“Who Am I . . . a Hockey Player”: Indigenous Generosity and the Transformative Power of Education in Hockey Spaces

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This paper examines the tenuous balance of Indigenous generosity in hockey spaces with the need for non-Indigenous players and organizers to educate themselves and others, pursue systemic change, and unburden Indigenous players of the heavy lifting of anti-racism. Interviews with five Indigenous elite women’s hockey players identify hockey as a potential site of decolonial and anti-racist learning, fueled by the players’ love for the game and willingness to expend emotional labor to affect change. Our intervieewees express the desire to make hockey safer for future generations of Indigenous players by educating their non-Indigenous teammates, often, in the process, exposing themselves to ignorance, indifference, and racism. The players uniformly argue that education is required for change; however, this paper illustrates that such education is not solely the responsibility of Indigenous participants in the game.

A hockey player is anyone, and a hockey player is anything. A hockey player can be a person of color. A hockey player can be a person who identifies as transgender, or bisexual, or anything. A hockey player can have long hair. A hockey player can have short hair. A hockey player can look like anything. So I definitely do think right now, . . . in our hockey culture, there is a need and call for change. (Sydney Daniels, Cree from Mistawasis First Nation)

Through engagement with the voices of elite Indigenous hockey players, the present paper examines the potential for ice hockey to be activated as a vehicle for decolonial learning and an incubator for anti-racism and social responsibility among settlers on Turtle Island. The paper builds from arguments and experiences shared by five interviewees from different Indigenous nations with diverse hockey histories at disparate stages of their careers. Despite these differences, we register striking commonalities among the interviewees’ (a) insistence on the importance of education regarding Indigenous cultures, lands, and rights in hockey spaces; (b) willingness to leverage their unique position-abilities and knowledge to participate in often difficult conversations with non-Indigenous teammates (and others) in the pursuit of cultural change within the dressing room, the sport, and society; and (c) ongoing love of the game and resilient belief in its potential as an instrument of positive social change, despite most having experienced racism in hockey contexts. In this paper, we endeavor to understand and amplify the perspectives of these participants—whose openness in the interview process was an act of generosity in the service of cross-cultural understanding—while embedding their arguments within contemporary scholarship in the fields of Indigenous studies, sport sociology, and decolonial studies, and placing what we refer to as Indigenous generosity in hockey spaces in conversation with demands for systemic (at the level of governmental agencies, administrative bodies, leagues, associations, and teams) and grassroots change (at the level of individual White-settler players, coaches, officials, and fans).

We deploy the phrase “Indigenous generosity” to refer to these players’ willingness to put themselves in the path of uncomfortable conversations and situations to help their non-Indigenous teammates better understand Indigenous cultures and histories in efforts to promote cross-cultural knowledge and reckonings, among those teammates, with the ongoing dehumanization of settler colonialism. The subjects at the center of this study generously take on additional responsibilities and burdens to make hockey spaces safer and more inclusive. We recognize such generosity is fraught, placing Indigenous players in the pathway of potential harm while risking unburdening settler players and the hockey establishment of responsibility for the difficult labor of learning and unlearning. It remains vital, however, that we acknowledge and amplify what the interviewees are telling us, and, to a player, they commit to engaging as culture brokers and change makers in hockey spaces in order to nurture the world the next generation of Indigenous players deserves to inhabit; they will not wait on the hockey establishment to make the change that they rightly demand and work to bring into being.

As has been argued by multiple scholars, including Robidoux (2012), Forsyth and Habkirk (Active History, 2016), and McKegeney and Phillips (2018), hockey bears a fraught relationship with Indigenousity within the settler colonial nation-state. While Indigenous cultural games like Oochamkunut among the Mi’kmaq of Nova Scotia can be traced among the many historical precursors that have been regulated into contemporary hockey, and scores of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit individuals remain among the sport’s most avid fans and players, the persistent presence of anti-Indigenous (as well as anti-Black and anti-peoples of color) racism in the game, coupled with its peculiar relationship to...
nationhood in Canada, complicates senses of belonging and un-belonging among Indigenous participants (Szto 2020; see also McKegney et al. 2021). Dominant narratives about hockey being “Canada’s game”—a sport that supposedly arises naturally from the northern landscape and unites Canadians in civic pride—tend to obfuscate Indigenous prior occupation and the dispossession and cultural genocide that have undergirded the Canadian nation-building process (see Buma, 2012). McKegney et al. (2021) refer to such dominant narratives as “the manufacture of settler belonging through sport: if the game belongs here, it belongs to us, therefore we belong here, therefore here belongs to us” (pp. 34–35). As these scholars elaborate, such nationalist myths inform the specific exclusionary valences of anti-Indigenous racism reported in many hockey spaces (see McKegney et al., 2021). Yet, hockey remains significant both socially and culturally in many Indigenous communities. Gwích’in and Inuvialuk interviewee (and coauthor of this paper) Davina McLeod refers to hockey in her home community of Aklavik, Northwest Territories, as “[d]efinitely the main event”: “anyone who’s able to play, and who has the money to play, definitely does.” Such conditions resonate with Blackfoot interviewee Meghan Big Snake’s description of her community in Alberta: “Hockey is life! . . . We eat, breathe, and live it here in Siksika.” Cree Elder and member of the Indigenous Hockey Research Network (IHRN) advisory council Eugene Arcand concurs succinctly, “We still need the game. As Aboriginal people, it’s in our blood” (Arcand et al., 2021).

