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Living With War: Sport, Citizenship, and the Cultural Politics of Post-9/11 Canadian Identity

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If sport scholars are going to contribute to a critical (inter)national dialogue that challenges “official versions” of a post-9/11 geo-political reality, there is a need to continue to move beyond the borders of the US, and examine how nationalistic sporting spectacles work to promote local military initiatives that are aligned with the imperatives of neoliberal empire. In this article we provide a critical reading of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s nationally-televised broadcast of a National Hockey League game, colloquially known as *Tickets for Troops*. We reveal how interest groups emphasized three interrelated narratives that worked to: 1) personalize the Canadian Forces and understandings of neoliberal citizenship, 2) articulate warfare/military training with men’s ice hockey in relation to various promotional mandates, and 3) optimistically promote the war in Afghanistan and the Conservative Party of Canada via storied national traditions and mythologies.

Pour que les chercheurs et chercheuses du sport contribuent à un dialogue critique et (inter)national qui met au défi les versions officielles de la réalité géopolitique post septembre 2001, il faut continuer à dépasser les frontières étatsuniennes et examiner la façon dont les spectacles sportifs nationalistes promeuvent les initiatives militaires locales qui sont alignées avec les impératifs d’un empire néolibéral. Dans cet article, nous offrons une lecture critique d’un match de la Ligue nationale de hockey communément appelé « Tickets for Troops » (billets pour les troupes) et retransmis à l’échelle nationale par la chaîne de télévision canadienne CBC. Nous révélons comment les groupes d’intérêt mettent l’accent sur trois récits inter reliés qui 1) personnalisent les Forces armées canadiennes et les compréhensions de la citoyenneté néolibérale, 2) relie l’entraînement militaire au hockey masculin et 3) promeuvent de façon optimiste la guerre en Afghanistan et le Parti conservateur du Canada par le biais de mythologies et de récits sur les traditions nationales.

Following the post-9/11 body of work in cultural studies (Butler, 2002; Denzin, 2004; Denzin & Giardina, 2006, 2007; Giroux, 2004, 2008; Kellner, 2004; McCarthy, Durham, Engel, Filmer, Giardina, & Malagrecia, M., 2007; Urry, 2002), a number of scholars (Atkinson & Young, 2005; Butterworth, 2005; Falcous & Silk,

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2005; Giardina, 2005; King, 2008; McDonald, 2005; Newman & Giardina, 2008) have, quite rightly, focused on the ideological currency of mediated US sporting nationalisms as a key “element of the cultural terrain within a wider cultural politics” (Silk & Falcouts, 2005, p. 465). However, as Denzin and Giardina (2007) implore, cultural studies is now more than ever a global project, and, in the absence of contextually-specific case studies, it is difficult to discern how the far reaching effects of 9/11 are being challenged, embraced, and transformed in particular locales via the terrain of everyday life and popular culture. To date, only Falcouts and Silk (2006) have examined the complex interplay between global regimes and local agendas outside of the US in their analysis of the treatment of boxer Anthony Mundine by the Australian corporate media immediately following his post-9/11 condemnation of Australia’s involvement in the US-led “War on Terror”. If sport scholars are going to actively contribute to a critical (inter)national dialogue that challenges “official versions” of a post-9/11 geo-political reality, there is a need to continue to move beyond the borders of the US—in our case, north of the 49th parallel—and examine how nationalistic sporting spectacles work to promote local military initiatives that are deeply aligned with a new formation of neoliberal empire that fuses the goals of geopolitical domination with the techniques of neoliberalism (see Pieterse, 2007).

One such example took place on November 23, 2007 when the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) aired a National Hockey League game between the Edmonton Oilers and the Chicago Blackhawks on its iconic program *Hockey Night in Canada* (HNIC). The nationally-televised game, colloquially known as *Tickets for Troops*, was played at Rexall Place in Edmonton, Alberta, and was the culmination of a philanthropic campaign spearheaded by the Edmonton Oilers hockey club and Rexall (Canadian Retail Pharmacy) to honor and support the Canadian Forces, whose presence in Afghanistan remains one of the most pressing political debates in Canada. Local season ticket holders were called upon to perform their neoliberal citizenship duties, and donate tickets to this specific game to military personnel garrisoned at Canadian Forces Base Edmonton in exchange for a tax receipt for the ticket’s face value.¹ This is, in fact, but a preliminary indication of the transnational significance of these types of philanthropic/voluntary promotions through which an expanding number of sports leagues/teams, television networks, and corporate sponsors are attempting to leverage their identities as patriotic corporate “citizens” through mutually reinforcing associations with the state(s). Indeed, despite being popularized in the US—most notably by the National Football League’s association with the Bush administration (King, 2008)—these private charity initiatives are increasingly being deployed and normalized in Canada to support worthy Canadian soldiers and their families while more collective social and public services are rescinded. It is helpful, then, to follow Wendy Brown (2006) and understand neoliberalism as an *achieved and normative* political rationality that involves a specific organization of the social, the subject, and the state according to market criteria. Included here is the development of numerous policies that produce citizens as individual consumers and entrepreneurs whose “moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for ‘self-care’” including “their ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions” (Brown, 2006, p. 694).

It is germane to note that several other “Canadian Forces Appreciation Nights” have recently taken place in other Canadian-NHL cities, most notably Ottawa and

Toronto, Ontario. However, unlike the “Canadian Forces Appreciation Nights” that took place in Canada’s respective political and economic capitals, the CBC’s broadcast of the *Tickets for Troops* game was of additional significance due to the fact that Edmonton is home to over 13,000 soldiers, many of whom are currently on tour in Afghanistan. In this respect, this particular CBC broadcast transported a national audience to a supportive military community in a conservative and de-politicized Western Canadian province (Harrison, 2005), to view a militarized sporting spectacle that took place in a hockey arena with over 6,000 military personnel and family members in attendance. By way of comparison, similar military charity events have not taken place in Quebec, where the historical intertwining of hockey and politics has been well documented: e.g., from the Richard Riots and the Quiet Revolution to the *La guerre de la 20^e* during the 1980s and 1990s between the Montreal Canadiens and their provincial rivals, the Quebec Nordiques—a team which to some degree represented nationalist aspirations of French separatists (Harvey, 2006). The US-led invasion of Iraq and the presence of Canadian troops in Afghanistan have been heavily critiqued in Quebec, where historically French Canadians have opposed “Canada’s involvement in Anglo-American military operations that they saw as ‘imperial adventures’” (Stein & Lang, 2007, p. 71). Most recently, for example, fans of the Montreal Canadiens—a team then owned by US businessman George Gillett—have booed the singing of the US national anthem (including after the death of four Canadian soldiers who were mistakenly killed by a US fighter plane in Afghanistan in 2004). Despite a dominant mythology that routinely romanticizes hockey as sustaining an imagined national community and enduring sense of “Canadianness”, these examples are an important reminder that the sport’s role as a unifying cultural form remains complex and often contradictory (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993; Ramos & Gosine, 2002; Scherer & Jackson, 2004).

In addition to the significant cultural and political divisions between Canada’s two traditional solitudes, sport history scholars will likely be familiar with the long-standing and, at times, contentious alignment between men’s hockey, the military, and Canadian nationalism. During the First World War, for example, organized senior and amateur hockey leagues were “effective instruments of recruitment” (Wilson, 2005, p. 315) for the Canadian Expeditionary Forces. Wilson (2005) suggests that, while athletes from other sports served during the war, by 1914 Canadian hockey players had become obvious and ideal volunteers for military service, in part because the violent sport of hockey served as a “reliable and necessary guardian of masculinity and military preparedness” (p. 315).³ However, at the outset of the Second World War, professional hockey players were ensnared in a significant debate that ensued from the federal Liberal government’s decision to forgo the establishment of a national overseas conscription policy. This position was widely challenged by critics, particularly outside of Quebec, who championed the conscription of young men, including professional hockey players who were still regarded by many citizens and government officials as ideal soldiers. In fact, McIntyre (1993) notes that some officials on the National War Services Boards actively tried to coerce players into enlisting in the military, while those who decided to forsake military service were widely condemned for “engaging in sport rather than in war” (p. 69). On the other side of the debate were other interest groups, including Prime Minister Mackenzie King, who believed that the National Hockey League provided Canadians with a welcome distraction from the hardships of war. Many National

Hockey League players, of course, enlisted and saw combat overseas, however, Canadians continued to follow hockey games even though team rosters were comprised mostly of players from junior and senior leagues (McIntyre, 1993). Indeed, by 1942 the debate over the continuation of professional hockey had subsided and Foster Hewitt's legendary radio broadcasts of Saturday night hockey games on *HNIC*—broadcasts that were often subtly linked to patriotic messages and themes (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993)—were widely listened to across Canada, and helped Canadians, at least temporarily, put aside their war-time anxieties (McIntyre, 1993).

