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GOTHIC NIGHT IN CANADA

*Global Hockey Realities and
Ghostly National Imaginings*

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The game of hockey is an example of a popular culture practice that has been enshrined as central to “being Canadian.”¹ Hockey has also served as a *context* for a body of *texts*, in both print and electronic media, that have helped construct and reinforce the myth of a seamless national identity. In *Reflections of a Siamese Twin*, John Ralston Saul observes that “Canada ... suffers from a contradiction between its public mythologies (e.g. hockey is Canadian ‘at heart’) and its realities.”² Saul also warns that there can be slippage from myth making to mystification and contrasts generally accepted Canadian myths to historical events that, for whatever reason, did not become part of the national lexicon.³ Myths are powerful communicative tools; for Barthes they are a “type of speech” yet their messages are ambivalent, repressing some truths

while monumentalizing others.⁴ While we may yearn nostalgically for hockey's pastoral beginnings, as a simple game played on the ponds and sloughs of the prairies, or in backyard rinks from Brantford to Baie Comeau, for the last several decades, it has also been played professionally "from New York to LA," and is increasingly characterized by big stars, big media, and most of all, big money.

At the same time, myths may have a positive function, as "stories that dramatize important themes and tensions in a culture."⁵ They are the stories we tell ourselves, and each other, about who we think we are. Furthermore, audiences play an important role in how popular myths are received and re-articulated. Unquestionably, hockey today is the object of market-driven mass cultural production.⁶ However as John Fiske and others have emphasized, such products are made meaningful only through a process of negotiated popular consumption.⁷ This may be why hockey has somehow managed to maintain its unlikely status as a "specific expression of culture in action."⁸

Let me emphasize that my purpose here is not to talk about "real" hockey—the literal game itself—but rather *representations* of hockey and the symbolic and communicative uses to which these texts and images are put. As discursive enablers of cultural myth building, hockey representations contribute to the kind of "deep horizontal comradeship" that Benedict Anderson argues is key to imagining community.⁹ Anderson also refers to the "ghostly" nature of these "national imaginings"¹⁰ and in the case of hockey texts, they are sometimes explicitly so. This should come as no surprise since, as Margaret Atwood points out, "the important images, archetypes and genres [in Canadian culture] are often tied to concepts of monsters, ghosts and the gothic."¹¹ Atwood's insights are in keeping with the work of other critics who have theorized that the gothic relies on the idea of unstable, splintered, or fragmented identities. For Michael Hurley this fragmentation is socially situated, since there is "a relationship between the gothic, the grotesque... and periods of cultural disorder or upheaval, a relationship also informing Canadian postmodernism."¹² Most agree that, at its otherworldly core, the gothic is about the instability of boundaries—between natural and supernatural, past and present, self and other, the living and the dead. Freud has described the gothic as *unheimlich*, literally "un-home-like,"¹³ and in the case of hockey gothic this seems like yet another paradox since, for many, the framing narrative of identity is that our "country is winter" and home is where the hockey is. Perhaps there is a tension between this most familiar of myths and the fear that, as

discourse, it may turn out to be unsustainable? If so, then the presence of gothic elements in hockey texts also speaks to the “in-between space”¹⁴ that is Canada, and the anxiety this ambiguity produces.

The Canadian gothic tradition to which Atwood refers dates back to First Nations tale-telling and shamanistic practices, and early fictional examples include the short stories of remittance man Algernon Blackwood¹⁵ as well as John Richardson’s *Wacousta*, generally recognized as the first novel written in English by a Canadian. More recently, authors as diverse as “Munro, Davies, and Ondaatje have all deployed gothic elements” in their writing,¹⁶ while Paul Quarrington, Jeff Klein, David Gowdy and others have contributed to a corpus of hockey texts involving spectres of various kinds. In the case of the latter, it also may be possible (as Pierre Macherey puts it) “to trace the path that leads from the haunted work to that which haunts it.”¹⁷ Interestingly, manifestations of hockey gothic seem to coincide with a state of heightened anxiety about the status of the game itself.

For decades in North America, NHL hockey was promoted as the only hockey to be taken seriously.¹⁸ The apogee of this “Fortress North America” mentality was probably the cold-war frenzy surrounding the 1972 Canada Cup, when Canadian NHLers defeated the national team of the then-Soviet Union. However, in today’s context, while hockey is doing well with other players (including amateur and women players) and in other places, creeping professionalism (the “business of hockey”), along with the commitment on the part of NHL “brass” to sun-belt expansion (while refusing to entertain the possibility of new franchises in Hamilton and Halifax¹⁹), has not benefited hockey culture here in Canada, as witnessed by the departure of small-market teams from Winnipeg and Quebec City. On the contrary, these events have fostered a growing sense among some Canadians that we are losing “Our Game.”²⁰

Perhaps this why writers and journalists, and even ordinary fans, have settled on ghosts and the gothic as the most effective means to represent their fears and hopes about the future of hockey. Derrida’s deconstructive “take” on spectrality is that, while ostensibly about the past, it is primarily concerned with the problems of the here-and-now.²¹ This chapter looks at two hockey novels—*The Divine Ryans* and *The Last Season*—a late-90s television series, *Power Play*, and, finally, persistent modern-day folklore regarding the “ghosts” of the Montreal Forum to examine and hopefully explain, the communicative functions that hockey gothic serves in each.

