Gender, Talk, TV, Hockey, and “Canadian Identity”: Feminist Takes on “Television Rejection”

Sandra Langley

Abstract: A certain manner of framing totalizing critical takes on television has become common over the last few decades. It entails reference to the assumptions of cultural highbrows and of leftists contemptuous of mass popular culture. Such a framing is necessary but not sufficient. It fails to indicate the presence and significance of certain critical-popular responses to television viewing, responses related to how such viewing has figured within family circles and gender orders, and within histories of racial rule. This paper draws on representations in feminist fiction, on personal experience related to the ritual of “hockey night in Canada,” and on Strikwerda and May’s analysis of male friendship and intimacy to support the argument that we need to attend to critical-popular feminist takes on television rejection. They provide a way in to the consideration of issues which deserve further attention.

Résumé: La télévision a fait l’objet de critique très réductrices tantôt du point de vue de gauchistes qui méprisaient la culture populaire de masse, tantôt du point de vue des partisan d’une conception elitist de la culture. Depuis quelque décennies, ces deux perspectives ont été beaucoup critiquées, et pour des bonnes raison. Cependant, ces critiques sont elles-memes devenue des lieux communs. Elles ne prennent pas en compte la présence et l’importance des réponses « critiques-populaires » à l’écoute de la télévision, des réponses qui ont à voir avec la présence de la télévision dans le « circle familial », dans l’or de genre et dans les histoires de domination raciale. Cet article s’inspire des representations tirees de la fiction féminist, de mon experience personnelle du rituel de la « soirée du hockey au Canada, » ainsi que de l’analyse faite par Strikwerda et May de l’intimité et de l’amitié entre hommes. Il soutien la nécessité d’une réflexion élaborée à partir d’un point de vue à la fois féministe, populaire et critique sur la télévision.

Keywords: Cultural studies, Feminist/gender, Mass media theory

Sandra Langley has a PhD in Communication Studies from Concordia University, and has taught communications courses and language courses in universities and colleges in Montréal. Most recently, she has done preliminary research in El Salvador to prepare for a study of perceptions of media and identity in three rural communities. E-mail: swlangley2001@yahoo.ca.

©2003 Canadian Journal of Communication Corporation
Introduction

On one level, this essay is about what I will call “television rejection”—about certain reasons for it, and about the insufficiency of a particular way it has commonly been framed in cultural studies texts. This term refers to a great variety of positionings. To describe just three: some people simply affirm that they feel no need for television viewing in their busy lives, although they do engage in media and cultural practices of various kinds; other people have an aversion to “television,” or to what they take “it” and “its” effects to be; and others watch television from time to time but have no desire for more than very limited viewing. I have met with, and still frequently meet with, various expressions and representations of “television rejection”; it has been represented in fiction, and it has been present amongst the college students and university students I have taught, and amongst people in the diverse circles I have contact with. As a young adult I went through a period of “television rejection” myself.

Positions related to television viewing have been important elements in the rethinking of media theory and cultural studies over the last two decades. A certain repertoire of now-common observations about traditions of academic analysis, “popular culture,” television and “the popular” has been inscribed across a wide body of work. This has worked to naturalize the predominance of particular ways of framing certain issues. So, for example, brief accounts of totalizing critical takes on television viewing tend to associate such positions with modernist highbrows, and with radical intellectuals and activists who have had negative conceptions of “ordinary pleasures” in capitalist societies.

While these accounts reference very significant dynamics, they do not sufficiently explain all instances of “television rejection,” some of which, I would suggest, have had much to do with experiences in the “family circles” and gender orders within which television has figured, and with issues of race as well. Further, all such instances cannot be neatly situated outside “the popular,” although that is how academic accounts have tended to position strong negative reactions to television. At the “popular” level as well, there have been responses to “television” which have taken “it” as a key element in the production or maintenance of negative aspects of social relations. (I have used quotation marks in the latter sentence to underscore the objectification which is one of my concerns; I understand “television” as an intersection of multiple social institutions, and thus as something which can and has differed substantially across time and space, and I understand “the popular” as a concept to be deployed carefully, with an eye to its limitations.) My concerns in this paper include particular types of negative responses to “television,” and representations of them, within what I have theorized as “critical-popular” feminist circles. I have chosen to explore them in significant part with a focus on hockey, because I can best understand this rejection dynamic with reference to my own past reactions to the viewing of hockey, because such viewing has figured large within a great many Canadian “family circles,” and because of the significance of past and present gender orders in this practice. Also of interest to me is the common reference to love of hockey as a
marker of Canadian identity. The lack of qualification in many such affirmations renders invisible important components of the experience of many of us, just as common ways of explaining television rejection do.

In the second of the two sections which follow, I consider dynamics related to hockey in the Canadian context, to gender, and to viewing practices, and I consider feminist representations in fiction of “television rejection” and of dynamics of talk, intimacy, and spectatorship—in part as they have to do with issues of race. I look critically at certain assumptions which are sometimes involved in “television rejection,” while arguing that a gender dynamic is sometimes at work therein, and that representations of it may inscribe critiques with some degree of purchase for the analysis of social relations. These critiques are worthy of our attention, both because of such purchase, and as indicators of how certain dynamics have been thought, of the circulation of such thought, and of the mix of important insights and questionable logic teachers of media studies continue to meet with in the statements of some students.

In the scenes and passages from feminist fiction which provide one of my points of reference, television viewing is cast as a practice which works in conjunction with socially-produced male character traits to displace talk or to limit the quality of talk. I do not wish to applaud all of these representations, or to simply deconstruct them. I advance a number of criticisms of them, even as I have some degree of appreciation for them. They provide a way in to the consideration of certain issues, issues which I approach with reference to my own experience as well, and with reference to a few of the many stories I have collected in the course of asking numerous friends, acquaintances, and students about their experiences of hockey viewing. (It is with great regret that I accept how few of these stories can be referred to here, given limitations of space.) I conceptualize these representations not just as the product of individual authorship; I take them to be indicative of the circulation of certain critical understandings of television within countercultural spheres and alternative social circles. (For the concepts involved here, I am indebted to Nancy Fraser’s “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” [1993].)