These weekly radio broadcasts of *HNIC* were such a part of the fabric of Canadian life and popular culture that recordings of the games were sent overseas to uplift the spirits of Canadian soldiers.⁴ Even more recently, the 1972 Summit Series between Canada and the Soviet Union was replete with Cold War ideology and military rhetoric (Scherer, Duquette, & Mason, 2007). Importantly, the Summit Series also provided Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau with a nationally televised platform that he skillfully used to boost his political image and promote a national unity agenda at a time of significant national divisions following the passing of the Official Languages Act (1969), and the October Crisis (1970) which resulted in the only peacetime usage of the War Measures Act in Canadian history.

In light of the historical intersections between men's hockey, politics, and the military, the CBC's broadcast of the *Tickets for Troops* event provides a key moment to reflect on how hockey continues to be articulated by various local interest groups with military initiatives: in this case in service of the US-led "War on Terror". As such, this article aims to contribute to a global cultural studies project that reads post-9/11 sport critically (McDonald, 2005) by providing a textual analysis of the *Tickets for Troops* broadcast. While sport scholars have critiqued private media networks—including Fox News and NBC among others—for suspending, and, at times, censoring critical commentary about the "War on Terror", our analysis focuses on a sporting text that was produced by a public broadcaster with other public service mandates. This is a significant point of departure that, arguably, can shed light on the role of the CBC—a public entity that is so often accused by Canadian conservatives as being little more than a left wing monolith (see Barlow, 2005; McQuaig, 2007)—in setting powerful ideological limits and pressures on the debates taking place in Canada over the complicity of successive Canadian governments in the US-led "War on Terror". In the subsequent section, we contextualize Canada's ongoing military presence in Afghanistan, and outline the currency of a global cultural studies project for our analysis of the *Tickets for Troops* broadcast.

Globalizing Cultural Studies: Living With War in Canada

Ramification is one of those words that we've almost forgotten is a metaphor—it means, literally, branching, consequences of an event branching out from their source. Already we know 9/11 will branch into so many aspects of our lives, into the culture of this country and of the world, in ways we can't even begin to see (Doty, 2007, p. 161).

Although writing about the US context, Mark Doty's comments speak to the complexity and uncertainty of an increasingly interconnected post-9/11 geopolitical landscape(s), where capital, goods, services, ideas, and people (with some

specific qualifications) move around the world at incredible speeds (Dallmayr, 2002; Johnson, 2002; Kellner, 2002a; Kellner, 2002b; Kellner, 2007; Sassen, 2002). None of these processes are unprecedented. However, it is clear that these multidirectional cultural, economic and political interconnections have profound implications for contemporary nations, while “more people are affected by decisions made in distant places—by transnational corporations or international bodies like the World Trade Organization (WTO)—than was true for earlier generations” (Whitson, 2007, p. 241).

It is in this sense that Doty’s comments also speak to the necessity for a broader, and theoretically reinvigorated cultural studies project to critically examine the tensions and contradictions of contemporary geo-political relations. Such a project is, by necessity, radically contextual (Grossberg, 2006), and focuses on unearthing how concrete local struggles/political debates are articulated with much broader connections or, in Ritzer’s terms (2004), with discourses from *nowhere*, that are often unseen. In this respect, McCarthy et al. (2007) suggest that there is an urgent need for scholars to show “how globalization is articulated to both the micro and macro dimensions of contemporary life” and reveal

the cultural work entailed in the organization of globalizing effects, not “at a distance,” but in our neighbourhoods, in our everyday lives, and in our bodies, as we negotiate social distinctions and cultural political choices related to home, identity, nation, and language, and raced, gendered, sexual, and class-based forms of affiliation (p. xix).

Drawing from Chen’s (1994) “internationalist localism”, a similar agenda has been proposed by Falcous and Silk (2006) to bolster an international dialogue that critically examines “the place(s) of sport as a site of significance within the politics of alternative locales in the post-9/11 September 2001 world” (p. 321). The currency of a global cultural studies project can therefore be found in its ability to reveal the interrelated and multidirectional cultural, political-economic, and military connections between the supranational and national. In our case, this involves illuminating the significant ramifications of 9/11 for Canadian citizens whose levels of prosperity and security—along with other pivotal environmental and energy issues—are increasingly entangled in Canada’s complex and interdependent, yet unequal bilateral relationship with the US.

Given Canada’s proximity to the US, the impact of 9/11 was felt immediately north of the 49th parallel, most significantly with the deaths of 24 Canadians who perished on that day in September. Following the attacks, over 200 planes in Canadian airspace (most were destined for the continental US) were safely guided to various communities across Canada; more than 33,000 passengers and aircrews were welcomed into homes and public facilities for up to three days until airspace was reopened and flights resumed. The attacks also resulted in the closure of the Canadian-US border by US officials, which severely disrupted trade and the flow of “capital, goods and services which amount to over a billion dollars a day in business for corporations in both countries” (Clarke, 2007, p. 85). Following 9/11, Washington radically shifted its policy priorities and implemented a new national security paradigm where “security trumps trade”—a paradigm that directly threatened NAFTA’s two peripheral states, Canada and Mexico (Clarkson & Banda, 2007a). This shift was especially worrisome for the Canadian business community and the

federal government who were haunted by the fear of further territorial shutdowns that could jeopardize access to the sizeable US market (Clarkson & Banda, 2007a). Moreover, unsubstantiated reports that the terrorist hijackers entered the US from Canada further inflamed fears that the world's longest shared border was a security risk, "fusing the previously separate issues of economic and territorial security into one indivisible problem" (Grinspun & Shamsie, 2007, p. 18).

Stephen Clarkson and Maria Banda (2007b) propose that these developments spurred the Canadian business community into lobbying for a radical agenda that articulated homeland security integration and military integration as a definitive solution to Canada's economic vulnerability in the context of the US-led "War on Terror". With the encouragement of business lobbyists like the Canadian Council for Chief Executives and other right-wing think tanks that have long advocated for an integrationist agenda, the Canadian Liberal government, then led by Jean Chrétien, reconfigured its domestic policy priorities in congruence with the new US security paradigm (Clarkson & Banda, 2007a). The Liberal government, for example, rushed the Antiterrorism Act into law—legislation that was modeled after the US Patriot Act (Byers, 2007)—and provided police and intelligence agencies with substantial new powers including enhanced use of electronic surveillance and the right to arrest people suspected of planning a terrorist act (Stoffman, 2009).⁵ And, in December 2001, Ottawa signed a "Smart Border" agreement with Washington that provided the US with "new rights of inspection at Canadian border crossings, along with the merging of US and Canadian immigration and custom databases" (Clarke, 2007, p. 86).

In a similar vein, the Canadian corporate community recognized that alleviating US global "defense" ambitions was a "price worth paying for its economic concerns" (Clarkson & Banda, 2007b, p. 141), and lobbied alongside military interest groups for deeper military integration with the US. Steven Staples (2007) suggests that what has in fact emerged in the post-9/11 context is a "new strategic alliance" (p. 162) between Canadian business and military interest groups that have powerfully advocated for the harmonization of Canada's defense and security policies with those of the US—an integrationist agenda that has been in gestation for years (Clarkson & Banda, 2007b). Indeed, just as Ottawa accommodated Washington's new continental security paradigm, the Canadian federal government accepted the rationale for an invasion of Afghanistan and, by October 2001, had committed Canadian warships, planes, and Special Forces (under Operation Apollo) to "Operation Enduring Freedom" in the Arabian Sea. In December of that year, Ottawa had, in secrecy, deployed elements of Canada's elite special forces to southern Afghanistan. In February 2002, the first of 800 Canadian troops were sent to Kandahar for a six-month tour as part of a US Army counter-insurgency task force (Byers, 2007): the only combat mission for Canadian troops since the Korean War, 50 years earlier. Nevertheless, by all accounts, there were no plans for Canadian soldiers to remain in Afghanistan and, according to Stein and Lang (2007), Canada had "no Afghanistan policy or plan beyond the summer of 2002" (p. 20). By January 2003, however, the impending US invasion of Iraq would alter Canada's military involvement in Afghanistan.