The Divine Ryans

The opening scene of Wayne Johnston's magic realist novel, *The Divine Ryans*,²² takes place in a graveyard. The Ryans, a St. John's Newfoundland commercial dynasty that has gradually fallen on hard times, own and manage (among other things) a funeral home:

All that was left of the empire, except for Aunt Phil's house, was its four corners: *The Chronicle* and the funeral home which we owned, and the orphanage and the convent, which we might as well have owned, given how long somebody named Ryan had been running them ... The only moneymaker in the lot was the funeral home, prompting Uncle Reginald to remark that, from now on, the family motto should be, "We make our living from the dead." (p. 2)

It is in this comic/gothic context that the principal character, nine-year-old Draper Doyle, comes of age. As might be expected of a stereotypically Canadian youth, Draper Doyle Ryan plays hockey. He is a goalie and, in his own mind at least, not a particularly good one. The framed photo on his bedroom wall says it all:

At my skates, on the ice just in front of me, lay my nemesis, the puck. The word "puck," my father had once told me, originally meant "demon." For a time it had even been used interchangeably with "hobgoblin." I made a mental note of thanks to that anonymous inventor of hockey who had had the good sense to opt for "puck." (p. 3)

Hobgoblins notwithstanding, Draper Doyle loves the game. In any case, he has other, more disturbing, worries. His father has died recently and Draper Doyle has been seeing his ghost:

... from out of the darkness of the house, he appeared, looking as if he had just come home from work. My father stood at the kitchen sink and looked out the window, at me, it seemed, though he gave no sign that he had seen me. I closed my eyes then opened them to find that a man

unmistakably my father was still staring at me... Then he took from his coat pocket what looked like a hockey puck, which he began to toss from hand to hand, his head going back and forth as he followed the flight of the puck ...

“Mom,” I shouted, “Mom, Dad is in our house. In the kitchen. He’s there, I saw him.” (pp. 3–4)

The adults in the family, and even his twelve-year-old sister, view these visitations with scepticism. To them, this is clearly a sign that Draper Doyle has been traumatized by his father’s sudden and untimely demise. Worse still (at least for the more religiously inclined family members) the ghost sightings seem downright frivolous. As matriarch Aunt Phil points out, “people came back from the dead to deliver ‘messages’ or ‘warnings’ to the living, not just to look at them or of all things to throw pucks up in the air” (p. 7).

Draper Doyle soon learns to refrain from mentioning these episodes to the other Ryans, but he continues to find them troubling, in part because he has experienced a memory loss or “black-out” and cannot recall the events immediately preceding and following his father’s death: “My ‘missing week’ Uncle Reginald called it. My father, he insisted, was gone but not forgotten. My missing week, on the other hand, was forgotten but not gone” (p. 8).

As well, Draper Doyle’s sleep is often disturbed by recurring nightmares and twice he dreams he is in the Montreal Forum. His second Forum dream is patterned on a “real life” incident, the death of hockey legend Howie Morenz²³ and subsequent public display, at centre ice, of his remains:

That night I dreamed that I was in the Forum, on the ice, standing with Aunt Phil in a line of people who, like us, were wearing street clothes. It might have been one of those Depression-era breadlines, for the way that we were dressed and the way that we shuffled forward, heads bowed ... It was exactly as Uncle Reginald had once described it to me. Aunt Phil was taking me to see the great Howie Morenz, who was being waked at centre ice ... Aunt Phil and I were taking part in one of the greatest moments in Habs history. “Morenz” the crowd kept whispering, “Morenz,” I said, as the circle slowly broke to let us in ...

“Kiss him,” Aunt Phil said. “Kiss the man good-bye.” She began to

lower me towards the casket ...

I looked down to see, not Morenz, but my father, his hair slicked back, a kind of spectral handsomeness about him, my dead father, waiting for a kiss from the one person who could bring him back to life ...” (pp. 122–124)

When the climax of the novel finally comes and Draper Doyle’s dilemma is resolved, this too is accomplished by means of a dream in which Draper Doyle, urged on by Uncle Reginald, must confront his fears externalised as monsters (a neighbour’s Doberman is cast as Cerberus) and exorcise his father’s ghost. Once again, Draper Doyle stands before his father’s coffin, but this time he is not in the Montreal Forum but rather in hell (or some underworld equivalent, located, appropriately enough, in the basement of Reg Ryan’s Funeral Home). He is dressed to do battle in his goalie mask and pads, and armed with magic hockey pucks:

“I don’t want to touch him,” I said. “I’m not touching him.”

“You don’t have to,” said Uncle Reginald. “Just use the pucks.”

“What?” I said.

“The pucks,” he said. “Put them on his eyes.”

I reached into my pads and took out the two remaining pucks.

“Put them on his eyes?” I said.

Nodding his head and looking at me through circles made with his index fingers, Uncle Reginald said gravely, “*On his eyes.*” (p. 199)

Pucks, rather than pennies, are placed on the dead man’s eyes, but the ritual works. When he awakens, Draper Doyle discovers that his “missing week” is missing no longer. He remembers how—and, more importantly, *why*—his father died, and this knowledge brings with it the possibility of freedom for his mother, his sister, and Draper Doyle himself. Their departure is an incongruous one—especially for a “Divine Ryan”:

I had always figured that we would leave Fleming Street in a hearse, though I hadn’t expected us to all go together, not to mention while we were still alive. Rather than climb into the casket compartment, which Aunt Phil wanted us to do so that no one on Fleming Street would see us,

we all piled into the front seat with Uncle Reginald. More than one person on the route to the airport witnessed the unlikely sight of a woman and her two children, crammed like hitchhikers into the front seat of Reg Ryan's hearse, all laughing except for Uncle Reginald, whose mournful expression was even more pronounced than usual. (p. 214)