In concluding, I will begin to suggest how certain understandings of television viewing might be productively brought together with the analysis developed in Robert Strikwerda and Larry May’s “Male Friendship and Intimacy,” (1992) a text widely quoted in feminist scholarship.

In the section which follows, I revisit some well-known theoretical terrain, with three purposes in mind: charting certain developments related to and subsequent to a widespread rejection of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School; mapping concepts and elements of debates which interest me in terms of how they have informed the framing of issues, and in terms of their relevance for my own consideration of gender, talk, TV, hockey, and “Canadian identity”; indicating that a now-common way of framing the analysis of popular culture is inscribed in a certain book—Gruneau and Whitson’s Hockey Night in Canada: Sport, Identities.
and Cultural Politics (1993)—and underscoring how this relates to an insufficient consideration of gender issues which I will subsequently address.

Hockey Night in Canada was initially the name of a radio program broadcasting National Hockey League (NHL) games, and then the name of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s most popular television program. The television program was broadcast every Saturday night throughout the hockey season. By the early 1960s, when some 80% of Canadian homes had television sets, and the Canadian population stood at about 18 million people, *Hockey Night in Canada* was “drawing audiences as large as 3.5 million English Canadians and 2 million French Canadians,” and “the value of these (largely male) audiences to advertisers increased strikingly through the 1960s” (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993, p. 105).

Reference can also be made to what I will call “hockey night in Canada.” I understand “hockey night in Canada” as a cultural ritual within a gendered social order, and, for the most part, my reference to it here is to its manifestations in the 1960s and 1970s. “Hockey night in Canada” has been a practice which has involved a substantial percentage of the population over a long period of time, and which has shaped and been shaped by gender difference. Although there have always been women hockey fans, and at least a smattering of women hockey players, and although the profile of women’s hockey has increased dramatically over the past decade—due in part to its inclusion as an Olympic sport—hockey night in Canada has traditionally been the site of a gender divide, albeit an imperfectly-marked one, as so many gender divides are. For many men, the watching of the Saturday night NHL game on CBC television—or, the watching of *La Soirée du hockey* on Radio-Canada, the French section of the CBC—signified in conjunction with the memory of childhood and family experiences at the rink, playing or watching hockey. It is only over the past decade or two that a significant number of hockey leagues for girls and women have come into existence, and although women have always had a presence in the audiences at local rinks and in front of the set, “the association of girls and women with the game tended to be defined only through the participation of the men in their lives” (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993, p. 2). In a significant number of cases, I would emphasize, this was not a positive association—and the particularities of the shaping of ambivalent or hostile responses to hockey within the space of the home have figured within what “hockey night in Canada” has been, although Gruneau and Whitson present no extended analysis of this dynamic in *Hockey Night in Canada*.

There are, of course, multiple ways in which practices related to hockey have worked to divide or connect people. Hockey playing and hockey spectatorship have been important sites for the staging and the articulation of tensions, conflicts, and “belonging” at the municipal, national, and international levels, and hockey has been accorded a central place within certain stories of how “Canadian identity” has been shaped. So, for example, Canadians are periodically told, on the CBC television news program *The National* and in other media sites, how “we” (Canadians) all feel about hockey. “We” are said to have had a passionate and abiding love for the game, just as “we” are said to have all been gaga about Pierre
Trudeau. Those of us who do not fit this description are, then, implicitly constructed as deviant, or as too distant from some presumed centre of our culture to warrant much attention. Statements of this type interest me: as they contribute to the production of ambivalence or hostility in relation to the very notion of “Canadian identity”; and as traces of how conversational agendas and public sphere discourses have been constructed in ways which marginalize or exclude certain aspects and components of “our” experience.

There has not been “a” female experience of “hockey night in Canada,” just as there has not been “a” female experience of “the traditional family structure”; the latter is, of course, an analytic abstraction, rendered problematic by social difference, and by diversity across time and social space—even as it retains its considerable purchase. Yet, even as there has been no singular “female” experience of hockey, and as there have been major changes in social relations over the last four decades, it can be said that there have been large numbers of Canadian women who, to say the least, have not been hockey fans, for reasons which have much to do with past gender orders within patriarchal social systems; and, even as I have no wish to place our stories of hockey night in Canada at the centre of some singular account of the “Truth” of hockey, I do want them to be circulating and to be accorded more attention. I also want to link these accounts to certain instances of “television rejection” and of representations of it.

Is it necessary for me to stress that I do not wish to attack the enjoyment of sport, nor to provide intellectual justification for angry attacks on the viewing of television, of sport and of hockey? The reality is that I greatly appreciate my own selective television viewing, and that I have long taken pleasure in playing and watching sports of various kinds (not including hockey).

Pleasure, cultural and media theory, and hockey night in Canada

Within communication studies and cultural studies, totalizing negative takes on television, and a related matter—responses to “pleasure/entertainment” which have been ambivalent at best—have largely been critically considered with reference to the positions of radical intellectuals and activists, and with reference to a certain type of cultural conservatism. Such conservatism, as we know, has entailed the sacralization of “high culture,” and the denigration of a commercialized “mass culture” taken to be a key element in the degeneration of “civilization.” In distinction from this, leftists have had various takes on, and definitions of, the “high” and the “low” in capitalist societies, and this has made for various responses to particular sorts of “popular” pleasures, responses ranging from aversion to ambivalence.