While the majority of Canadians, particularly those inhabiting the provinces of Quebec and British Columbia, were opposed to any military participation in Iraq, the Canadian government was under ongoing pressure from business and

military lobbyists to support the “War on Terror” in some capacity (Stein & Lang, 2007). As a result of this dilemma, federal officials regarded a continued, if not more forceful military presence in Afghanistan, as a pragmatic political solution that would enable the Canadian government to decline involvement in Iraq without radically compromising diplomatic relations with our largest trading partner and continental ally. In February 2003, Canada sent 2,000 troops to the Kabul area of Afghanistan under the United Nations mandated International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which Canada would eventually command. This commitment allowed Ottawa to placate the US while strategically capitalizing on public opposition to the invasion of Iraq, and, on March 17, 2003, Chrétien announced in the House of Commons that Canada would not participate in military operations in Iraq.⁶ Chrétien’s decision was rebuked by right wing critics, including current Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper who, as Leader of the Opposition, extolled in his House of Commons address:

We will not be neutral. We will be with our allies and our friends, not militarily but in spirit we will be with them in America and in Britain for a *short and successful conflict* and for the liberation of the people of Iraq. We will not be with our government, for this government, in taking the position it has taken, has betrayed Canada’s history and its values...and for the first time in our history, left us outside our British and American allies in their time of need (as cited in Flanagan, 2007, p. 88: emphasis added).

We do not have space to do further justice to the other substantial instances of military and economic integration between Canada and the US that have occurred since 9/11, other than to reiterate that “September 11 scrambled together previously separate questions of economic and territorial security into one indivisible omelette” (Clarkson & Banda, 2007b, pp. 132–133). However, it is worth mentioning the ascendancy of Rick Hillier to General and Chief of Defense Staff of the Canadian Forces in 2005: a development that has had profound consequences for the Canadian Forces and Canada’s role in Afghanistan. Hillier’s vision for both were clarified in a Defense Policy Statement that emphasized the need for major structural and cultural changes as a means to enable the Canadian Forces to “neatly mesh with the US military” (McQuaig, 2007, p. 71) to aggressively respond to “failed” states (like Haiti and Afghanistan), and the threat of global terrorism in a decidedly complex post-9/11 new world order. Frustrated by years of budget cuts, Hillier and other military and corporate lobbyists sought to transform and remasculinize the image of the Canadian Forces from a “flaccid” peacekeeping-military, to a more substantive, virile force that engages in military combat with the type of high-tech weapons required for joint operations with the US military (see McQuaig, 2007; Dobbin, 2009a). Hillier’s ambition to transform the Canadian Forces into a war-fighting “junior partner to the US empire” (Dobbin, 2009a, p. 15) was embraced by Jean Chrétien’s successor, Paul Martin who, in the 2005 federal budget, granted the biggest military funding increase in a generation: \$13 billion over a five year-period marking a fundamental shift “both within the Canadian Forces and in the government’s view of the military” (Stein & Lang, 2007, p. 157). Moreover, it was Hillier’s proposed insertion of Canadian troops deeper into Afghanistan that resulted in the most significant deployment of Canadian Forces since the end of the Cold War. By 2005, the Liberal cabinet had approved a commitment of 2,000

troops to Kandahar for a one-year assignment. Prime Minister Martin reportedly agreed to this mission because it “was the most dangerous available and therefore best suited for amending damage caused to the Canada-U.S. relationship by our refusal to participate in the Iraq War...” (Byers, 2007, pp. 41–42).⁷

In preparation for the upcoming mission, Hillier publicly reasserted that “the role of the Canadian military is “to be able to kill people” and referred to insurgents in Afghanistan as “scumbags” (McQuaig, 2007, p. 72); a less than subtle contrast to Canada’s well regarded and carefully cultivated diplomatic reputation as an influential middle power, and successful international peacekeeper. Notably, Hillier’s bravado echoed the war-fighting rhetoric that permeated the US corporate media in their coverage of the “War on Terror”, where military heroes/liberators were routinely juxtaposed against “terrorists” and “evil-doers”. As the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2006) suggests, these claims also illuminate the ubiquity of fear in contemporary society whereby the often unseen, yet omnipresent, “terrors of the global” are routinely held up by local political and military leaders as evidence of the need for armed intervention and a permanent war economy.⁸ Despite his frank comments, Hillier’s language was intended to prepare the Canadian public for casualties, and in this regard, his statements were prophetic. Forty five Canadian soldiers died within the first few months of the deployment, which essentially altered the traditional image of the Canadian Forces from a military engaged in peacekeeping and humanitarian work, to an army engaged primarily in warfare (Stein & Lang, 2007). Moreover, the deployment to Kandahar and the resulting Canadian casualties:

Prompted the first national debate about Canada’s role in Afghanistan fully five years and three missions after the Canadian Forces had first set foot in Afghanistan. It would sharply divide Parliament and the Liberal Party. It would also mark the beginning of a vigorous public debate about the appropriate role for Canada and its military in global peace and security operations (Stein & Lang, 2007, p. 196).

By the end of 2005, Paul Martin’s minority government had been defeated in a confidence motion in the House of Commons, and on January 23, 2006 Stephen Harper and the Conservative Party of Canada were elected with a minority government. Harper, who is described by Canadian activist Maude Barlow (2005) as a “pro-Washington hawk” (p. 19), favors deeper economic and military integration with the US, although his ambitions have been somewhat restricted by the constraints of a minority government. Maintaining war-fighting armed forces is, however, “one of the few roles that Harper believes government should have” (Dobbin, 2009b, p. 17). Despite growing casualties and a heightened public debate over the war, in March 2006, Harper boasted of committing Canadian troops in Afghanistan until the “job is done”. Two months later, in May 2006, Parliament narrowly extended Canada’s mission in Kandahar for an additional two years—from February 2007 to February 2009—by a vote of 149–145 in the House of Commons. The motion to extend the mission was undoubtedly a risky move for the minority Conservative government, but it allowed Harper to demonstrate to Canadians, and perhaps more importantly to the US, that the Conservative Party was “stronger” on defense than its Liberal predecessor. In fact, the Kandahar mission has subsequently become synonymous with Stephen Harper and the Conservative Party of Canada to such an extent that Stein and Lang (2007) propose that most Canadians have forgotten

that the original decision to send Canadian soldiers to the most dangerous region in Afghanistan was made by Liberal leader Paul Martin.

It is within this divisive national context that the *Tickets for Troops* event must be located. As noted earlier, the dense nationalistic sentiments surrounding men's hockey, and the sport's long-standing historical connections with the military, have resulted in its frequent articulation by a range of political leaders at different historical conjunctures (Scherer et al., 2007). Still, it is worth revisiting an observation made by Stuart Hall (1984) about the willingness—and success—of the Right to maintain a popular presence and connect with British citizens via the terrain of popular culture: strategies that the Left largely neglected. As we will argue in the remainder of this article, Halls' concerns hold true in the contemporary Canadian context, where sport has served as a key site for the Conservative Party of Canada to promote a neoliberal agenda and morally regulate debate over Canada's involvement in Afghanistan (Scherer & McDermott, in press). Indeed, under the Harper government there has been an intensification of the hockey-war nexus that is, to use King's (2008) terms, evidence of the further militarization of everyday life, but also the sportification of political life in contemporary Canada.

Methodology

We were drawn to this project by the initial announcement of the *Tickets for Troops* event, and the ensuing decision by the Edmonton Oilers to censor critical postings about the philanthropic initiative and comments on the team's website that indicted the presence of Canadian troops in Afghanistan. Similar issues and power relations associated with the censorship of popular sport-related websites have been examined elsewhere (Scherer & Jackson, 2008). In light of these tensions, and the national debate over the war in Afghanistan, we became interested in exploring how the *Tickets for Troops* event would be presented to Canadian viewers on *HNIC*: a broadcast which was, of course, part of the planned flow (Williams, 1974) of that particular evening's programming on the CBC.

In an "attempt to grasp the basic rhythms and related elements of the program" (Gruneau, Whitson, & Cantelon, 1988, p. 273), we transcribed the succession of interrelated items and themes contained within the *Tickets for Troops* broadcast (with the exception of commercials). These included pregame commentary and interviews, play-by-play coverage in all three periods, and dialogue that took place during the intermissions including the *Behind the Mask* segment after the first period, and the CBC's interview with a high ranking military official after the second period. We also transcribed the lengthy postgame *After Hours* segment that featured a discussion between CBC hosts, three Canadian soldiers, and an Edmonton Oiler hockey player at ice level, as hundreds of Canadian soldiers took to the ice for a photo-op. The latter part of the *After Hours* segment also featured a conversation between the wife and son of a local soldier who participated in the segment live via video-phone from Khandahar. However, rather than viewing these elements as distinct segments or units, we sought to "understand the internal composition of the program, especially with respect to the interrelations between the primary segments or blocs of movement within it" (ibid).⁹

We approached our critical reading of the *Tickets for Troops* broadcast with the intention of illuminating how a number of local agendas in Canada are being

increasingly entangled within a much wider set of pressures and limits associated with neoliberal empire. While we were interested in revealing how various interest groups emphasized certain cultural meanings and political stances in support of the war in Afghanistan, we also sought to directly challenge those claims as part of a broader struggle to “change the commonsense alignments and formations of discourse” (Grossberg, 1997, p. 225). Our analysis revealed the promotion of three interrelated narratives throughout the broadcast, through which various interest groups endeavored to: 1) personalize the war in Afghanistan, the Canadian Forces, and neoliberal notions of citizenship, 2) articulate warfare and military training with the sport of men’s ice hockey in service of various promotional initiatives, and 3) optimistically promote the war in Afghanistan, the Canadian Forces, and the Conservative Party of Canada via the terrain of popular culture and commonsense Canadian “values”.

