particularly avoidable. He expands on this point here:

NKL: So, what do you think about that sort of thing, you know, like, I mean, obviously you understand the injury, understand the pain but...

Vasil D.: There's, there's nothing you can do about it. There's players hurt... if you look at a American League roster or ECHL, East Coast Hockey League, roster or even, sometimes, NHL rosters, there's thirty, forty players at times, right, that are moving up and down because of injuries and there's nothing you can do. I can go through a season

without getting an injury at all and then, you know, there's a season where I went through where I had a couple of injuries, and, but, you cannot, at that speed and that level, you cannot stop injuries from happening.

Again, what stands out here is the structural nature of injury in professional hockey. It is the reality all players must accept. The second point he makes in the earlier passage, in which he comments upon how well the equipment of goaltenders protects them from injury, contextualizes why injury was not a central part of his own experience as a goaltender. Yet, that said, he goes on to elaborate and reveal that even for goaltenders, injury is a part of the game:

NKL: Okay, can you tell me a bit more about the injuries that you have had?

Vasil D.: Yeah. My, my injuries were, were mainly my hips because of a goaltender that goes down to his knees and gets back up, so we do a lot of that and, you know, you've got a, you've got to stretch a lot to make a save and, and then the majority of your movement that you use from your hips and there's tons of goalies that I've played with or have, have seen playing that they have a lot of problems with goaltending is hip injuries.

Although goaltenders are not subject to the sort of contact-based injuries that most hockey players face, the nature of their role does lead to a consistent form of bodily harm: hip problems. This is hardly a minor issue, as, likely, when these players reach a more advanced age, they will be confronted with increasingly great difficulty moving, something that, as former athletes, will likely have even greater subjective consequences than for the average person given the investment of their identities in physical agency (Sparkes, 2004).

One theme that emerged in the testimony of some players, very much following in line with Vasil D.'s analysis, was the mundane nature of injury in the perception of players despite its obvious significance to their lives and livelihoods. Lawrence F.'s experiences with injury are relatively representative of this. He lists the most salient injuries in his recollection: "Broken back. Shattered heel. Two shoulder operations. I had, I think, fifteen operations through my career. You know, many concussions. Yeah." What is striking here is the way he recounts the

list, almost as if it is entirely banal. He states the fact that he was subjected to “fifteen operations” as if it is an entirely unremarkable fact. Injuries were so commonplace that he does not seem to find it necessary to elaborate on the fact that nearly every part of his body was subjected to devastating harm over the course of his career. We see much the same attitude in the testimony of Sean O.:

NKL: Have you had any serious injuries over the course of your career?

Sean O.: Ah, you know what, I have. But, it was, it, it was in practice. I took a stick in the eyeball.

NKL: Stick in the eyeball?

Sean O.: Yeah. [Speaks to a child] Sorry buddy! [Back to me] I, I took a stick in the eyeball in a training session and it tore, uh, it tore the retina and I had to get surgery on that to take care of that.

This is a rather grievous and notable injury, yet he glosses over it as if it was insignificant. It was something he merely had to “take care of.” As with Lawrence F., surgery is framed as customary and unremarkable. Much like the former two players, Curtis U. endured a wide variety of injuries over the course of his career aside from the career-ending knee injury discussed in chapter five:

NKL: So, did you have, other than the devastating knee injury at the end of your career, did you have any other injuries also before that that were significant?

Curtis U.: Yeah, I separated both shoulders, broken nose, I guess [sharp exhale as he thinks], I had a bulging disc in my back, and that was it prior to the knee injury.

NKL: Would you say that also, and I’ll pick up on those, that’s plenty obviously, did you ever, would you say that you ever experienced concussions over the course of your career?

Curtis U.: Oh yeah, sorry, yeah, yeah, you don’t consider those injuries, do you? At least, we didn’t, but, yeah, I had, I had four diagnosed concussions and likely suffered more that just weren’t diagnosed or I just didn’t address.

Like Lawrence F. and Sean O., he suffered a litany of very significant injuries, in this case over a comparatively short career. The extent to which injury is actually assumed by players to be an inevitable outcome of their occupation is betrayed by the way that he says, “that was it” after listing off a series of significant injuries that an average person would likely be horrified to experience over the course of a lifetime. For a professional hockey player, this is a basic job requirement. In fact, his final comment on concussions suggests that even traumatic head injury is considered by players to be a basic expectation demanded of those who play professional hockey:

NKL: And, how did you feel about that [the fact that concussions were not addressed] at the time? Was that just, that was normal to you, that’s just how things roll, or did it feel a bit uncomfortable that that was happening?

Curtis U.: Oh, that was just the norm. Every player went through it, I mean, there’s, I, I, I would doubt that there’s any player that finished the game without at least a co-, a couple of concussions.

As an overall assertion of the place of injury in the game, this is a pretty remarkable statement. For non-goaltending players, head trauma is simply a sacrifice demanded of all players who set foot on the ice in order to generate a spectacle that fans can invest meaning into.

Luc C. expanded at greater length on his experience with injury. What he reveals is the incredible amount of pain he was forced to endure in order to fulfil his role as a social reproductive athletic labourer:

NKL: Sorry, you’ve told me already that you’ve been injured a number of times, seriously, over the course of your career, could you just be a bit more specific for me now about the nature of those injuries, especially the biggest ones?

Luc C.: All kinds of injuries. Like, when I was in [an original six city], like, one year, I got my jaw broken. A guy hit as I was trying to, to stay, stay in the line-up, playing with, with a guard on my helmet that would allow me to play even if, even if I had a broken

jaw. I got hit a few more times during the year and ended up breaking my, my jaw, or re-breaking it, twice, you know.

NKL: Oh, wow.

Luc C.: So, anyway, that's... when you play with a broken jaw and your, your helmet has this big thing around your face to, kind of, protect you, well, obviously everybody knows that you are playing hurt. It's, uh, so, uh... yeah, and back then, I mean, it's, it's, you know, people were not worrying about the hits to the head, concussions, and stuff like that. So, obviously, if you have your jaw broken three times in the same year, it's because you got hit to the head three times. Believe it or not, those three times that I got my jaw broken, the only thing that happened was one two-minute penalty [laughs].

NKL: Wow.

Luc C.: So, the other times that I got hit, players did not even get penalized. So, it's, anyway, that's, that's part of the frustrations that, that come with that. And, you know, the dirty hits and the dirty slashings, and all that stuff, so, each year, you have to deal with that. I mean, so, yeah, it's many, many different kinds of injuries. Just the slashing to the hands, like, you know, there's nine of my ten fingers that have been broken...

NKL: Wow.

Luc C.: And I have never missed a game because of broken fingers. So, again, it's, it's just an example of what players go through. No fans, or, just, broken ribs sometimes, you know? You play, you play with broken ribs where you, you have a tough time breathing and stuff like that. So, yeah, there's all kind of things that you go through and you battle through and that people don't really know about.

This is an incredible litany of injuries (and it does not include concussions, for these are yet to come). Like Vasil D., Luc C. also indexes the way in which pain and injury become institutionalized as part of the game. Much of the violence within the game is tolerated, to the point that jaws and fingers can be repeatedly broken without penalties being called. Again, it is important to acknowledge that this violence is not incidental to the sport. The tacit sanction of violent tactics and behaviour are logically consistent with the fact that professional hockey must have high stakes in order to entice fans to invest meaning and then finances into the game. For players like Luc C., this means that they must constantly endure pain and harm to their bodies in the course of their labour – working conditions that would scarcely be tolerated in any other

profession. Thus, this is another revealing instance of the hidden cost of this social reproductive work beyond typical exploitation – it is the actual suffering experienced in the course of doing this work.

Luc C. goes on to explicate his experiences with head injury:

NKL: Sure, would you say, just guessing, looking back on your career, would you say that you received concussions while you played?

Luc C.: How many?

NKL: Yeah, yeah, would you be able to guess how many concussions?

Luc C.: Probably, uh, um, I would say, between six and ten in, in my career.

NKL: And, were they diagnosed at the time, or are you just kind of thinking back, guessing that that happened?

Luc C.: Well, there's, there's four times, I believe, it was diagnosed. I remember, like, the first one that I really recall was when I was, my first, my first training camp... and got hit behind the net and just felt a big shake, you know, and, you know, back then, people did not even worried about that. I mean, you, yeah, you had a concussion, but it was treated like, "Okay, you got [laughs], you got hit hard, and, uh, we'll keep him on the bench a little bit and if he, he doesn't feel right, we'll get him undressed." And, that was, that was about it. Like, there was no follow-up, na-, not much of the, you know, the big caring that should have been, should have been done.

NKL: Yeah, I do. Yeah.

Luc C.: You get on the plane, you go at high altitude after the game, and it's, uh, the only thing they, they tell you is, uh, is, "Can you get your wife to wake you up a few times during the night." [Laughs] Which is pretty, is pretty funny when you really think of it.

This description underlines how commonplace concussions were in his experience as a player and how little care went into protecting him from the consequences. Indeed, he is forced to resort to a species of black humour in laughing at the cursory character of the care he received. It is impossible to guess just how much harm these concussions have caused him up to this point in his life and will cause him in the future.

Darin K. also spoke at length about his experiences with injury, especially head injury:

NKL: Can you give me a sense of what kind of injuries you had?

Darin K.: Yeah, I suffered many concussions. I suffered a broken, a broken orbital bone where they had to put a plate underneath the eye. A broken tibia and fibula in my ankle which put me out all year. And then a tendon on my right, or sorry, a tendon on my left thumb that was off the bone and they had to put it back on.

Again, there is a remarkably matter-of-fact quality to his delivery of his testimony, one that betrays the pervasiveness of injury in professional hockey. Indeed, this tone appropriately represents the amount of concern and support offered to players who experienced severe head injury during the period of his career:

NKL: Okay, well, to be a bit more specific, because you've had a lot of different types of injuries and I want to touch on a couple of them. First of all, the concussions were obviously a huge factor. How aware of concussions were you at the time – obviously we know now that there's been a lot of research and a lot of media coverage about concussions – at the time, how focused were you on those injuries? What kind of impact did they have on you at the time?

Darin K.: Zero. I had no idea. No idea. I mean it was more of a, you didn't feel well or you were sick. But you went out and played again, like, right away. So we didn't, there was no protocol for getting knocked out back then.

NKL: Yeah. So you never missed time, like, playing time for a concussion?

Darin K.: Not until my last, last fight.

NKL: And, were they ever diagnosed as concussions at the time, even as they sent you back out there?

Darin K.: I think I had one that was diagnosed, maybe two. But, I had a hundred, a hundred and some pro fights, right? So...

NKL: Wow. And how many times would you, if you had to guess, obviously it's just a guess, how many concussions would you guess you had?

Darin K.: Well, there's different grades, but I would, I was told probably around seventy-five grade one concussions.

There is not much that can be added to this astounding and deeply disturbing revelation. Given the literature on repeated head trauma, it is impossible to overstate the level of harm his body was subjected to during his professional hockey career and how little regard was paid to this fact as it was occurring. It is difficult to imagine a more profound illustration of the toll of social reproductive labour upon the athletic labourer than this one.

While most of the players interviewed demonstrated a relatively high degree of equanimity on the subject of the various injuries they suffered over the course of their careers, this does not mean the injuries had little overall impact on their lives. Rather, it speaks to the way in which athletes must condition themselves to endure the physical and psychological challenges of injury during their careers given that they are a fundamental element of their work. It would not be possible, ultimately, to pursue a lengthy career as a professional hockey player if one were not able to cope with the challenges of injury. Yet, this does not mean that injuries did not have tremendous affective consequences in the overall lives of the players interviewed, both during and after their time as professional players, influencing the ways in which they subjectively experienced themselves and the world. This is the profound toll of social reproductive labour: players are compelled to push their bodies to the point of injury in order to reify the imagined athletic community, but in doing so they sacrifice their physical well-being and in the process compromise themselves affectively as well. They literally must become another person, another self – one that has less physical agency and less psychological acuity (concussions) in order to reproduce fans in the manner capitalism requires. This is the level of exploitation too often ignored.

In his above general comments about the specific nature of the injuries he experienced during his career, Lawrence F. seemed to take the harm done to his body in stride. Yet, the fact that his injuries were unexceptional in his perception of what the labour of professional hockey requires does not mean that he was personally emotionally unscathed by the damage he endured:

NKL: Yeah. Okay, well, if you will, can you take me back to the experience of some of those injuries, any of those injuries? Just to tell me, I'm sort of thinking, what was going through your mind at the time and in the aftermath?

Lawrence F: Well, I remember, one was, it was the All-Star break, in Vancouver. Our farm team in Milwaukee – you listening to this story, eh Sean?

Sean O.: Yeah.

Lawrence F.: So, our farm team in Milwaukee was short players, so they asked me, they asked me they didn't tell me, said, you know, "Would you go down and help out?" So, as a team guy, I said, "Yeah." So, we were playing in Halifax, back-to-back games in Halifax over the All-Star break. Now, the NHL guys all get a break. So, being a good team guy, I went down. The second game, okay, was a Saturday night. I was leaving on a plane Sunday morning to come back to Vancouver I was on a breakaway and Walt G., actually a friend of mine, dove out, and I stepped on his stick. I was going head-first, full-blast in the boards and I spun around just at the last and hit my feet first [claps] and shattered my heel. I'm going back to the NHL, I was out most of the rest of the year, I was out. So, talk about devastation, here I am going down to help the Vancouver Canucks farm team, being a Good Samaritan, and I go down there and end my season on an injury, on a fluke play.

NKL: So what were you thinking at the time?