These ambivalent dynamics are illustrated powerfully in Cree interviewee Sydney Daniels’ discussion of hockey as a site of connection with her grandfather:

My grandfather was in residential school, and that’s where he learned to play hockey . . . I don’t even have the words to describe it for my grandfather: It was a shaping experience—one that shaped who he was—and hockey came from it . . . . Hockey kind of became a way of having self-worth . . . and a way of connecting his body with his soul, and just feeling love for something. And I think I try to look at the sport the same way, . . . in hopes that when I’m playing it, I’m closer to him and I’m closer to the same serenity that he sought after in the sport, that he needed to get through those times in residential school. So, definitely I connect with hockey on a spiritual level.

With restraint and sensitivity, Daniels acknowledges the profound impact of residential schooling—a technology of colonial dispossession designed to force the disavowal of Indigenous identities by First Nations youth and their self-identification as subordinate citizens of the Canadian nation-state through martial discipline, evangelical indoctrination, and racist pedagogy—referring to it as “a shaping experience.” As Michael Robidoux (2006) has argued, hockey was part of the disciplinary machinery of residential schools, mobilized to “incorporate First Nations youth into dominant Euro-Canadian culture” (p. 267). Yet, the experience of the game and the surreptitious agency it afforded participants were by no means predetermined by the genocidal objectives of institutional overseers. In fact, for many students like Daniels’ grandfather, hockey became a way of nurturing the “self-worth” that residential school was designed to deny him—a way of “finding meaning of life and a way of connecting.” As Daniels expresses, hockey even became, for her grandfather, a tool with which to suture together the “body” and “soul” from which residential school pedagogies of acculturation had functioned to alienate him (see McKegney, 2021). For these reasons, hockey remains “a very spiritual thing” for Daniels, as it does for her grandfather.

As Daniels reveals, while hockey is embroiled historically in Indigenous dispossession and the naturalization of the Canadian nation-state on Indigenous lands, the sport’s meaning and utility are owned neither by settler colonialism nor the White-settler hockey establishment. As much as Canadian players and fans rehearse the cadence “Our Game” to the exclusion of diverse others (including Indigenous peoples), hockey can be expressive of other horizons of possibility: Indigenous cultures and kinship systems, resilience, and sovereignty (Ingles, 2006). This paper seeks to understand these other horizons of possibility, as well as what might impede their actualization, by attending closely to the voices of the five interviewees at the heart of this project. While our discussion by no means exhausts the insights, arguments, and experiences shared in the recorded conversations, it is intended to honor these participants’ perspectives by amplifying themes that cut across all five interviews. After introducing the project’s participants and methodology, we will analyze the hockey dressing room as a locus of possible change, the need for cultural education to render such change productive, and the resilient commitment of our interviewees to mobilizing the sport in decolonial ways that break down barriers to participation for Indigenous athletes.

**Participant Profiles and Methodology**

The present project, initiated in 2020, emerges from the work of the IHRN. The IHRN is a collective of Indigenous and allied researchers dedicated to examining hockey’s Indigenous past, present, and future. The IHRN aims to cultivate critical understanding of hockey’s role in relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples over time, particularly in lands claimed by Canada. Through archival research, personal interviews, data collection and analysis, and Indigenous community-led approaches, the network takes up hockey as a site for community building and Indigenous empowerment, as well as a vehicle for the pursuit of reconciliation, decolonization, and resurgence. Of the multiple projects in which the IHRN is engaged, one centers on the experiences of elite Indigenous players. We define “elite player” as any athlete who has played at, or near, the top level of competitive hockey available to them during their late adolescence and early adulthood. This paper focuses on the first five interviews conducted by the IHRN with elite women players. Although we do not foreground gender-based analysis in our discussion—focusing rather on salient commonalities among the players’ ideas about the game and its potential as a site of learning and unlearning—we recognize that gender remains significant both to the individual experiences of these players and to hockey culture more broadly (Allain, 2019; Krebs, 2012).

As Indigenous and non-Indigenous theorists have argued unequivocally, settler colonialism has always been and remains a gendered enterprise. While historians have, at times, misrepresented the colonial endeavor as a clash between unlike cultures in which patriarchal European societies encountered often matrilocal and matrilocla Indigenous societies and sought to remake them in their own image, Indigenous scholars like Anderson, Driskill, Hunt, Justice, Maracle, Million, and Simpson have shown that the targeting of Indigenous gender systems by colonial powers constitutes a strategy not of assimilation but elimination—not of gender reform and absorption but of genocide. The fact that gender knowledge continues to be a primary arena in which the dispossession of Indigenous nations occurs undoubtedly informs the experiences of the Indigenous women at the center of this study, especially given the fact that hockey spaces are consistently reinscribed within the dominant culture as domains of hypermasculinity (Buma, 2012;
Robidoux, 2006; Robinson, 1998). While gender is not at the forefront of our argumentative claims in the present paper, and we make no comparative observations in relation to the voices of Indigenous men players also interviewed by the IHRN, we recognize not only that gender remains integral to our subjects’ experiences and aspirations, but also that the specific dynamics of the women’s game may indeed heighten the decolonial impact of such players’ recourse to an ethic of Indigenous generosity, as discussed in the final section of the paper.

Taryn Jacobs (interviewed May 27, 2021) is Ojibwe from Walpole Island First Nation in Southwestern Ontario and currently plays junior hockey for the Southwest Wildcats in the Provincial Women’s Hockey League (PWHL’s) Under-22 Division. She has consistently represented her community in the annual Little Native Hockey League (LNHL) tournament and has been a member of Team Ontario in the National Aboriginal Hockey Championships (CKSN, 2021). Jacobs has committed to join Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and play Division 1 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) hockey in the 2022–2023 season.