In *Rethinking Media Theory: Signposts and New Directions*, Armand Matte-lart and Michèle Mattelart, writing in the mid-1980s, observed that

... one can not stress enough the difficulties critical theory has had in freeing itself from a banalized opposition between infrastructure and superstructure, and its decisive variant, the matrix of the question of pleasure, the mind-body dichotomy. Nor can one stress enough the heritage of the definitive split between the tradition of militant culture and the idea of pleasure. As a German
Marxist philosopher points out, “Marxism has traditionally a split relationship to pleasure. ‘Theoretically’ it approves of the worldly life but in practice and in ‘practical ideology’ pleasure is suspect. Pleasure appears to be counter to effort, to the sacrifice we are called to make, to renunciation.” (Mattelart & Mattelart, 1992, pp. 100-01; citation from Haug, 1983)

The reference here to militant culture provides a nuance that is lacking in numerous accounts of past traditions of “Marxist” positions on media—accounts which tend to suggest that those who held such positions sprang full-blown from the heads of the Frankfurt School theorists (minus Benjamin). Mattelart and Mattelart do, however, reference the thought of the Frankfurt School, and the aversion of Adorno and Horkheimer to what they called “affirmative culture”; the value of culture was its “negative resonance.” The latter, it was apparently felt, could not be produced without a certain continuous high seriousness on the part of the producers; and on the European left as well as on the right, the idea of culture was “divorced from the idea of ordinary pleasure” (Mattelart & Mattelart, 1992, p. 101).

With particular attention to the case of France, Mattelart and Mattelart sought, on the one hand, to applaud the new insights accompanying the leaving behind of analytic traditions which had ignored or merely heaped scorn on “ordinary pleasure” and “affirmative culture.” (The wide distribution of affirmative culture had of course been seen as in good part the product of American cultural imperialism.) On the other hand, they sought to critique certain developments subsequent to this shift, and to contest the terms of related debates on the state. Some had cast “the withering away of the state [as] the condition for the revival of freedoms” (p. 131)—as having allowed cultural consumers to wander freely through a vast landscape of private sector offerings.

The notion of uplift so long operative in numerous instances of state support for and articulations of “culture” most certainly warranted strong critique; and the recognition that states could change and had changed significantly without full-blown revolution marked a desirable step away from the mechanical model of social reproduction entailed in the influential Althusserian theorization of “ideological state apparatuses” (apparatuses constituted by public and private institutions alike). What was not acceptable, however, was a certain emergent intellectual positioning, a “new fusion with the people in delighting in media entertainment” that may have been “hiding more confusion than meets the eye” (Mattelart & Mattelart, 1992, p. 102). Given the terms of the private-sector reshaping of sociocultural and media landscapes in a period of the ascendancy of neo-liberalism, and given the diversity and particularity of what states were and could be, more circumspect responses were in order.

Some of the concerns and arguments presented in Rethinking Media Theory (Mattelart & Mattelart, 1992) find an echo in Angels Dancing: Cultural Technologies and the Production of Space, a paper delivered by Jody Berland at a large international conference in the U.S.A. in 1990—“Cultural Studies Now and in the Future.” Berland sought to address issues including government and market restructuring of Canadian society, and the insufficient attention being given in
cultural studies scholarship to the reshaping of sociocultural and media landscapes in an era of “free trade” and conservative governments.

While the Mattelarts spoke to “pro-pleasure” positions as held by intellectuals, Berland took apart culture industry discourse, and its conflation of pleasure and democracy. This discourse proclaimed that “Fun is fun, and has nothing to do with power (or is power’s sole and adequate source) . . .” and that “good entertainment is ‘what people want,’ which means if you don’t like it, you aren’t people” (p. 47). As Berland affirmed:

This suggests that entertainment value arises from a classless, genderless, raceless popular desire, rather than, as part of the productive process, seeking incessantly to produce such desire in its own image, to make its space a universal space, which would make a critique of entertainment values a critique of popular right, an assault on the progressive universalization of pleasure by which “the popular” is now dominantly understood. (1992, p. 47)

Attention to what was being displaced was being dismissed by some cultural studies scholars, and was often characterized as the product of an idealization of the past and of nationalism and the state. In response to this, Berland, like the Mattelarts, did not seek to simply champion public broadcasting systems and political economy approaches, but rather, to contest the reduction of such to a single “meaning,” a reduction ignoring the particularities of conjunctures and of different nations. Public broadcasting was being conceptualized “as an intrusive apparatus of the state (or at best as the moralizing pedagogy of the upper middle class) incapable of mobilizing or articulating popular sentiments or symbols” (p. 48). The Canadian situation put this understanding into question.

While the position of highbrows contemptuous of the popular has long been cast as something to be equated with wholesale rejection of television, Berland’s comments indicate that champions of high culture have also been envisioned as looking down their patrician noses at certain television fare, rather than at television fare per se. These nefarious figures, it appears, have both received the critical attention they warrant, and have been pressed into service in the quick dismissal of certain questions. The “pro-pleasure” camp, as Berland underlined, has made ample use of such moves.

Fortunately, as we move into the twenty-first century, a great many cultural critics have long since demonstrated their capacity to adopt both/and positions—to both problematize and appreciate popular practices and pleasures. Amongst these critics are the numerous critic/fans who have appeared on the landscape of scholarly reception. They most certainly deserve a place there, even as critical questions in relation to the specificity of analyses remain vital.

In Hockey Night in Canada: Sport, Identities and Cultural Politics, Gruneau and Whitson take up a both/and position in relation to “the popular.” The authors describe their approach as situated “at the crossroads between history, sociology, and . . . contemporary cultural studies” (1993, p. 4); they set out

. . . to write a book about hockey that could be assigned in university classes on popular culture or Canadian society, as well as in courses focused directly
on the social analysis of sport and leisure. Yet at the same time we also wanted
to produce a book of interest to anyone with a curiosity about hockey and its
changing place in Canadian culture. (1993, p. 4)

Gruneau and Whitson note the common attitude amongst Canadian aca-
demics that research should be about “more important” things; and, with their
intended readership in mind, they go on to chart what for many of us is the now
familiar story of how cultural studies took shape in part over against prior tradi-
tions of analysis. They reference both the barrier cultural critics had long erected
between high culture and commercial mass culture, and the fact that “radical mass
culture theories can also harbour a negative view of the masses . . .” (p. 21).
Having established both that hockey is a legitimate object of analysis, and that
they are not hockey-bashers, but rather have themselves taken great pleasure in
the game, Gruneau and Whitson hasten to underline that their book is by no means
a celebration of hockey spectatorship, hockey playing, and hockey promotion as
innocent pleasures and practices which have been untouched by power and by
complex and sometimes highly-problematic dynamics. They address many dif-
ferent dynamics, including: issues of class related to hockey in its emergent
decades; relationships between media, audiences, and the NHL monopoly; the
work world of pro hockey; dreams of fans; hockey beyond the pro leagues; vio-
ience, fighting, competitive mentalities, and masculinity; conflicting agendas in
communities, in towns and small cities, civic boosterism, and fans; hockey and the
new politics of accumulation; patriotism, profits and shifting identities in an era of
international hockey; and hockey and Canadian culture in the age of globalization.
(The latter list is based on both my formulations, and the authors’ subtitles.) A sig-
ificant amount of attention is given to television markets and to U.S. markets and
ownership as they have shaped the game.