Lawrence F.: Oh, I was sick. Because, the problem was, is, it's so hard to get to the NHL. And, here I am, not being sent down, I was *asked*, would you go help us. Davey, Bob, asked me, I was like, "Of course I'll go Davey," even though I didn't want to go, because everybody's going to Vegas, right? So I went, and it was, it was... devastating.

The story speaks to the emotional impact of injuries. The damaged body is "devastating" because it is connected to an entire livelihood and identity and comes in service to a larger project. He was playing because he felt it was the right thing to do, and because there was employment pressure, not because it was something he valued in its own right. It's also worth highlighting the

fact that he mentions that he was hurt by his friend accidentally. As in so many of these stories, injuries are a necessary by-product of the game, not something superfluous or exceptional. Perhaps most importantly, he vividly recalls the precise circumstances of his injury, including the player who was involved. This, despite the fact that he has difficulty with memory on a daily basis. The mere fact that this memory is so distinct to him after so many years suggests how important the moment was in his life. The details are enshrined in his memory because the emotional impact upon him was too great to forget.

Darin K. is similarly able to conjure up the specific details of the experience of suffering a traumatic injury while playing professional hockey:

NKL: Would you describe one of [your injuries] as the most traumatic at the time in terms of how you felt about it?

Darin K.: Oh, my ankle.

NKL: The ankle?

Darin K.: Yeah, when I hit the net it, it had to go one way or the other. I looked down at my, my toes were pointing to the right, my foot was to the right.

NKL: Wow. Could you tell me about, could you just take me through a little bit what was going through your mind at the time, could you just take me through the experience of how that happened?

Darin K.: Well, I was on a breakaway and the guy turned me and I fell down and put my feet up on top of the, the goalpost and their, their goalie was the one that actually said something about, about it. I was in shock, I didn't really see it or feel it for the first few seconds, anyways. And then, uh, yeah, after that I was in complete shock. You know, go into shock, right?

NKL: Okay, yeah.

Darin K.: And, they had to saw the bottom of my boot off, the skate, because it was too swollen to get off. And then, rushed me to the hospital and put, I think it was, nine or ten screws into a plate.

NKL: Wow. So, what were you thinking? I mean, obviously, you said you were in shock, which makes total sense, how did you psychologically process what happened in the aftermath?

Darin K.: Well, it's that you're, you're not sure if you're going to play again. That's the biggest thing, you know. That's, any athlete's fear is having an injury like that and not coming back and being able to perform. So, that was the biggest thing.

NKL: Yeah. And would you say that you experienced a really significant amount of that kind of emotional or psychological distress as a consequence of it?

Darin K.: Oh yeah. For sure. Yeah.

He is reluctant to delve into the precise nature of his feelings, but even this somewhat oblique response provides a window into how traumatic an injury like this is for an athlete. He fears for the end of his career and the loss of everything that he has worked for. Moreover, he too recalls the precise details of his injury, from the way in which it came about, to the treatment he received afterwards, right down to the specific thoughts passing through his mind at the time.

Curtis U., too, is able to recount in detail from memory the occasions on which he suffered serious injuries, and not just the devastating injury to his knee that ended his career:

NKL: Of all those moments, I'm guessing that the knee may be the answer, but does any of them stick out, the moment that it happened, do you have a real recollection of what was going through your mind, like, how that experience played out when you were injured?

Curtis U.: I pretty much remember all of them. The back one, I think, was more of a, a, you know, just degenerative over time, kind of just wear and tear. But, yeah, I remember all the occasions, I remember when I got the, the, you know, the larger concussions too and how they were handled and all that sort of stuff, so I definitely remember all the injuries, yeah.

The fact that he has a distinct recollection of all of these situations speaks to how significant they were in his life both at the time and in the aftermath. The clarity of his recollection is best exemplified in the way he is able to recount exactly what happened to him when his knee was first injured:

NKL: Okay, so I'm curious if you could just, even if you use one as an example, I'm curious if you could take me back maybe through what was going through your mind as it happened, especially with the knee injury which had such a dramatic impact on your career, I'm curious about how much you were thinking about even that as it was happening?

Curtis U.: I'm not sure, it was just, it was just part of the deal [laughs]. You know, so I was playing [a home game and] was chasing the puck, made a quick turn, I got checked, slightly, from behind and it, and it just happened to be the way I fell. It wasn't a vicious hit, it wasn't a brutal attack, it wasn't anything dirty, you know, it was just the way that I fell. My leg was under me when I fell over and, you know, went over on the knee the way that you're not supposed to and blew everything out. I remember that, I remember, you know, afterwards, you know, in the change room, and, and being given the news that, you know, this, all this damage was done, they're going to have to do surgery, I, I was not up, I wasn't upset, I wasn't, you know, pissed off, I wasn't, you know, scared or anything, it was just, "Okay, well, surgery tomorrow and then we'll start rehab and we'll just carry on." It was just part of the deal, because I, you know, I guess, being around change rooms for so long, there's, there's always guys on the medical table dealing with something and I just kind of felt, "Okay, this is what I'm gonna have to deal with," and I didn't, I, maybe, I just didn't fully understand the, how bad the injury was. Just, the way they explained it was, "Okay, we're going to do some surgery tomorrow and you'll to be ready for training camp next year." And, so, "Alright, let's just get going here." That was basically it.

Two elements of this narrative really stand out. First, his precise recollection of the incident and the succeeding events speaks to the pivotal place it has played in his life. Second, the normality with which he received news of the injury at the time is striking. Clearly, the experience of harm to the body is so normalized for professional athletes that even such a traumatic event can be framed as within the realm of the everyday.

Curtis U. is not the only player to downplay the emotional impact of injury. In an earlier excerpt of testimony discussed in the previous section, Sean O. alluded to an injury he suffered to his eye. In the following passage, he expands on this injury, explaining that it has not had a significant impact on his life:

Sean O.: Uh, yeah, it was just more, it was an annoyance, right, where you just constantly have to go through it and they couldn't find anything and, and then eventually,

you know, I went to a second specialist and they said, “Your retina was tearing apart.” So, the same guy who did Brian Berard’s surgery did mine and, and, fantastic, like, unbelievable. But, there’s still, like, um, it looks like, when I’m, uh, looking through, like, some water, that’s the way I see out of my eye now. So, it’s okay, but it’s not perfect, but it doesn’t affect my, I don’t think it affects my life at all.

Here he is describing the aftermath of an injury in which his retina was torn by a hockey stick. Although he acknowledges long-term implications – he continues not to see clearly out of that eye – he vehemently denies that it affects his life in any way. Perhaps this is because it really does have no affect on his life. However, there is also the possibility that his categorical denial that it has any affect on his life (even though it has literally altered the way he is able to perceive the world) suggests that it may be too difficult to confront head-on the reality that his life was changed. In that sense, it may be easier to try to convince himself that nothing is different, nothing is harder.

Unlike Curtis U. and Sean O., Luc C. speaks at length about the difficulty of experiencing injury:

NKL: And, when [your jaw was broken], did you have any worries about how it would affect your ability to keep playing, your career, that sort of thing?

Luc C.: No, not, not at all, not at all. But, today, looking back at that, you know, obviously that had a major effect, you know, you are marked, you know what I mean? It is something that will obviously mark you as an individual. Not that you’ll start playing scared, you know, it’s, but you will be playing with having, you know, experienced that. I mean, it’s, it’s just major. It’s just common. I mean, when something like this happens, you’ll, you’ll play and think about it, you know?

Although he goes on to elaborate that he is primarily talking about the impact his injuries had on him psychologically as a player, the language he uses here invites a somewhat broader reading. He says that his most grievous injury “is something that will obviously mark you as an individual... it’s, it’s just major.” This is one of the clearest statements of how profound the impact of an injury is on a player. It affects his very identity as an athlete, if not person in

general. It is also worth underlining that fact that he goes out of his way to say, “It’s just common.” In his mind, this is not a unique experience. The interview continues:

NKL: And can you just tell me a bit about what you mean by that?

Luc C.: Well, I mean, you, you just, it’s something that you don’t want to happen again. So, if, if you, you play, and you’re skating down the ice with the puck, and you come to a certain place where you previously in your career got, got hurt badly, you know, you don’t want that to happen again, you know what I mean?

NKL: Yeah.

Luc C.: It’s like, one time, at centre ice, got hit knee on knee, and, and, got a fracture, compound, like, what is it called, like, a deep bruise fractured knee, you end up missing eight weeks of, of play, I mean, the next time you skate through the, the centre ice, I mean, it’s just something you, you will look for, in case there’s some idiots that are coming to, to hurt you knee on knee again.

NKL: Sure.

Luc C.: So, it’s, yeah, it’s not that you play scared, it’s, it’s that you play, you know, with, you know, in the back of your head with memories of something bad that happened, you know?

The distinction he makes between playing “scared” and what he is experiencing is interesting beyond the simple fact that he is defending his masculine integrity. He is describing feeling as if the injury has actually become internalized as a part of his identity. He is not worried it will happen again; he is unable to shake the memory that it has happened before. He carries that with him in everything he does, especially athletically. This is how it has marked him.

The sacrifices of the athletic labourer cannot simply be measured according to the physical and emotional trauma suffered during the athlete’s career. With the power of retrospect and the accumulation of experiences both during and after their careers, most players expressed regret to varying degrees about their careers as professional athletes because of the consequences they experienced after their careers ended. Although they may not have been willing to concede

that they would have done things differently (more on that below), they did suggest that there were many aspects of the experience they would liked to have been different so that their post-career life might be more fulfilling. This fact speaks to the permanent nature of the sacrifice these men make. They give up who they are forever so that the spectator can receive a temporary revitalization. But, since the reproduction is only temporary, it is constantly incumbent on other athletes to perform the same sacrifice and reiterate the meaning of the game. Because the construct of sport and fandom is artificial, it can never be permanently validated. In a sense, it is like the Minotaur that must be fed again and again and again.

Lawrence F. was among the most candid of the interview subjects in this study on the subject of his experiences with injury and his willingness to speak openly about the long-term implications of his athletic career thus proves remarkably illuminating as to the full extent of the harm suffered by the athletic labourer. In the following testimony he articulates the full extent of the physical and emotional harm he experienced as a result of his athletic career and the long-term consequences on his quality of life:

NKL: Do you feel any differently about the decision to play through those injuries now that your career has ended?

Lawrence F.: The only one is probably my concussions.

NKL: Okay, and why's that?

Lawrence F.: Well, because there's nights I didn't even I was, what I, I didn't even know where I was. I got in a fight on a Friday night, I got hit so hard that I was concussed, and I didn't remember anything until Tuesday. I ended up having two more fights that week and then actually scored two goals, and it all came to me Tuesday where I'm going, "What?" And I realized there was a problem. So, when it was to do with the brain, then you're going, "Okay." I didn't realize it back then, because I just played through it, right?

NKL: Yeah. How many concussions would you say you probably had during your career?

Lawrence F.: Documented, eight.

NKL: And that's documented at a time when they weren't documenting nearly as many.

Lawrence F.: Yeah. So, who knows, with all the fights I had, and the hits, and stuff. I couldn't tell you.

This is one of the most significant passages in his testimony, for it reveals the cost the athlete must pay for playing. Although he is willing to accept the harm done to the rest of his body – no doubt because he has to some extent internalized the ideology of masculinity and coercive entitlement – he cannot help but admit that the harm done to his head crosses that line. It is particularly poignant and instructive that the head injuries he suffered actually caused him to miss out on the pleasure he would otherwise have taken from a week in which he scored two goals (an anomaly for a player with his role on the team). In other words, he acknowledges here that the subjective consequences of head injury affected his experience even as he played. As he continues, it becomes clear that these consequences only worsened in severity after he retired from his career. The interview continues:

NKL: Sure. This question may follow up on that, but do injuries that you suffered during your career currently impact your life?

Lawrence F.: Oh, Gosh, yeah.

NKL: Can you tell me a bit about how that...

Lawrence F.: Well, my broken back bothers me every day. My three hand operations, if you look at my hands [shows NKL his hands], you know, all my ligaments and three, you know, the joints, and my elbow had major elbow surgery, so if I move my elbow the wrong way it hurts. My shoulder, if I turn my shoulder the wrong way it hurts. You know, hernias, you know, if, if... you know, anywhere that there's been a knife on you, you feel it. Yeah.

NKL: Uh huh. Do you think about that a lot?

Lawrence F.: Well, when I'm, when I'm doing things, yeah. Because I don't want to re-injure it, right? Like, when I'm working out here today, there's certain things I can do and certain things I can't do. Okay, we're going to go back over here.

Although he has earlier remarked that he was willing to play through injury and that it was worthwhile, he has nevertheless suffered significantly as a consequence of them. His testimony suggests that the professional athlete's body is forever scarred by the experience of playing. To play is, in some sense, to give up the possibility of complete physical well-being, a tremendous irony for someone who devotes his life to optimizing his physical capabilities. He goes on:

NKL: And what about the concussions? Do you feel like you notice that?

Lawrence F.: Well that's, that's what bothers me because... we're going to go this way, sorry.

NKL: No problem.

Lawrence F.: Um, that one there is, now, there's little things, and this is the best example I can use: I forget if I brushed my teeth or not. So, I'm licking my teeth, and I'll go back to see if my toothbrush is wet. So, there's little things that are happening where you are going, are the long terms effects sinking in from the headshots, right? So, that's, uh, you know, that does kind of scare me a little bit. That does make me think. Because, my memory's not as good. I used to have a great, I could remember anything, and now, I'll have people come up to me that I should know... I had a guy come up to me at a game last night, eh?

Sean O.: No way?