Personalizing War: Promoting Consensus and Neoliberal Citizenship

The CBC’s broadcast commenced with live footage of Rexall Place filled with fans in military fatigues, cheering loudly to heavy metal music. Cameras focused on the yellow ribbons that were painted on the ice surface behind each goal net, emblazoned on every player’s helmet, and pinned to the lapels of all media personnel working for the CBC that night. In Canada and the US, the yellow ribbon exists as a ubiquitous symbol that confers an immediately recognizable set of meanings and values associated with the support of military personnel and patriotism. Meanwhile, the word “Thanks” was interspersed between regular rink board advertising: a subtle intermeshing of patriotism and consumption that also represents a distinct political strategy designed to promote and shore up the belief that all Canadians support the war in Afghanistan. These images and sequences framed the broadcast in a particular (inter)national context and set the scene for the dramatic significance of this specific broadcast of *HNIC*. Building on these shots, cameras focused on the entrance of the Royal Canadian Artillery band and a military color party that displayed the Canadian and US flags to further emphasize the uniqueness of this game, and the post-9/11 solidarity of both nations.

Notwithstanding the symbolism of the yellow ribbons, one of the main representational strategies that featured throughout the *Tickets for Troops* broadcast was the personalization of Canadian soldiers and their families, and indeed, the broader war in Afghanistan. While sports broadcasters often focus on personalizing individual athletes (particularly in team sports such as ice hockey) through various hero-making production strategies (see Cantelon & Gruneau, 1988), the CBC essentially produced a series of personal vignettes about individual Canadian soldiers and their families who were routinely promoted as heroic “ordinary Canadians”. In their analysis of Fox Television’s mediated representations of Super Bowl XXXVI, Silk and Falcous (2005) observed that various post-9/11 “heroes” (police, firefighters, military personnel) “performed key perfunctory duties within the heavily propagandistic and carefully choreographed pregame show” (p. 456). Similarly, before the US and Canadian national anthems, which received loud ovations by those in attendance in another powerful symbolic display of solidarity, two soldiers and their wives joined CBC hosts Scott Oake and Kelly Hrudehy

on the ice for a pregame segment. After introducing the soldiers (including their ranks and number of tours in Afghanistan) and their wives, the CBC commentator informed Canadian viewers that one of the soldiers was soon to return to Kandahar. The soldier was then asked to speak to a video clip that introduced Canadians to soldiers in Afghanistan via the terrain of popular culture:

Scott Oake: Tell us the story of the special puck you will be using for the ceremonial face off.

Soldier: Right, a couple days before I left Afghanistan I was given the puck and told that we would be dropping a puck at a certain day in November. I had no idea that it would be tonight, and I had no idea that it would be in front of all this, so I said “sure, I will do that”, and we had as many people take pictures with it as we could, and I brought it back with me on my leave, and here we are.

Canadian viewers were then shown a montage of four photographs of Canadian soldiers (all but two were men) stationed in Afghanistan, smiling and posing with the hockey puck, and playing ball hockey with a Canadian flag in the background. Fox Sports produced very similar segments during the XXXVI Super Bowl pregame show that featured postcards through which viewers were invited not to forget US soldiers in Afghanistan (Silk & Falcous, 2005). In this sense, the local *Tickets for Troops* broadcast was not only about introducing a national audience to soldiers and their families in Edmonton. Equally important was establishing a strong “personal” connection—via the medium of television—with Canadian soldiers currently stationed in Afghanistan in a popular and quintessentially Canadian manner that promoted unity and connectedness.

Building on these strategies, immediately before the start of the game, the Rexall Place rink announcer reintroduced these soldiers and their families who were accompanied to center ice by other members of the Canadian military (including General Rick Hillier who received a boisterous ovation) and the Minister of National Defense, Peter MacKay:

Hockey fans, Captain Dan Hone has traveled to Edmonton from Kandahar airfield in Afghanistan and brought with him a puck that Canadian military members use for pick up road hockey games in Kandahar. And Captain Hone tells me that it would be fitting that this special puck would be brought to start tonight’s *Tickets for Troops* game. We now ask the Oilers’ Assistant Captain Shawn Horcoff and Chicago Blackhawks’ Captain Martin Lapointe to join Captain Vitch, Captain Hone, and Minister MacKay at centre ice to start tonight’s hockey game.

During the *After Hours* segment, meanwhile, viewers across the country were introduced to another Canadian soldier currently stationed in Kandahar via video-phone, and his wife and son who were in attendance at the game in Edmonton. Indeed, throughout the *Tickets for Troops* broadcast, the families of Canadian soldiers were also called upon to perform key perfunctory duties. For example, in this instance, Canadian viewers watched live on national television as the soldier greeted and conversed with his wife and son. Most of the light-hearted dialogue, which was moderated by the CBC hosts, appeared to be highly scripted and choreographed: the soldier’s son reported on the outcome of the game to his father, and the soldier

thanked the Oilers' organization and fans for their support of Canadian soldiers. However, when CBC host Kelly Hruddy jokingly asked the soldier's wife, who was visibly nervous and seemingly well aware of the voyeurism at play, if she had anything else say to her husband, she unintentionally revealed the scripted nature of the dialogue by quickly responding: "not on air".

The cumulative effect of these narratives was the articulation of soldiers and their families, military leaders, and Conservative politicians with affective national symbols and, of course, the promotion of personalized and patriotic representations of these interest groups as "ordinary Canadians". For Eva Mackey (2002), the "ordinary Canadian" is a key concept of a so-called populist neoliberal discourse that seemingly transcends differences of race, class, gender, and sexuality, especially when it is associated with taken-for-granted elements of national popular culture. Returning to the initial introductions in the first period, for example, while the soldiers appeared in military fatigues, family members wore Edmonton Oiler hockey jerseys like any quintessentially Canadian family, while Peter MacKay dressed casually, like "any" blue collar hockey fan in Edmonton, in jeans and a red and white sweatshirt (the national colors). There are at least two interrelated effects that flow on from these strategies. First, the soldiers and their young families—all of whom were white, working-to-middle class, Anglophone Canadians—were promoted as ideal neoliberal citizens and worthy recipients of these charity initiatives: "ordinary Canadians" who seek neither special status nor help from the state. In this sense, the "ordinary Canadian" also constitutes what Eva Mackey (2002) refers to as an unhyphenated Canadian identity that is white and culturally unmarked. Yet, the "ordinary Canadian" is nonetheless defined primarily by who he/she is not: a discursive strategy that works to redefine citizenship and "naturalize the exclusion of some citizens from notions of national belonging without direct reference to culture, race, sexual preference and gender" (Mackey, 2002, p. 21). The fluid alignment of the soldiers and their family members with these taken-for-granted understandings of what it means to be an "ordinary Canadian" arguably provides an initial explanation as to why these individuals and their families were selected to appear on this particular broadcast in the first place. Finally, the humanized representations of the Canadian Forces and their families as "ordinary Canadians" positions them in a sympathetic and supposedly apolitical manner: an ongoing strategy used by the Conservative government to render any criticism against the war in Afghanistan as unpatriotic, and as a failure to *support* the troops and their families (see Laxer, 2008; McQuaig, 2007).

Second, Peter MacKay's casual appearance was likely carefully scripted in relation to the Conservative Party's promotional strategies that have been designed to make the party, and various right wing politicians, more palatable to working and middle class voters (Flanagan, 2007; Wells, 2006): for the most part, the exact constituency in attendance at the *Tickets for Troops* event. In this respect, hockey continues to be deployed as *the* preeminent signifier of a particular "brand" of Canadianness by the federal Government to reimage its divisive neoliberal political platform to appeal to its imagined "ordinary Canadians" via the terrain of everyday life. These promotional endeavors have been first and foremost deployed with the aim of softening Stephen Harper's reputation as an uncharismatic, right wing ideologue, by articulating the Prime Minister as a passionate hockey fan, an avid and dedicated hockey historian, and an "ordinary" Canadian hockey Dad (Scherer

& McDermott, in press). Nevertheless, these tactics similarly reinforce a power structure that, despite significant demographic changes across an increasingly multicultural nation, is sustained by a naturalized vision of life in Canada—with hockey at the forefront of that vision—that remains “decidedly masculine and white” (Adams, 2006, p. 71).