Kayla Gardner (interviewed May 27, 2021) is Ojibwe from Eagle Lake First Nation, near Dryden, Ontario. Gardner began her elite career at the age of 14, moving from Eagle Lake to Warroad, Minnesota, to play high school hockey. She excelled at Warroad High, amassing 320 points in just 130 games and attracting the attention of NCAA scouts. She went on to play Division 1 hockey at the University of North Dakota, receiving a full scholarship. Gardner was recognized as a Western Collegiate Hockey Association Scholar-Athlete each year she was eligible for the honor, which requires a 3.5 GPA after a year of full-time studies (Ninham, 2020). After completing her degree, Gardner drafted thirty-third overall in the 2017 Canadian Women’s Hockey League (CWHL) entry draft to the defending champion Calgary Inferno. After one season with the Inferno, she went overseas to Sweden and joined Brynäs IF of the Swedish Women’s Hockey League (SDHL). While Gardner has expressed desire to continue playing, it was her final year of pro hockey, for which she cites the lack of a stable income in the women’s game.

Sydney Daniels (interviewed June 10, 2021) is Cree from Mistawasis First Nation in Saskatchewan and is the daughter of former National Hockey League (NHL) player Scott Daniels. She grew up in Massachusetts but visited Mistawasis regularly and played on several Indigenous hockey teams, including Team Saskatchewan in the National Aboriginal Hockey Championships. Daniels played high school hockey at the Westminster School and minor hockey in the New England Girl’s Hockey League; she was selected to the United States under-18 team multiple times, winning a gold medal in 2011 and silver medal in 2012. She followed this success by playing Division 1 NCAA hockey at Harvard, capturing the team in her senior year. Daniels was named to the All-Ivy League first team in 2016 and second team in 2017 (Go Crimson, n.d.). At the conclusion of her degree, Daniels was drafted fifth overall to the Boston Pride of the NWHL, where she played one season before returning to Harvard as an assistant coach.

Megan Big Snake (interviewed July 22, 2021) is from the Sikisika Nation in Alberta. Big Snake began playing hockey at 15 after being inspired by the Team Canada Women’s gold medal victory at the Salt Lake City Olympics. She overcame the late start by relying on strong skating skills developed in figure skating, playing “AA” midget, and “AAA” summer hockey, and gaining entry to the Warner Hockey School for her final year of minor hockey. This quick ascension into elite hockey led to her becoming the first woman from her community to play in the NCAA. Big Snake joined the hockey program at the State University of New York-Oswego in 2007 and was an alternate captain for her final two seasons. She is currently the First Nations Liaisons Worker at Westmount Elementary in Strathmore, Alberta, and coaches a variety of minor hockey teams while running camps and clinics for Indigenous youth.

Davina McLeod (interviewed September 17, 2020) is Inuvialuk-Gwich’in from Aklavik, Northwest Territories. McLeod only played in local pick-up games and tournaments between the ages of 6 and 15—never participating in a dedicated team practice during this period—yet went on to play “AAA” and college hockey in her teen and early-adult years. A contributing factor to her growth as a player was participating in Indigenous hockey tournaments, most notably the National Aboriginal Hockey Championships. McLeod began her elite career in “AAA” at the Athol Murray College of Notre Dame women’s hockey development program. She later played two seasons of college hockey with the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology Ooks and another two seasons with the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT) Trojans. McLeod now coaches in Aklavik while finishing her degree from SAIT and was awarded a scholarship from the Aboriginal Sport Circle in support of this work (Scott, 2021).

While playing for the SAIT Trojans in February 2020, McLeod was the target of a racial slur hurled by an opponent from the Red Deer Queens. She was outspoken about the incident, sparking national headlines, and began working to address racism in hockey through a variety of media outlets. Such exposure incited the interest of members of the IHRN who interviewed McLeod in September of that year, the first such interview with an elite woman player for this project (McLeod & McKegney, 2021). That interview demonstrated that McLeod’s passion for decolonizing hockey aligned with the IHRN’s mission, and she was invited to become a member of the research team. In consultation with other network members, McLeod volunteered to take on the role of interviewer for other elite players, ultimately conducting the four additional interviews discussed in this paper. In such work, McLeod’s insider status as an elite Indigenous player has helped foster conditions of safety in which participants have felt comfortable sharing personal perspectives and experiences (see Robidoux, 2012). While working from a flexible roster of research questions, McLeod’s rapport with participants has enabled the interviews to flow organically and follow lines of interest initiated by the players. The methodology for data collection in this paper involves semiparticipatory ethnography conducted via semistructured interviews.5 We consider the ethnography semiparticipatory because the interviewer is responsive to cues of the interviewees and her own voice becomes part of the data.

