

TO MY SISTERS IN THE FIELD

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LIBERATION SCENES

One of the reasons why I like reading the work of bell hooks is that she draws on examples from her own life as a black woman in America to expose the ways that racism and sexism still operate in the United States. In her chapter titled "Liberation Scenes" she takes aim at the media, arguing that far too many people have become complacent with the images they see and the words they hear on television and in the movies, and reminds us that these performances are much more than forms of entertainment, they are cultural constructs which shape and propagate ideas about the social world. Drawing on her own background, she describes how for black people living in the American south in the 1950s and 1960s, watching television and going to the movies was not a means of escape but rather "a place of confrontation and encounter" (hooks, 1984: 4). Theirs was not a passive consumption of images. Depictions of black servants living in harmony with their benevolent white masters were refuted and rebuked, not romanticized and idealized. Moreover, she discusses how these challenges took place among friends and family — in the home — away from public scrutiny. Resisting these images was a daily struggle, but this was black liberation in the mid-twentieth century. To bell hooks, modern day viewers, especially people who have to battle stereotypes and discrimination, need to nurture this critical edge.

Sport as a form of popular culture can be interpreted in the same way; it is not a means of escape but a place of confrontation and encounter (Coakley and Donnelly, 2004). This reality is particularly true for women who are increasingly gaining access to the once male-dominated domain of organized competitive sport. Encouragement for this movement comes in many forms. For example, conferences and gatherings organized around themes about women and sport are being hosted worldwide to encourage more women to get involved and stay committed to sport. These meetings are important because they provide women with new ideas, new contacts, and a new sense of hope. Yet, discussions about how women can improve, influence, and enrich existing sport structures belie the fact that for many female participants, integration into this area of life is still highly problematic (Hall, 2002). If following prescriptions worked, we would not be wondering about the complexities of female involvement in sport, or the slow progress associated with their incorporation into positions with decision-making power. The reality for many women who want to exercise and expand their leadership potential in this area of life is that they must consider when pushing for equity will re-

sult in meaningful change and when it will close the doors on future discussions. This is female liberation in sport in the twenty-first century.

In this paper, I examine some of the challenges that continue to limit the ability of women to exercise their leadership potential in sport.¹ I focus in particular on issues pertinent to Aboriginal women in Canada, and examine how their involvement in sport is shaped by two broad political projects, that is, Aboriginal self-determination and western feminism.² I show how these projects function in relation to the idea of “inclusion” which has become a key concept in Canadian sport, utilized by the federal government, through Sport Canada, to expand opportunities for sport to once previously marginalized groups. However, the various ways in which inclusion has been put into practice are complex and sometimes controversial. On the one hand are the efforts by Sport Canada to improve the situation for Aboriginal people and women by constructing and enforcing policies and action plans that require sport organizations to develop and implement strategies that will facilitate the involvement of these target groups. On the other hand are efforts by the sport organizations to accommodate the needs of under-represented populations. This issue becomes even more complicated when a sport organization is run by and for a particular target group, e.g., Aboriginal people or women, as the overarching political project facilitates the marginalization of select issues. In this paper, it is the marginalization of Aboriginal women and issues pertinent to them that is discussed in detail. Despite the appeal that each space offers — as spaces where Aboriginal female concerns are supposed to be addressed — when issues relevant to Aboriginal women are raised, broader concerns related to race or culture are prioritized instead, with the result that issues pertinent to them are not acted upon in a significant or sustained manner.

Inspired by the work of bell hooks, I have included examples from my own background to illuminate these challenges. As an Aboriginal woman who has participated as an athlete, administrator, and organizer in both the Aboriginal and mainstream sport system in Canada, I bring a perspective that Paraschak (1995) has noted is often missing from discussions on women and sport. Moreover, because there is a dearth of information on Aboriginal

1 Within the context of this paper, the term “leadership” refers broadly to positions with decision-making power (i.e., coaching, administration, event management, board of directors, etc).