These carefully scripted segments that introduced Canadians to their fellow neoliberal citizens were, however, incredibly fragile. For example, during an interview with the aforementioned soldiers, CBC host Scott Oake acknowledged that one of the soldiers was soon to return to Afghanistan and asked his wife: “Bonnie, what has [Mark’s] leave meant to you?” Anticipating the impending departure of her husband, she was visibly shaken and tentatively replied: “It is really great to have him home. The kids missed him. It gives us a chance to bond a little bit . . . and now we’re just getting ready to have him go again.” The salience of this moment was further amplified by an awkward and unscripted pause that, presumably, caught the CBC host off-guard. However, instead of acknowledging the intensity of this moment, the flustered CBC commentator attempted to salvage the segment before a commercial break by simply stating, “Okay, so there they are! Great Canadians who put their lives on the line to make the world a better place.” Despite its brevity, what was on display was in fact a subtle, but powerful indication of the real impact of the war on Canadian soldiers and their families who are struggling to cope with the realities of neoliberalism and the consequences of lengthy wartime service. For example, in April 2008, it was reported that suicides committed by military personnel doubled between 2006 and 2007 to a rate triple that of the general population. Meanwhile, earlier in 2008, the outgoing military ombudsman publicly lambasted the federal government for failing to provide adequate support to families of fallen and injured soldiers, especially those suffering with posttraumatic stress disorder (Ottawa failing, 2008). Adding to this criticism, a 2008 Senate Defense Committee Report drew critical attention to the fact that wounded Canadian soldiers returning home from Afghanistan do not receive a uniformly high standard of treatment (O’Neill, 2008).

Indeed, the increasing prominence of these types of popular sport charity events needs to be understood in relation to the recalcitrance of the Conservative Party of Canada to provide more substantive social services that could ameliorate some of the private issues that Canadian soldiers and their families are encountering. Here it is worth returning to a point made by Raymond Williams (1985) over 20 years ago when he observed what some would consider to be just a (dis)comforting “contradiction”: the radical Right’s articulation of “pro-State rhetoric and practice, in military forces and a heavily policed law-and-order, with an anti-State rhetoric and practice in social welfare and the domestic economy, and in international monetary and trading exchange” (p. 191). We want to follow his observation by noting that this “contradiction” needs to be seen first and foremost as an “open and class-based division of powers” (ibid) by which the Right pursues its neoliberal ambitions that runs counter to the long-established common interests of Canadians (i.e., universal healthcare and collective social services). Indeed, it is precisely these common interests that are being further frayed when Canadians and Canadian families are continually encouraged by the Right—and consumer culture in general—to embrace consumer-oriented and private philanthropic solutions to personal troubles (see Harvey, 2009; King, 2006) without reference

to public issues or more enduring political solidarities. There are clear parallels between these tendencies and what Raymond Williams (1985) conceptualized as “mobile privatization”: a condition where individuals/families gradually withdraw from a fuller and more political sense of citizenship into a private and depoliticized life that consists of significantly higher levels of consumption and mobility than those afforded to previous generations. In the context of neoliberalism, it is the consumer-citizen who is now increasingly called upon as a volunteer to perform acts of charity, all the while remaining in the comfort of that “private shell” (Williams, 1989), content to further relinquish what were once the responsibilities of the public sector to corporate-led philanthropic initiatives.

War Minus the Shooting in Promotional Culture

Working in tandem with these narratives, CBC broadcasters and military interest groups worked hard to articulate selective themes and images of warfare and military training with men’s hockey. However, on the *Behind the Mask* segment, CBC host Scott Oake initially opened the piece by attempting to dismantle the all-too-common equation of sport with war, and athletes with warriors:

In the business of sport broadcasting we know all too well that we are very privileged with the use of words like battle and warriors, so we’re going to fix that right now on *Behind the Mask* because we’re delighted to welcome three real warriors who have seen real battle.

Similarly, Samantha King (2008) has observed that after 9/11, US sports commentators placed a brief moratorium on the deployment of sport-war metaphors and military language. Yet, despite the CBC host’s intention to reintroduce Canadians to three “real warriors”, the soldiers almost immediately reverted to taken-for-granted sports-talk and military metaphors. As the segment continued, for example, the soldiers compared the skill-level of a 19-year old rookie hockey player with the skills needed by soldiers in battle. Next, the soldiers equated military exercises and mental preparation for battle with training for hockey games, and compared the positional tactics in ice hockey with military maneuvers and strategies:

Scott Oake: ...when you guys go “outside the wire”, which is military lingo for off-base on a mission, you’re putting your lives on the line, if it’s not IED’s [Improvised Explosive Devices], it is snipers ... it’s whatever. When we talk about mental preparation in professional sport, in our case the sport of hockey, but that’s nothing compared to what you guys have to go through to get ready. How do you do it?

Soldier: Absolutely. If you compare the military, going overseas, the training we do, with a hockey game let’s say, it’s the same drills, the same plays, over and over again on the ice as it is in the field. And we don’t think about it when we go there, it is second nature, just like it is in a hockey game. It’s all timing. It really is no different.

Contained herein is a glaring contradiction between the host’s conspicuous efforts to distinguish between sport and war in his initial question, and the soldiers’ near instant reversion to popular sport-military metaphors. In fact, as the segment

continued, the soldiers were asked to describe an actual firefight, to which one responded:

Umm, a fire fight is fast. Again, it's all second nature...once it's done then you got time to relax. It's like a 20-minute hockey period, you may do it in three days, but once you're done you get time to relax and go back to your dressing room... and have a conversation about what you could have done better.

These segments were arguably intended to take Canadian viewers behind the scenes of battle—albeit at a very safe distance—via ordinary imagery and language that they can understand and relate to in their everyday lives. However, at no point did either of the CBC hosts challenge these types of claims and sport-war associations that effectively trivialized the potential consequences of wartime service for Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan. Interestingly, similar euphemisms were deployed during the Persian Gulf War by US corporate and political leaders who used gridiron imagery “to deflect the public’s attention away from the real horrors of war by rallying support for the ‘home team’” (Jansen & Sabo, 1994, p. 7). The uncritical embracement of these sport-war analogies of almost unbelievable banality also illuminates the superficialities and limits of this type of popular “sports talk” which rarely departs from its scripted format. Undoubtedly, these individuals were most likely coached to use specific sports-language and popular imagery throughout the broadcast. Here, the celebration of soldiers as athletes and the association of sport with war—and the inevitable omissions of these analogies—are consistent with a type of symbolic violence. For Pierre Bourdieu (1996/98), symbolic violence is “wielded with tacit complicity between its victims and its agents, insofar as both remain unconscious of submitting to or wielding it...the people involved are manipulated as much as they manipulate. They manipulate even more effectively the more they are themselves manipulated and the more unconscious they are of this” (p. 17).

Beyond this, we were struck by the sheer amount of dialogue throughout the broadcast that was devoted to mentioning or explaining the extensive military training that soldiers undergo before serving in Afghanistan. Returning to the aforementioned conversation about firefights, another soldier responded: “It’s the same as training, as long as things don’t go pear shaped, guys react like they do in training”. In the *After Hours* segment, meanwhile, three Canadian soldiers also discussed the physical, tactical, and mental training they received before departing for Afghanistan, while numerous images and clips of soldiers taking part in training exercises were displayed. The consistent emphasis on the training methods of the Canadian Forces was arguably shown to demonstrate to viewers and potential new recruits that, despite mounting casualties, Canadian soldiers are well prepared and well equipped to “succeed” in Afghanistan.

Although never directly mentioned by military personnel during the evening’s broadcast, the articulation of sport with military service and training—and soldiers with athletes—needs to be contextualized in relation to the recent aggressive marketing initiatives of the Canadian Forces that have been officially dubbed “Operation Connection”. Not unlike “Operation Tribute to Freedom” that was, in part, designed to reinforce the bonds between citizens and the US military (King, 2008), “Operation Connection” was developed to connect all elements of the Canadian Forces with citizens through a range of community-based programs. However, in addition

to simply raising the profile of the Canadian Forces, “Operation Connection” was primarily conceived of as a comprehensive cross-country recruitment strategy to increase reserve numbers by 10,000 new recruits, and standing army numbers by 15,000–75,000 soldiers (Ebbels, 2006). Indeed, sport exists as a key promotional site through which new recruits—especially boys and men—are invited to “fight with the Canadian Forces,” the slogan of a popular new advertising campaign for the Canadian military that, incidentally, was featured in the flow of that particular evening’s broadcast on the CBC. It is increasingly common, for example, to see Canadian Forces Hornet jets flying over top of Canadian Football League games and military displays at hockey arenas and other cultural events. Beyond this, in 2006, the Department of National Defense negotiated a \$500,000 marketing deal to sponsor Canadian Interuniversity Sport, allowing the Canadian Forces to have a presence at all sporting events, in addition to gaining one-on-one access to student athletes (Mayeda, 2008). During the 2007 Canadian Interuniversity Sport championship football game, the Vanier Cup, a military recruitment office was stationed inside the stadium grounds to target students and athletes, while military equipment has been displayed on several university campuses across Canada.