Under patriarchy we all bear "the name of the father" so it is significant that, as a condition of their release (and symbolic gesture of excommunication), Aunt Phil insists that Draper Doyle's mother revert to her maiden name. Henceforth, the widow and her two children will be known by the more secular and mundane patronymic, Delaney. Draper Doyle, who, as Uncle Reginald has reminded him, is the last male bearer of the Ryan name, must, as a condition of freedom, leave that name behind him (p. 212). This, however, does not subvert the already-established link between Draper Doyle and his father, nor does it break the metonymic chain: father/hockey/past/identity. It is surely no accident that, as a denouement, Draper Doyle discovers his father's final message to him (again, from beyond the grave) in his copy of *The Cartoon Virgil*. Like Aeneas, Draper Doyle must emerge from the underworld (i.e., life under the parochial dead hand of the "Divine Ryans") in order to fulfil his yet-to-be-discovered destiny.

The Last Season

Hockey hauntings are not always so benign. Unlike the protagonist of *The Divine Ryans* who is looking for clues as to who his father really was and (by extension) who he himself may become, the central character of Roy MacGregor's novel *The Last Season*²⁴ struggles to come to terms with a past—and an identity—that he has personally rejected, but that simply will not go away. Felix Batterinski is a member of the category euphemistically known as "New Canadians" and his Polish-immigrant father, whom he loves deeply, is a source of embarrassment to the acne-ridden and emotionally insecure teenager who hopes to become a successful professional hockey player.

The story begins with a flashback. The fifteen-year-old Felix has left the remote northern community of Pomerania and is "boarding out" with a middle-class family in the town of Vernon. He is dismayed when his father who, in Felix's eyes, "looks like a degenerate" (p. 2) pays him a surprise visit:

“Why have you come, Poppa?”

“I want to see my son play hockey.”

“We don’t play tonight. It’s juveniles tonight. Midgets don’t play until tomorrow.”

“Fine then. I’ll stay till tomorrow.”

Den. Den. Fine den. ... Christ, until I heard him I hadn’t realized how much I’d lost. It was amazing what laughing behind your back could do for your front; I fell asleep thinking “th” and woke up saying it.

“Never mind,” Poppa said quickly, though I had said nothing. “I’ll get a room at the hotel.”

I couldn’t be sure whether he expected me to argue with him or not. But how could he have possibly stayed at the Riley’s? If he went to the bathroom he wouldn’t even know to flush. (p. 4)

Ironically, the more Felix tries to escape the past, the more it pursues him. He is particularly determined to get away from his step-grandmother, Batcha, who has a reputation in her own community, as a woman of power, in Polish, a *carovnica* or white witch. For Felix, Batcha and her folk remedies are a particularly potent symbol of “foreign” ignorance and superstition:

Growing up with her always around, it had never seemed all that unusual to me. But now, coming from Vernon where Mrs. Riley had her sparkling medicine chest filled with every cure the television promised, Batcha seemed outrageously impossible. (p. 29)

Still, he has some feelings of ambivalence, which lead to even more strenuous denial:

I myself had seen her cure swollen cows’ udders over at the Jazdas’ by scratching the teats with a mole’s foreclaw. And I remembered how when Jaja died she had forced Poppa to walk around the yard telling everything, chickens, bushes, trees, even a chipmunk, that the old man was dead, while she came along behind making the sign of the cross over everything Poppa spoke to. I remember he seemed embarrassed. But I also remember he did it. So not much had changed in Pomerania—they were still buying the old

bitch's tricks. (p. 30)

When the *carovnica* sacrifices a black cat, as part of an attempted cure for a neighbour-woman's cancer, Felix confronts his father, who is more than a bit evasive:

I shook my head. "Why do you let her do it?" ...

"Your Batcha is very well thought of around here, Felix," he said.

"She spooks me," I said....

"You're fifteen years old, son. Has she hurt you yet?" (p. 41)

Batcha continues to "spook him," and years later when Felix is forced to acknowledge that his once-promising hockey career is in ruins, he blames her for everything:

She fucked Philadelphia. She fucked Helsinki. She fucked me in Leningrad. It was always her, always at the window, laughing... And she's still laughing.

Bitch! (p. 303)

The Last Season is a variant of the classic (the unsympathetic might say shopworn) tale of the underprivileged Kid from the Sticks whose Special Talent enables him to Rise to Stardom. In fact, such "Cinderella Stories" were not all that rare in real life and for decades, the sons of farmers, factory workers, trappers, lumberjacks, and miners provided the raw material from which future hockey Hall-of-Famers would be shaped. In *The Last Season*, however, MacGregor manages to subvert the rags-to-riches cliché just enough to allow a different, much darker, story to emerge. Felix Batterinski's (his name is a deliberate pun) special talent is that he is unusually tough, strong, and aggressive, and he achieves fame (or at least notoriety) as one of hockey's premiere enforcers (read: "goons"):

It was Orr and Batterinski, the two defencemen, they talked most about in Ontario junior. Bobby Orr would get the cover of MacLean's. I almost got the cover of Police Gazette after the Billings incident. My rep was made. The North Bay Nugget's nickname for me, Frankenstein, spread throughout the league ... *They didn't know me. I didn't know myself.* But I loved

being talked about in the same breath as the white brush cut from Parry Sound. (p. 100)

Over time, however, Felix does learn to recognize the self he sees reflected in his ambivalent public image and to identify with his hypermasculinized Frankenstein persona. But as his career falters (he is traded to an expansion team, and eventually ends up as a playing coach Europe) he also begins to understand the downside of life as a manufactured monster. As his self-doubt grows, he is increasingly haunted by negative aspects of his past, particularly Batcha. On a rare visit home to Pomerania, the increasingly demoralized Felix goes on daily runs to try to keep his aging body in “game shape”:

Ahead of me, just where the road would rise to the cedar knoll heading up to a rock face overlooking the swamp, a sun pocket lay in waiting. But I did not see it until I entered. ... Four long strides and I was through—a light switched on at night, then instantly off—and the higher fog was already swallowing me when I spun in mid stride.