2 In this paper, Aboriginal self-determination is defined as Aboriginal control over Aboriginal programs, and feminism is defined as a political project that seeks to create an environment where all women can flourish.

female experiences in sport in the written literature, part of my political project is to begin filling this gap by writing and theorizing about my own experiences, as proposed by Birrell (1990). Thus, what I offer is an experientially based critique of how ideas about Aboriginal self-determination and western feminism have both helped and hindered the leadership potential of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women in sport. To highlight these issues, I have organized my paper around two key themes: encountering inclusion and confronting silence. In doing so, I hope to expose the different ways ideas about inclusion have been put into practice and show how, sometimes, these ideas have the unintended effect of marginalizing and silencing the very people whom were meant to be empowered.

ENCOUNTERING INCLUSION

One of the strengths of the current Canadian sport system is its stated commitment to work towards inclusion; whether in the Aboriginal or the mainstream system, it is promoted as a highly valued goal. For example, it is widely acknowledged that opportunities for under-represented groups must be enhanced in order for the federal government to achieve its stated goal of increasing participation, excellence, capacity, and interaction among the stakeholders in sport by 2012. Statements about inclusion pertaining to women and Aboriginal people are mentioned in the *Canadian Sport Policy* (Canadian Heritage, 2002), the overarching strategy that guides federal priorities for sport development in Canada, and the *Federal-Provincial/Territorial Priorities for Collaborative Action 2002–2005* (Canadian Heritage, 2003), which builds on the Canadian policy by providing a concrete outline of what the government will consider committing resources to within a specific time frame. Not only are statements about women and Aboriginal people identified in the national policy and action plan, there exists a federal policy for each target group: the *Sport Canada Policy on Women in Sport* (Fitness and Amateur Sport, 1986) and *Sport Canada's Policy on Aboriginal Peoples' Participation in Sport* (Canadian Heritage, 2005). When viewed together, these documents represent the government's commitment to making sport more inclusive by attempting to address the diverse needs and interests of each group through principled policy statements.

In light of the important value placed on inclusion in sport, the challenge is not to secure support for the concept but to identify, discuss, and alter, where necessary, the various ways it has been put into practice. For instance, Sport Canada, the governing body for sport development in Canada, uses the

term inclusion to refer to “the process of viewing all members as equal members of society” (Canadian Heritage, 2005: 9). As a general statement that should be viewed positively, there remains significant latitude for how each sport organization will construct and maintain inclusion as a valued practice. Furthermore, ideas about how to include under-represented groups are shaped by the broader political aspirations and economic situation of each organization. Reaching agreement on the end goal — that of being viewed and respected as equal members of society — is one thing; it is quite another to map out, and agree on the process by which that goal will be achieved.

For example, within the context of Aboriginal sport, matters of cultural representation have sometimes taken precedence over matters of gender equity. In 2001, for instance, the Aboriginal Sport Circle, the national body for Aboriginal sport in Canada, agreed to provide financial support to the Assembly of First Nations to deliver international hockey opportunities for male hockey players through Team Indigenous (Ontario Aboriginal Sport Circle, n.d.). Although the Aboriginal Sport Circle normally distributes its resources evenly between male and female athletes, no such requirements were outlined in its support for the hockey project (Aboriginal Sport Circle, 2001: 1). Soon after forming the partnership, the Aboriginal Sport Circle withdrew its support for the proposed venture, not because female hockey players had been left out of the program but because of problems associated with the lack of communication between the two organizations. As this example demonstrates, the broader political aspiration of an organization, e.g., to secure an Aboriginal presence on the international sporting scene, shapes the type of projects it will foster and support. It also shows that when resources are scarce, as is typically the case in Canadian sport, directing human and financial resources to programs that already have established support systems can be legitimized as a rational decision even if it limits opportunities for some of its members, e.g., female hockey players. Equally important, it demonstrates how the use of homogenizing terminology to advance broader goals for sport, e.g., to promote the accomplishments of Aboriginal athletes, can render invisible the needs and goals of specific populations, in this case, Aboriginal female athletes. In environments where the nexus between politics and scarce resources intersect, the provision of opportunities for some members (males) is often described as “a good first step” because it is assumed that comparable opportunities for other members (females) will soon follow.