An illustrative example of the semiparticipatory nature of the interviews that connects to this paper’s argument occurred during McLeod’s interview with Daniels as the participants drew upon personal experiences to consider the ambivalent realities of assuming responsibility for educating settler teammates. Acknowledging that “all people aren’t starting with the same book of knowledge,” Daniels advocated for “a little bit of patience and understanding and ultimately willingness to have those conversations.” In her response, McLeod agreed “to some extent” but cautioned against absolving settlers of responsibility for their own learning:

[In the Indigenous community at this point in time, there’s frustration, as there should be, and there’s this tiredness that . . . many people in the community feel with being like, “It’s not our job to educate you. You’re supposed to do that on your own. The education system failed you, but it’s your job to do it.”]
Exclaiming, “You’re absolutely hitting it right on the head,” Daniels conceded, “You’re right, it’s not our job by any means to educate others; it should be their want and their desire and effort to learn about our culture . . . and history.” Nonetheless, Daniels affirmed, “I do lead with empathy a little bit more and try to be that connection.” The point is that by reading, reacting, and responding to one another, and even by disagreeing and prompting further reflection, McLeod and Daniels develop a more layered and nuanced conversation that lays bare the complexities of decolonial work in hockey spaces, and it was crucial that the interviewer’s voice remain part of the data—both in terms of transparency and findings. Furthermore, such recognition of the two voices involved enacts relational accountability that is vital to the ethical dimensions of Indigenous studies research. The subjects at the center of this study are not anonymized both because they have each requested to have their words thus recognized and because, as Cree-Métis scholar Deanna Reder (2016) argues, “all knowledge is generated from particular positions, [and] there is no unbiased, neutral position possible” (p. 7). For this reason, “position and self-reflection continue as fundamental methodologies in Indigenous . . . studies” (p. 16). Data analysis on the interviews has been conducted individually by McLeod as lead author on this paper and collaboratively with other members of the IHRN. Each interview took place over Zoom between Autumn 2020 and Summer 2021.

Kinship and Conditional Belonging: The Dressing Room as a Site of Peril and Possibility

When asked why they love hockey, multiple interviewees discussed the significance of the “team game.” Sydney Daniels states, “I love that it’s a team sport, and you can’t just play it yourself. It takes a collective effort to win, and to work together in order to reach a common goal, and I’ve always valued working with other people and growing with other people.”

Meghan Big Snake, who transitioned to hockey from what she describes as the “very individual” and “competitive” sport of figure skating, lauds hockey’s capacity to foster comradery and connection: “Why I love hockey is the family part of it. I just love the teamwork, and the friends that you make . . . . The long-lasting relationships are just key . . . . It’s awesome being a part of a team.” All participants spoke of meaningful relationships forged throughout their hockey careers with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous teammates, often pointing to them as evidence of hockey’s capacity to break down barriers and generate solidarity and shared purpose.

Throughout the interviews, it became evident that players’ experiences of dressing room environments were affected by whether those dressing rooms were predominantly White-settler spaces, Indigenous spaces, or somewhere in between. Participants described a variety of team settings, including local teams populated primarily or entirely by Indigenous-identified players (as was the case for McLeod in Aklavik and Big Snake at Siksika), local teams populated by a mix of Indigenous and settler players (as was the case for Jacobs in Wallaceburg and Gardner in Warroad), and local teams upon which they might be the only Indigenous-identified player (as was often the case for Daniels during her youth in Massachusetts); competitive and/or regional teams made up entirely of Indigenous players (including those at the LNHL tournament and the National Aboriginal Hockey Championships [NAHC]); and elite teams upon which there might be no, one, or a handful of other Indigenous player(s). McLeod notes that the SAIT team in 2020 boasted 10 Indigenous players, so they experienced “the glory of almost being a majority in there.” Reflecting on this rare experience at the college level, she explains, “it’s been really nice to be surrounded by those people and to say things that other people wouldn’t necessarily understand just because—even though they grew up in the provinces with their Indigenous family, and I grew up up North—we’re still living the same life.”

Daniels, who played mainly with non-Indigenous players while growing up in the United States, expresses the importance of returning to Canada to play in Indigenous tournaments like the NAHC: “those experiences . . . felt a lot closer to my heart . . . . It felt like I was playing for more than just a hockey team. I was playing for my First Nation. I was playing for my parents, grandparents, and I had all my cousins in the stands! And all my uncles and aunts, and so I think if anything those experiences were almost more emotional . . . . It just felt more powerful. It felt greater than the game of hockey itself.”

Not all hockey environments, however, have proven equally welcoming of Indigenous culture and identity. Participants identified multiple experiences as targets and witnesses of anti-Indigenous racism. Some of these involved racial slurs, as McLeod experienced from an opposing player in a college game in 2020. Others involved the denial of opportunities and playing time by scouts, management, and coaches. As McLeod argues, “Anyone who has grown up white and not in an Indigenous area has probably been told at one point or another in their life that Indigenous are lazy, they’re just taking all the government’s money, like they don’t work, they’re alcoholics, they just don’t care. Like they’re useless, all of this stuff . . . . And some people don’t unlearn those things that they’re told. And some of those people become coaches.” The impact of biased coaching has deleterious consequences for the experiences and development of players, particularly, as McLeod notes, for those Indigenous players who must travel from their home communities to play at the elite level:

When . . . you have someone who is homesick for their family, has grown up in a rural area, is trying something completely new, is scared, and then they fumble the puck a little more than usual when they’re actually really good at it, and they’ve just been a superstar in their hometown that long. Because they feel the tension, and they feel that coming from someone who should be there to help them prosper. I can assume that there would be more names in hockey today. There would have been more Ethan Bears if that wasn’t the case, and that’s really sad.

Big Snake argues that it is difficult for Indigenous players to intervene in such experiences due to the power dynamics at play, the invisibility of racism, and the disincentivizing pressure of seeking future elite opportunities:

With the coaching thing, I’ve been in that position before where you kind of have the tell, and you could make an educated guess as to why some things were happening, and it was because of who you were and where you came from, but to actually do anything about it . . . because you didn’t wanna come off as that aggressive person.