Batcha had been standing there!

My ankle caught and I stumbled, skidding on the grass embankment along the side, falling heavily to my knees in the gravel and stopping on all fours, my palms pounding the loose stone through ...

“Batcha?”

But nothing. I looked at all sides of the strip of bright morning. There was the path, wet and glistening, the silver poplar trunks, dew on the cedar, some dry blueberry bushes, the blue sky in a narrow gap above, the fog banks on all sides—But not Batcha.

Yet I *had* seen her ... (p. 220)

Not long afterwards, Felix learns the meaning of the name Batcha had called him as a child. To her, he has always been a *vjeszczi*—a monster—because he was born with a caul. Unknowingly, Batterinski has been a “Frankenstein” all along!

If Draper Doyle’s journey resembles *The Aeneid* (in that he goes on to new beginnings), Felix Batterinski’s follows the pattern of *The Odyssey*, a circular journey fraught with many perils, which finally takes him back to his point of origin. Here, however, all similarities cease, for there is no glad homecoming for

the prodigal from Pomerania. Ultimately, this hinterland anti-hero (who has wanted so desperately to be part of the mainstream) remains a displaced person: “In the end, I am just a Pole. Alone. All I can truly pray for is Batterinski, the poor dumb bastard. But pray for what?” (p. 289). As his identity as a hockey player disintegrates, Felix becomes increasingly delusional and, in a last desperate act, he tries to lift the *vjeszczi* curse, which (supposedly) has been on him since birth, and that the former sceptic now accepts with the zeal of a true believer. In his own words, he attempts “to devour his past to nourish his future” (p. 310). But it is not his real past; this he has carelessly lost, along with his grandfather’s cherished Batterinski Family History. Felix can neither learn to value his Polish heritage, nor construct a viable alternative identity, and the failure to do so literally kills him.

Power Play

Other media have employed spectres to remind us of our ambivalence about where we come from and who we are. *Power Play*, a television series produced by the Canadian corporation Alliance Atlantis, was introduced in the late 1990s, and ran for two seasons on the CTV network before finally being cancelled due to poor ratings in the U.S. Half morality play, half soap opera, *Power Play* tells the story of the Hamilton Steelheads, a fictional small-market Canadian NHL franchise, and the struggling team’s efforts to survive in the high-priced world of professional hockey. One of the ongoing themes of the series is continuity, and in several episodes, ghosts appear to the protagonist to re-introduce him to events from his past and to admonish him regarding his present conduct.

The importance of continuity is made clear at the outset by the program’s opening. The theme music is Stompin’ Tom Connors’ “The Hockey Song.” Initially, we hear the song sung by Tom himself, over a grainy black and white (signalling “the Past” as well as “the Real”) montage of children and adults playing pond hockey, long shots of the Hamilton steel mills, and close-ups of the hands of working men carrying lunch boxes and punching time cards. Then, we segue to the present; colour replaces black and white, and the audience now hears a cover version of the same song, this time performed by the 1990s “Celt-Rock” band, Great Big Sea. As the credits roll, we see Hamilton today (principally the Copps Coliseum where much of the action is set) and the faces of various cast members.

(The above is reinforced on a weekly basis as the same sequence appears at the beginning of every episode.)

Power Play is a Canadian product that was obviously created with an eye to the American audience. It makes fun of cultural clichés on both sides of the border. In the first episode, when the main character, Brett Parker (expatriate Canadian and successful player agent—with headquarters in New York, of course!) tells his American girlfriend he is going home to Hamilton, she insists that Hamilton is in Bermuda. When he argues (“No, it’s in Ontario”), she flatly states that she knows perfectly well where it is, since she was there just last week. This is only one of several examples lampooning American arrogance and ignorance about things Canadian. However, with typically “Canadian” self-deprecation *Power Play* includes comments such as the following: “A young ‘hip’ guy named ‘Ashley,’ plays a fiddle, wears a kilt (pause... eye roll...) only in Canada!” (episode eight).

Episode one of the series begins with a scene in which marketing “whiz” Parker vetoes a promotion because it is “too Canadian.” The first thing the television audience sees is an aerial shot of a frozen prairie landscape, then the camera cuts to a game of shinny (both of which are filmed in black and white). At the same time, a voice-over is telling us, “It was born from the land, an expression of joy and community in the face of bleak winter... It is a game, yes, but also a tribal ritual; a blood bond handed down from generation to generation...”