When I first saw the illustration on the jacket cover of this book, I wondered
how it was that such an illustration had been chosen to figure above the words
“Cultural Politics” in the second half of the title, featured below it; upon looking at
the back of the book, however, I recovered a bit of my hope that the authors would
address certain things. The front cover features—directly below the words
Hockey Night in Canada—a man and a boy on a couch in front of the television
set, with eyes and mouths wide open with excitement. On the back, in a small
square of light in the far corner, we find “Mom” bent over the sink, wearing a
long-skirted dress, and outlined by the frame of the kitchen door. (To the right of
the kitchen, in the dark, is a piano—included, perhaps, as a symbol of high cul-
ture.) I was of course led to consider what the choice of this illustration, and the
representation of “Mom,” might mean. Was attention being directed to “the
excluded” of “mainstream” accounts of culture remaining happily oblivious to
cultural politics and to analysis based in highly critical theorizations of the social?
No doubt. However, the little square of light in the back that bespeaks the
according of importance to issues of gender finds an echo in what is, in propor-
tional terms, a much, much smaller space given over to gender analysis in the
content of the book; and of issues of race and ethnicity there is even less.
The jacket illustration represents the space of a home while evoking a certain era in the viewing of “Hockey Night in Canada.” I had hoped for some analysis of this space in relation to the first decades of television, and of “hockey night in Canada” as considered from the standpoints of diverse social subjects, including those of women who were not fans. Women working in the kitchen, or otherwise engaged in some other part of the home, also experienced hockey night in Canada as it structured space, sound, and interactions in their homes. Further, I would have liked some textual analysis and discourse analysis of hockey commentary and conversations—analysis of popular constructions of masculinity, femininity, ethnicity, and national identity in these sites—and more analysis of the representation of hockey and of hockey players and fans in the media and in fiction. Also of interest to me is the question of what refugees, immigrants, and diverse groups within our officially multicultural society think when they are in the presence of “hockey talk,” talk which they may or may not relate to, and which is constructed as central to “being Canadian.”

Whether or not I could legitimately insist on the need for all of this in a book on hockey in Canada is one thing; and in any case I have no desire to do so. However, I do feel I could have expected that the authors would at least have acknowledged, or acknowledged in a much more forceful way, the importance of certain lines of investigation which they did not pursue at all, which they merely touched upon, or which they did not pursue at length with reference to certain bodies of scholarship which they might have consulted. (Feminist literature on the social construction of gender comes to mind here.) They might have expressed hope that others would take up these lines of investigation, or would continue to pursue them. This is, after all, a book the authors envisioned as destined for use in university classes, as well as for a more general audience. I am left to puzzle over the fact that David Whitson did not even reference one of his own articles—“Sport in the Social Construction of Masculinity”—in the notes. (The latter makes up the first chapter in Sport, Men and the Gender Order: Critical Feminist Perspectives, 1990). I can well imagine a rebuttal to my critiques listing some of the many moments in which Gruneau and Whitson do address diverse questions related to cultural politics; the problem, however, is not the absence of such, but the authors’ failure to sufficiently underline that they had not “written the book” on hockey as considered from a theoretically-informed position. Gruneau and Whitson’s book can by no means be equated with those texts wherein cultural criticism has collapsed to an extreme degree into fandom; nevertheless, the authors give much of their attention to issues which have already been problematized within the universe of hockey fandom.

The “hard” versions of critiques of hockey as an institution, of hockey fandom, and of commodified mass culture are attributed to a by-now-familiar list of culprits: highbrows, and left-leaning critics who take popular culture to be a diversion from the more serious pursuit of oppositional politics—an indulgence in trivial quotidian pleasures in lieu of engagement with something else more
vital. There has, however, been another type of “hard” version of hockey and television trashing, and it is to this that I now turn.

**Stories of gender, talk, TV, and hockey**

In *La dernière partie*, a short film by Michel Brault, a woman meets her husband at a hockey game. He has no inkling that she has come to inform him of her decision to leave him. (Subsequent to his retirement she must deal with long hours in the presence of a “stranger” in the house, and she can endure it no longer.) They sit in the stands. Roger follows the action. Madeleine looks at him, and into the air, with distaste sliding into resignation, and with grief marked in the lines of her face and body. She has resolved to cease waiting for the coming of what might have been between them, and she is in mourning for the death of a long-standing dream.

For decades, Roger has wanted her with him at the Saturday night game, despite his knowledge that she does not like hockey. This is her last appearance beside him in the stands. She begins to speak at one point, but does not capture his attention.

The shots of the game feature fights and aggression.

Following one shot of the ice, there is another of the stands—but empty now, save for this couple; and the sound is cut. Roger continues to watch the game, his eyes and neck shifting to see “what is happening.” Madeleine is alone in the silence.

She leaves, and Roger eventually goes in search of her. The breakup scene unfolds in a corridor, while the game continues on the screens hanging above and behind them. The thoughts Madeleine has long been accumulating are calmly laid out.

Roger’s eyes stray to a screen. The habit of a lifetime will out, even—or especially—in a moment such as this.

Roger’s last line is a question. Is this crisis due to her menopause? In parting, Madeleine says “pauvre Roger”—poor Roger—and there is no irony in her voice.