In contrast to my observations in Aboriginal sport, inclusion in organizations dedicated to advancing opportunities for women in sport generally

refers to having a diverse group of women at the decision-making table. It is common to find these organizations making space available for targeted groups, such as Aboriginal women, women of color, and women with disabilities, to participate in decision-making activities, panel discussions, workshops, and conferences. Over the years, I have come to appreciate the emotional support these spaces provide. Here, I can talk about openly and honestly about the lack of Aboriginal female participation in sport, the challenges they face, and the lack of financial resources to support their involvement. Acquiring opportunities to generate revenue to support female sports participation can be daunting when human and financial resources are scarce, and the general orientation of a community is more supportive of male athletic endeavors.

Sometimes in my discussions with women, we reach an impasse and I struggle to explain how gender, as it relates to Aboriginal women, fits into the picture. For example, the idea of “tradition” in Aboriginal sport can be both enabling and constraining depending on the perspective. At the same time this concept is being used by Aboriginal people to help revitalize and sustain their cultures, it is also being used to restrict Aboriginal female involvement in certain aspects of sporting life (e.g., Giles, 2004; 2005). The argument goes something like this: “Women have their own dances, sports, and games, and should take great pride in this, and not want to participate in the activities of men. It is tradition. It is part of our culture.” My point is that when issues specific to Aboriginal women come to the fore in environments dominated by the experiences and perspectives of non-Aboriginal women, tensions between ideas about gender, culture, race, and ethnicity emerge and struggle for legitimacy. If Aboriginal female experiences do not correspond to the lived experiences of the majority group, then the issues articulated by Aboriginal females are at risk of being labeled and marginalized as an “Aboriginal issue.”

Fiske and Browne (2006) utilize the term “culturalism” to describe this discourse impasse. As a technology of power, culturalism privileges “‘culture’ as an explanation for social differences at the expense of illuminating structures of dominance and bias” (p. 92). The parallel in sport is strikingly similar. Whether in all-Aboriginal or all-female environments, the discursive of “cultural difference” marginalizes Aboriginal female needs and goals for sport as something beyond the concerns of the majority. Rather than stopping to investigate how Aboriginal self-determination and feminism in sport is being implemented, and its impact on Aboriginal women, the call for attention

to Aboriginal female issues is viewed as evidence of the fragmentation of the group and its objectives.

Paradoxically, the tensions associated with culturalism stem in part from our limited understanding of the experiences of Aboriginal women in sport, and how their experiences are similar to and different from the experiences of Aboriginal men and non-Aboriginal women. There has been much talk among researchers about the need for this understanding but aside from the work of a few scholars (e.g., Giles, 2002; 2004; 2005; Hall, 2002; Hargreaves, 2000; Paraschak, 1990; 1995; 1996; 2007), there remains a dearth of analyses which focus on Aboriginal women and sport, or which engage Aboriginal women in discussions about their experiences in sport. The absence of this knowledge, which could enrich our understanding of the nexus between race, ethnicity, and gender, blinds us to ways that we can shape sport so that it enhances our lives socially, politically, and culturally.

For now, it appears that Aboriginal self-determination and feminist aspirations for sport share similar limitations for Aboriginal women. In the Aboriginal sport system, ideas about self-determination have contributed to the production and maintenance of gender inequality, while, in the mainstream sport system, Aboriginal women can find support for common concerns among women generally but struggle to extend the boundaries for what constitutes gender. At the practical level, the discursive marginalization of Aboriginal female issues makes it very difficult for Aboriginal women to gain access to resources that would enhance their involvement because alternative routes for human and financial support must repeatedly be sought. This is Aboriginal female liberation in sport in the twenty-first century.