Operating at the core of “Operation Connection” are claims that by joining the Canadian Forces, new recruits—including Aboriginal youth who are increasingly targeted by recruiting campaigns—will not only get important life skills, but an education and employment. D’Abord Solidaires, a citizen-based collective, in fact, suggests that these “predatory recruitment strategies”, like the ones used by the US military to target low-to-middle-income citizens, “take advantage of unemployment and ever-rising tuition fees at post-secondary institutions” (2009, p. 9). Beyond this, what these examples reveal is that in contemporary promotional culture, “there are no obvious starting points and endpoints, but rather recursive and mutually reinforcing public texts that generate more visibility and more business for all concerned” (Whitson, 1998, p. 67). Here, it appears that Canadian Interuniversity Sport, and other professional sporting leagues/teams, are increasingly seeking out marketing partnerships with the Canadian Forces in a promotional manner designed to enhance the popularity and interests of all parties.

National Interest: Massaging War with “Canadian” Values

Throughout the *Tickets for Troops* broadcast, high-ranking military officials, Canadian soldiers, and Conservative political leaders were afforded an uncontested platform to speak to a national audience and promote Canada’s role in Afghanistan as a matter of national interest for *both* countries. As noted earlier, the Conservative Party has routinely attempted to “massage” divisive neoliberal policies to appeal to moderate voters via the sport of hockey. These types of promotional tactics are, in fact, a skillful adaptation of the strategies used by the Bush administration (Scherer & McDermott, in press; Wells, 2006) that, in turn, speaks to the transnational connections of a right wing political network that shapes and structures political dialogue in Canada. More specifically, the Harper government has readily adopted the discursive strategies of Frank Luntz, a US Republican pollster and communications adviser who, in recent meetings, encouraged Conservative Party members to capitalize on the popularity of hockey to sooth any divisive tensions from right wing policies (Scherer & McDermott, in press).

These strategies set powerful limits and pressures on the dialogue that took place throughout the *Tickets for Troops* broadcast. During the second period, CBC host Scott Oake conducted a brief interview with Defense Minister Peter MacKay who was afforded the opportunity to refute criticism of Canada's intervention in Afghanistan in light of mounting Canadian casualties. Notably, the CBC host introduced the segment with a distinctly gendered statement (to date, two female Canadian soldiers have been killed in Afghanistan):

Scott Oake: When you send our men [sic] to war you know there's a chance of the ultimate sacrifice, and so far 73 soldiers have made it. What would you say to Canadians to convince them that the mission in Afghanistan is working?

Peter MacKay: Well, millions more children in school, mainly women, never given the opportunity to vote and participate in democracy. That's all happening. And it's happening in large part due to those sacrifices. We're seeing a country transformed, no longer exporting terrorism. That's good news to everyone. People here in Canada really appreciate what our Forces are doing.

Despite MacKay's attempt to massage the current mission in Afghanistan as a legitimate and successful intervention, his remarks, though perhaps nowhere near as audacious as George W. Bush's infamous "mission accomplished" speech, over-state the quality of life for the vast majority of Afghans since the US-led coalition overthrew the Taliban in 2001. Indeed, many of the Western promises of "democracy" and "freedom"—elusive and often illusory concepts in their own right (see Harvey, 2009; Roy, 2007)—have failed to materialize as corrupt politicians, the consequences of a thriving drug trade, unfathomable levels of poverty, crumbling infrastructure, and growing civilian casualties fuel local animosity against foreign soldiers who, as an occupying armed force, are struggling to win the "war" for the hearts and minds of Afghans. According to UN reports, 2,118 Afghan civilians were killed in 2008—an increase of 30% from 2007—with more than 800 killed by NATO and progovernment forces (Waiting for, 2009). These fatalities have further damaged the relationship between soldiers and Afghans, many of whom are swelling the ranks of a deeply rooted local insurgency in southern Afghanistan, where Canadian soldiers are on the front lines. Moreover, it is also widely accepted that lawlessness reigns in many parts of the country, while according to the UN as many as 18 million Afghans live on less than \$2.50 a day, and one in four Afghan children die before the age of five from preventable illness (Waiting for, 2009).

Despite the significance of these ongoing issues, during the second intermission, hosts Scott Oake and Kelly Hrudef interviewed Brigadier General Mark Skidmore who again massaged the "important work" being done by the Canadian military in Afghanistan:

Mark Skidmore: Well, you're seeing the dramatic stuff on the news. You're seeing sort of the combat action and so on. But so much of it goes on behind the scenes where we're trying to help, you know, Afghan children and Afghan women try to build the infrastructure and the competency there to have a stable democracy.

In yet another instance, during the *Behind the Mask* segment, host Kelly Hrudey asked one of the soldiers to speak to Canadians about the role of the Canadian Forces in Afghanistan:

Kelly Hrudey: And your presence ... what does it mean to the people in Afghanistan?

Soldier: The presence, I think, it's ... I think the people want us there. There's the freedom that they get now that they didn't have before.

Kelly Hrudey: Are they able to express that to you or is it dangerous for them to?

Soldier: It is dangerous for them at times, the women and children ... we try and provide them with schools, build them roads and give them a better life. And it's hard for them to show their support when the bad guys are still there.

These "preferred narratives of military intervention" (Silk & Falcous, 2005, p. 457) are highly selective and, beyond glossing over the political division that surrounds Canada's continued presence in Afghanistan, are almost identical to the recent rhetoric produced in the US that codes the "War on Terror" through an unyielding moral frame based on "universal" values and human rights (Harvey, 2009). This represents a significant change from earlier propaganda that aggressively emphasized "smoking out" al-Qaeda and annihilating the Taliban before, and immediately following, the initial US-led invasion of Afghanistan. However, when Canadian politicians and military personnel portray the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan as a democratizing project or an exercise in reconstruction that is providing freedom to a recalcitrant nation, they neglect to reveal the overall goal of the war they are complicit in: to install a regimen favorable to the interests of the US and its allies, and to expand the US empire into Central Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe (Kowaluk & Staples, 2009). Furthermore, we cannot discount the colonial paternalism that underscores many of the remarks of white politicians and military personnel who train to "do good" and eliminate the "bad guys" on "missions" to build democracy and help civilize Afghanistan. By extension, these comments reveal an underlying racism that "portrays Afghans as totally devoid of humanity, congenitally averse to democracy, justice, and human rights" (D'Abord Solidaires, 2009, p. 7). It is in this sense, then, that the cloaking of the "War on Terror" as a mission of liberation speaks to the ongoing Orientalist mentality that dominates Western thinking about the Muslim world (Farhoumand-Sims, 2009), further revealing the ongoing suturing of neoliberal globalization and imperialism.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the rhetoric justifying the ongoing military intervention as a mission to liberate Afghanistan's most vulnerable citizens: its female population. Against these claims, which have previously been invoked by the likes of George W. Bush and Tony Blair, we argue that the real motives for the war in Afghanistan—or any recent war for that matter—have little, if anything, to do with the liberation of women. Before 9/11, Western governments had, of course, turned a blind eye to the long-standing inequalities in Afghanistan, and ignored the violations of women's rights "by former Mujahedin warlords and US allies who terrorized the country and are recorded to have participated in gross violations of human rights against the Afghan population as a whole" (Farhoumand-Sims, 2009,

p. 182). If one of the main motives for the invasion of Afghanistan was the liberation of women, it would seem plausible, then, to suggest that Canadian Forces could be deployed wherever the rights of women are violated, including a host of countries like Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, or perhaps even in Western countries with long-standing gender inequalities and high rates of domestic violence. Beyond this, it seems unlikely for an occupying Western force to be able to address “the cultural, historical, and traditional foundations for gender discrimination and violence in Afghanistan” (Farhoumand-Sims, 2009, p. 188). Indeed, a number of recent incidents—acid attacks on schoolgirls in Kandahar, targeted assassinations of female politicians and police, and the Afghan government’s endorsement of the Family Law Bill that appears to legalize rape in marriage—call directly into question whether the lives of Afghan women have actually been improved since the occupation of Afghanistan (Martin, 2009). Finally, it is no small irony that, despite showing rhetorical concern for the safety and plight of Afghan women, the Conservative Party of Canada’s domestic neoliberal agenda has been widely vilified by feminists for its far-reaching cuts to women’s programs across Canada.¹⁰

At this point, it is worth commenting on another important paradox that accompanied the narratives that emphasized the liberation of Afghan women: the near complete exclusion of women from the *Tickets for Troops* broadcast itself. For example, not once throughout the entire broadcast was a female soldier interviewed (of course, many were in attendance at the game) about their role in Afghanistan or the families they left behind to serve overseas. Nor was a single female soldier asked to comment about the hockey game. In fact, the only women who appeared regularly were the soldiers’ wives who were positioned as vulnerable and responsible for maintaining the domestic “front”.