The final scene features Roger asleep in an armchair at home, in front of the harsh light of the test pattern on the television set. There is an old picture on the stand beside him—a picture of a hockey team, perhaps a team he played on in his youth.

I was much moved by this film, with its striking visual and auditory contrasts. The woman’s grief, and her husband’s incapacity to respond to it—and to access depth of feeling within himself—spoke from her focused gaze and his glazed-over eyes.

*La dernière partie* was Michel Brault’s contribution to *Montréal vu par* (Atlantis Films Limited/National Film Board of Canada, 1991), a collection of six short films produced to commemorate the 350th anniversary of Montréal. In Brault’s piece, the story of one couple marks a “moment” of historical rupture—the decades in which a large percentage of women chose divorce—and the narrative of Madeleine and Roger speaks to the experience of a great many women from certain generations and places.
Growing up in a small town in western Canada, I spent much time at the rink in winter and at the swimming pool in summer. These were sites of local community, such as it was; and the viewing of NHL hockey on television—an experience which was no doubt heightened for those who regularly played and watched games at the rink as well—figured large within (whose?) imaginings of national community. Figure skating, however—which in addition to skating for fun was what I mostly did at the rink—became a big event just once every four years, during the Olympics, and even then it was not a big draw for men.

Every Saturday night, sets across Canada and Québec were tuned in to Hockey Night in Canada, or to La Soirée du hockey. And it was by way of such viewing that many men in western Canada learned a good part of their repertoire of stories about “the French.” Men who would have had very little to say, had they been asked to sketch out the particularities of québécois history productive of tensions and of separatist aspirations, could expound at length on the exploits of the Montréal Canadiens and on the careers of the legendary National Hockey League players Québec had produced. In environments rife with racism, ethnic chauvinism, and denigration of “Others,” the complaints of “the French” were commonly cast as nothing more than the product of bad self-centred character. French hockey players, however, “were us,” particularly when hockey came to be played on the world stage. And according to the official story, there were moments when all Canadians came together in the joy of being the best in the world—while showing up the communists to boot.

In 1972, the last game of the Canada-Soviet Union Challenge Series happened to fall during school hours. No matter. This event was deemed to be of sufficient importance to justify the assembling of the whole of my junior high school class in front of a television set. And who can forget that glorious moment in our national history when Paul Henderson scored the last-minute winning goal? Actually, I had to look up the details of this; however, I do remember the great roar that went up at that moment.

I do not recall following the game intently, and I suspect I did not, but I do remember participating in the roar. It was a welcome novelty to have the license to move with exuberance, and to make a great joyous noise, within the confines of the classroom, simultaneously with everyone else.

Or so I remember. At the same time, like Madeleine I detested hockey, and I cannot recall a time when I did not hate this game.

On Saturday evenings in my childhood home, I would flee to my room at the first sound of the all-too-familiar music introducing “Hockey Night in Canada.” There was no escape from the beast, however; the walls did not keep out the booming noise of the television set.

The sounds of the “excitement” of the game did not simply leave me cold. These sounds seemed to me to proclaim something central to my reality; the spaces of communication in my home were spaces shaped in good part by my father, and there was, to say the least, a good deal missing there. Much later, watching La dernière partie, I would come to see many men I had known in
Roger, although by that time I had left behind my earlier, simpler conceptions of “men” and of “television.”

For me—as a child and as a teenager—the noise, the movements, and the fights of hockey games, and hockey spectatorship, came to signify essences forever fixed within “the game itself” and within the watching of it on television. These things bespoke the essence of Empty, and of something I would later come to name as patriarchy. They filled a space where, it seemed, something else might have been. In a large body of representations across the cultural landscape—and, of course, on television—people in the spaces of home and family basked in the rich glow of intimacy and of quality connection by way of conversation. There were, however, a great many of us who found this glow short on the ground in our own homes. In its place was the light from the set. It seemed logical to think of the presence of the television as a cause.

In the essentialist days of my youth, I took certain signifiers and signifieds to be neatly and inseparably bound together. Short hair on men, for instance, meant conservatism, and it was unimaginable that this could ever change. After learning more about signification and social change, however, there was much that I had to reconsider.

For some time now, a substantial number of girls have been playing hockey, and the Canadian women’s team, like the Canadian men’s team, was victorious at the February 2002 Olympics. The infamous Don Cherry was to be seen speaking to a woman representing Canadian hockey champions. (He insisted on kissing her on the cheek, apparently remaining oblivious to her grimace of distaste.) Further, various and diverse circles of women, including some lesbian feminists, now enjoy watching and “talking” hockey—and, of course, there always have been some women who have taken pleasure in these activities. I have been taking in changes such as these; and I occasionally meet with the kind of hockey/social history stories which do interest me to some extent. I have, in short, come to recognize hockey and hockey viewing as socially-constructed practices which change and are changed by other dynamics within the social, and as practices in which meanings and assumptions about identity are constructed and contested.

Television viewing, likewise, must be historicized. “Television” and television viewing practices have been constructed at the intersection of various institutions, in different times and places. Further, reception and television viewing practices are not simple matters. They relate to the whole gamut of activities and discursive formations figuring within the lives of diverse viewers; and television viewing does not automatically signify the absence, in a person’s life, of other worthy activities. “Diversion”—relatively “thoughtless” pleasure—has not been the whole of the picture, nor something that is in itself a problem. For all these reasons, “television” and television viewing are not simply things to be rejected with contempt—even as many of us have no difficulty imagining where some of the impulse towards contemptuous reduction comes from.

I have long since recognized that my own reactions have not been simply “natural” responses to the “deep truth” of hockey and TV. At the same time,
although I can now get considerable enjoyment from laughing at my response, I continue to have a fixed visceral response to the sites and sounds of hockey on TV; and, although I have long since delinked this response from my reaction to television (which I now watch fairly regularly), I can well understand the intensity with which many women and men express their television rejection. This, I would argue, sometimes has much to do with formative experiences in the family, experiences which ought to receive more acknowledgment in cultural studies; for want of reference to this dynamic, we are left with Cartesian visions of the television-rejector types who appear so regularly in theory—the highbrows and the hyper-serious always-working militants.