CONFRONTING SILENCE

Given the fact that sports participation is linked to improved health outcomes, that Aboriginal women have fewer opportunities to participate in sport than Aboriginal men and non-Aboriginal women (this fact is highlighted by their position in sport as a specific target group within target groups) (e.g., Elias et al., 2000), and that the health of Aboriginal women, on average, is worse than their male and female counterparts (Native Women's Association of Canada, 2002; 2004), the need to focus attention on their involvement in sport is of paramount importance. At present, however, our knowledge on this subject is limited by the existing body of literature and published documents on Aboriginal female participation in sport and health, broadly defined. For instance, in the *Annotated Bibliography of Aboriginal*

Women's Health and Healing Research (Bennett, 2005), the most comprehensive resource to date on Aboriginal women's health in Canada, not one of the 900+ articles surveyed for the report pertain to sport or recreation. I view this as a curious omission because of the holistic approach that is frequently used to discuss Aboriginal health. The holistic approach, typically represented by a medicine wheel, is a reminder of the need to balance the mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual aspects of life. Most often, however, discussions about the physical component do not include analyses of the role of sport and/or recreation in Aboriginal female lives. A good example of this silence in the literature can be found in the *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (Government of Canada, 1996: 7–106), which includes a chapter (numbering more than 100 pages) on women's perspectives but which does not refer to sport, recreation, or physical activity as an integral part of female lives, or how being physically active can help women to gain and maintain good health.

In a similar vein, recognition of the context surrounding Aboriginal female participation in sport is missing from government documents and reports. Most references simply identify the under-representation of Aboriginal females as an issue that needs to be addressed. For example, in *The Report on Consultations with Provincial/Territorial Aboriginal Sport Bodies on the Draft Policy Framework* (Sport Canada, 2003), respondents from Ontario (pp. 13–14) and the Northwest Territories (p. 21) stated explicitly the need to focus more attention on issues pertinent to Aboriginal females so as to provide the government and sport organizations with reliable information on which to build policies and programs. As a result, and no doubt aided by efforts to encourage gender equity within the broader Canadian sport system, two brief statements about Aboriginal females having “unique” needs were inserted into Sport Canada's *Policy on Aboriginal People's Participation in Sport* (Canadian Heritage, 2005: 5–6). The insertion of these statements in the policy is an important consideration for the practitioners in the field — the coaches, organizers, and administrators — because we do not have a clear understanding of what these “unique” needs are and, consequently, risk reproducing the structures that continue to marginalize Aboriginal female participants.

If our present understanding of Aboriginal female participation in sport is shaped by a small collection of scholarly work (e.g., Giles, 2002; 2004; 2005; Hall, 2002; Hargreaves, 2000; Paraschak, 1990; 1995; 1996; 2007), then many of the policies and programs being developed today must be influenced by knowledge about Aboriginal male and non-Aboriginal (typically

white, middle-class, English speaking) female participation in sport. After all, policies and programs are not created from nothingness; they are based on long established practices that benefit certain segments of the population (and not others). That is why there is a national sport policy for Aboriginal people, and another for women. Each strategy is designed to respond to the needs and concerns that are “unique” to each group, while at the same time fulfilling the goals of the federal government.

My intention here is not to dwell on the dearth of knowledge about Aboriginal women in sport but to highlight the importance of bringing together Aboriginal women, policy makers, sport leaders, and researchers to discuss how the boundaries for sport can be, and should be, extended to better enable Aboriginal women to contribute to sport. It is time that Aboriginal female realities are acknowledged, documented, and addressed through research, policy, and practice, and that their stories are integrated into existing accounts of Aboriginal sport and women’s sport. With more information, policy makers and sport leaders will also be able to make more informed decisions about how to invest a limited range of human and financial resources to advance the needs and goals of this segment of the population.

Unfortunately, the reality for many Aboriginal women in sport is that they have few opportunities to publicly engage in discussions about gender, and how it shapes their lives as women. This point became clear when I participated in the first known roundtable discussion for Aboriginal women in sport in Ontario (Ontario Aboriginal Sport Circle, 2004). The goal of the roundtable was to provide a safe place for women to talk about the gender issues in sport, network, and, hopefully, walk away with new strategies for dealing with issues of equity and access for girls and women in their communities.

