

Embracing Discomfort and Manifesting Hope as an Activist Practice

Carly Adams

University of Lethbridge

Since first travelling to Japan in 2008, I have been fascinated by the culture of Japanese gift giving, a process of exchange that involves giving, receiving, and repaying. In Japan, the traditional cloths used to wrap and carry things are called Furoshiki and the practice of wrapping is an art. The culture of gifting in Japan, I find both fascinating but also discomfiting. I am often befuddled by the expectations around receiving and the weight of the obligation to partake in this exchange process in particular ways. Joy Hendry, in her book *Wrapping Culture*, discusses the intercultural communication and the meanings and expectations associated with the practice of gift giving and how wrapping and unwrapping are intentional acts.¹ When we offer a gift, we are simultaneously offering something but also creating a ‘debt’ of a sort. It is relational work that calls us to lean into discomfort and to make meaning from it.

Much of my work with the *Sport History Review* over the past seventeen years (as book review editor, editorial board member, associate editor and editor) has been relational work of giving and receiving. There is much I reflect on from conversations and discussions with authors, colleagues, mentors, and students who have pushed me in sometimes uncomfortable but also productive and necessary ways as they challenge me to look closely at my presuppositions, my responsibilities, and my praxes. As anthropologists Susanna Harris and Laurence Douny write: “to unwrap is not simply to reverse wrapping; the act of unwrapping is significant in itself and has its own outcomes.”² And yet, as Hendry writes “we are perhaps overly concerned with the ‘unwrapping’ with revealing the perceived essence of things, when we might do well to examine a little further the nature of the concealment used.”³ I often think about the “wrappings” we use in our lives, our research practices and our teaching – to think about what they mean and what is revealed when we unwrap the structures, logics, and taken-for-granted ways of engaging in and with academia, sport history, and our own research practices. How do we make visible and refuse the status quo, read the silences, embrace counter-narratives, sit in the surprise and awe of uncomfortable disclosures, and unravel our research practices and conventions as we look to the future?

Adams is with the University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge, AB, Canada, and is Editor of *Sport History Review*. Address author correspondence to carly.adams@uleth.ca.

What are the “wrappings” in your academic worlds? Whose viewpoints and experiences do you center? What questions do you ask of the past and the present?

These questions challenge us to “examine a little further the nature of the concealment used” in much of the work that we call sport history.⁴ I admit, I often shy away from moments that are unsettling or uncomfortable in my own life and also in my research. I wrap myself in the familiar. I don’t seek out tough conversations, and for those who know me, you will know I really do not like conflict. In my professional circles, I am known as a consensus builder. While my tendency is to wrap myself in the comfortable and what I know, I have found it important and necessary to lean into, embrace, to feel the ambivalence, to embrace the difficult conversations, to unwrap the layers of institutional and research logics that have allowed me to function in comfortable, privileged spaces. I am trying to see the potential for “micro actions to ripple, to erode, and to subtly shift.”⁵

In recent years there has been a lot of talk about positionality, how our positionality impacts and shapes the research we do. I am still embracing what this means, to reckon with my positionality as a privileged white heterosexual cisgender settler woman who grew up on the lands and treaty territory of the Saugeen Ojibway Nation on the shores of Lake Huron. A woman who has negotiated and been welcomed to higher education and sporting spaces with relative ease, but who also holds an ambivalent relationship to sport places and practices. My positionality has led me to reflect more deeply on the questions I ask and the histories I examine (and those I choose not to), how I read silences and sometimes ignore them, and how this shapes the way I act (and do not act) in the world, the research that I do (and do not do), the histories I write and create and co-create (and those I do not), to how white my research and teaching has been over the past 25 years. It led me to recognize and question the fact that most spaces I enter – including and maybe especially spaces like sport history conferences, and within the pages of our disciplinary journals – are occupied largely by white, seemingly able-bodied folks, like me. As I look around conferences I attend and browse through the pages of academic journals, I wonder at how little diversity there is in these spaces – diversity of bodies and bodily capacities, diversity in lived experiences, perhaps, diversity, certainly, in relation to dominant disciplinary conventions and practices.