Lawrence F.: Honestly, the, all day long I know him, I don't even know who it is. He goes, Lawrence, it's Todd from roller hockey." I go, "No kidding, how you doing?" And that's when I kind of got a bell going on. There's no way I should have forgotten who that was. So, those are the little things that you're going, "Okay, normally that wouldn't happen." Right?

The testimony of this passage largely speaks for itself. His ability to have a full, normal life has been compromised by the damage he suffered as an athlete. Reading slightly between the lines, he suggests here, perhaps, that he is not even the same person he once was. Great memory was part of his identity previously, yet, now, he is left fumbling to recall basic acquaintances, and,

still more disturbingly, even to recall if he has brushed his teeth only moments before. This is the ultimate cost of social reproduction. However, it is not the only consequence Lawrence F. experienced as a result of his career in professional hockey:

NKL: Yeah. And, did you become more conscious of that when there was more, sort of, publicization about...

Lawrence F.: Oh big time. When it started coming out...

NKL: Then you started to think about...

Lawrence F.: Well, Nathan, that's when I was the guy who came out and said, "Take fighting out of hockey." You know, I've been saying it for five years, because the headshots, from punches, getting hit by these guys, people don't realize the damage it's going to do. I watch the UFC and I go, "These guys are not going to be able to think when they're later." The amount of headshots they take in training and these fights, they're going to be brain-dead later in their lives.

NKL: So, just to sort of follow up on the same sort of theme, do you have any teammates you think of specifically who have been significantly affected by injury, that you can recall, whose experiences stand out to you?

Lawrence F.: Well, I think, you know, I think, you look at some of the guys who committed suicide. You know, one of my former teammates, Daryl S., you know, he ended up hanging himself, being drunk. And, it was a lot to do with, you know, his health, it has a lot to do with some personal issues. But, I look at him and say, "Why would he have taken his life?" With a beautiful family, he had money, and I do stem it to, like, the football players, to brain trauma and not feeling well. And it was like the football player who shot himself and left a note and... Duerson...

Sean O.: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Lawrence F.: He said, "I can't live like this anymore." Right. "I can't live like this anymore." And, the guy, you know, Junior Seau. These are, these are situations where you're struggling so bad in life that you're willing to take your life.

A profound conviction rings through this passage of testimony. There is a certainty here, perhaps born of experience, that head injury is life-altering. This is what he sees when he looks at athletes across different sports and it is what he sees when he looks at former teammates. The toll of physical play is the inability to appreciate "a beautiful family" or "money." It is the inability to

lead a complete life. It is, in the most extreme cases, the inability to continue living at all. This ultimate, most extreme sacrifice – the sacrifice of the sense that it is possible to endure life itself in the aftermath of a professional hockey career – is something that Lawrence F. is able to relate to first hand:

NKL: Do guys talk about these sort of experiences?

Lawrence F.: No, no. You never talk about it. You know, I contemplated suicide before, but I was on drugs and alcohol and I was, you know, in the worst part of my life until I cleaned it up. But I do know that that going on with depression and probably the head trauma and all that, I was close to taking my own life, right? I just didn't know how to do it. So...

This is the most startling revelation of all. Even for a player like Lawrence F. who was able to move on with his life, suicidal thoughts and drug and alcohol use were direct consequences of his experience with professional hockey. He explains further:

NKL: Alright, so just a last couple of things, actually related to your post-career. Just to see how you followed up. So, I'm curious how satisfying you found your post-hockey career work to be, and then, compared to your professional hockey career.

Lawrence F.: Well, my post-career was terrible because I went into a black hole of drugs and alcohol and almost dying. And then, for the last six years I've been clean. So, I cleaned my life up after, you know, basically, losing my life, if you will. So, my post-career was terrible. My post-post-career has been great. It's been the best part of my life. Apart from having my three kids, this has been the, you know, most peaceful part of my life.

NKL: Do you mind if I talk a little bit more about the more difficult period?

Lawrence F.: No, of course, no! I'm an open book to it.

NKL: Do you have a good sense now, looking back on it, what was going on, why you were in this...

Lawrence F.: Yeah, I was, I was this professional hockey player that had money and everything and all of a sudden it comes to an end. What am I going to do? And this is what the problem is with so many players. Where are you going to go? What are you doing? And, next thing you know, you lose your marriage, you lose your family, you lose

your money, you lose everything, you lose your self-worth. And, what you'd rather do is just die. You're just like, "I'm worthless." Because you're up here [gestures with his hands] and now you're so far in the hole of, of feelings and depression that it's not worth being here. My kids don't even need me here because I'm worthless.

This is perhaps the clearest possible statement of the subjective crisis that follows being the locus of meaning for thousands of fans. Injury and lack of physical agency are part of this, but only part. Part of it is inherent to the simple act of performing this sort of social reproductive labour. When the athlete is no longer the vessel for the meaning of fans, he comes to feel as if he has no "worth" whatsoever. This is the full extent of the sacrifice of the athletic social reproductive labourer. It is a form of exploitation that extends beyond surplus value alone, for it is the very core of the athlete's identity and sense of self that is sacrificed. For some, this loss is too much to survive at all. We see further evidence of this in a brief passage from the testimony of Chris M:

Chris M.: Well, my own experience, I separated my shoulder and had a minor concussion and, and then when I realized I wasn't really up in the NHL draft, I figured, you know, I was smart enough, I was smart enough to get out. A lot of people pushed, and pushed, and pushed and found themselves with nothing but addictions at the end.

This is a revealing passing comment because it suggests that many players who tried to push themselves through injury ended up suffering pain and disappointment that caused them to seek refuge in addiction much as Lawrence F. did. It seems apparent that for many players, the affective toll of social reproductive labour can only be managed through recourse to self-medication through drugs and alcohol.

Although he doesn't get into the specific implications, James I. echoes the assertion of Chris M. that the harm caused by injury and concussion are pervasive and generally not worth enduring:

NKL: So, generally speaking, if we think of hockey as a profession, would you say that the cost of injuries is worth the rewards people receive for playing?

James I.: It depends where you're playing, right? If you're making millions of dollars, like, yeah, for sure, it's worth it. But, if you're playing in the East Coast League or the Central League, or something, and you make a couple hundred bucks a week, what are you really doing it for, right?

NKL: Okay, so do you feel like people you played with might have some regrets in those contexts, of what happened?

James I.: Yeah, I mean, I mean, it's probably different for head injuries too, right, like, that'll affect you for a long time. I mean, guys who proba-, guys who played through the, stuff like that, probably, I'm sure they regret it a little bit, but, it depends on, like, if you're still waking up with headaches five years later, then you're probably gonna regret it, but, if you went through it for a year, got your insurance money, then you're probably okay with it, right?

His analysis is far more instrumental than that of most of the players interviewed. Rather than answering the question through the prism of the meaning associated with playing professional sport, he takes a more utilitarian approach. If players made a significant amount of money, it was worth it. If not, it wasn't. He does add, however, that head injuries alter this equation, implying that they are not worth it for any amount of money.

For some, the long-term consequences of athletic labour are more physical than psychological, although, of course, to an extent the physical and mental are inextricably linked. Vasil D. speaks to the way that physical damage accrued initially during his hockey career has taken an increasingly significant toll on his health with the passage of time:

NKL: Yeah, and do you feel any different, now that your career is over, do you feel like you might regret some choices you've made in terms of playing through injury or this or that?

Vasil D.: Yeah, well, I got a couple of injuries right now. My shoulder, and...

NKL: Oh, could you tell me about that?

Vasil D.: Yeah, I hurt my shoulder in my fourth year of professional hockey. Um. I kept playing through it and, you know, I actually injured it more. I had surgery on it. But now, being 36 years old, compared to when I was 24, I'm having a lot more pain through it

now than when I played, right? So, when you're 24 years old and you're young, injuries don't mean anything to you. You just want to play hockey, right? Now that I'm 36, I realize, wow, maybe I should have took some time, some more time off, because of my future, and, you know, doing stuff around the house, or, with my kids, I've got four kids now, you're lifting them, there, you can feel the pain still, right, so...

This is compelling testimony about the increasing impact of injury on quality of life as a player ages. Indeed, one reason why players might be so willing to play through pain is that they don't fully understand how much of an impact it will have on them down the road. As he goes on, Vasil D. reveals that the most significant cost of professional hockey for most players is the long-term effect that head injuries have on their quality of life. Although this is not something he has to contend with, as a goaltender, it is something he witnesses amongst those he played with. He says, "I've played with *many* players that have had really bad concussions that still affects them today." This is a basic point, but worth underlining how frequently it has been repeated: myriad former players suffer from the effects of head trauma suffered during their careers. When prompted, Vasil D. elaborates further on this subject:

NKL: Now, in terms of the concussions, because you were mentioning that as another thing, you said you knew other guys, do you feel that was really common amongst your former teammates to have concussions that they experienced during their career affect their lives?

Vasil D.: Yeah, yeah. There's, it happened quite often. Now, obviously, it's talked about a lot more than back when I played. I'm sure that there was many more concussions that nobody really said anything about, right, talked about it. But, it would happen, yeah, you know, we would have guys, fighting's a big thing in hockey and talked about, and [sighs] there's been many guys where, uh, you know, they get knocked right out in a fight. And, that's pretty much a concussion, you can guarantee that, right? And I've been involved in, in my eight years of hockey, I've seen seven to ten guys get knocked right out, laying out on the ice. So, there's ten concussions right there. And, it affects people's lives. I've seen players retire after three, four years because of concussions.

NKL: Yeah, and would you say that, you know, former teammates that you've had, that you're still in touch with now if you see them, did you feel like you can tell that their lives, their experiences have been affected by head injuries?

Vasil D.: I don't know if you can tell, but they kind of tell you.

NKL: Oh, okay.

Vasil D.: Oh yeah. I've been told by many players that they, you know, still feel, still have their dizzy spells and whatever their problems are. But, yeah, I've had many players tell me that, you know, it still affects them now today after, you know, ten years. It's probably been ten years since I've played, played professional hockey and so, after ten years later, they're still having problems with it.

Vasil D.'s testimony here suggests that the experience described above by Lawrence F. is far from exceptional. Like Chris M., Vasil D. observes that post-career head trauma is par for the course for professional hockey players. Because violence is so inherent to the game, it is difficult for those who participate to avoid experiencing damage to their heads that lingers in many cases for the rest of their lives. This is the sacrifice that the athletic social reproductive labourer makes to produce meaning for spectators. Ultimately, Vasil D. demonstrates ambivalence when confronted with the question of whether a professional hockey career is worthwhile:

NKL: Alright, do you feel like the cost of injury is worth the rewards you received for playing, ie. your wages or whatever else?

Vasil D.: That's funny. I've been asked that question a few times actually. [Sighs.] I say yes, just because, I, you know, hockey players, they love the game, they love to play and I just think, you know, I, I've, I have friends that were construction workers, and they have injuries too, so, you know, was it worth it, yeah, I loved playing the game, obviously, and had fun doing it, so I think it was worth it, yeah.

NKL: But why your hesitation when you answered that?

Vasil D.: W—

NKL: It seemed like there was a little hesitation, it seemed like you were weighing two different sides...

Vasil D.: [Answers slowly at first] Well, you don't want to be hurt, obviously, of course. But, you know, I met so many different people, had lots of friends, it opened up a lot of doors for me, so, obviously nobody wants injuries, but my injuries are, I guess, a lot more minor than some other players. Maybe somebody else would tell you that had the bigger injuries with concussions and stuff like that, they'd probably say a different thing.

The hesitation here, particularly from a player who did not suffer the most traumatic of injuries, speaks to the toll that any injuries take. It is worth noting, however, the fact that he never had a career in the NHL which could mean that he did not experience the full realization and validation of the childhood dream of becoming a professional hockey player. I will explore this issue at greater length below.

Although his experience is less traumatic than some of the others discussed, Luc C. too has dealt with long-term physical consequences to the injuries he suffered as a professional player:

NKL: Do injuries that you suffered during your playing career currently impact your life?

Luc C.: Of course, yeah, yes. I mean, you know, say I have to go shovel the, the entry in winter, and stuff like that, you know, like, I do have back pain and sometimes shoulder pains or... When I go do cross-country skiing, like, I, I do other sports now, like, say, last summer, I was, uh, you know, there's, there's other sports that I do now in my life. I don't play hockey anymore, but it gives me the chance to do other, other things and, and sometimes I, I do have to, to deal with, with back pains, or shoulder pains, or neck pains and stuff like that, and, and obviously that, that is directly caused by what happened throughout my career.

NKL: Yeah, and do you ultimately feel that those kinds of pains, the reward of playing and the salary you received made it worthwhile, or do you have some regrets in the big picture?

Luc C.: Well, no, it's, that's, that's the part of the, when you play hockey, I mean, you, you know that you'll, you'll have to deal with it. It's something that you, you should agree to. You know, the only regret that I have is that, you know, that instead of playing hurt, you know, again, it's just like I just told you a couple of minutes ago, instead of playing through injuries, many times, you, you should just be smarter or, or, you know, people should not put pressure on you as a player. You know, you know, it's, it's, it's tough, because when they play-, when they're paying you a lot of money and the fans are coming there to see the high-profile players and, and you're one of them, well, they, they, they want to see you in the line-up. But, when you're hurt, when you're badly hurt, I think it's just smarter to, to leave you aside for a couple games and to, to fix you up the right way. And, and, later on in your life, you, you don't have to deal with, you know, with, with soreness and with back pains coming back all the time, so...