Neither the gendered shaping of subjectivity nor television viewing practices are simple matters of men having been one way, and women, another; so, for example (and I will eschew entering into feminist theory at this point), I think of a friend whose father was not the hockey-watcher in her childhood home. (He was not present there at all, after her earliest years.) Rather, the hockey fan was her mother. My friend recalls that her mother’s viewing behaviour was disturbing to her. She was left to wonder why hockey could arouse such intense interest, and such a passionate display of feeling on her mother’s part, when she, her mother’s daughter, apparently did not.

While women generally experienced more in the way of social conditioning conducive to the development of the capacity to engage emotionally, men of past generations were very often taught to think that their human/family connections were just “there,” like the sun in the sky, and not something they had to produce through something other than the practice of a breadwinner role and a certain limited type of presence. The frequent figuring of “togetherness” as proximity—as charted in, for example, Lynn Spigel’s “Television in the Family Circle: The Popular Reception of a New Medium”—would appear to indicate and encourage such a limited concept of togetherness—a concept which we most certainly do not have to imagine as universally present across all North American families, nor as attendant upon the introduction of television.

Spigel’s essay was based on her doctoral thesis, in which she looked at representations of television in media from 1948 to 1955, “a period when more than half of all U.S. homes installed a television set” (Spigel, 1990, p. 74). She makes no mention of representations constructing television viewing as a damaging displacement of talk, and I found this interesting, given the breadth of her analysis. She worked primarily from ads and articles in women’s magazines in the United States. It seems likely that if the theme of “displacement of talk” had figured large in the “popular reception” of television as a new medium—reception as reflected in commentary broadly distributed across social sites—this theme would have had a presence in the magazine articles and in Spigel’s essay.

In the post-war years, “the television set . . . became a central figure in representations of family relationships” (Spigel, p. 73). There was an abundance of images featuring a family seated in a semi-circle around the television set, and magazine articles referenced both this television-focused family circle, and the
different moments and spaces of family life, with its gender divisions and its child-adult divisions. Some articles offered advice as to where to put the set, or sets, so as to best maintain family harmony. “Togetherness” was frequently figured through the representation of the physical proximity of family members, be it while they were together around the set, or while they were “together” in different spaces within the same room or home, happily engaged in separate viewing, reading, or other activities.

Surveys and studies of the time reported people’s commentaries that television had made for “closer” family circles:

One housewife concluded: “My husband and I get along a lot better. We don’t argue so much. It’s wonderful for couples who have been married ten years or more . . . Before television, my husband would come in and go to bed. Now we spend some time together.” (p. 79)

At the end of this statement, television is cast as not having replaced talk—given that there was none to begin with. In contrast, at the outset of this statement the woman suggests that television has replaced talk, but more specifically arguing (“bad talk”?). In any case, this glimpse at some of the things that “being close” can mean is suggestive of overdetermined dynamics of interaction such that any question merely focusing on “the effects of television” would be far too simple a question.

Empowered and inspired by feminist movement, women increasingly came to stress that it is the quality of time spent together which makes for togetherness worthy of the name. In the two novels which I will refer to below, Barbara Kingsolver’s *Pigs in Heaven* (1993), and Alice Walker’s *The Temple of My Familiar* (1990), television viewing is represented as present where quality talk and interaction is lacking, and it is also linked to divorce and separation. The representations in question thus resonate with those in *La dernière partie*, while also bringing in issues of race.

Television viewing is constructed in critical terms in these novels, not because it represents indulgence in pleasure where something else is wanted, and not due to an understanding of television fare over against the products of a high culture understood within a Eurocentric “culture and civilization” vision of the progress of humanity. Rather, the watching of television is represented as an actual or potential factor in the absence or anticipated absence of a different kind of pleasure/thought which otherwise might exist. This is a pleasure/thought bound up with face-to-face communications between men and women, family members, and community members. Such communications may both contribute to the development of intimacy, and allow for the dissemination of “popular” knowledge that has been largely excluded from “popular” culture produced by the culture industries. Popular knowledge, as it figures within these novels, is rooted in significant part within African-American and Cherokee cultures, though not in “culture” simply as an unchanging, unproblematic, and sacred inheritance from the past; the authors do not inscribe explicit or implicit romantic views of pre-television worlds and of television-free worlds—views which have figured within
many critical accounts of television. Indeed, in Walker’s novel, which the author described as a “romance of the last 500,000 years” (see jacket cover of the Pocket Books paperback), gender orders which are problematic or wounding to various degrees figure large in cultural formations of numerous sorts across the ages.

Kingsolver’s *Pigs in Heaven* (1993) and Walker’s *The Temple of My Familiar* (1990) were both New York Times bestsellers. I would suggest that they figure within what might be called “critical/popular” feminist formations. These works contribute to a body of progressive and relatively accessible feminist novels with considerable circulation, and on the basis of my knowledge of some of the kinds of circles in which they are read, I believe it makes sense to understand them as circulating within a “counterpublic sphere” situated across various sites, and across engagement with multiple types of media and various genres. (As mentioned above, I am indebted to Nancy Fraser’s (1993) theorization of the concept of the counterpublic sphere.) I would suggest that these novels draw on, as well as underwrite and construct, assumptions common in certain circles—assumptions which are not, then, simply the product of any singular “auteur.” What I conceptualize as “critical-popular feminist counterpublics” disturb borderlines, given that they are sites for the circulation of interpretations of the social which run the gamut from astute, well-historicized and nuanced analyses to expressions of reductive fixed ideas articulated along with problematic universalizing prescriptions, or which mix the former with the latter.

Much cultural studies analysis and ethnography has, thankfully, undertaken to respond to instances of “popular” theorizing as pronouncements which often have a certain degree of complexity and purchase, rather than as statements to be rejected outright on the basis of the untenable nature of some of the assumptions apparently informing them. It is with the hope that this respectful treatment can be accorded the representations below that I now turn to them.