“All right—KILL IT!” Abruptly we hear the voice of Brett Parker, and the TV audience realizes that we have been watching a video (shown in a Manhattan boardroom). Parker continues: “What the HELL was that? We’re supposed to sell fire on ice—this was KIDS WITH FROZEN SNOT!!!! WHO DID THIS????” The blurb, which was to have been the network opener for the forthcoming playoffs, turns out to have been the “brain child” of someone named Ian. With a sneer, Parker pounces: “Ian? Ian... with a name like that you wouldn’t... you wouldn’t conceivably be CANADIAN would you?” When Ian replies, “hockey is universal, eh,” Parker’s response is, by now, predictable: “He said ‘eh.’ GET HIM OUTA HERE! ... How many times do I have to tell you, you don’t hire Canadians for these jobs? They don’t know how to sell hockey. They don’t know ANYTHING ABOUT HOCKEY. ...” (episode one). This brief vignette pokes fun at stereotypes (this time Canadian ones) while establishing Brett Parker’s persona as an American “wannabe.”

The conflict that drives the series centres on the interactions of three principal characters. The team owner, “Duff” McArdle (played by Gordon Pinsent) is both

a businessman (he also owns McArdle Industries) and a lover of hockey. He is torn, because he knows that it would make good economic sense to move the franchise to an American city, but his heart is in his hometown, Hamilton. He hires Brett Parker to manage the team, and instructs him that his preordained task is to keep the team from moving. This pits Brett against Colleen Blessed, president of the Steelheads and CEO of McArdle Industries, who has been instructed (again by Duff), to sell the team to the highest bidder.

Duff himself lives mainly in the past and is constantly reminiscing, yet he has problems with his short-term memory (implying that recent events are somehow tainted by their proximity to the present, and, as a result, are less meaningful).²⁵ In the context of the plot structure of individual episodes, he functions as a kind of *deus ex machina*, setting near-impossible tasks for Brett and Colleen, then sabotaging their chances of achieving their respective goals. In true soap opera fashion, a love interest develops between the two, both “hometown kids who’ve (more-or-less) made good” and both characters who must be reminded—in Brett’s case at times forcefully—of where they come from. In a pivotal moment, after seeing the house that Brett grew up in, and in which he lives once again, Colleen observes, “Parker, you’re just like me” (episode ten).

It is clear, in *Power Play*, that the fate of a small-market team is also tied to national survival (Canada as small-market country) and a set of values. Duff McArdle embodies old-style paternalistic capitalism displaced by the “new world order” and he remarks, in true High Tory fashion that: “Nobody knows why they do anything any more... There’s *just some things they have to hang on to*” (episode one, emphasis added). Family is represented by Brett’s teenaged daughter Michele whom he abandoned as a child (in favour of his career) but with whom, upon his return to Hamilton, he re-establishes a relationship. However, when he asks her if she wishes to call him ‘dad,’ she replies “‘dad’ is something you earn, like ‘doctor’ or ‘major.’” Later, when confronting a young “cool” American hockey player who wants to date her she challenges his cynical attitude toward the game and asserts Canadian Difference: “Hockey is not just a ‘gig’. It’s not just ‘show biz’, *not in this country*” (episode seven, emphasis added).

In *Power Play*, conservative community values are all, in one way or another, opposed to economic rationalism because, as the series makes clear, it actually *would* make sense (and dollars) to move the team south. McArdle industries is going broke and the money from the hockey franchise might save the business, which in turn

would mean saving jobs for local steel mill employees. Even the players could benefit, because of potentially higher salaries paid by big-market franchises. The message is a mixed one and, to varying degrees the characters all display a kind of schizoid indecision about what choices they should make and why. However, only the “identity-challenged” Brett Parker sees ghosts, who (invariably) remind him that you have to remain true to tradition, in hockey, as in life.

While he has spectral encounters with, among others, Bill Barilko, Jacques Plante, and the infamous Eddie Shore (who is only marginally more terrifying as a ghost than he was in life) not all of these hockey apparitions are famous NHLers. He also sees the ghost of the Steelhead’s recently deceased general manager who coached him during his promising PeeWee career, as well as the spectre of his father, a career minor leaguer who was always somewhere else when his son needed him. One night, after a demoralizing loss, estranged from his players, and alone in the darkened arena parking lot, Parker is accosted by the ghosts of the Dawson City Seven²⁶ who tell him that, when times are hard and things fall apart, its good to “be with your team” (episode three).

The protagonist of *Power Play* must learn that he can only address new realities by remembering, and being true to, the old. In the final scene of the concluding episode, he is (literally) invited to embrace the past, when his father’s ghost clasps him in his arms. The series *Power Play* is well named, since it is about both play (hockey) and power. It reminds us that:

The subordinate may be disempowered but they are not powerless. There is a power in resisting power, there is a power in maintaining one’s social identity in opposition to that proposed by the dominant ideology, there is a power in asserting one’s own subcultural values against the dominant ones. There is, in short, a power in being different.²⁷

The Ghosts of the Forum

Hockey also provides a context for ghostly speculations of a more grassroots kind, and one arena in particular, the now-defunct Montreal Forum²⁸ has proven to be the locus of ongoing commentary that affirms the enduring existence of departed members of *le Club de Hockey*. In 2006, during March and April, the Canadiens.com Fan Forum recorded over ninety posts on the subject

of “the Forum Ghosts.”²⁹ The following remarks by “hockey guru grand Manitou” are typical:

Saturday March 11, 2006, the night the Canadiens retire Geoffreon’s #5 jersey, Huet records his 5th shutout of the year

Saturday March 11, 2006, the day Geoffreon dies and the day the Habs retire his #5 jersey come on March 11, the same day that the funeral of his legendary father-in-law, Howie Morenz, was held in the Montreal Forum in 1937