There are a few things going on in this passage. First, on one level, like many other players, he ultimately says that playing was worth the harm it caused him. Yet, what is different here is that he still returns to the point that he was compelled to play in situations in which he was hurt, and that there have been lasting physical repercussions he regrets. Indeed, he is physically unable to continue playing hockey in his post-career life because of the accumulated damage to his body. What is also salient is the fact that he makes a conscious link between the fact that he had to play through injury and the expectation fans had to see players play, one that ultimately led management to ensure that they did.

Compared to most of the non-goaltenders interviewed, it actually seems like the long-term effects experienced by Luc C. are relatively minimal by comparison, for head trauma is not listed among his complaints. The same cannot be said for Darin K.:

NKL: I mean, do you feel any differently now? For instance, you played through all those concussions at the time, you didn't really have a choice, you didn't necessarily know what the nature of them was, looking back at it now, do you regret that at all?

Darin K.: I don't regret anything in my life. You know, I've learned to say, "Hey, this is my course, this is the path I went down." Do I, do I wish they had a protocol back then? Yeah, sure. But, I don't, I don't regret it.

Although he seems reluctant to expand, there is much to be gleaned by reading through the lines of this testimony. It is evident that he has found ways to cope with what he went through by framing it as his "course," "the path [he] went down." The very fact that he has felt the need to do this, though, suggests how difficult it has been to reconcile what he went through. Thus, he wishes "they had a [concussion] protocol back then." The interview continues:

NKL: Okay, sure. Now, do any of the injuries you suffered, and, obviously, there's a whole range, right there's the orbital bone, the fibula, the thumb, but then also the concussions, do any of the injuries you suffered currently impact your life?

Darin K.: Well, my ankle, very, very stiff. Not a lot of movement, not a lot of mobility in it. And then, obviously, [small pause] the concussions, I think, have a part to play too.

NKL: Yeah?

Darin K.: Um...

NKL: How do you experience the consequences of the concussions?

Darin K.: You know, the difficult stuff. Memory loss, tension headaches, that kind of stuff, I mean it's [long pause]... I don't know how to put a finger on it, but...

Here again he reveals a great deal without saying much about the long-term consequences of the injuries that he suffered. The ankle injury and concussions are obviously things he will have to deal with for the rest of his life. Again, the seeming reticence to elaborate is perhaps the most evocative element of this testimony. It seems to be difficult for him to speak about his experiences with concussions, as he pauses before mentioning them initially and then again when he begins to elaborate. He gestures to the fact that he endures significant hardship by referring to "the difficult stuff" when describing the symptoms he experiences and then begins to itemize that difficulty before retreating onto the safer ground of ambiguity. Evidently, the sacrifice he had to make as a professional player was great and is still felt today, something that he must continually struggle to reconcile. The emotional strain of this struggle becomes still more apparent as the interview continues:

NKL: More generally, do you find that you ever talk much to other former players about their experiences with injury, concussions, is that something that comes up in your life?

Darin K.: No.

NKL: No, okay, is it the opposite? Is it something that people do not speak about?

Darin K.: Well, I mean, I don't want, I don't like to rehash any head problems that I had or, you know, any injuries. I'm trying to move on with my life, right? And, when you're in the middle of playing hockey, you're so, you're so consumed with injuries and your

health and now I'm just happy to, you know, not have to fight anymore and, and be a, be good father.

Here he more directly addresses his reluctance to expand, a comment that is itself evocative. The fact that he is “trying to move on” and doesn't “like to rehash any head problems” suggests that these are things he must deal with in the aftermath of his career. Likewise, it is extremely telling that he is simply “happy to, you know, not have to fight anymore.” Yet, despite these difficulties, he ultimately concludes that his career was worth the hardship that followed:

NKL: Do you feel like the costs of injury are worth the rewards players receive for playing?

Darin K.: Well it, it depends on how you define injury. You know, I mean, for me, for me, yeah, but for some guys that have to get their hips replaced or, you know, are constantly burdened with major concussion symptoms, no, fuck no.

Again, this answer is brief but layered. First, it is interesting that he defines it as personally worthwhile. This certainly speaks to the power of the meaning he attaches to the game. However, despite this, he is not willing to make a universal statement. Indeed, the profanity he uses to describe the experience of others also indexes the possibility that he relates to their experience more than he is willing to concede in this interview or even, potentially, to himself. Indeed, this is a general trend that I experienced while conducting these interviews: players often seemed more comfortable discussing the trauma of others rather than themselves. For many, this oblique approach to the subject matter seemed to liberate them to speak freely in a way that was still too difficult about themselves. For players socialized to believe that they had attained the apotheosis of human experience as professional hockey players, it was evidently a considerable struggle to reconcile the ongoing suffering and hardship that they experienced after their careers ended. Perhaps, because this was something that did not fit into the narrative they had been sold as

children, and because the investment had already been made and could not be reversed, it was too difficult to stare directly at the full extent of the sacrifice they had made.

No experience is universal, however. Whereas for some it is difficult to speak openly about the life-long trauma caused by the injuries suffered as a professional athlete, for others this reality has simply become a matter of fact. Much like Lawrence F., whose experiences opened this section, Curtis U. is utterly candid about the effects of injury upon his life:

NKL: So, I mean, at this point in your life now, do those injuries, especially the knee injury, but just in general, maybe the concussions, any of those injuries, do they currently affect your quality of life today?

Curtis U.: Uh, yeah, all of them.

NKL: All of them, really?

Curtis U.: Yup.

NKL: Can you just give me a sense of how that is?

Curtis U.: Well, I've been told I'll need a knee replacement because the last surgery or last check-up I had, my knee is very arthritic because of the rubbing, you know, bone on bone. The shoulders will pop out every once in a while and I have to do some exercises to get them back in. My back aches regularly. The first thing I do in the morning is I take pain medication and I'll, you know, follow it up with probably pain medication later on in the day, in the day, depending on how I'm feeling, but every, yeah, everything hurts [laughs]. So, you know, when the weather changes, I'm like the old man on the rocking chair, I can tell when the weather is gonna turn bad just because the way my joints are feeling. So, it does affect how I, I can't run, so, you know, I'm limited in physically in what I can do, so, you know, there's no quick sports like basketball or tennis or any of those kind of things. You know, biking is fine, swimming is fine, I, you know, I still skate occasionally, but, you know, I can't perform, obviously, like I, like I was, or like a younger man would. But, to me, the biggest issue that I deal with is pain.

NKL: Yeah, okay, and what about, so, the concussions you don't feel so much in the way of long term effects?

Curtis U.: No, I, I think it's affected my memory. I need to write everything down, otherwise I will forget most tasks and if somebody tells me something or they want me to do something, I tell them either send me an e-mail or, or I have to write it down, otherwise I'll forget certain things. You know, I'm very good with numbers, I can remember numbers, I can remember phone numbers and locker combinations and all that

sort of stuff, but, you know, details or, you know, conversations that I have with people or names and so on, I think it has affected my memory on those things.

There is not much annotation required here. The consequences to his life of his brief experience in professional hockey are manifold and span the broad range of consequences most former athletes experience, from chronic pain, to loss of mobility, to loss of memory and beyond. Like so many others interviewed, he views his experience as broadly representative rather than exceptional:

NKL: Would you say that of the former teammates that you've had, people that you know in that community of retired players now, would you say that most of them have, kind of, on-going, the residue of injuries affects their lives? Maybe not to the extent that it is for you, but do you feel like most of them are, in some way or another, affected by injuries?

Curtis U.: Yeah, I think most guys who leave the game will have something that they're dealing with today and as the years go on it increases, so, like, meaning, like, the older I get, the worse the pain gets, so, I, I think that for most guys, there's, there's something. I know that when I get together with the boys every once in a while, the conversation turns to, "So, you know how are you feeling?" You know? "What are you dealing with?" Very few guys actually come out of the game with, you know, no injury or no, no lasting effects on their body.

Yet, perhaps his most revealing assertion of all comes in reference to the way in which he now experiences the sport. Earlier in the interview, he described how much he loved the game and how big a fan he was before he ever became a professional player. Yet, this is how he now views the game:

NKL: Where would you say your enthusiasm for the sport of hockey is now? Do you still kind of love the game, and you said you still get on your skates occasionally, do you like watching it, or has it kind of been soured for you a little?

Curtis U.: No, I mean, the on-, the only thing I watch, I very rarely watch a full game, it might be on tv or something, but I very rarely will, you know, follow a team, I'm not a fan of the game, but I do cheer when, you know, if it's playoff time or if it's, you know, the Olympics or something like that, those are the only games that I'll watch. Regular season or the first part and, you know, the playoffs, I tend not to care.

In a certain sense, Curtis U. has watched the sausage that is professional hockey be made and he has lost his appetite. After a career of injury and mistreatment at the hands of management, the institution around which his life was once organized has lost all meaning and value for him. This is the ultimate indictment of professional hockey as a political economy that requires the sacrifice of players for fuel, more so, even, than any explicit polemic. For, he does not even seem to have the energy left for rage. This is not a willful boycott so much as a genuine loss of interest and enthusiasm. He simply does not care about hockey anymore.

Yet, although the above testimony suggests that players tend to ultimately regret the sacrifices they are compelled to make over the course of a professional hockey career, this is not a universal reaction. Some players also remark that the sacrifice was ultimately worthwhile. This is, of course, important and contradictory testimony. Yet, it can be accounted for in a significant way: it speaks to the power of the meaning produced and the dialectical relationship between spectators and players. The meaning that fans take from the game elevates those who play it to the status of heroes. This fetishization is a form of validation and valorization. Players come to believe that the game is a meaningful end in itself, and this contributes to their willingness to make the sacrifices that in turn fuel the belief of fans in the meaning of the game.

The effects of this complex process are apparent in the testimony of some of the players interviewed. Here, Darin K. discusses the feeling of fulfilling his dream of playing professional hockey:

NKL: Now let's talk a little bit about your "relationship to fans." So, I have some specific questions here. And, the first is very general, to what extent you would say you were aware of fans during your career, and, first, when you were on the ice playing?

Darin K.: Pretty aware, I mean most, most is not necessarily while you are playing on the ice but when you are on the bench.

NKL: Okay.

Darin K.: And you're sort of taking it all in at that point, you know? Yeah. It's not necessarily more on the ice, more, more when you're on the bench, having, having time to, to sort of, to take it all in.

NKL: Okay, and what did you think of fans? When you say, "take it all in," what are you talking about?

Darin K.: Well, that you, you know, you're playing in front of twenty thousand people. That was every kid's dream, making it to the NHL, so, what I tried to do is, every game, at least once, look up in the stands at all the people that were there and sort of tell yourself that you made it.

Evidently, he internalized the notion that playing in the NHL was the height of meaning and purpose long before his actual ascent to the league. The experience of looking into the crowd at all of his admiring supporters served to reinforce and validate the notion that his sacrifice on the ice had a higher purpose. This in turn no doubt legitimated the risks he took, both physically and subjectively, on behalf of the team.

The powerful ideological effects of the dialectical relationship between the imagined athletic community and the social reproductive work of the athlete is perhaps nowhere better exemplified than in the testimony of Lawrence F., given that he is responsible for providing some of the most evocative and damning remarks about the tremendous toll exacted by this form of labour. Yet, here he ultimately says that it was all worthwhile:

NKL: Okay, so, this is very much in the same line with what you guys are talking about, do you feel now, I mean, you have a different perspective, your career is over, do you feel like the cost of injury is worth the rewards received for playing?

Lawrence F.: Yeah. Because, that's what we signed up for, that's what your dream is. So, people say to me, "Knowing now the long-term damage of fighting, what it did to you, would you do it again?" Of course I would. To play in the NHL is a dream. So, you know, at nineteen, twenty years old you're doing it all day long, every day. Even, like... If they said to me at 48, "You get to go play in the NHL, but you've got to go fight this guy, this guy, this guy five nights in a row," I would do it just to say that I had played in the

NHL. That's, the, it's the hardest, you know, making the pro league, NFL, NBA, is the hardest thing to do for an athlete. The percentages to get there are very small, so if you asked somebody that, they'll do it all day long. So, would I do it again, yeah, right?

And, again, at the very end of the interview, he reaffirms this conviction:

NKL: And, yet [after a lengthy discussion of how traumatic the experience of playing was], you said you would do it all again?

Lawrence F.: Of course I would, you know, to play in the NHL? You know, people can say, you know... I think different now, but would I do sign up for it again, sure I would.

It is fascinating that after everything he has said about his experiences with drug addiction, suicidal thoughts and impulses, permanent memory loss, a damaged body, not to mention the perpetual anxiety he suffered throughout his career, he still ultimately settles on the fact that it was worthwhile. What this suggests is the incredible power of the ideology around sport for young men. Professional sport is framed for them as “the hardest” thing out there to achieve, an accomplishment that validates itself. This is evidence that athletic labour actually comes to socially reproduce the subjectivity of the athletic labourer himself, for it produces athletic labour as “a dream,” albeit one mediated by a feedback loop through fandom: “The percentages to get there are very small, so if you asked somebody that, they'll do it all day long.” “Somebody” refers not to some athlete, but to *anybody*. The meaning invested by “anybody” (for which, I think, we can read fans, for they are ubiquitous in the life of the athlete) is what justifies his own willingness to sacrifice himself as a social reproductive labourer.

Sean O. is similarly resolute in his assessment that a career in professional hockey was worth all that it cost him:

NKL: So, do you feel like the, you've told me that the injuries haven't affected you too much, and so forth, I mean, would you say that over all that you feel like the cost of the injury is worth the rewards that you received for playing in terms of the pay you received, the fan support, and so forth?

Sean O.: Yeah. I would... Yeah, no, it, it, it, again, nothing has impacted me that bad. I'd do it again ten times over, you know, the exact same way, the exact same way, way I did things, nothing would have changed. So, you know, high reward for me.