Due to the subjective nature of coaching, it is difficult to prove that decisions to limit ice time or powerplay opportunities have been motivated by racism, even though one can “make an educated
guess.” Furthermore, because players desire to progress within the somewhat closed system of elite hockey, and coaches remain gatekeepers, they are encouraged simply to endure and not come off as “aggressive.” Due to the “stereotypes” carried by many coaches and scouts, Daniels argues that:

We’re not given the benefit of the doubt. Young kids aren’t given the benefit of the doubt, and they’re already fighting people’s assumptions and stereotypes of them that they don’t even fully get to show their authentic self, and to me, that’s, that’s unacceptable. Like, I can give you countless examples.

Big Snake elaborates, “It sucks and it hurts and you just don’t know how to feel because you’re a kid still!”

While the disabling impact of prejudicial coaching and inter-team racism demands further analysis, we focus in this paper on intrateam dynamics: more subtle forms of culturally and/or racially motivated exclusion and the capacity for change fostered by the team environment. The dressing room is arguably the most important place for teammates to bond and create lasting memories and relationships with each other. While all participants identified positive dressing room experiences—and some, like Taryn Jacobs, identified these as the norm, noting “we’ve always been like a family on my team. We’re really inclusive of each other”—some participants identified limits to the sense of belonging they have felt within teams on which they were a minority. Membership within a community—a hockey team—is dependent on the recognition of other members who set the de facto boundaries of belonging regardless of potential or skills (Glenn, 2011). Despite the fact that Indigenous players have made the team and are a part of the roster, this does not necessarily equate to membership within the dressing room. Building from the work of E. N. Glenn, gender and sport scholar Ali Greey examines the experiences of trans people in locker rooms to consider the relationship between unbelonging in sporting spaces and the broader society. Greey argues that

The daily indignities that interviewees described experiencing within locker rooms impressed upon them the lack of their membership within these spaces and, thus, society (Glenn, 2011). Access to locker rooms, Glenn’s work would suggest, is about more than participation in physical activity; locker room access is about membership in the category of human. (p. 17)

Locker rooms tend to be governed by a dominant group that determines membership through performative acts of othering, which register the unbelonging of specific constituencies (even if those constituencies are officially part of the team and possess rights-based protections).

For McLeod, such feelings of exclusion have been almost ubiquitous:

With any team that I’ve been on, it has been a really hard first few months. Like I said, my skin colour, it’s different. And just, you see people getting invited out. You see people making friends . . . . So that’s definitely tough. And as I got older and I played on many teams, it’s always been the same. I’ve just transitioned into the same team and the same dynamic, being who I am, a lot of the time . . . . I’m sure they weren’t doing it intentionally at all. I just know it’s definitely a factor, and it’s played a factor on probably every team I’ve been on. Where it’s like, I have to prove myself, and they’re like, “Oh, you’re funny, you’re outgoing, you’re this, you’re that.” And it’s like I shouldn’t have to be, to be included.

McLeod’s default experience on hockey teams since she left Aklavik has been as an outsider until she actively breaks down barriers. Not all players, however, are able to persevere amid such exclusion. These problematics motivate McLeod’s work with the IHRN: “If the Indigenous Hockey Research Network can do anything, I hope that goes away,” because “[feeling unwelcomed in the dressing room is huge—like it’s forced so many people to go home. I have friends who have been like, ‘The dressing room is just awful.’”

Big Snake describes an incident from her first day with her NCAA team that highlights how Indigenous belonging within hockey spaces can be called into question. When she arrived in the dressing room, an Alaskan teammate was wearing a shirt that read, “I’M NOT NATIVE”:

I knew as soon as I saw the shirt, the other teammates did, and they looked right away like, “What is she going to do?” And I just, took the high route, and I thought I’m not going to let this affect me because this is the first time I’m going to be on the ice here, I gotta keep in the zone and keep my eye on the prize, but . . . it bugged me. And I did, I cried to my family because I didn’t know what that meant, but the thing was I didn’t react, and I took a step back and I thought, “Okay how am I going to approach this? I gotta be the bigger person, I gotta be the role model here,” and it’s how we move forward is important.

Faced with blatant derogation of Indigenousity, Big Snake was forced not only to deal with feelings of hurt but also to manage the discomfort of her non-Indigenous teammates, all of whom looked to Big Snake in this moment. This incident demonstrates the performative exclusion of Indigenousity from hockey settings and also that the context for dealing with such racism is often conditioned by the very racist stereotypes from which such exclusion emerges.

Big Snake’s options for response in this scenario were delimited by the conditioned desire not to conform to stereotypes about Indigenous people likely held by her settler teammates. Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island face discriminatory stereotypes from the moment they are born. These manifest in wandering eyes in a retail store, backhanded compliments from non-Indigenous friends who assure them that they are “not like other Natives,” and assumptions that the government puts money directly into their bank accounts simply for existing. All of these are incidents members of our research team have experienced that idle in their minds years later. Indigenous people are taught to expect such incidents; over time, they are conditioned to act in ways that will not be deemed aggressive or confrontational, which Big Snake acknowledges in her efforts to “keep [her] eyes on the prize,” “be the bigger person,” and “be the role model here” (for discussion of this dynamic as “manufactured compliance,” see McKegney et al., 2021). Unfairly, but not unexpectedly, Big Snake chooses to be nonconfrontational and to transform this racist incident into an educational opportunity for her teammates, a vehicle for changing hearts and minds in ways that might render the dressing room a more welcoming space (McKegney et al., 2021; Szto, 2020). This example, which Big Snake calls taking “the high route,” is expressive of an ethic of generosity we view as pervading these five interviews: the willingness to endure one’s own feelings of discomfort—even anger, sadness, and pain—to help others learn about Indigenous realities and thereby pursue decolonial change.
The “Fine Art” of “Patience”: Responsibility and Education in Hockey Spaces