March 11, 1996 is also the night of the final NHL game at the Forum

Have the ghosts from the old Montreal Forum finally found their way to the Bell Centre?³⁰

Over the two months of its virtual existence, this online discussion vacillated between skeptics and believers, the latter deriving support for their arguments from portents such as the discovery that then-Montreal goalie, Cristabel Huet, had images of the “ghosts” painted on his helmet and warning the doubters to “not mock the spirits.” The concern expressed most often by fans was whether or not the Forum ghosts have relocated in the home team’s new arena, briefly named Molson Centre, but now (as of September 2002) the Bell Centre. While most seemed hopeful that the ghosts had made the move, some were less sanguine. After all, how could a building designed to represent and promote corporate logos possibly evoke the same feelings as an arena bearing the name of the city that was recently—if somewhat arbitrarily—declared the “birthplace” of hockey?³¹

It’s worth noting that the forum ghosts turn out to have been a hockey legend even before the fan trauma induced by the closure of the Forum. In 1999, on NHL.com, the league’s official website, sports journalist John Halligan posted an article with the following “lead”:

It has been over three years now, and still nobody has told the ghosts.

Either that or the fabled “Ghosts of the Montreal Forum” are simply taking their sweet time about moving from their home of 72 years into the new home of the Montreal Canadiens, the squeaky clean Molson Centre.

Veteran “ghost watchers” would swear they saw the stiff pennants move

when the ghosts were about, as they surely were on two notable occasions in recent years.

It was the ghosts, wasn't it, that caught Boston coach Don Cherry with too many men on the ice in 1979, leading to a dramatic Guy Lafleur goal that propelled the Canadiens to victory in the semifinal round against the Bruins?

It was the ghosts, wasn't it, that caught Marty McSorley of the Los Angeles Kings with an illegal stick in 1993, leading to a Montreal goal that led to four straight victories after an opening game loss?

The "Ghosts of the Forum" are generally believed to be a fluid group. Morenz is there, to be sure, but Hall of Famers George Vezina, Newsy Lalonde, Joe Malone, Aurel Joliat, Toe Blake, Bill Durnan, Jacques Plante and Doug Harvey have probably visited at one time or another."³²

Today, the Forum ghosts can be viewed on an AOL video and, in 1996, the arena (and its ghosts) was the subject of a French-language television documentary, *Le Fantôme du Forum*, by award-winning Québécois filmmaker Jean-Marc Duchesne. More recently, recollections of a visit to the Forum inspired the following comments from one nostalgic blogger, John Cianfaglione, who, in 2007, recalled attending a "Habs" game in 1993 only three years prior to the building's closure:

It was like a dream come true walking through the Forum doors, seeing pictures of famous Canadiens players of years past, like Guy Lafleur, Jean Beliveau and my dad's favorite Maurice "The Rocket" Richard. I honestly thought that I'd died and gone to heaven. I could feel the presence of those famous Forum ghosts.³³

* * * * *

Gothic elements figure in each of the above examples, reminding us of the need for continuity, and signalling the dangers of losing our links with home and history. In the case of the anecdotal ghosts of the Montreal Forum, the loss is a literal one, given that the team has abandoned the building that was its "home" for decades. In this instance, it seems clear that the function of *les fantômes* is to convey a message of hope to demoralized fans who feel that Montreal might be losing its tradition as the "winningest team in hockey." This loss of tradition can be

ascribed, at least in part, to the changing nature of the North American entertainment industry, and the impact of these changes on the sport of hockey.

Revenants are “crucial to the gothic, where haunting usually takes the contractual form of inheritance”³⁴ and in *Power Play*, the central character learns that, despite his yuppified disdain for all things Canadian, he *can*—in fact must—“go home again.” According to Atwood, fictional ghosts tend to be of three general types: “spirits of place ... bearers of fate [or] ... manifestations of repressed inner lives made visible.”³⁵ Fortunately for Brett Parker, his ghosts (functioning as “bearers of fate”) are there to show him the way. Once again, economic imperatives are pitted against shared community values and in the black-and-white soap opera universe of *Power Play*, the choices, while clear, are not easy.

Magic realism, represented here by *The Divine Ryans*, is a subgenre of the gothic in which “mythic elements convey their messages through humour and a certain ambiguity.”³⁶ A ghost who throws pucks in the air seems almost playful, though the sheer incongruity is alarming. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake, in the context of Johnston’s novel, to take these visitations less than seriously given that the ghost—clearly, a “sliver of [Draper Doyle’s] repressed inner life made visible”—actually functions as an agent of recovered memory. In the climactic scene, we learn it was Draper Doyle’s accidental discovery of his father’s secret gay identity that has triggered both Donald Ryan’s suicide and his son’s memory loss. For father and son (both “divine Ryans”) family ties bind in cruel ways, but while the former is victimized by homophobia, Draper Doyle manages to stand Aunt Phil’s bigotry and fear of public disgrace on its head. The repressed returns—and with a vengeance—yet brings with it release, and the promise of future possibilities.