There is an almost overzealous quality to his insistence that it was entirely worth it, that he would "do it again ten times over." This level of effusion is again suggestive of the ideological strength of the notion that professional sport is among the highest ends to which human beings can aspire. Thus, despite an eye injury that has never fully healed, he feels grateful to have had a career even as a semi-professional player.

Finally, and perhaps most remarkably given the harrowing saga he experienced over the mismanagement of the knee injury that ended his career, Curtis U. too ultimately testifies that his sacrifice was justified:

NKL: And, do you think that as a general attitude, you folks feel a little bit differently about it than you did at the time? You know, at the time, everyone's saying, as you said, the coach is saying, you play through it, and you know that, you've known that your entire life, that's the only way to do it, you wouldn't do it any other way, you know, down the line now, fifteen years pass or whatever, do you feel like guys maybe feel a little bit differently, like maybe it wasn't what they thought?

Curtis U.: No, I, I, no, I think it's just, it's just part of the deal, you know, that, you take the good with the bad. I don't think anybody would change it or, you know, at least not in the conversations that I had. I don't regret anything, I don't think any of the players regret dealing with the issues they're dealing now. I think, you know, for some of us, yeah, maybe they would have handled it a little bit differently. I think concussion treatments, you know, I think most guys are starting to realize maybe they should have been handled differently, but as far as bones and knees and joints and whatnot, it's, those things, you know, they, you're not going to change too much of that. But, from the conversations I had with players, nobody regrets having to go through anything that they're going through.

I have been focused throughout this text on the fact that sport functions to produce meaning for fans and that this is the foundation of its political economy. But, the testimony of players like Lawrence F. and Curtis U. suggests that it is equally true that in a dialectical way the investment

of fans in turn influences the attitudes of players. That is, because players are raised and live their lives in a society that fetishizes the game they play as one of the most prestigious imaginable professional pursuits, they themselves interpellate this ideology, and this is what induces them to sacrifice themselves. On this level, professional sport is not about money, but meaning for fans and players. Players condition fans by performing athletic contests as do-or-die spectacle and fans, in turn, condition players by investing their identities in that spectacle, in the process reifying the meaning associated with it. The social reproductive work of athletes reproduces not only the subjectivities of fans, but also, through a feedback loop, comes to reproduce their own subjectivities as social reproductive labourers. The existence of sacrifices that players make on the ice implies to fans and players alike that such sacrifices could only exist in the service of something inherently meaningful.

What I hope has become clear over the course of this chapter is the subjective complexity of social reproductive labour. Not all professional athletes experience the work they perform in the same way and their ideological investments are not necessarily predicated on the particularities of their own experiences. Yet, with that said, there are some salient patterns at work that suggest that the toll of athletic social reproductive labour is great. Because athletes must be willing to subject their bodies to enormous harm in order to validate the very meaning of professional sport, they experience manifold consequences that shape their post-career lives. Indeed, the very act of serving as a repository of meaning for legions of spectators is one that seems inherently fraught with the possibility of emotional letdown and potential subjective crisis. This crisis is only compounded by the physical damage suffered by most players over the course of their careers, especially the head injuries which have the potential to radically alter – or even prematurely end – their lives.

Given the ambivalence articulated by players – ambivalence I have attempted to account for by elaborating the ideological context in which players labour – it is impossible to render any final verdict on the legitimacy of professional sport as an institution and political economy. Yet, what I believe the testimony of this study does reveal is that there is a cost to this labour that is not typically named or acknowledged. This cost is not incidental, but rather at the very heart of the dialectic that makes professional sport viable as a political economy. It is only in the sacrifice of the athlete's body that the fan can fully come to extract the meaning from professional sport that s/he so desperately needs and desires within the context of neo-liberal capitalism.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

In this dissertation I have attempted to address both the nature of exploitation experienced by athletic labourers and the reason for the enduring allure of sport to spectators. In answering these questions, I have tried to demonstrate that they are inextricably linked: it is impossible to understand either athletic labour or sports spectatorship without viewing them as part of a larger political economy that requires both and, from a still more macro standpoint, a mode of production in which each plays a part.

The mode of production in question, of course, is capitalism, and it is with capitalism that we had to begin in order to ultimately understand spectatorship and athletic labour. The purpose of capitalism as a mode of production is to systematically produce surplus value, or profit. Karl Marx (1976) shows us in *Capital* that in order for capitalists to generate surplus value, they must exploit the commodity labour-power that is supplied by workers. Thus, if the generation of profit is the fundamental end of the system, workers are equally essential to the system as the means to that end. This is where sport enters the equation. Although capitalism can exist without professional sport and high performance sport can exist without capitalism, capitalism and professional sport have proven to be both compatible and mutually-beneficial.

In fact, I argue, professional sport has come to play an increasingly significant role in the reproduction of capitalism. As a mode of production, capitalism makes tremendous demands of its subjects in terms of the amount of labour it requires and in terms of the nature of social relations it imposes. Capitalism requires workers to sell their labour for a wage, in the process alienating workers from the fruits of their labour and transforming their relations with other people into relations of exchange and competition. In these ways, capitalism is profoundly

dehumanizing. This has obvious negative repercussions for the worker, of course, but it also poses risks for the sustainability of the system itself. For, if capitalism were to utterly exhaust the labouring potential of its labour supply, both physically and emotionally, it would be left with no labour to exploit and thus no ability to generate surplus value, the goal of the system in the first place. For these reasons, capitalism requires a systematic mechanism for the reproduction of its labour power, both in terms of the concrete bodies and minds of its current labour force and also in future potential generations of labour that will ultimately come to replace them. This reproduction requires another form of labour. Unlike productive labour, this labour does not produce surplus value directly. Yet, it is no less essential, for without social reproductive labour, productive labour, and, following from this, surplus value, would not be possible. Historically, this labour was performed as domestic labour by women, who worked to sustain both the men who laboured in the productive labour force and the children who would replace them. This social reproductive work required physical and emotional elements, for it needed to ensure both that workers could literally subsist as labouring bodies, but also that they could endure the emotional privation of the alienation they experienced from their work and from other human beings. Social reproduction is no less important to capitalism today than it once was. What has changed is that in many instances it has now moved outside of the home to the realm of commodification. It has become paid work, part of the productive economy.

This is where professional sport enters the equation. I contend that the labour of professional athletes is a form of social reproductive labour because of the way in which it provides a sense of affective/subjective renewal for fans. Spectators who experience isolation and alienation in their day-to-day lives as capitalist subjects come to sport seeking that which they have been denied: a sense of meaning, connection, and community. Professional sport

provides this to them by serving as a sort of armature upon which that community can be built. In consuming the spectacle of professional sport, then, spectators come to experience the social reproduction they require to remain productive capitalist subjects. It is in this way that professional sport has become a significant reproductive mechanism for the system itself.

Yet, just as capitalism to a certain extent requires (or, at least, has come to rely upon) professional sport, professional sport itself fundamentally relies upon certain features of capitalism in order to sustain its own political economy. The spectators who flock to professional sporting events largely do so because of the needs produced by the system (the isolation and alienation described above). They are a market of people in search of community spawned by capitalism. Professional sport offers that community through the labour of its high performance athletes, upon whom spectators are able to project their desire for meaning and community. This is no mere abstraction, however. In fact, it is athletic labourers who function as the armature for the imagined athletic community, for it is their bodies that must bear the weight of the almost limitless desire that spectators foist upon them. The imagined athletic community – the collective fantasy produced for fans by professional sport – requires that athletes sacrifice their bodies completely in the performance of their labour. It is only through this sacrifice, or absolute willingness to make this sacrifice, that the imagined athletic community becomes reified as something tangible and real and spectators become willing to spend their money on sports fandom.

I explored this theoretical understanding of athletic labour and spectatorship through qualitative interviews with eight former professional hockey players and eight spectators of sport. These interviews were not intended to provide a definitive or comprehensive picture of

sport as a political economy, site of exploitation, or vehicle for community. Rather, these interviews served as a mechanism to dig a little deeper into the subjective experiences of participants in sporting culture in order to examine the ways in which these broader structural phenomena are lived by people every day. Still, patterns emerged from these semi-structured interviews that do shed some light on these structural and theoretical questions while simultaneously spawning new issues and avenues of inquiry. The testimony of former players was quite consistent in the linkages it drew between the political economy of professional sport and the harm and exploitation they experienced in the course of their work. Nearly every player understood that it was their job to make fans care about the games and that if they failed to do so, the construct of professional sport – and their livelihood – would collapse. This is not altogether surprising given that players concretely come to experience that the sausage that is professional hockey is made from their bodies. The testimony of spectators on the subject of political economy was notably different, however. Rather than acknowledging that the meaning and pleasure they derived from watching professional sport was predicated on the destruction of athletic bodies, most spectators seemed relatively, or even wilfully, oblivious to this reality.

I have discussed the ways in which capitalist subjects, in general, experience alienation from species-being, that is, a non-commodified form of connection and social relations among human beings. What this study additionally suggests, however, is that a further form of alienation seems to exist between athletes and spectators. Athletes demonstrate an awareness that spectators often are unable to empathize with the brute reality of their occupation. Luc C., for instance, remarks: “the effort and the sacrifice to play is, is out of this world and it’s something that, that people don’t know.” This failure to recognize the level of “sacrifice” made by players “creates misunderstandings... and, that’s normal. If people are not aware of that, how can you be

sympathetic to, you know, to the athlete if you're watching if you don't know?" On the surface, it may appear that Luc C. is speaking about a failure to understand the effort and physicality required by professional hockey. I don't think this is quite correct. For, spectators demand that players push themselves to and beyond their limits when they play. No, what spectators don't understand, for Luc C., is that often players are "going through a really tough time, you know, dealing with issues." Curtis U. makes a similar point: "[Fans] see the athlete, they see them on the field or on the, on the ice, and they expect that performance to be there every night and sometimes the player is dealing with something, it could be emotional, but most times it's physical, that would limit them from performing at their best." What spectators don't understand, in other words, is that players are human beings too, beset with similar challenges, including those posed by a commodified existence within capitalism. Thus, a form of alienation exists between the athlete and the spectator. The spectator grasps for an elusive sense of species-being within a society structured to deny that form of connection by placing vicarious investment in the bodies of athletes. Yet, this very act of investment functions to instrumentalize and commodify the athlete, who becomes simply a means to this end rather than a potential fellow in the sought-after community. Athletes understand this process as it occurs, because it is a process that denies them their humanity by transforming them into something both more (the heroic vessel) and less (the abject failure) than human. Spectators, on the other hand, largely remain oblivious to the fetishistic qualities of the imagined athletic community and the ways in which it alienates them from the very people it is constructed upon (athletes). In fact, this is precisely what renders the imagined athletic community fetishistic in a Marxist sense: it mistakes a commodified social relation for species-being. For, whatever, the bonds that come to exist between spectators, it is always predicated upon a relation to the athlete that is fundamentally instrumental.

Spectatorship, False Consciousness, and Hegemony

Does this mean that sports spectatorship is inherently dehumanizing? Is fandom a form of false consciousness? In order to answer these questions, we need to turn briefly to the work of one of the earliest Marxist theorists of false consciousness, Georg Lukacs. For Lukacs, a class' consciousness could be either true or false depending on whether or not it aligned with the material conditions of the time and the political activity that would be required to improve those conditions (Lukacs, 1971). This is not to say that Lukacs dismissed false consciousness as the purview of ignorant dupes. Rather, Ron Eyerman (1981) argues,

As Marx had written in *Capital*, exchange relations and thus commodity fetishism come to dominate and define more and more of the human interaction within capitalist society... Human beings come to see their relations with other people and people as such, as instruments to ends which become harder and harder to identify... Because such commodity relations permeate all spheres of society, false consciousness affects everyone's perception and construction of reality in capitalist society. The difference between the working class and the bourgeoisie, in this regard, is that the latter benefits from this mystification and the former suffers from it. (pp. 49-50)

Thus, false consciousness is the perception of capitalist society and instrumental social relations as natural and immanent. There is a compelling case to be made that spectators (unlike athletes, who appear to demonstrate a very significant amount of awareness about their material conditions and position in the broader schema of capitalist society) experience a form of false consciousness in that they take an entirely instrumental view of athletes who become for them objects through which they attempt to achieve plenitude and renewal. They are unable to see the broader context that shapes and guides and in a sense demands this type of experience. It is therefore little wonder that political economy and capitalism itself seldom appear in the testimony of the spectators who were interviewed in this study. This instrumental/exchange relation has been naturalized so that it is 'just' sports. It follows from this that there is little

concern about the harm done to athletes but much greater concern about the lack of effort or passion perceived to be evinced by those same players in what amounts, from the standpoint of the spectator, to a failure to fulfil the terms of exchange initiated by the spectator through her paid consumption of the athletic spectacle. The problem with this reading – a reading I do not think should be dismissed out of hand, for it contains a great deal of insight – is that it does not provide much space for imagining how sport spectatorship might be transformed within capitalism or what kind of possibilities and alternatives it offers to resist it.