*Pigs in Heaven* (Kingsolver, 1993) frequently makes use of a comic tone and of odd characters, and it does not consistently strive to be “realistic.” Given these and other characteristics of the novel, it would be wrong to suggest that Kingsolver simply underwrites the ideas about the effects of television which she has one of her characters express. At the same time, it proves hard to believe that Kingsolver’s text is not at all indicative of some degree of sympathy on her part for a certain set of critical ideas about television.

At the outset of *Pigs in Heaven*, sixty-one-year-old Alice prepares to leave her husband Harland, who rarely talks to her. Harland’s preferred pastime is watching television. He doesn’t bother with CNN; the Home Shopping Channel is what grabs him. Alice’s daughter Taylor has been living far from her and Alice has felt alone in the company of her husband and of the television. After having been married to Harland for just a few years, Alice feels it is her fate to return to the solitary state which has been the common lot of the women in her family line.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in the U.S.A., Taylor hits the road with her daughter, Turtle, after she is visited by Annawake who is a lawyer representing the Cherokee Nation, and is Cherokee herself. The visit has to do with Turtle. Turtle is Cher-
okee, and the procedures of her adoption were not legal. In the face of the possibility of a custody hearing, and the loss of Turtle, Taylor takes the child and flees.

Alice travels to Annawake’s Cherokee community to investigate the situation and to visit a cousin. She learns that, given her own ancestry, she is eligible for membership in the Cherokee Nation. Further, due to some conniving on the part of Annawake and other women in the community, she gets involved with Cash Stillwater, who turns out to be Turtle’s grandfather.

Alice relishes the presence of a man who talks as much as Cash does, but also notices that he has the television on at home.

Near the end of the novel, a Child Welfare Services hearing decides that Turtle must spend three months of every year in her people’s community. Immediately after the decision, Cash proposes to Alice. She announces that she doesn’t want “another husband that’s glued to his ever-loving TV set” (p. 340). This prompts Cash to invite those assembled for the hearing to his home, where he carries his television set outside and shoots it. Alice understands that her life sentence of household silence has been commuted. The family of women is about to open its doors to men. Men, children, cowboys, and Indians. It’s all over now but the shouting. (Kingsolver, 1993, p. 343)

Alice’s union—with Cash, with her own daughter and granddaughter, and with a community and a Cherokee legacy—is consummated with the destruction of the set, and the reader is invited to imagine that the home from which the television has been removed will be rich with talk.

As is the case in Pigs in Heaven, in Alice Walker’s The Temple of My Familiar (1990) the “making absent” of television is linked to the filling of a home space with a wealth of talk and intimacy, with contact across the generational divide, and with the oral transmission of “histories from below” related to life under white domination. While there are several interwoven story lines in this novel, I will here refer to only one, that in which television figures—briefly, though as a significant signifier.

Near the outset of the novel readers are introduced to Suwelo, who is doing poorly in the absence of his wife Fanny. Amongst the many things contributing to her departure were her aversion to the institution of marriage—though not to Suwelo—and the fact that her husband had read none of the novels and histories she had so enthusiastically recommended to him. Suwelo, who had never read a book by a woman, taught “American history” at a college. He took pleasure in slipping a certain number of African-American figures into the established/establishment story. For Fanny, however, the unofficial stories were the story. Her “imagined community” was peopled with historical personages who were little known within white/mainstream circles, and with comparable characters from novels. Suwelo resisted encountering this “imagined community,” and women writers, and for this and other reasons, Fanny had left him.

A new presence in Suwelo’s life comes to compensate somewhat for Fanny’s absence. Subsequent to the death of his great uncle, he had spent a few months in the house he had inherited, and had gotten to know his great uncle’s long-time
companions, Miss Lissie and Hal. Their long autobiographical storytelling sessions had taken place beside the television set.

When Suwelo first invites Miss Lissie into his newly-inherited home, where she had spent a good part of her own life, she remains standing in the foyer until he realizes the television is on, and goes to turn it off. Miss Lissie sits in a chair next to the set, and makes use of a vivid blue shawl lying on top of it—the shawl had covered the set—thus explaining to Suwelo the reason for its presence there. One day

Mr. Hal sat in the same chair Miss Lissie usually chose, right by the TV, and like Miss Lissie he paid more than cursory attention to the position of the shawl. Suwelo watched TV much less himself now that Miss Lissie and Mr. Hal talked to him, or, as he sometimes thought of it, transmitted to him, in much the same way the TV did. He was in the habit of covering it whenever it was off. Mr. Hal contented himself with tugging at the corner of the shawl and straightening the edge. That small ritual completed, a gesture that seemed unconsciously designed to close off completely an erroneous and trivial point of view, Mr. Hal settled back to take up his narrative where he had left off. (Walker, 1990, p. 95)

Suwelo eventually sat in the “hot seat” beside the television himself, and despite his discomfort he began to tell the story of his relationship with Fanny.

After his time with Miss Lissie and Hal, and his lengthy reflections on his relationship with Fanny, Suwelo is able to engage with Fanny in a richer way. In a scene in which he and Fanny come to a new understanding, he affirms that talking is “the very *afro-*disiac of love” (p. 322).

In both *The Temple of My Familiar* and *Pigs in Heaven*, there is a certain slide between the theme of “talk versus no talk” and the theme of “talk of a certain kind versus other talk,” and for this and other reasons the treatment of talk seems simple at some moments and much more complex at others.

Although Kingsolver’s novel is most certainly a serious exploration of issues of identity and of race in late twentieth-century America, the television-shooting/communion ending, like certain other segments of the novel, is articulated in a light comic tone. It can be read as something of a humorous toss-off, or as a marriage/utopia true to the classic form of “comedy.” It would be reductive, then, to merely cast it as a too-simplistic ending. Nevertheless, the remarks of Alice which lead to it sit oddly alongside the fact that Cash has been represented as someone who finds great pleasure in talking. There is little in the novel conducive to the reader’s imagining him as capable of turning into a Harland. While the removal of the television is linked to the premise of talk, this does not make sense in so far as the reader’s imagining of the probability of talk, in the case of the union of Alice and Cash, is a result of who Cash already is; and he is this despite having watched television.