The forum ghosts are an example of a fan-inspired, half tongue-in-cheek urban legend, while *Power Play* and (to a lesser extent) *The Divine Ryans* often treat serious issues with a kind of ironic levity. In contrast, *The Last Season* is a more straightforward work that blends gothic elements with psychological realism. For the immigrant protagonist, who admits he does not “know himself.”³⁷ Canada is “a new home whose ‘newness’ constantly calls forth the spectre of the past.”³⁸ Felix Batterinski, however, wishes to avoid his past, and is further conflicted by his Jekyll-and-Hyde-like dual identity as both man and monster, a result of the need to remake himself as a cultural commodity for export (i.e., a career NHLer). The setting, a remote northern community, is also appropriately gothic, recalling as it does Margot Northey’s haunted wilderness that, as Atwood has pointed out, is the shad-

owy domain of Windigos and other strange things: “The settler’s arrival in this uncharted region displaces him (sic) from European social codes of conduct and threatens... a potential loss of self.”³⁹ Batcha’s ghost, at once “bearer of fate” and “spirit of place,” embodies both immigrant identity and the peril of the North Ontario bush country, a convergence against which the embattled Felix—who has always been a kind of “one-man garrison”—cannot fortify himself.

Ghosts and the gothic remind us that there is something unstable about our most seemingly secure cultural assumptions. Perhaps this is because Canadian identity is less about ontology than “hauntology,” and the Derridean state of suspension between being and non-being. Myths, as mentioned earlier, are stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, and Julian Wolfrey notes that “to tell a story is always to invoke ghosts, to open a space through which something other returns.”⁴⁰ But such instability, while sometimes uncomfortable, is not a bad thing, because, as Colin Davis points out, spectrality in Derrida represents “the structural openness... directed towards the living by the voices of the past or the not yet formulated possibilities of the future.”⁴¹ If the sport of hockey’s symbolic function is to tell us “we are Canadian,” representations of hockey as gothic undermine all such certainties, and may even gesture towards a critical interrogation of what being Canadian actually means.

Conclusion

While much hockey writing sustains and celebrates our myth of national identity, a number of examples, including those discussed above, point to the gap between myth and reality that Saul refers to earlier. Hockey texts are sites of contradiction, including the assertion-in-discourse of a fundamental relationship between the game of hockey and “Canadian-ness,” in the context of a globalized world where hockey, like much else, exceeds national boundaries. Graeme Turner observed a similar phenomenon in the case of representations of Australian nationalism that have “outlasted most of the political and social conditions that produced them [yet] have not lost their potential for signifying Australian-ness.”⁴² Years ago, Raymond Williams distinguished between “residual” and “emergent” cultural forms, pointing out that both can work in opposition to the hegemonic dominant culture.⁴³ It may well be that his insights are more valid now than ever, given the scope of present instabilities:

The [contemporary] cultural configuration of everyday life is an unsettled—and constantly unsettling—*mélange* of the globally same and the locally diverse, with the latter continuing to exist in the face of the former, and the former in some ways stimulating both old and new versions of the latter.⁴⁴

In Canada, at least, the Garrison walls have been breached and old forms of exclusionary nationalism have been de-centred but, it should be possible to find new and better ways of resisting the Master Narrative of corporate globalization. The need to do so is urgent but the task is difficult because, while systematically exploitative of both populations and resources (natural as well as cultural), at the level of discourse (or, if you like, as myth) the neo-liberal consensus is nothing short of Panglossian in its simple-minded optimism and self-proclaimed inevitability.

The answers to my questions about why Canadians seem so obsessive in their need to mythologize hockey turn out to be speculative. This is fitting, I think, given the phantasmagorical qualities of our imagined community, something I see as symptomatic of both internal and external pressures. Regarding the latter, Justin Edwards concludes that the supposedly “Canadian taste for order and stability” is subverted by “a sort of Northern grotesque that one might attribute to the peripheral position Canada occupies with respect to the centres of power”⁴⁵ while Gina Wisker emphasises that, in postcolonial discourse, the gothic is frequently employed “to explore ways in which imperial and colonial powers disempowered, de-energized, disenfranchised and silenced... taking from [the colonized] their identities, their histories, languages and the right to imagine and speak.”⁴⁶ For Andrea Frolic, “arguably the only thing all Canadians share is a protracted quest for a coherent national identity.”⁴⁷ At the very least, hockey gothic articulates a tension between the desire to know ourselves through myth and memory and a troubled uncertainty as to whether or not such a coherent collective self ever was, or could be.

NOTES

1. In a study that included both print and electronic media, and explored a range of cultural artifacts and practices, from commemorative postage stamps, to Molson's well-known "Joe Canada Rant" advertisement, to the Senate appointment of a former NHL star (Frank Mahovlich), the research showed that, for producers and consumers of hockey texts, the identities in question frequently had to do with national belonging. To be "Canadian" was to engage somehow with hockey. I found this conclusion paradoxical, given that hockey was never an exclusively Canadian sport, and rarely has been less so than today.
2. John Ralston Saul, *Reflections of a Siamese Twin: Canada at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Toronto: Viking, 1997): 1.
3. Saul 1997, 6.
4. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Granada, 1973): 109.
5. Richard Gruneau and David Whitson, *Hockey Night in Canada: Sport Identities and Cultural Politics* (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1993): 133.
6. David Cruise and Alison Griffiths, *Net Worth: Exploding the Myths of Pro Hockey* (Toronto: Viking, 1991). Gruneau and Whitson 1993. Bruce Kidd and John Macfarlane, *The Death of Hockey* (Toronto: New Press, 1972).
7. John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1989).
8. Martin Laba, "Myths and Markets: Hockey as Popular Culture in Canada," in *Seeing Ourselves: Media Power and Policy in Canada*, eds. Helen Holmes and David Taras (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992): 336.
9. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1996). For a discussion of the utopian potential of such nostalgic imaginings, see Hughes-Fuller, 2002. "The Good Old Game: Hockey, Nostalgia, Identity." PhD dissertation, University of Alberta.
10. Anderson 1996, 9.
11. In Donna Bennett, "Criticism in English," in *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, eds. Donna Bennett and Russell Brown (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2002): 161.
12. Michael Hurley, *The Borders of Nightmare: The Fiction of John Richardson* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992): 161.
13. Justin Edwards, *Gothic Canada: Reading the Spectre of a National Literature* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2005): xx.
14. Edwards 2005, xiv.
15. John Colombo, "Four Hundred Years of Fantastic Literature in Canada," in *Out of This World: Canadian Science Fiction and Fantastic Literature* (Ottawa: Quarry Press and the National Library of Canada, 1995): 32–5.
16. Hurley 1992, 6.
17. Pierre Macherey, Excerpt from *A Theory of Literary Production: A Critical and*