Like Lukacs, Antonio Gramsci engaged the question of false consciousness from a Marxist perspective, in his case developing the concept of hegemony. Gramsci understood capitalist social relations to have been naturalized and normalized to the extent that they came to be taken up as simply common sense. Raymond Williams (1980) writes of Gramsci's theory:

Hegemony supposes the existence of something which is truly total, which is not merely secondary or superstructural, like the weak sense of ideology, but which is lived at such a depth, which saturates the society to such an extent, and which, as Gramsci put it, even constitutes the substance and limit of common sense for most people under its sway, that is corresponds to the reality of social experience... (p. 37)

This notion of hegemony – false consciousness, in a sense – as a form of naturalized common sense that fundamentally governs the world view and understanding of social relations for most people is actually very much in line with the position articulated by Lukacs. From this standpoint, the concept of hegemony also seems to suggest that most spectators come to view athletes in an instrumental way in order to vicariously find meaning through their labour. Such commodified, fetishistic relations are normalized within a capitalist system always seeking to exploit and alienate labour in order to maximize surplus value. Yet, what is different is that Gramsci, as Williams shows, suggests that this hegemony or false consciousness is never absolute (nor does it need to be for the system to successfully reproduce itself). Williams writes,

“Thus, we have to recognize the alternative meanings and values, the alternative opinions and attitudes, even some alternative senses of the world, which can be accommodated and tolerated within a particular effective and dominant culture,” (p. 39). What Gramsci and Williams make clear is that hegemony is never universal. Pockets of resistance can exist within – even are tolerated by – a dominant system. This observation is vital, for it locates political agency even in contexts where false consciousness is largely ubiquitous. This is no mere semantic point, for in implying that resistance can exist within a hegemonic culture, it also suggests that it can be nurtured and, ultimately, more broadly disseminated. Gramsci’s theory thus provides something vital that is absent in Lukacs’ notion of false consciousness: the notion that it is possible to resist capitalist reproduction in the realm of culture prior to the abolition of the economic system as a whole.

A Gramscian reading would suggest that we should not merely dismiss the testimony of spectators who relish the exploitative world of professional sport as victims of false consciousness. Rather, it invites us to look more closely in their testimony for alternative visions of spectatorship that might serve as germs for new, more humane ways of participating in sporting cultures. Paul D. provides such an alternative when speaking about the level of responsibility or guilt he feels for athletic injury. Unlike the other spectators interviewed, he makes a direct connection between athletic sacrifice and the needs of spectators:

Well, yeah, I mean, if, if, if the, the hype to win is such that they feel the responsibility to get out there even although their instincts tell them that they are actually, could be putting themselves and their life, their life, you know, their long-term life, in jeopardy. I mean, why would you take steroids, you know, and, and all of that? I do feel a measure of responsibility. Because, I don’t think anybody, you know, does things which are detrimental to their body, unless... there’s also a lot of, you know, weight of responsibility of the fans to, “Get out there, you bum,” you know? And, and so, I think, I do feel, you know, I don’t think about it a lot, but I have to say that I do feel some measure of responsibility. And... so, I, I, I, in short, I do feel a measure of responsibility

and, and, you know, when, when, I guess, when teams encourage athletes to do what's unhealthy for them, ultimately, they're doing it because they think it's good for business, i.e. the fans want them to do it.

Although this is just one voice among many, what it reveals is that a passion for sports spectatorship does not inherently preclude the possibility of empathy and connection between players and fans. While the system actively produces this alienation as part of the process of social reproduction, it can never do so universally. Paul D.'s ability to see the connection between violence and the political economy of sport betrays a crack in the hegemony of the imagined athletic community and social reproductive athletic labour. With this example in mind, the question thus becomes how that crack might be widened.

Face-to-Face

Guy Debord wrote that "the spectacle's job is to cause a world that is no longer directly perceptible," (1994, p. 17). What he means by this is that the function of spectacle is above all mediation. Capitalism works to commodify and fetishize social relations, yet human beings persistently seek species-being. Spectacle is useful to capitalism because it creates distance between people. As a society we have increasingly come to view one other through the remove of screens. This distance facilitates objectification in all forms. The distance/mediation of the spectacular arrangement produces the alienation, fetishization, and instrumentalization of capitalist social relations instead of human connection and community. Nowhere is this truer than in the realm of professional sport, wherein most spectators interact with players only through their television screens or, at best, from dozens of metres away in colossal stadia. If there is any potential for professional sport to emerge as a site of contestation against capitalist alienation rather than an arena for its reproduction, it is likely that what is required is an

attenuation of the distance between spectators and players, what I would like to refer to as a face-to-face encounter. Such encounters are actually not unheard of in the lower strata of professional sport. In fact, for Sean O., who played professionally in England, face-to-face encounters with spectators were a quotidian aspect of his existence as an athletic labourer:

NKL: Did you have any interactions with fans off the ice?

Sean O.: It was huge. After every home game, you'd have to go to the supporter's club. And, supporters that helped with meals on the road, and stuff like that, and they would do things, you know, for your apartment, or your flat in England. You needed a tv, they were always there to provide stuff for the team. So, after games, there was always a lot of interaction with the paren-, sorry, the supporters. So, lots of times you would go in there, you would have a quick beer with them, and you'd do other things. So, it was always, uh, it was always huge to get the supporters on your side to make sure the gates would keep coming up, right, so it was a big part of interacting, and the school visits, and all the other stuff you'd have to do, right?

NKL: Yeah, alright, that's interesting. So, what did you think of the fans?

Sean O.: Uhh, you know, to me, I loved it. You know, I, I, I grew up as a wrestling fan, and I always thought it was fun when, you know, to boo the bad guy off the ice. Even if you weren't a bad guy, a villain or a fighter, you know, and you get kicked out or you take a bad call, you know, they're booing you hard, they're calling you, you know, ribbing your last name, but it was all, they, they would call over there, they would call it banter, and then there was, almost, especially in the second division, right, you'd always, like, in smaller towns, you'd, before you get on the road, we might go up to, and most rinks would have a bar or pub-type, so you'd go out and maybe grab a couple beers, especially on a Sunday when your weekend was, you'd play Saturday, Sunday most nights, and on a Sunday, if you were on the road, you'd go up to the bar and grab a couple beers to take back on the bus, or whatever, and so they would come up and talk to you. And, just like, you know, let's say for example, there was this one time we were playing in Kingston and I, I thought I scored, so I threw my hands up. But the puck didn't go in so every time I got the puck, they all went, "Yay!" [mimes throwing his hands up], like, thinking I was scoring. And then you see them after, and it's just fun, it's entertainment, right?

Sean O.'s testimony here strongly suggests that small scale, lower level professional sport is not fetishized to nearly the same extent as the top level pro leagues. Unlike so many of the players interviewed, who experienced aggravation and alienation from their (mediated) encounters with fans, Sean O. took obvious satisfaction from his more direct interactions. These experiences

included sharing meals and drinks with fans and even forms of reciprocity such as the gifting of furnishings and televisions. This does not mean that Sean O. experienced mystification about the nature of his labour; rather, he is clearly able to comprehend the central role of the athlete-spectator relationship for the political economy of his sport. Yet, although he has no illusions about the exchange nature of his relations with fans, he is still able to at least partly transcend this commodification and, in doing so, resist complete alienation. This is because instead of simply producing community *for* spectators through his own sacrifices, Sean O. actually comes to participate in a community *with* fans. It follows from this that although Sean O. received considerably less remuneration and celebrity from his career in professional hockey than nearly every other player interviewed, it is he who seems to have drawn the most satisfaction and least anguish from his career.

I contend that it is the face-to-face elements – the deconstruction of the spectacle – in Sean O.’s experience of professional hockey that provide a vanishing point for less alienated forms of athletic labour and spectatorship more generally. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2002), building on Emmanuel Levinas, suggests that narrative creates a face-to-face encounter that is more politically productive than abstraction or theory because it “positions the reader face-to-face with the victim of cruelty whose face always carries the injunction: Thou shalt not kill,” (p. 113). Professional sport does produce narrative about players that fans consume during games and through the popular media. C.L.R. James, writing of cricket (sport), exhorted readers to perceive it as art (narrative): “Cricket is first and foremost a dramatic spectacle. It belongs with the theatre, ballet, opera and the dance,” (p. 258). Although one might expect these narratives to generate pathos from spectators towards players, particularly with respect to the harm, or “cruelty,” inflicted upon their bodies, I argue that the narrative of professional sport largely

remains in the realm of abstraction because it is mediated by spectacle. A separation exists between players and fans imposed by the screen, geographic distance, the media, and advertising. The athlete becomes less, not more, human through these processes. The reality and human suffering of his experiences become subsumed in the fan's own needs and desires. Without a more direct face-to-face confrontation, the player becomes little more than an avatar for the fulfillment of the spectator's fantasies of connection and plenitude.

Yet, Chakrabarty's words are still useful because they invite us to turn back to their source in Levinas. For Levinas (1985), a face-to-face encounter with the other does not entail merely *looking* at the other. The look involves knowledge, and knowledge is, naturally, associated with power. To look at a person is thus to objectify that person as a "character," constituted only by "everything that is in one's passport, the manner of dressing, of presenting oneself," (p. 85). Thus, the mere presence of the Other in a narrative does not constitute an authentic confrontation. The authentic ethical relation "is discourse and, more exactly, response or responsibility," (p. 88). In other words, it is through dialogue/conversation with the Other that we come to ethically acknowledge her or his humanity. It is important to note that Levinas does not limit the ethical relation to "response" alone. By acknowledging the humanity of the Other through face-to-face dialogue, we are also confronted with the ethical necessity of taking "responsibility" for the well-being of that Other: "The saying is a way of greeting the Other, but to greet the Other is already to answer for him [sic]," (p. 88). Levinas' notion of the conversation between self and Other requires dialogue. As Levinas puts it, "The face *speaks*. It *speaks*, it is in this that it renders possible and begins all discourse [emphasis added]," (p. 87). For, if the Other does not speak, then s/he remains an objectified object of knowledge and no political intervention can take place. Sean O. shows us that it is possible for this sort of dialogic face-to-

face encounter to exist in the world of professional sport. In doing so, he allows us to imagine how a different sort of professional sport might be possible, one in which the labour of athletes would provide pleasure and even the foundation for community for fans without requiring the sacrifice of the athlete's body. For, through face-to-face connections, fans might experience the empathy currently lacking in the imagined athletic community and athletes might be able to participate in the communities they labour to create.

Because this vision may appear somewhat far-fetched in the face of the hegemonic world of large-scale, corporate professional sport, I would like to leave off with an example of possibility drawn from the experience of the highest-performance professional basketball players in the world. During the 2011 National Basketball Association lockout¹⁰ and the summer that preceded it, we witnessed the emergence of an encounter between elite athletes and spectators that looked very different from what we have come to expect in the era of spectacular sport. This was a conscious, player-led movement away from the big business, spectacular political economy of professional basketball. Instead, games were organized that featured the best players in the world (including Kevin Durant and LeBron James) in urban communities in the United States for affordable tickets that could be procured on a first-come-first-served basis. These events were held in small arenas or playground courts and broke down the distance between athletes and spectators (Sharp, 2011, August 31). Andrew Sharp (2011, August 22) describes the experience of attending these events from the standpoint of spectators:

Vendors hawked mixtapes and Len Bias t-shirts in the aisles of the grandstand, teenagers sold homemade food on the baseline, and everyone froze every few minutes with the latest jaw-dropping dunk.

¹⁰The lockout, which technically began on July 1, 2011, delayed the start of the 2011-2012 NBA season from November 1 to December 25 and shortened the regular season from 82 to 66 games. The primary issue at stake was how league revenue would be divided between owners and players.

Security was minimal if not invisible, but it never mattered. Maybe out of respect for Rawls [a local organizer] or just respect for the event itself, nobody abused the privilege that came with being ten feet away from NBA superstars for two hours. Or maybe nobody want to risk getting kicked out, missing out on their chance to see the spectacle first hand. In any case, the community event showcased a community that used basketball as an excuse to come out and party together peacefully.

What we see here is the potential in spectatorship for a different kind of community connected to sport that is based on the face-to-face encounter. Spectators, in this setting, were face-to-face with both athletes and each other. They were part of the same community. This coming together, particularly in the context of systematically-exploited working class African-American communities, also produces the potential for greater forms of structural resistance from below.

It is not only spectators who benefitted from these dynamics. Kevin Durant explains why he participated in these events: “I just want to hoop... I do it for everybody back here that really don’t get a chance to see me that much. I just want to break the barrier.” Later, he adds, “It feels good to go into different hoods and show them my game... People respect it,” (Lee, 2011, August 14). This brief, even passing, line is extremely illuminating. It suggests a mutuality of exchange at these events. However, it is “respect” that is being exchanged rather than cash and this leaves Duran feeling “good” rather than exploited or used. Later, speaking of a game at Rucker Park in New York in which he scored 66 points and was “mobbed by fans after a flurry of 30-foot three-pointers,” he adds, “It was unbelievable, man... Just a great atmosphere, people showed me so much love. It was one of the best moments of my life.” This is salient because Durant is accustomed to having success in front of enormous crowds. What is different here is the intimacy. He is, in a sense, a member of this crowd, not an object onto whom they are projecting their needs. This is likely a moment that will endure for Durant because it is one he shares with others, people who will not simply discard him for the next vessel for meaning, but a community

he can always remain a part of. This is the kind of community high performance sport has the potential to build.

Academic scholarship has a role in to play in the re-humanization of professional sport. There may be real potential in a project that tests the ideas of Chakrabarty and Levinas by bringing spectators into dialogue with players who are empowered to speak back about the authentic nature of their experiences. Even if it is not possible to sit spectators and athletes down in the same room, there is real value in exposing fans to the thoughts and ideas of players about their experiences in professional sport. I hope that this dissertation has to some extent served that end in a preliminary, textual fashion. In future, it would be well worth expanding and testing that project by bringing the testimony of players directly to spectators in order to see how they respond to a direct confrontation with the “cruelty” of professional sport.