Faced with her teammate’s racist T-shirt, Big Snake asked her family, “How do I approach this? How do I go on, because I feel very discouraged.” Her family’s advice was to speak to the player involved and ask her, “Do you have any questions?” For Big Snake, this open, responsive, and educational approach “kicked-started it”:

I told them I will answer any questions, and I think because of that, it changed her mind, her thinking. And to this day, she’s one of my closest friends now. She’s just totally changed, and so it’s because when you’re more knowledgeable, and you have a better understanding of who we are as people, then . . . you just have to . . . be more respectful.

Big Snake demonstrates remarkable empathy: Despite being adversely impacted by her teammate’s display of racism, she recognizes such ignorance is not the player’s responsibility alone but rather cultivated by an educational system that misrepresents Indigenous and colonial histories and a society that devalues Indigenous experiences. As McLeod asks in relation to such societal conditions during her interview with Jacobs, “How were they supposed to know better if they weren’t exposed to it or didn’t have those experiences?” Aware of the pervasiveness of such ignorance among non-Indigenous players, Daniels suggests that there is “a fine art in having patience and . . . knowing that all people aren’t starting with . . . the same understanding of how things work, and how things are, and how things have been in our history. So, . . . you have to have a little bit of patience and understanding and [be] willing to have those conversations.”

Among the most prominent findings from our interviews is the players’ openness to cultural questions from settler teammates. Each of the players interviewed espoused a welcoming approach to answering questions about her Indigenous culture and identity. While recognizing that “[i]t was hard to communicate with coaches, and players, and meeting people on the same page,” Big Snake states, “I did encourage my teammates . . . that if they did have questions, to ask away, because I’m open, I will answer anything that they had.” Due to the deficit models of Indigeneity perpetuated in dominant culture, non-Indigenous people often assume that Indigenous people are ashamed of their Indigeneity; because settler society is permeated with negative images of Indigenous life, settlers tend to assume Indigenous people must carry that weight as well. Such preconceptions discourage non-Indigenous people from broaching this subject matter, which is among the reasons participants in our study have taken it upon themselves to bridge the gap and curate opportunities for intercultural transmission of knowledge. Daniels states, “I would be lying to you if I said I haven’t had experiences where, you know, I would get frustrated by people not understanding”—moments she describes as “heart wrenching” and “gut wrenching,” in which “[y]ou don’t feel like you’re validated, you don’t feel like you’re . . . worthy, or even a complete person”—yet, she refuses to pass up opportunities to change others’ thinking: “I personally view it as the more awareness I can generate and create, and the more conversations I can have, maybe that’s a way I can help because I’m comfortable doing those things.” Taryn Jacobs adds:

There have been times where there’s been comments or questions just about my culture and stuff. And I really try to take it in a positive way, just trying to educate others, answering any questions people might have because I know everybody doesn’t have the same experiences I would. So, I’m just trying to make everyone more aware.

Despite understanding that “it’s not our job by any means to educate others” and that it should be the “desire” of settler players to “learn” (Daniels), all five interviewees expressed willingness to take on the emotional and intellectual labor of facilitating their teammates’ understandings of Indigenous cultures, experiences, and issues. Each expressed commitment to mobilizing the generative space of the dressing room as a site for cultivating allyship and anti-racism, which might produce ripple effects beyond the arena. They rendered themselves vulnerable in efforts to reimagine the dressing room as an inclusive space, one in which they could be their whole selves, and future Indigenous players would not face the unbelonging they had experienced. As Daniels suggests, being able to share more about her “culture” and “where [she] come[s] from . . . makes you feel more safe and at home . . . allows you to feel more of you and express more of you . . . . [I]f we can continue to encourage conversation and openness, it’s so important because it’s in the little moments we make changes.”

The dressing room is a fertile site for change because it is a closed community with foundational shared experiences, despite cultural and other differences. Teams engage in a collective embodied initiative through sport and develop commonalities of understanding through the narratives they layer over that endeavor. Maoli scholar Ty P. Kawika Tengan (2008) refers to this as “embodied discursive action—the active signification, enactment, and production of identities through bodily movements and engagements,” which he suggests makes spaces like hockey dressing rooms potentially “potent sites for identity formation” (p. 17). Tengan acknowledges that while the discursive field in which Indigenous athletic movement occurs is conditioned by colonial influences, it can be impacted as well by both the embodied actions of participants and the narratives they produce about their experiences. Intensive athletic endeavors engender collective experiences that circulate as narratives in which individual athletes’ stories are interwoven with those of their teammates to create a discursive fabric in which identities can be tested and given shape. This is why the closed community of the dressing room is a dynamic site of possibility.