How do you make sense of your own positionality? How do positional logics point to possibilities for inquiry and perhaps exclude others?

In the past few years, as part of a research project I am working on, I have delved into using digital storytelling films as one way to disseminate and return oral histories and experiences to the communities with which I collaborate. The philosophy behind digital storytelling is that it aims to provoke emotion, a relationship or a connection between the storyteller and the audience. It also encourages storytellers, similar to auto-ethnographers, to ‘show not tell’ to encourage the viewer or listener to think about their own experiences. What story do you want to tell? And what do you think your story means? Why this story? Why now and for whom?⁶ Through digital storytelling, like oral history research,

we are asking our participants to be vulnerable, to disclose their deepest most sacred and meaningful experiences, to sit in the discomfort of sometimes difficult, forgotten, or silenced moments. While as researchers we sit over here and listen deeply. But how often do we interrogate our own positionality as part of the research process? How often do we recognize, engage with, perhaps even welcome *our own* discomfort?

I have a lot of discomfort and ambivalence about my sporting past, about the spaces I occupied and those to which I was denied access. I grew up in a small Canadian town in the 1980s and 90s. A time and place when there were fewer opportunities for girls and women to play ice hockey than now. Yet, I lived in a hockey family. We gathered around the television to watch and cheer for the Toronto Maple Leafs. I followed my brother from rink to rink as he learned to play defense and as he negotiated the ups and downs of a rural hockey culture. I heard the exploits, challenges, and joys of my grandfather's life journey as a junior hockey trainer. It was a world I was part of and yet not really. I did not unwrap the complexities of this until years later. I was not welcome to move as an athlete in these spaces as a girl. I wrapped myself in my feelings of injustice and invisibility in spaces such as this. And yet, unwrapping some of that discomfort has helped me see how my whiteness means that I was and am very much at home in the nation-making projects of which ice hockey, as a quintessentially Canadian sport, is a part. To use the words of Malcolm MacLean, "these places I think and do from rather than my disciplinary training" have led to my fierce desire and commitment to read the silences in sporting histories, to center women-identified voices, and call out gender discrimination and exclusionary practices, although in very narrow ways, through the lens of a heterosexual cis gender white woman who grew up with little understanding of the horrific colonial violences, erasures, and silencing that has been sanitized in and by Canadian histories, and that continue to take place as part of the Canadian nation-making project.⁷ My "little understanding," I am coming to understand, was simply not a lack of information; it was also "an activity . . . a form of knowing supported by the socio-political system."⁸ I am now reckoning with my complicity. As part of a broader social, political, and disciplinary context, I have contributed to the normalization of historiographical whiteness of Canadian sporting histories.

What have you and your writing, your teaching, normalized? Have your positional logics, like mine, contributed to the normalization of whiteness in the field of sport history? How is our complicity situated and relational?

While these reflections on my own sporting past might seem unimportant or insignificant, the stakes are not. My experiences point to the way certain bodies are granted access to spaces, to the politics of ex/inclusion and access, and how ideological meanings about athleticism, physicality, femininity, masculinity, and whiteness that these dynamic processes (re)produce are attributed (in often troubling ways) to bodies in sport spaces, and how spaces and places and our sense of them, are always already gendered.⁹ Thinking with both Sara Ahmed and Lisa Slater, I have been moved to interrogate how I "feel my way," approaching my "emotion as a form of cultural politics or world making."¹⁰ Following my own affective (un)certainities, I consider what *kinds* of world-making I am involved in,

or, in the words of Lisa Slater, how I “orientate my subjectivity and embodied relationships to people, place and history.”¹¹

How do you orientate your own subjectivities and embodied relationships to people, places and histories? Which people and places? Whose histories?

My journey as editor has been enriched and eased by the outstanding and committed editorial board members who have worked with me over the years to grow *Sport History Review*. I am also grateful for the authors who have entrusted their research to the journal; for the staff at Human Kinetics who make this all come together; for Toby Rider, Colleen English, and Tanya Jones who all held terms as book review editors; for Associate Editor Pierre-Olaf Schut who handles the French submissions; and for Ornella Nzindukiyimana who has transitioned from editorial board member and reviewer, to Associate Editor, and who will soon be stepping into the role as Editor. In Spring 2025, Ornella will be piloting a new section of the journal called “Sport Matters.” This is a section for critical reflection and (re)assessment of the place of sport, sport studies, sport histories in our current moment. The Call for Papers asks “Is there a place for radical hope in our classrooms, conferences and/or academic output?” I am convinced there is.