Bibliography

- Abdel-Shehid, G. (2005). *Who da man : Black masculinities and sporting cultures*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press.
- Abdel-Shehid, G & Kalman-Lamb, N. (2011). *Out of left field: Critical perspectives on social inequality and sports*. Winnipeg: Fernwood Press.
- Agathangelou, A. M. (2004). *The global political economy of sex: Desire, violence, and insecurity in Mediterranean nation states* (1st ed.). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ammirante, J. (2009). Manufacturing players and controlling sports: An interpretation of the political economy of hockey and the 2004 NHL lockout. In A. C. Holman (Ed.), *Canada's game: Hockey and identity* (pp. 180-210). Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press.
- Anderson, B. (2000). *Doing the dirty work? The global politics of domestic labour*. London: Zed Books.
- Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Andrews, D. L. (2009). Marxism, Sport, culture and late capitalism. In B. Carrington & I. McDonald (Eds). *Marxism, cultural studies and sport*. London: Routledge. (pp. 213-231).
- Andrews, D. L. (2006). *Sport – commerce – culture: Essays on sport in late capitalist America*. New York: Peter Lang
- Bannerji, H. (2000). *The dark side of the nation: Essays on multiculturalism, nationalism and gender*. Toronto: Canadian Scholar's Press and Women's Press.
- B.C. premier vows to hunt down rioters. (2011, June 16). *CTV.ca*. Retrieved from http://www.ctvbc.ctv.ca/servlet/an/local/CTVNews/20110616/bc_vancouver_riots_110616/20110616/
- Beamish, R. (2009). Marxism, alienation and Coubertin's Olympic project. In B. Carrington & I. McDonald (Eds). *Marxism, cultural studies and sport*. London: Routledge. (pp. 88-105).
- Bélanger, A. (2009). The urban sport spectacle: Towards a critical political economy of sports. In B. Carrington & I. McDonald (Eds). *Marxism, cultural studies and sport*. London: Routledge. (pp. 51-67).
- Berg, B. L. (2004). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences*. Boston: Pearson.

- Boulton, C., Earp, J., Morris, S. & Young, J. (Producers), & Earp, J. (Director). (2010). *Not just a game: Power, politics & American sports* [Motion picture]. United States: Media Education Foundation.
- Brand, D. (2001). *A map to the door of no return: Notes to belonging*. Toronto: Doubleday Canada.
- Braverman, H. (1974). *Labor and monopoly capital: The degradation of work in the twentieth century*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Brenner, J. & Laslett, B. (1989). Gender and social reproduction: Historical perspectives. *Annual review of sociology*, 15, 381-404.
- Brohm, J. M. (1978). *Sport: A prison of measured time: Essays*. London: Inlinks.
- Burstyn, V. (1999). *The rites of men: Manhood, politics, and the culture of sport*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Cameron, B. (2006). "Social reproduction and Canadian federalism. In M. Luxton and K. Bezanson (Eds.), *Social reproduction: Feminist political economy challenges neo-liberalism* (pp. 45-74). Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Chakrabarty, D. (2002). *Habitations of modernity: Essays in the wake of subaltern studies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Connell, R. W. (1990). An iron man: The body and some contradictions of hegemonic masculinity. In M. A. Messner, & D. F. Sabo (Eds.), *Sport, men, and the gender order: Critical feminist perspectives* (pp. 83-95). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics Books.
- Curry, T. J. (1993). A little pain never hurt anyone: Athletic career socialization and the normalization of sports injury. *Symbolic Interaction*, 16 (3), 273-290.
- Day, R. (2000). *Multiculturalism and the history of Canadian diversity*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Debord, G. (1994). *The society of the spectacle*. (D. Nicholson-Smith, Trans.). New York: Zone Books. (Original work published 1967).
- Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1983). *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. (R. Hurley, M. Seem & H.R. Lane, Trans.) Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Dhamoon, R. (2009). *Identity/Difference politics: How difference is produced and why it matters*. Toronto: UBC Press.

- Dunning, E. (1996). On problems of the emotions in sport and leisure: Critical and counter-critical comments on the conventional and figurational sociologies of sport and leisure. *Leisure Studies*, 15 (3), 185-207.
- Dunning, E., Murphy, P. & J. Williams. (1986) Spectator violence at football matches: Towards a sociological explanation. In Elias, N. & E. Dunning (Eds.), *Quest for excitement: Sport and leisure in the civilizing process*. Pp. 245-266. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- ESPN.com news services. (2014, December 17). Chris Conte: NFL worth early death. *ESPN.com*. Retrieved from http://espn.go.com/chicago/nfl/story/_/id/12040968/chris-conte-chicago-bears-says-playing-nfl-worth-long-term-health-risk
- Edwards, H. (1970). *The revolt of the black athlete*. New York: The Free Press.
- Eyerman, R. (1981). False consciousness and ideology in Marxist theory. *Acta Sociologica*, 24 (1-2), 43-56.
- Fanon, F. (1967). *Black skin, white masks*, (C. L. Markmann, Trans.). New York: Grove Press.
- Ferguson, A. (1989). *Blood at the root: Motherhood, sexuality & male dominance*. London: Pandora.
- Forrester, P. (2013, April 23). The painful existence of being a Browns fan. *Sports Illustrated*. Retrieved from <http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/-nfl-draft/news/20130423/jimmy-haslam-cleveland-browns/>.
- Frey, J. H. (1991). Social risk and the meaning of sport. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 8 (2), 136-145.
- Full text of original apology by Camille Cacnio. (2011, June 20). *Vancouver Sun*. Retrieved from <http://www.vancouversun.com/technology/Full+text+original+apology+Camille+Cacnio/4977657/story.html>.
- Galeano, E. (2003). *Soccer in sun and shadow*, (M. Fried, Trans). London: Verso.
- Giants fan Bryan Stow moves arm; condition upgraded from critical to serious. (2011, June 22). *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2011/06/giants-fan-bryan-stow-moves-arm-condition-upgraded-from-critical-to-serious-.html>
- Giulianotti, R. (2002). Supporters, followers, fans, and *flaneurs*: A taxonomy of spectator identities in football. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 26 (1), 25-46.

- Gilroy, P. (2000). *Against race: Imagining political culture beyond the color line*. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Glenn, E. N. (1992). From servitude to service work: Historical continuities in the racial division of paid reproductive labor. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 18(1), 1-43.
- Harvey, D. (2003). *The new imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hage, G. (2000). *White nation: Fantasies of white supremacy in a multicultural society*. New York: Routledge.
- Hall, S. (1996). The after-life of Frantz Fanon: Why Fanon? Why now? Why *Black skin, white masks*? In A. Read (Ed.), *The fact of blackness: Frantz Fanon and visual representation*. Pp. 14-37. London: Institute of Contemporary Arts and Seattle: Bay Press.
- Helstein, M. T. (2007). Seeing your sporting body: Identity, subjectivity, and misrecognition. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 24, 78-103.
- Hennessy, R. (2000). *Profit and pleasure: Sexual identities in late capitalism*. New York: Routledge.
- Hobsbawm, E. (1992). Introduction: Inventing traditions. In E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (Eds.), *The invention of tradition*. Pp. 1-14. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hobsbawm, E. (1992). Mass-producing traditions: Europe 1870-1914. In E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (Eds.), *The invention of tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hobsbawm, E. (1990). *Nations and nationalism since 1780: Programme, myth, reality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hornby, N. (2000). *Fever pitch*. London: Penguin Books.
- James, C. L. R. (2005). *Beyond a boundary*. London: Yellow Jersey Press.
- Kalman-Lamb, N. (2012). "A portrait of this country": Whiteness, indigeneity, multiculturalism and the Vancouver opening ceremonies. *Topia: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*, 27, 5-27.
- Kalman-Lamb, N. (2013). The athlete as model minority subject: Jose Bautista and Canadian multiculturalism. *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture*, 19(2), 238-253.

- Lacan, J. (1988). *The seminars of Jacques Lacan: Book I—Freud's papers on technique 1953-1954*. (J. Forrester, Trans. & J.A. Miller, Ed.). New York: W.W. Norton and Company.
- Law, S. (2011, June 24). Don't blame the anarchists, UBC professor says. *Vancouver Sun*. Retrieved from <http://www.vancouversun.com/news/blame+anarchists+professor+says/4998569/story.html>.
- Lee, J. (2011, June 17). Vancouver mayor and police chief blame Stanley Cup riot on anarchists. *Vancouver Sun*. Retrieved from <http://www.vancouversun.com/health/Vancouver+mayor+police+chief+blame+Stanley+riot+anarchists/4958411/story.html>
- Lee, M. (2011, August 14). Kevin Durant stars at Goodman League, sets Oct. 1 deadline for potential overseas decision. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wizards-insider/post/Kevin-durant-stars-at-goodman-league-sets-oct-1-deadline-for-overseas-decision/2011/08/14/gIQAnNgPFJ_blog.html.
- Levinas, E. (1985). *Ethics and infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. (R.A. Cohen, Trans.). Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Lindsay, B. (2011, June 15). Looting breaks out as riots intensify in Vancouver. *CTV.ca*. Retrieved from http://edmonton.ctv.ca/servlet/an/local/CTVNews/20110615/bc_stanley_cup_riot_110615/20110615/?hub=EdmontonHome.
- Lofland, J. & Lofland, L. H. (1995). *Analyzing social settings: A guide to qualitative observation and analysis*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Loland, S. (2006). Three approaches to the study of pain in sport. In S. Loland, B. Skirstad & I. Waddington (Ed.), *Pain and injury in sport: Social and ethical analysis* (pp. 49-62). London: Routledge.
- Lukacs, G. (1971). *History and class consciousness: Studies in Marxist dialectics*. (R. Livingstone. Trans.). Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.
- Mackey, E. (2002). *The house of difference: Cultural politics and national identity in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Mahler, J. (2011, May 31). Can Bill Simmons win the big one? *New York Times Magazine*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/05/magazine/can-bill-simmons-win-the-big-one.html?_r=1&pagewanted=2.
- Mandel, E. (1978). *Late capitalism*. (J. De Bres, Trans.). London: Verso. (Original work published 1972).

- Marx, K. (1994a). Alienated labor. In L. H. Simon (Ed.), *Selected writings* (pp. 58-68). Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Marx, K. (1994b). On the Jewish question. In L. H. Simon (Ed.), *Selected writings* (pp. 2-26). Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Marx, K. (1976). *Capital volume one*. (B. Fowkes, Trans.). London: Penguin Books. (Original work published 1867).
- Marx, K. (1978). *Capital volume two*. (D. Fernbach, Trans.). London: Penguin Books.
- Matas, R. (2011, June 15). B.C. premier promises to expose rioters to public gaze. *Globe and Mail*. Retrieved from <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/british-columbia/bc-premier-promises-to-expose-rioters-to-public-gaze/article2062706/page2/>.
- McIndoe, C. (2013, May 21). The 20 types of depressed sports fans. *Grantland*. Retrieved from http://www.grantland.com/blog/the-triangle/post/_/id/62564/the-20-types-of-depressed-sports-fans.
- McNally, D. (2011). *Monsters of the market: Zombies, vampires, and global capitalism*. Boston: Brill.
- Meier, K. V. (1975). Cartesian and phenomenological anthropology: The radical shift and its meaning for sport. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 2 (1), 51-73.
- Messner, M. A. (1992). *Power at play: Sports and the problem of masculinity*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- McClintock, A. (1995). *Imperial leather: Race, gender and sexuality in the colonial context*. New York: Routledge.
- Nash, S. [Steve]. (2014, November 7). I definitely don't want to be a distraction, but I felt it best everyone heard from me in my own words. I have a ton of miles on my back. [Facebook status update]. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/stevenash/posts/10152770496175250>
- Nixon, H. (1992). A social network analysis of influences on athletes to play with pain and injuries. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 16 (2), 127-135.
- Robidoux, M. A. (2001). *Men at play: A working understanding of professional hockey*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Rutherford, J. (1988). Who's that man. In R. Chapman and J. Rutherford (Eds.), *Male order: Unwrapping masculinity*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.

- Sabo, D. (2004). The politics of sports injury: Hierarchy, power, and the pain principle. In K. Young (Ed.), *Sporting bodies, damaged selves: Sociological studies of sports-related injury*. (pp. 59-79). Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (1985). *Between men: English literature and male homosocial desire*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Simmons, B. (2005). *Now I can die in peace*. New York: ESPN Books.
- Sharp, A. (2011, August 31). LeBron James and Kevin Durant, spreading the gospel in Baltimore. *SB Nation*. Retrieved from www.sbnation.com/NBA/2011/8/31/2395040/lebron-james-kevin-durant-baltimore-goodman-league-camelot-anthony.
- Sharp, A. (2011, August 22). Love this game: The genius of basketball's endless summer. *SB Nation*. Retrieved from www.sbnation.com/NBA/2011/8/22/2377341/kevin-durant-punishment-goodman-league-drew-league.
- Shilton, A. (2007, June 9). They bleed Toronto red. *Globe and Mail*, p. M1.
- Shogan, D. (1999). *The making of high-performance athletes: Discipline, diversity, and ethics*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Sparkes, A. C. (2004). From performance to impairment: A patchwork of embodied memories. In J. Evans, B. Davies and J. Wright (Eds.), *Body knowledge and control: Studies in the sociology of physical education and health* (pp. 157-172). New York: Routledge.
- Smith, C. (2007, April 28). We are TFC. *National Post*, p. S2.
- Smith, D. (1987). *The everyday world as problematic: A feminist sociology*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Stein, R. (1991). *Psychoanalytic theories of affect*. New York: Praeger.
- Stern, R. A. et al. (2011). Long-term consequences of repetitive brain trauma: Chronic traumatic encephalopathy. *PM&R* 3 (10S2), S460-S467.
- Tarrant, D. & Kruse, M. (2011, November 8). A Sunday without sports. *Grantland*. Retrieved from http://www.grantland.com/blog/the-triangle/post/_/id/9089/a-sunday-without-sports.
- Thapar, R. (1992). *Interpreting early India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Thobani, S. (2007). *Exalted subjects: Studies in the making of race and nation in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Young, K. (2004). Sports-related pain and injury: Sociological notes. In K. Young (Ed.), *Sporting bodies, damaged selves: Sociological studies of sports-related injury*. (pp. 1-25). Amsterdam: Elsevier.