The players interviewed for this study break down barriers erected by the “cultivated ignorance” of their settler teammates in order to generate conditions in which they can bring their full selves into the dressing room—conditions in which they do not need to disavow or camouflage elements of their identities as Indigenous women to experience belonging as hockey players (McKegney et al., 2021). The goal is ultimately to reimagine the dressing room as a site for celebrating the full humanity of Indigenous players and generating ethics of anti-racism among non-Indigenous teammates that will persist beyond hockey contexts. Daniels traces the contours of one such dressing room:

I’ve been lucky and fortunate enough to play with other Indigenous players. At Harvard for example, I played with Kalley Armstrong, and . . . she saw me for who I was and celebrated me and I celebrated her, and we were able to actually bring our culture into our locker room and have moments and windows where we could teach our teammates about our culture. Even to the point where we were playing pow wow music one time in the locker room, and our teammates loved it! And I’m like, this is such a cool moment.
where I get to feel like I get to be my authentic true self, and you see me, and you love me for it, and I am just your teammate who you love, and I get to be me. So I’ve been very fortunate to feel fully embraced by the people on my teams and allowing me to be who I truly am and expressing what I truly love.

**The Resilient Commitment to Hockey as a Tool of Positive Change**

Among the surprising findings from our study have been the strong ties to hockey affirmed by the interviewees despite negative experiences they have faced in hockey spaces. When McLeod first began conducting interviews for the IHRN, she predicted that many players would express negative or ambivalent views of hockey due to her own experiences. After the first few interviews, however, it became evident that such ambivalence did not align with the sentiments of the interviewees who described hockey primarily as a force of unification and even a vehicle for addressing racial injustice. While other players shared unpleasant experiences, these did not appear to trouble their enduring affection for the game. When asked, “Are there connections that you perceive between hockey and your culture?” many described their relationship to the sport in ways that mirror their connections to Indigenous worldviews. The youngest interviewee, Taryn Jacobs, shared her pregame ritual:

> I braid my hair every game—before every game. I sit there and take that time away from the team, just getting ready and making sure that I’m connected, playing with my mind, body, and spirit. I really want to put forth positive energy into the game and, having my hair braided, I feel a lot more connected.

**Big Snake draws an explicit parallel between cultural pride among Indigenous peoples and national pride for the sport:** “It’s in our blood, and it’s not just me and my family, it’s everybody! Everybody in Canada . . . So how we’re proud to be Indigenous, I think Canada as a whole nation is proud that hockey is in our bones.”

Due to its popularity across Canada, hockey possesses the latent capacity to serve as a site of change despite the racism and discrimination often present in the sport (Adams et al., 2021). Jacobs explains,

> I think with hockey, ‘cause it’s huge all over Canada, it really unites people. And within the game, there’s plenty of Indigenous players, and that kind of gives them a platform to stand out and speak about their cultures and different experiences that they have. I think it is a really good way to bring people together from all over the place, where everyone can have fun and enjoy the game and have a good time.

While the galvanizing scenario depicted here is not always realizable, the players at the center of this study have all experienced moments of such shared purpose and connection that they draw upon in educating their teammates despite the emotional toll such conversations demand. Such education, in fact, can serve as self-preservation for Indigenous players by reducing microaggressions in the dressing room and encouraging team atmospheres of inclusivity. For such outcomes to be actualized, however, settlers must value their Indigenous teammates’ labor. The burden taken on by Indigenous players is only worth the toll if settler players self-reflect and continue learning in order to produce enduring change. Big Snake’s college teammate who wore the “I’m not Native” shirt and ultimately became a dear friend provides a telling example in this regard.

Without settler players taking steps toward meaningful change *themselves* and addressing racism directly, there is a danger of overburdening Indigenous teammates and devaluing their generosity. Learning no longer to engage in actively racist behavior is not enough; change is only sustainable if it leads to adoption of *anti-racist* ethics. As Szto (2020) argues, “Not being a racist, or not saying racist things, is not the same as being anti-racist. Until hockey culture adopts this perspective, hockey will not be for everyone” (p. 168).

> Eva Mackey’s (2016) *settler uncertainty* and Battell Lowman and Barker’s (2015) *productive discomfort* offer potential pathways for settlers to change their perspectives and by extension the colonial structures of which they are part. *Settler uncertainty* articulates a lack of confidence in Eurocentric worldviews that is embraced as a means of opening oneself to new ways of understanding. As Mackey suggests, “perhaps embracing anxiety and uncertainty may also offer pathways out of the settled expectations of settler colonialism” (p. 37). Slater (2020) describes similarly how uncertainty and hesitation help to “work against the desire for innocence and goodness and re-orientate settlers to other forms of relationality and responsibility” (p. 825). Once seeds of doubt are placed in settlers’ minds concerning Eurocentric worldviews, they can begin questioning larger structures and their implication within them. Embracing uncertainty can produce the context in which more meaningful efforts to address Indigenous dispossession and historical justice become possible. Battel Lowman and Barker argue that settler discomfort can serve as a precondition to shifting consciousness and be used as a compass to generate anti-racist and anticolonial decisions. Together, uncertainty and discomfort offer pathways toward positive change in the dressing room and on Turtle Island more broadly.

The team dynamic of hockey championed by interviewees earlier in this paper is conducive to uncertainty and productive discomfort. When Indigenous players open themselves to answering teammates’ questions about Indigenous cultures and histories, they not only alter the team environment but also generate a balm to ease the anxieties that asking such questions might engender. In other words, they create a context in which settler teammates can lean into their discomfort and potentially become unsettled. Furthermore, the bonds between Indigenous and settler players as teammates incentivize settler players’ embrace of uncertainty as an expression of respect for their teammate’s vulnerability and emotional labor. In this manner, settlers can begin to trouble the naturalization of their worldviews and cultivate anti-racist ethics and behaviors, which will extend the social impact of such education beyond the insularity of the team.