Responding to Rebecca Solnit’s 2016 call to have “hope in the dark,” Michelle O’Shea, Victoria Paraschak, Sonya Pearce, Hazel Maxwell, and Alison Pullen (2024) suggest that “hope” is an “activist practice” that is,

not about wishful or idealistic thinking nor a denial of the wicked and deeply disquieting realities we continue to witness at home and across the globe. Rather, hope is to face (and when possible, address) them.”¹²

“Embracing hope as an everyday action,” O’Shea and colleagues suggest, can lead to transformations and more just futures. I have hope for the future of *Sport History Review* and the field of sport history. In our individual practices and our collective disciplinary conventions and logics, we have important questions to address about what has been carefully wrapped, what has been concealed. We need to lean in and push the boundaries of what is possible. Learning with Lisa Slater, “we need to follow our affective (un)certainties, to consider the kinds of world-making we are involved in, to see discomfort and uncertainty as a place of political possibility, to consider what kind of world we are bringing into being as an inheritance.” We have to think deeply about how the discipline has *disciplined us* and how this has affected our relations within it. We have important questions to address about what might be made thinkable, be made possible, by carefully unwrapping some of our most deeply held convictions and thinking about our everyday actions. In anticipation of the new section of *Sport History Review* in Spring 2025 I encourage you to think about O’Shea and colleagues’ assertion that “[h]ope is everyday action, kept alive through individual actions and a commitment to share this hope with others, moving us closer to transformative change.”¹³ Paraphrasing Eve Tuck and K Wayne Yang’s often quoted article “Decolonization is not a Metaphor,” I conclude with the important words of Nathan Fawaz and Danielle Peers: “Get uncomfortable. Stay uncomfortable. Learn. Lay bare. Be uncomfortable. And, bear witness.”¹⁴ I’m convinced now more than ever, we need to sit in our discomfort in order to *manifest* hope, to see and embrace it *as an activist practice*.

Notes

1. Joy Hendry, *Wrapping Culture: Politeness, Presentation, and Power in Japan and Other Societies* (Oxford University Press, 1993), 1–26.
2. Laurence Douny and Susanna Harris. “Wrapping and Unwrapping: Concepts and Approaches.” in *Wrapping and Unwrapping Material Culture: Archaeological and Anthropological Perspectives* (Routledge, 2016), 15–40.
3. Hendry, *Wrapping Culture*, 5.
4. Ibid.
5. Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin, eds., *Arts of Engagement: Taking Aesthetic Action In and Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 2016), 2.
6. Joe Lambert with Brooke Hessler, *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community*. (Routledge, 2018), 53–69. See also, Lambert, Joe, and H. Brooke Hessler. *Digital Storytelling: Story Work for Urgent Times* (Digital Diner Press, 2020).
7. Malcolm MacLean, “Rethinking British Sport History for a Decolonising Present: Confronting Thingification and Redaction,” *Sport in History* 42, no. 4 (2022): 493.
8. Lisa Slater, “A Politics of Uncertainty: Good White People, Emotions, and Political responsibility,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 34, no. 6 (2020): 824.
9. See Massey, Doreen. *Space, Place and Gender* (John Wiley & Sons, 2013).
10. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 1.
11. Slater, *A Politics of Uncertainty*, 822.
12. Michelle O’Shea, Victoria Paraschak, Sonya Pearce, Hazel Maxwell, and Alison Pullen, “Everyday Activism and “Actionable” Hope as Tempered Radicals,” *Gender, Work & Organization* (2024): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.13176>. See also Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (Haymarket Books, 2016).
13. Ibid., 16.
14. Nathan V. Fawaz and Danielle Peers, “Dismantling Historical Hardscapes: Unsettling Inclusion as Solidarity,” *Sport History Review* 53, no. 2 (2022): 173–176.