Williams, R. (1980). *Problems in materialism and culture: Selected essays*. London: Verso.

Appendix A: Race and Social Reproduction in Professional Hockey

Although all players are asked to play roles in the process of social reproduction that is professional sport, it is more difficult for some to satisfy the requirements asked of them than others. This is particularly true when these roles are racialized. For, in the world of professional hockey, whiteness remains hegemonic at the expense of all other subject positions. This is an important consideration for the question of social reproduction itself, for the political economies of Canada and the United States make very particular demands of their subjects around the question of race. Privilege is bestowed upon white citizens – who continue to be understood as authentic – while non-white others must perform model minority-hood in order to achieve acceptance (Kalman-Lamb, 2013). The consequence of this when it comes to the culture of professional hockey is that those players who do not satisfy the hegemonic and homogenous norm of whiteness face approbation from both other players and from the spectators who build their imagined athletic communities on the labour of athletes and who expect them to be constituted in a particular, racialized way.

Many of the players interviewed refused to acknowledge the presence of racism in the game. However, for others, it was undeniable. For instance, in the recollections of Lawrence F., racism was a commonplace occurrence during his time in professional hockey:

NKL: Yeah, did fans act differently towards players based on their race or ethnicity, in your perception?

Lawrence F.: Well, I think when we go back to London, Ontario, when they, when they threw a banana peel on the ice for Wayne Simmonds. I think it says that yes. So, I think that says a lot.

NKL: Did you see that first hand in your own...

Lawrence F.: I did. I did. You know, there's some, you know, African-American guys who played where you heard the N-word a lot from the stands.

NKL: You did?

Lawrence F.: Oh yeah. Even on the ice, it was different back then, right? You had players that were prejudiced. They would, you know... I won't mention his name, I played with a player that was prejudiced and there was, I think at the time, three black guys in the league and he fought them every game. Every game he went out and fought them.

NKL: And you felt that was deliberate?

Lawrence F.: Oh yeah, he made it very clear by his actions, by his words.

NKL: Do you feel that was condoned in the locker room, for the most part?

Lawrence F.: Condoned?

NKL: What I mean is, do you feel like most teammates accepted that as reasonable, or did most of them sort of think that was problematic behaviour?

Lawrence F.: Well, back then, you didn't think anything of it because it wasn't...

NKL: Yeah, that's what I mean.

Lawrence F.: Yeah, I mean, like I didn't say anything because I wasn't prejudiced, but when I think now, I'm thinking how wrong it was. Like, for him to talk like that and go right after a guy because he was a different colour was, to me, barbaric when you think of it today, right?

Lawrence F. is very candid here in this extended meditation on the racial politics of the time. He describes racist head-hunting and the general climate the black players in the NHL were confronted with from both fans and other players. There is an important point here that needs to be made about social reproduction with respect to race. Gladiatorial combat between white and black players in front of white crowds functioned to reproduce the notion of whiteness as heroic in the climate of a society moving towards liberal multiculturalism. As Hage (2000) has discussed, it produced something of a white nation fantasy that sustains a political economy predicated on racialized, often migrant, labour.

Luc C. addresses a different form of racism, suggesting that he was subject to abuse from fans as a result of his French-Canadian identity:

NKL: Okay, so, this question is slightly different, but I'm curious, did you ever notice that fans acted differently towards any players because of their race or ethnicity?

Luc C.: Uh, yeah, yeah. I, I personally felt that and I remember one of the first times I went to Toronto, you know, one fan that was close to the ice, close to the, the window, yelled over the window, "Frog!" You know, like, so, I, you know, I heard that, obviously. So, I don't, I don't know how much of that actually happens and how much you actually hear. You know, I remember that time, hearing that, and really made me feel uncomfortable.

NKL: It did, yeah, can you tell...

Luc C.: It's, it's pretty fucking stupid... [Laughs] for, for fans to, you know, to say such comments. I mean, it's... So, anyway, that's... you know, not that I, you know, that I heard that very often or that I witnessed that stuff very often, but I *know* it does happen, so...

NKL: And did you carry that with you, sort of throughout your career, the memory of that, of thinking about that?

Luc C.: Well, if I remember today...

NKL: Sure, sure.

Luc C.: Obviously I did, yeah. I'm talking about something that happened in, probably in, 1993 or something.

He retains a vivid memory of experiencing discrimination as a French-Canadian and is confident that many others experienced the same thing. Indeed, the fact that he uses a profanity when describing the behaviour he was subjected to suggests that it had a significant affective impact upon him, particularly given that this is the only moment in the interview in which he uses such language.

The interview I conducted with James I. was the briefest of the entire set, as he seemed relatively uninclined to expand on most of his answers. Yet, when I brought up the subject of

race, he was quick to acknowledge that racism was a fundamental part of the experience of professional hockey for non-white players:

NKL: To what extent do you feel like the race of a player affected the ways fans acted towards him?

James I.: You know, it wasn't bad for me, but I do have some friends, like, black, black friends that play that had, like, bananas thrown at them, like, slurs and stuff. But, I think a lot of the, it doesn't happen too much in the NHL but it's happened to a lot of my friends and, the fans, and all, but if you go overseas and stuff, like, you'll get a lot more.

NKL: Okay, so, it's worse overseas, and would you say that most players, most non-white players that you knew had some experiences with racism?

James I.: Yeah, for sure.

Although he doesn't focus on his own experiences with racism in professional hockey, he does acknowledge its pervasiveness. In doing so, he calls into question the testimony of other players who denied the existence of structural racism in the game. This is particularly important given that he is one of the few players in the study who identified as non-white himself.

The following passage from Chris M. is particularly illuminating because, like that of James I., it casts the testimony of the players who attested not to have witnessed racism into some doubt. Certainly, Chris M.'s experiences were not obtained at the NHL level (he played in the OHL). Yet, what his sweeping discussion of the culture of minor league hockey seems to suggest is how deeply ingrained racism is in that world. Indeed, this discussion occurred years after the experiences of Lawrence F. (who believed that the culture had since become less racist) and seem to suggest that racism flourishes today as much as ever:

NKL: So, let's talk a little more about race, actually, because you brought that up and I have that on my list of questions and I'm interested in hearing more about it. I was going to ask, to what extent do you feel like the race of a player affected the way fans acted towards him? I mean, you talked about playing with Subban at one point, we have this recent example...

Chris M.: Well, um, you know, you've got to tip your hat to him, because he's dealt with it his whole, his whole career. Like, the incident in Lon-, like, there's so many, bananas thrown on the ice, it wasn't him, was other, other guys. Hazing incidents in Windsor when I was playing with, there's a black kid and, like, there's like a, sort of, Aryan culture in hockey. They think swastikas are funny and all this stuff. If you watch the movie *Slapshot*, there's a guy, you know, their fan club, and, I mean, I'm sure it's mea-, it's kind of, it's a parody, but, you know, he's got one of those helmets with a spike and a Nazi symbol following them on the bus. He's there, you know, like, they're just trying to say, like, you know, it is that... and, you know, the fans that tweet, basically, after a black player has some success. And, it's not just that. It's not, I mean, if you're not a white Christian, you're like, don't even mention anything else. Don't ask for time off on your holidays, don't bring it up to the team, like, because it just causes some sort, some alternative discourse, and they want the team in military precision, marching, like, like, it's, there's real-, I, and, I know it's slowly changing, but, I mean, there's, there's, it's, behind the back, especially because you know there's, over time it will go away, but even so, the people in management now were the people playing before in the times of racism. Listen, if you can put money in, in the pockets of the owners or the players, they'll have you there. But, if you're just one of those average guys, like, it's just brutal. Like, there's some kid, Josh Ho-Sang, or something like that if you want to look it up later. It's, they say, "Oh yeah, he has..." they don't like his attitude. And he says, "Well, it's because I'm half-Jewish and half-black and I don't want to, I don't go into the status quo," and so he fell like thirty picks in the draft. So, he went from, like, a should have been a top ten, to number, like, twenty-eight. And, you know, clubs like New York will, sort of, take him. He went to New York Islanders where there's more diversity in the region. And, those are the teams that will take him. So, it's, it's kind of interesting. And he, just because he doesn't fall into the perfect, like, behaviour that they want and he says, "It's not that, it's just that, not only am I not only exactly cookie-cutter and keeping my mouth shut completely, I'm also black." The guy who killed himself: sent him home, yeah, he was smoking weed or something like that, it's like, big deal, they give you a thousand dollars, they give these teams a thousand dollars on a weekend to go to the bar. You know, alcohol is equally as bad. So, like, how can you condone drinking, but someone gets sent home for marijuana use? Like, and, and the thing is that under-age people are drinking too. They say, "Oh, it's illegal, well, okay, let's send home every single person under the age of nineteen that had a beer on the team." Because, teams get together with a case of beer. You have twenty-one year olds, twenty year old, nineteen year olds, "Here kid, have a beer." You know, like, so, you know, a lot of people doing cocaine and stuff, like, it's, it comes with the, you know, like, it's like sex, drugs, and rock and roll kind of attitude. But, it's like, oh, the black kid does one thing wrong, he's out of here. You know, like, so, and, you don't want to be Jewish, you don't want to be black, you don't want to be, you *definitely* don't want to be Asian. You know, like, it's whatever the stereotype is: it's like, "Oh yeah, the Asian kid doesn't want to shower. You know, because he, you know, because, like, whatever." You know, the Jew is just like, you know, Holocaust jokes all over the place. The black is like the n-word, whatever, like, there's more hate towards, I would say, blacks. And it's more, it's jealousy, just like, you know, just like: "Oh yeah, you know why there's no jobs? Because of those black guys,

let's go hang 'em." You know, we learned that, most of that stuff in Abdel-Shehid's class, like, you know, the scape-goating of, of black people and this and that. But, yeah, so, you know, how, blacks, Asians, Jews, you name it. Anything that's not white and Christian. It's like, Catholic is okay, Evangelist is okay, Mormon fine, like, but mostly you want to be, you want to be, like, a Protestant white guy from a farm. And then you're like, "That's the kid we want, gettin' up early, working hard on the farms, you know, grinding it out, not, like, into excess, not, not, not, has no, doesn't fancy education to any extent.

In this extended passage, he demonstrates the depth and breadth of racism in hockey culture, from anti-semitism to traditional racism against non-white players. What he reveals above all is the way in which whiteness is enshrined as the dominant, desirable subject position for players and standard against which all others are judged. Note that whiteness is connected to a rural culture; the urban becomes a codeword for racial difference. He goes on:

Chris M.: I was lucky that my dad always told me, was always like, you know, typical Jewish, like, sorry to say, like, no, I can expl-, I was Jewish, I was the only Jew in the OHL that year, so I always saw things a little differently. Someone asked me, first of all, always Holocaust jokes. Like, they would make, they sho-, people would say, "Oh, you should have played for the Osh-witz Generals," you know? And I was like, "Okay, whatever." Eat it. But, if a younger kid said that, I remember a younger, a rookie, a few years later, said that, and I remember choking him. You know, like, I was really mad and I grabbed him by the throat and he said [he makes a choking sound], I'm like, "Yeah, that's right, you can't say anything, kid." And then I re-, then I realized, "What am I even doing?" Like, so, but that's the kind of jokes, you know. And someone said to me, "That's okay that you're Jewish, you still celebrate Christmas, right?" Like, okay, like, you know, I'm not, like, obviously I'm not, like, very Jewish if I'm playing hockey every Friday night, every Saturday night's a game. Saturday day, Friday night game. So, but, my grandfather was in the Holocaust, so, you know, to be called, and he was in Auschwitz, actually, so to be called Osha-witz Generals, like, you know, like, there's just so much racism built in, in the, in the coaches, okay, there was a black kid on the team, and there was dark in the back of the bus, and the coach was counting and they said to the kid, "Eh, smile," and then, "I can't see you," you know what I mean? Like, so, I can relate to it sort of a little bit, but it wasn't horrendous.

In this passage, Chris M. sheds still more light on the nature of racism in professional hockey and the impact it has upon players. On one level, he reveals the way in which racialized players are forced to accept the racism directed against them because of the power structure of

professional hockey. Chris M. had to “eat it” when older players and coaches were explicitly racist towards his Jewish ancestry because to resist would be to potentially be branded a locker room cancer and, with that, risk losing his job. This does not mean he was unaffected, however. The toll of this racist abuse is evident in the way that he lashed out against younger players who made similar comments. In a sense, this was a displacement of his rage against the institutional racism of professional hockey at the safest outlet: players with still less power than him. In general, Chris M.’s testimony demonstrates one of the consequences of athletic social reproductive labour. The professional hockey player is tasked with reproducing a singularly white form of collective identity for spectators (a process that is naturalized to the extent that it is reproduced by players even within their own locker rooms – recall, after all, that these players were initially spectators themselves). For non-white and non-Christian players, this means absorbing and sometimes internalizing years of racial abuse with little outlet, a process that can only have the most deleterious effects upon their self-esteem and sense of well-being.