Varda Burstyn (1999) has argued that sport and warfare play a vital role in organizing the contemporary gender order, evident in the cultural emphasis placed upon the ideas that men are built for violence and death, and that war is “an essential test of manhood and, like sport, a quintessentially masculine activity” (p. 175). She also makes the additional point that these naturalized beliefs “provide an identity anchor for masculine self-definition on both an individual and a social scale, especially if other anchors are melting away” (ibid). Michael Messner (1992) and Dave Whitson (1994) have advanced similar arguments about the value of contemporary men’s sport as a masculinizing practice through which traditionally masculine ways of embodying power (i.e., the capacity for physical violence and domination) are celebrated widely, and extensively circulated in the media as evidence “that men are superior to women and that aggression is not only affective but admirable” (Whitson, 1994, p. 359). We wholeheartedly agree with these observations, and propose that the public celebration of hegemonic masculinity and masculine heroism—on and off the ice—throughout the broadcast needs to be seen as a defense of the gender order that is being challenged and called into question on a number of interrelated cultural, economic, and political levels. That is, in the broader context of the recent remasculinization of the Canadian Forces, and the sport-focused recruitment strategies that appear to target boys and men, the broadcast normalized a number of taken-for-granted cultural beliefs that equate hockey and warfare as male preserves.¹¹ Beyond this, in the *After Hours* segment, viewers were shown a video clip of male soldiers playing ball hockey in a rink/men’s cultural center (Kidd, 1990) in Afghanistan that prompted one soldier to boast

about the physicality of those games by noting that “there have been few broken bones”. These naturalized gendered “expectations”, which often operate unconsciously, were perhaps best displayed through the comments of Brigadier General Mark Skidmore who, when asked to comment about the *Tickets for Troops* event, responded with a rhetorical question that speaks to the invisibility of masculinity: “What’s better than soldiers and hockey”?

In addition to uncritically promoting the presence of Canadian troops in Afghanistan as matters of national interest, the CBC’s broadcasters, Conservative politicians, and soldiers routinely massaged the mission in Afghanistan with other popular, commonsense Canadian “values”. Take, for example, the following discussion that took place during the *After Hours* postgame segment between the CBC hosts, three Canadian soldiers, and Edmonton Oiler Shawn Horcoff:

Scott Oake: Afghanistan is a war-torn country, and people there are used to seeing soldiers now for generations. Here’s something you can all weigh in on: what distinguishes Canadian soldiers from others that have engaged in battle in that country before?

Soldier: Canadian soldiers are more respectful of the people in that country. We try to help them help themselves, and not try to be an, umm, oppressive force, over top of everybody else. It’s just the way we are—Canadians.

Soldier: I think one thing we bring to the table with us wherever we go is our politeness and our willingness to get the job done. The same way as it is in hockey, no matter what happens out in front of your goalie, you’re gonna get the guy outta there.

Shawn Horcoff (laughing): That’s great advice, we’re gonna have to use that a little more.

Admittedly, this segment was designed to be optimistic and light-hearted, and was clearly draped in a dominant national mythology: an ongoing “story we tell ourselves about ourselves” which, in this case, articulated the Canadian Forces with the popular image of Canadians as respectful and polite that was perhaps aimed at triggering a residual association with Canada’s peacekeeping legacy. We were, however, somewhat struck by this type of commentary as it appeared to counter the recent shift in the promotional strategies of the Canadian Forces and the masculine banter of Rick Hillier who initially depicted the role of Canadian soldiers as “killing machines”. However, the prevalent and taken-for-granted construction of Canadians as polite and respectful works,¹² in some ways, to distinguish the Canadian Forces from other armies, namely, the much-maligned US military (e.g., Abu-Ghraib), with the specific caveat—one with obvious hyper-masculine overtones—that Canadian soldiers can still “get the job done”.

Nevertheless, the public relations narratives of “polite progress” expressed by these individuals trivialize the complexity of Canada’s mission in Afghanistan and occlude the ongoing issues facing Canadian soldiers who are increasingly divided from Afghan citizens. These issues include tremendous challenges with respect to language difficulties, Afghanistan’s history, geography, traditions, tribal and ethnic divisions, and perhaps most importantly, long established patterns of warfare that

have successfully expelled other more sizeable armies throughout history (Byers, 2007; Laxer, 2008). Yet, the spin evident throughout the *Tickets for Troops* broadcast neglects to mention these and other egregious tensions including a growing insurgency in Kandahar that continues to take the lives of many Canadian soldiers who are often regarded by Afghan citizens as indistinguishable from US soldiers. Indeed, as Michael Byers (2008) has observed, for the better part of a year in Kandahar Canadian soldiers “essentially remained under U.S. operational control—in part because of their dependency on U.S. air support” (p. 42). Byers, in fact, suggests that Canadian soldiers have faced an escalation of attacks by insurgents because of heavy-handed US tactics, most notably air strikes against villages suspected of housing suspected Taliban or Al-Qaeda members.

Moreover, Canadian troops are based out of a heavily fortified US base in Kandahar—another indication of the transnational connections between both militaries—with secure fencing around the perimeter designed to offer protection against suicide bombers and explosive devices. Notably, while US soldiers enjoy a range of fast food franchises (including Burger King and Subway) on the Kandahar base, itself a comment on the increasing synergy between the military and other corporations, their Canadian counterparts have access to a quintessential symbol of Canadian identity and culture: a private Tim Horton’s coffee franchise.¹³ Despite the benefits afforded by these popular practices (and the obvious promotional gains for Tim Horton’s), they also speak to the significant cultural differences that exist between soldiers and Afghan civilians, many of whom, as noted earlier, are simply struggling to survive. Indeed, it is these types of affluent, fortified Western enclaves that symbolize a divide between “whole ways of life” that often generates substantial local resentment against foreign soldiers who only leave the base in armed convoy tanks due, in part, to the continued threat posed by suicide bombers and improvised explosive devices. As Stein and Lang note, soldiers

do not mingle easily with the population and even when they do spend the night in a village, they generally leave after a short time to move on to the next one. They are cut off, separated, foreign. They become intruders, even occupiers—a foreign body that is unwelcome to the local population... (2007, pp. 213-214).

Furthermore, in April 2006, allegations emerged that Canadian soldiers had abused three detainees before they were transferred to the Afghan National Police (Stein & Lang, 2007). The accusations sparked immediate parallels to an ill-fated mission to Somalia when, in 1993, two members of the Canadian Airborne Regiment tortured and beat to death Shidane Arone, a 16-year-old Somali boy who was caught attempting to steal supplies from the Canadian base.¹⁴ In May 2007, a further controversy erupted when reports emerged that Canadian soldiers had, in fact, handed over prisoners to Afghan officials “despite ample evidence—including from Canadian officials—that Afghanistan routinely tortures those in its custody” (McQuaig, 2009, p. 161). In fact, the original transfer deal—signed by Rick Hillier—failed to contain any provisions for the monitoring of detainees once they were transferred to the Afghan jails, making Canada complicit in torture in Afghanistan.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the controversy was somewhat “massaged” by the Canadian General who, as Linda McQuaig pungently observed, attempted to divert media attention “onto the flashy arrival of the Stanley Cup and a group of NHL old-timers in Kandahar” (2009, p.162).

Conclusion

When the enemy rears its ugly head, I expect you to kill and capture them and defeat them....The change today is similar to a line change in hockey. It's still the same team going down the ice to score... (US Lt.-Col. Bert Ges, speech to mark the handover of the frontline in Kandahar to Canadian soldiers, as cited in Laxer, 2008, p. 41).

In this article we have sought to advance a post-9/11, global cultural studies project that challenges the official rhetoric of nationalistic sporting spectacles that are deeply aligned with discourses of neoliberal empire and work in service of specific local agendas. Without doubt, there are important opportunities for sport scholars to continue this (inter)national dialogue by critically engaging other sport-state synergies, and sport-related philanthropic events that are increasingly taking place around the world. Each of these practices, like the *Tickets for Troops* event, undoubtedly provides much needed and valued support for military personnel and their families. However, our analysis also revealed how Canada's power elite, to borrow Mills's (1956) term—and here we include corporate (e.g., Rexall, the Oilers, other sponsors, etc), political, and military groups, and the CBC—converged to promote their own interests and generate popular consent for the war in Afghanistan during the *Tickets for Troops* broadcast. We have also argued that these increasingly prevalent spectacles, which are deeply aligned with the US-led “War on Terror”, further naturalize understandings of neoliberal citizenship in the postwelfare reform era and popular notions of corporate benevolence. Yet, as Raymond Williams (1985) remarked, the market can only provide so much support for citizens, let alone nourish more enduring collective identities: for “other human needs, beyond consumption, other relationships and conceptions of other people are necessary” (p. 190).