- Cultural Theory Reader*, eds. Antony Easthope and Kate McGowan (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992): 21–30.
18. Gruneau and Whitson 1993, 103–105.
 19. An example of this would be the NHL's negative response to Peterborough Ontario native Jim Balsillie's, repeated attempts to purchase franchises that are faltering in the US and move them to Canada.
 20. Dave Bidini, *Tropic of Hockey* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2000): xviii.
 21. Colin Davis, "État Présent, Hauntology, Spectres and Phantoms," *French Studies* 59:3 (2005): 379.
 22. Wayne Johnston, *The Divine Ryans* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1998).
 23. Morenz, known as the "Stratford Streak" was famous for his scoring ability (in 1928–29 he scored forty-four goals in forty-eight games) but also for his speed and finesse. When he died at age thirty-five "the funeral was the greatest outpouring of public grief the nation had ever expressed. The body lay in state at centre ice in the Forum, while... outside 200,000 stood in mourning as the coffin was borne through the streets of Montreal." See Peter Gzowski, *The Game of Our Lives* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1981): 26.
 24. Roy MacGregor, *The Last Season* (Markham, ON: Penguin, 1985).
 25. Throughout the series, "Duff" keeps up a continuous (and often hilarious) patter of anecdotes and remarks on Canadian themes and icons. He recalls Canadian swimmer Marilyn Bell, "a pretty little thing when she wasn't all pruney," laments the cancellation of *Don Messer's Jubilee*, refers to someone as "huffin' and puffin' like (former CTV news anchor) Harvey Kirk," and so on. In another instance, he takes Brett Parker's American girlfriend on a tour of Hamilton, pointing out and describing the buildings that used to be, as she (puzzled) follows him from parking lot to parking lot.
 26. "Of the many challenges in Stanley Cup history, 1905 provided the most unusual. The famed Ottawa Silver Seven were challenged by a team from Dawson City in the Yukon. The Klondikers travelled 4000 miles to Ottawa, part of the way by dogsled, where they were humiliated by one of the greatest teams ever assembled." See Brian McFarlane, *One Hundred Years of Hockey* (Toronto: Summerhill Press, 1989): 6.
 27. Fiske 1989, 19.
 28. The Forum has not been demolished; rather it has been transformed into a combined Cineplex and Bowling Alley.
 29. "Fan Forum, *Le Canadiens.com*: <http://forum.canadiens.com/index.php?showtopic=7297> (accessed 7 July 2008).
 30. *Ibid.*
 31. The origins of hockey have been a source of contention for some time: "There are numerous accounts of ball and stick games... being played on ice as far back as the eighteenth century. Indigenous people may have played such games even earlier" (Gruneau and Whitson 1993, 32) The most popular choices have been Kingston, Ontario; Windsor, Nova Scotia and, of course, Montreal (www.birthplaceofhockey.com).

- com/origin/overview.html). Only recently was the latter institutionalized as hockey's "official" birthplace, in part because of the "Hockey Day in Canada" commemoration process.
32. Halligan, John. "The Ghosts of the Forum," 1999: <http://www.nhl.com/hockeyu/history/teams/montreal.html> (accessed 9 July 2008).
 33. John Cianfaglione, "My First Visit to the Montreal Forum," 2007: <http://johncianfaglione.blogspot.com/2007/02/my-first-visit-to-montreal-forum.html> (accessed 7 July 2008).
 34. Edwards 2005, xxix.
 35. Margaret Atwood, *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (London: Virago Press, 2004): 73–74.
 36. Charles DeLint, "Considering Magical Realism in Canada," in *Out of This World: Canadian Science Fiction and Fantastic Literature* (Ottawa: Quarry Press and the National Library of Canada, 1995): 120.
 37. Macgregor 1985, 100.
 38. Smaro Kamboureli, *Making a Difference: Canadian Multicultural Literature* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1996): 1.
 39. Edwards 2005, 3.
 40. Julian Wolfrey, *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature* (London: Palgrave, 2002): 3.
 41. Davis 2005, 379.
 42. Graeme Turner, *Making It National: Nationalism and Australian Popular Culture* (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1994): 110.
 43. Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," *Rethinking Popular Culture*, eds. Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991): 407–423.
 44. David Inglis, *Globalization, Culture and Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 2005): 135.
 45. Edwards 2005, 164.
 46. Gina Wisker, *Horror Fiction: An Introduction* (New York: Continuum, 2005): 187.
 47. Andrea Frolic, "Wear it with Pride: The Fashions of Toronto's Pride Parade and Canadian Queer Identities," in *In a Queer Country: Gay and Lesbian Studies in the Canadian Context*, ed. Terry Goldie (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2001): 281.