The roundtable was attended by a small group of female coaches, organizers, and administrators working primarily at the community level. Initially, a few of us began talking about how hard Aboriginal women had to work to achieve respect within the Aboriginal sport system. I shared my frustrations about being a doctoral candidate, a Tom Longboat Award recipient, and an experienced coach, organizer, and administrator, and still being positioned as a “youth” voice at various decision-making tables. Some of the women looked lost, so we shifted the discussion to community issues to encourage their participation. This focus opened the door for their involvement. They talked about the need for more opportunities for hockey, basketball, and volleyball to keep the men in their life busy in the evenings and on the

weekends. When asked what the females did for sport and recreation, they commented on the lack of opportunities, but could not identify why this inequity existed or why it should be changed. This is not Aboriginal female liberation in sport.

I have since interpreted their struggle for words as indicative of their lack of opportunity to engage in public dialogues about the nexus between gender, equity, and sport. I concluded that whatever discussions they may have had on this matter probably occurred in private, somewhere safe, away from scrutiny and discrediting discourses (e.g., “that’s a woman’s issue” or “that’s an Aboriginal issue”). It is also possible that they were afraid to talk about their experiences in sport; they were afraid of being misheard. Though it was our Aboriginal identities that brought us to the table, it might not have been enough to create a shared experience. Equally significant, it is possible that because the language of sport is rooted in the experiences of white middle-class men, the current lexicon utilized by Canadians to describe their sports experience is unable to capture the complex reality that is known to Aboriginal females (Best, 2003: 902). As one Aboriginal female respondent stated in a regional consultation on the development of the Aboriginal sport policy: “mainstream sport is something white guys on T.V. do” (Sport Canada, 2003: 11). In addition to these issues, my inability to understand this silence demonstrates the breadth of Aboriginal female experiences in sport; if I had some understanding of the issues they faced, I would not be fishing for reasons, I would simply tell you.

While Aboriginal female inclusion in sport has provided numerous opportunities for Aboriginal people and women to learn from each other, the extent to which this learning has resulted in systemic change is debatable. Decision-makers in sport, whether Aboriginal or not, are constrained by rules and regulations that are meant to enhance the Canadian sport system. More research on the extent to which diversity projects (e.g., Aboriginal women invited to participate in non-Aboriginal female environments) have changed the working culture of an organization will help to illuminate the enabling and constraining features of this type of inclusion. The framework utilized by sociologist Pam Ponick (2000) to examine the experiences of non-Aboriginal women as decision-makers in Canadian sport might be a possible framework for analysis. Case studies on how human and financial resources are deployed for Aboriginal female projects will also shed much needed light on this matter.

LIBERATION SCENES REVISITED

This analysis demonstrated the ways that Aboriginal self-determination and western feminism has shaped Aboriginal (and non-Aboriginal) female participation in sport. Within the Aboriginal sport system, the experiences, perspectives, and perceived needs of boys and men dominate the agenda. Conversely, the agenda for women in sport in Canada is dominated by non-Aboriginal female experiences and priorities. As each political project seeks to advance its cause — to get more Aboriginal people and women involved in sport — each project also has the unintended effect of marginalizing Aboriginal female needs and concerns. In this way, each project shares the same weakness. In constructing a discourse that was meant to unite and empower people under one umbrella term — Aboriginal or women — a division has been created, wherein Aboriginal female issues are positioned as being different from the needs and concerns of the majority, and that this difference will immobilize the political potency of each project.

In this paper, I made an implicit connection between the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women in sport. As such, my primary audience is female, mainly because I believe women have much to gain from learning about each other's experiences. Whereas Aboriginal women can gain a better understanding of the broad issues that shape female participation in sport, non-Aboriginal women can learn from Aboriginal women about how to expand the possibilities for inclusion that sport holds. Encountering inclusion — confronting silence — we women need to engage, explore, and ponder this dynamic to its fullest extent so that Aboriginal women, as well as non-Aboriginal women, can contribute more fully to sport, and become healthier in the process. These dialogues will be messy, troubling, and frustrating, but richly rewarding with the potential that we will come to a new understanding about the possibilities that sport holds. Will these dialogues lead to a more unified women's movement in sport? Maybe not, but public discussions of this sort are necessary if we are to gain a better understanding of the commonalities and differences that we face as sisters in the field.

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