> As Cree Elder Eugene Arcand (2021) suggests, “The circle of hockey is very small,” and, as such, developmental shifts in attitude and understanding can yield substantial cultural change, which is particularly true of the women’s game. With much of elite women’s hockey affiliated with higher education, many settler players can access critical resources and coursework to develop their understanding. Settlers who adopt anti-racist mindsets and embrace productive discomfort can contribute to changing the long-term outlook of the sport. Current elite players will shape the game’s future by later becoming coaches, scouts, and managers, especially as the women’s game has a stable, large-scale, player-driven league on the horizon (Azzi, 2022; Salvian,
As women’s hockey grows, Indigenous and settler players alike have the challenge ahead of creating the equitable and anti-racist future for the sport that has eluded the NHL, Hockey Canada, and USA Hockey. Describing hockey’s emancipatory capacity, Daniels explains,

A lot of barriers that society puts up kind of dissipate when you’re playing a game and playing by a set of rules of the game. Other things don’t matter, like being a girl on an all-boys team, kind of fades away and being a younger kid on an older team kind of fades away. So, I think, if I had to give it a characteristic, I would just say “freeing.” Allows you to be you and whoever you were and whatever you want to be on the ice. It didn’t really matter anything else, as long as you could skate, and you didn’t give up a goal, everyone kind of supported you and you loved it. So, yeah. I’d say “freeing.”

Playing hockey can provide Indigenous players a sense of freedom not always accessible elsewhere in Euro-Canadian or American society. While on the ice, other pressures and obstacles can fade away. Such freedom can extend to the dressing room, but it requires the commitment of settler teammates to learn with care. Indigenous players should not have to expend immense emotional labor and risk feelings of dehumanization to feel the same sense of freedom they do on the ice. By taking the lessons learned seriously, and embracing uncertainty and discomfort while adopting an anti-racist mindset, settler players can honor their Indigenous teammates and help change the future of hockey.

Conclusion

The elite Indigenous players at the center of this study are skilled athletes, powerful cultural advocates, and champions of change. They place themselves in the line of fire to educate their teammates into more knowledgeable (even anti-racist) citizens of these lands and the sport. In this way, they work toward safer hockey spaces for American society. While on the ice, other pressures and obstacles can fade away. Such freedom can extend to the dressing room, but it requires the commitment of settler teammates to learn with care. Indigenous players should not have to expend immense emotional labor and risk feelings of dehumanization to feel the same sense of freedom they do on the ice. By taking the lessons learned seriously, and embracing uncertainty and discomfort while adopting an anti-racist mindset, settler players can honor their Indigenous teammates and help change the future of hockey.

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Notes

1. Hereinafter, referred to as “hockey.”
2. Turtle Island is not a term that is ubiquitous among Indigenous nations in what is commonly called “North America” as Indigenous nations have diverse concepts and terms for this land mass. However, because the IHRN is currently based out of Queen’s University in the territories of the Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe, and Huron-Wendat peoples, we have chosen to employ this term, commonly employed within those nations’ anglicized vernaculars, while being aware of its limitations.
3. While we are focused specifically on Indigenous experiences in hockey and the central problematic of anti-Indigenous racism, we understand that such racism functions in complex alignment with anti-Black and anti-people of color racism. As such, we insist that the responsibility for changing hockey culture rests primarily with White people, even as they must take guidance from BIPOC knowledge and experience.
4. In most cases, the athletes interviewed have gone on to play elite competitive hockey in adulthood—whether professionally in the NHL, the Premier Hockey Federation (formerly NWHL), or other leagues in North America or abroad; internationally for Team Canada or Team USA; or at college university. However, we retain interest in the perspectives of Indigenous players who have chosen to cease playing competitive hockey prior to adulthood, despite further prospects, as their stories tend to complicate dominant narratives about the productive nature of adversity and how enduring oppression can condition resilience and success.
5. McLeod’s own interview was conducted by White-settler scholar and IHRN researcher Sam McKegney and was semi-structured in a manner similar to the interviews conducted by McLeod herself. However, as a settler man whose hockey-playing experience never rose to the elite level, McKegney was not an “insider” in the interview process.
6. Māori scholar Ty P. Kāwika Tengan provides a model for such interviewing praxis in his reflection on the Indigenous Hawaiian concept of “talk story”: “It’s as much an emotional connection as it is a transfer of knowledge . . . . [A]t the core, it’s sitting together and connecting on an emotional level, which helps bring us closer as we’re engaging in this back-and-forth dialogue . . . . Our ability to have an exchange is crucially at the base of it—an emotional exchange, one that is not just a one-way thing, but one that we both get something out of that’s positive . . . . It creates this sense of a shared identity because you’re having and engaging in this communicative event, this modelling of personal stories after collective stories. Making these emotional, personal, and collective connections, that’s what solidifies a sense of community” (qtd. in McKegney 2014).
7. Ethan Bear is a Cree defenseman who plays for the Carolina Hurricanes in the NHL.
8. Remarking on an incident, Big Snake states, “I swear I think it’s just cause my last name, to be honest.”
9. Both Szto (2020) and Kalman-Lamb (2018) track similar experiences among other racialized players, indicating that although specific historical contexts and expressions of racism may vary, the desire not to disrupt the
status quo is conditioned among many non-White constituencies in hockey. The authors are grateful to one of their reviewers for this connection.

10. The authors are grateful to one of their reviewers for this citation.

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