This brings us to a final comment about some recent developments pertaining to Canada's role in Afghanistan: a “mission” that remains divisive as Canadians are increasingly confronted with the realities of war-time service for military personnel. To date, 140 Canadian soldiers have been killed in Afghanistan, while hundreds more have been severely wounded and at least 400 others have suffered nonbattle injuries, including stress disorders (O'Neill, 2008). We can say with no certainty how many thousands of Afghans have perished as “collateral damage”, except that it has “exceeded many tens of times over the 2,746 who died in Manhattan” (Ali, 2009, p. 53) on 9/11. In March 2008, the Canadian Parliament passed a Conservative government motion to extend Canada's military mission in Afghanistan beyond February 2009, to an end-date of December 2011. The complete cost of the war to Canadians is estimated to reach \$28.4 billion by December 2011 (Staples & MacDonald, 2009), although these expenses have not deterred the Conservatives from making further substantive investments in the Canadian Forces. For example, in May 2008, Stephen Harper announced a \$30 billion plan to strengthen the military over the next 20 years, further distorting the role of government and the spending priorities of Canadians, and heightening existing concerns about the militarization of Canadian society (Barlow, 2005; McQuaig, 2007). Somewhat predictably, the day after this announcement, Harper appeared at the 2008 International Ice

Hockey Federation World Hockey Championships in Nova Scotia where Canada played Russia in the gold medal match: a historic rivalry with obvious Cold War/militaristic undertones.

There have also been several recent developments surrounding allegations that Canada has been complicit in the torture of Afghan detainees. Most recently, in November 2009, Canadian diplomat Richard Colvin testified to a Commons Special Committee on the Canadian Mission in Afghanistan that senior government officials were well aware that Canadian Forces were handing over detainees with the knowledge that they would be tortured by Afghan authorities in 2006 and 2007. The publicity over Colvin's testimony significantly damaged the Conservative government and led to angry refutations from generals, former generals—including Rick Hillier—and a number of cabinet ministers who focussed on attacking Colvin's credibility in an effort to deflect attention away from the substance of his testimony. In light of this growing controversy, on December 31, 2009, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper controversially announced the suspension or prorogation of Parliament until March 3, 2010, effectively shutting down all committee work, including the committee on Afghanistan, until after the Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver, where national attention will be focused on the performances of Canadian athletes and, in particular, the men's hockey team, which is looking to restore national pride after finishing in 7th place at the 2006 Turin Olympics.

In light of these developments, numerous social commentators on the Left have intensified their calls for a renewed and wide-ranging national dialogue on the far-reaching challenges that result from our deep economic, cultural and military exposure to the US (see for example the signing of the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America in 2005), and the recent shifts in Canadian policy. These developments appear to be undermining many of the values and institutions (e.g., multilateralism and peacekeeping¹⁶) that have been a source of great national pride and identity for Canadians at home and abroad. The media—public and private—as always, will play an integral role in framing future debates over these public issues, just as they continue to play a powerful role in setting ideological pressures and limits on the debates taking place over the role of the Canadian Forces in Afghanistan. Much of the coverage on the war in Afghanistan, like the CBC's coverage of the *Tickets for Troops* event, however, has been uncritical if not celebratory (Basen, 2009; Laxer, 2008; McQuaig, 2007). In fact, most of the reporting has come from journalists who, like their counterparts in the US, are embedded with the military, and whose resulting stories are "like those of sports writers working for the home team" (Laxer, 2008, p. 11). Yet, as the quote that introduces our conclusion makes clear, in the context of neoliberal empire, distinctions of sovereignty and the national identity of the "home team" are increasingly difficult to discern.

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Notes

1. This, in turn, signaled a subtle investment of public funds for the *Tickets for Troops* event. Although Rexall donated a block of tickets to the event, we are unaware if similar requests for donations were made to the occupants of the arena's luxury boxes (which, for the purposes of corporate entertaining, are also tax-deductible).
2. This references the highway between Montreal and Quebec City.
3. The Memorial Cup, which recognizes Canada's junior hockey champions, commemorates the valour of Canadian soldiers during the Great War, while thousands of Canadians have played in numerous war memorial hockey rinks across the country.
4. Thanks to substantial technological developments, Canadian soldiers currently stationed in Afghanistan can watch broadcasts of *HNIC* on the Canadian Forces Radio and Television satellite network.
5. The federal government currently spends \$25 billion a year on national security, while security for the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Games alone will cost upwards of \$900 million (five times their original estimate). Notably, the US military will cooperate with the Canadian Forces to provide security for Olympic events and US assets, fueling concerns about the substantial police/military presence at Canada's "terror games" (Atkinson & Young, 2005). This is in addition to the expenditure of \$100 million for the services of a private security consortium comprising one US and two Canadian firms that will provide additional security services during the Games.
6. This decision did not preclude the development of a "hidden compromise" with Washington: while no Canadian troops were sent to Iraq, Canadian frigates patrolled the Arabian Sea while Canadian soldiers remained seconded to US units as forces advanced on Baghdad. US military aircraft also passed freely through Canadian airspace en route to the Middle East (Byers, 2007).
7. It is also worth mentioning that despite accommodating Washington's new security paradigm, economic favors have been far from forthcoming as evidenced by higher duties on British Columbia's lumber and Prairie wheat (Byers, 2007; Clarkson & Banda, 2007). Moreover, despite extensive lobbying on the part of the Canadian government, in June 2009 the US began requiring anyone entering its territory by land to have a passport—a move that will likely deter millions of Americans who do not have passports from visiting Canada (Byers, 2007).
8. A similar culture of fear is visible in Canada, for example, with respect to the potential threat of home-grown terrorists in Toronto, and the possibility of terrorist attacks on Canadian soil, including, the Athabasca Tar Sands in Alberta.
9. We did not conduct an analysis of Canadian icon Don Cherry's popular *Coach's Corner* segment. In 1995, the CBC instituted a double-header format involving one game from the East—typically involving either Toronto or Montreal—and a later game featuring one of the Western Canadian teams, in our case the Edmonton Oilers. Cherry's *Coach's Corner* airs during the first intermission of the earlier game. Readers familiar with the Canadian context will, however, be aware of Cherry's trenchant support of the Canadian Forces and the "War on Terror". In fact, years earlier Cherry devoted an entire episode of *Coach's Corner* to promote his position that Canada ought to join the US in its invasion of Iraq. Cherry's viewpoints on Afghanistan and the contradictory nature of the CBC which, in this respect, is forced to consider the entertainment "value" of a media personality like Cherry over the other cultural mandates of the public broadcaster, await further analysis.
10. The Conservative Party has closed more than half of the regional offices of the Status of Women Canada department, and changed the criteria for government funding for women's groups, and removed the word "equality" from its objectives. The Harper government has also cancelled the court challenges program (which determined whether laws contravened women's rights), refused to adopt pay equity legislation, and cancelled funding for a national child-care program ("1,000 protesters", 2006).

11. Readers familiar with the work of Laura Robinson (1998) will no doubt be well aware of the highly eroticized hazing practices of all-male Canadian military and hockey subcultures that reproduce male power and female subordination.
12. Despite this construction, the Canadian Forces have benefited from many of the wartime practices of the US military. As Michael Byers noted: "In 2002, Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan were ordered to lay anti-personnel landmines around their camp. When the Canadians refused—citing our obligations under the 1997 Ottawa Landmines Convention—American soldiers, whose government has not ratified the convention and are thus not subject to the same restrictions, laid the mines for them" (p. 27).
13. While Tim Horton's waved the \$450,000 franchise fee, this particular outlet cost Canadian taxpayers \$3.9 million in its first year of operation (Boudreau & Liu, 2006).
14. The Airborne Regiment was disbanded in 1995 following the release of videos that depicted members of the Regiment making racist statements and engaging in brutal hazing rituals.
15. Yet, when this evidence emerged, and all three opposition parties subsequently demanded the resignation of the Minister of Defense (then Gordon O'Connor), Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper accused the opposition of sympathizing with the Taliban and failing to support Canadian soldiers: "I can understand, the passion that the Leader of the Opposition and members of his party feel for Taliban prisoners. I just wish occasionally they would show the same passion for Canadian soldiers" (Liberals furious, 2007). Operating behind the surface of this comment, of course, is the reductive framing of any criticism of the Canadian Forces or government policy as treasonous, and "un-Canadian".
16. Before the mid-1990s, Canada consistently ranked in the top ten of the nations contributing to UN peacekeeping operations. In 1991, Canada supplied 10.7% of all personnel used in these missions, which is starkly juxtaposed to our contribution by 2007 which had fallen to .077% (Valpy, 2007), ranking us 50th out of 95 nations contributing to such operations (Laxer, 2008).

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