Explanations of contempt for television viewing have included the suggestion that it often entails a romanticized notion of reading and nostalgia for a Gutenberg galaxy which has long since lost its position of social centrality. Novelists have met with the charge that they have thoughtlessly bought into this position, or
that they resent historical conditions which have diminished their own possibilities for recognition, status, and wealth. The drawing of the shawl over the television set in Walker’s novel, then, as considered in some quarters, might be taken as a rather pathetic expression of a novelist’s fantasy, as might the shooting of the set in Kingsolver’s novel.

In response to this hypothetical critique, it invites mention that in *Pigs in Heaven* there is no concerted promotion of reading. Representation of the joy and productivity of reading does, however, figure in *The Temple of My Familiar*. At the same time, to approach the above critique from another angle—across the many fictional and non-fictional texts of Alice Walker, great attention is paid to aesthetic and sensual pleasure, including visual pleasure and the pleasure taken in objects and colour. Given this, it would be questionable to suggest that the covering of the television followed from a book-learning-versus-sensual-indulgence binary. Nevertheless, televisions can of course provide visual pleasure, and it is hard to envision Walker not taking a certain satisfaction in the imagined exclusion of a television fare cast as indicative of an “erroneous and trivial point of view” (Walker, 1990, p. 95).

There is, then, an implicit suggestion in Walker’s novel that television viewing works to the detriment of the transmission of important knowledge; and this suggestion is accompanied by affirmations of reading elsewhere in the novel. But can these components of *The Temple of My Familiar* be neatly summed up as indicative of nostalgia for the Guttenburg galaxy? Such nostalgia, even if we do take it to exist, is by no means the whole of the picture. It should be taken into account that the initial landscape of Suwelo’s reading was also represented in highly critical terms. This is indicative of something which ought not to be obscured by analysis referencing the tendency to value one kind of media over against another.

Critical takes on television may be responses to the common inscription in television texts of discursive formations constructing race and gender, and television fare is merely one location of formations situated across the texts of different kinds of media. It may be particular formations, and the relative absence of certain kinds of images and narrations, rather than a certain kind of media per se, which have been productive of aversion.

Neither *The Temple of My Familiar* nor *Pigs in Heaven* makes any reference to diversity across the range of television fare, nor to the potential for a great variety of programming landscapes and of viewing practices—practices which do not necessarily have to constitute a displacement of quality talk or take place in lieu of other worthy activities. These novels, unfortunately, can work to confirm the position of those readers who simply affirm that the box is bad, and who leave it at that. It would be welcome to see much more nuanced novelistic treatments of TV; in bringing together representations of television viewing and of dynamics of gender, talk, and intimacy, Walker and Kingsolver take a few steps down a path they ultimately do not make much use of. Television viewing figures more as a
symbol than as a subject in their texts, even though they do begin to evoke common dynamics worthy of further attention.

In concluding, I would like to suggest the potential for further consideration of some of the issues I have raised with reference to a relevant conceptual framework detailed in Robert Strikwerda and Larry May’s “Male Friendship and Intimacy” (1992).

The authors conceptualize three types of interaction in the context of North American society: parallel play, comradeship, and intimacy. While there is a place for all three of these in our lives, many people’s friendships never go beyond parallel play or comradeship, and men, due to their social conditioning, have a much greater tendency than women to be limited in this way.

Strikwerda and May’s (1992) analysis of the greater propensity of men to avoid entering into a certain kind of intimate talk—or to even recognize that there is a lack of such interaction and that that might be problematic—can be related to a type of viewing behaviour represented in the stories I have considered above. Encounters or “togetherness” in the presence of the screen facilitate an avoidance behaviour of a sort which many (and men more so than women) are already prone to. In the presence of the television, men and women have an apparently “natural” reason for shifting their attention, and for aborting a certain kind of interaction; that in which one person begins to “see” the particularity and perhaps the vulnerability of the other.

There is no simple relationship of television viewing to talk, and the former can of course be productive of the latter. Nevertheless, the presence of television has worked and can work to facilitate the continuation of an imbalance in types of interaction, and this relates in part to gendered family dynamics.

This strikes me as being far from a controversial new conclusion, particularly since in advancing it I have not suggested its applicability to all households. The dynamic in question does, however, warrant attention, for a number of reasons. Although it is indicative of important aspects of social history and popular culture, reference to it does not figure within common framings of television rejection and of spectatorship, and extended theorization of it is absent within certain bodies of academic writing. Further, as Jody Berland (1992) observed in an article quoted above, the critical positions of some in relation to television spectatorship have been dismissed on the grounds that the critics in question are “not people,” and, given that populist discourses have had a presence in the academy as well as in culture industries, we in the academy continue to confront a certain kind of dismissal of critical positions related to television viewing and television fare, a dismissal which suggests that such positions are all totalizing. In deploying the concept of critical/popular feminist counter publics, and in suggesting the need for historicization of television viewing and television fare, as well as an understanding of “television” as something shaped at the intersection of multiple social institutions and discourses, I wish to contest this kind of dismissal, and to affirm that certain kinds of circles I have known well are in fact inhabited by people.
Many of us do not always see ourselves in certain public sphere constructions of the Canadian “we,” and, given that we do not fit certain descriptions, we are implicitly cast as deviant, or as too distant from some presumed centre of our culture to warrant much attention. Rather than responding to this by suggesting that “Other” stories ought to be presented as Truth and as Centre, I have instead simply suggested that more space should be made for the serious consideration of them. Stories of “hockey night in Canada” as this ritual has been read from outside the spaces of fandom speak to our social history, and to social difference, and figure within cultures which are at once popular and unpopular.

Note
1. The use of “over against,” here and elsewhere in my paper, implies the understanding that constructs we name as entities are constituted in discourse, and that we know them in part as they figure within a field of other practices or “objects of knowledge.” The relationship between certain items in a field of signification or practices may, in some quarters, be thought of as one of opposition or frontal challenge, but in using “over against” I seek to avoid the suggestion that this way of knowing necessarily entails such reduction.

References