

## **Queer Theatre and Performance in Canada: Taking Stock**

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## **THE SPACE WITHIN: QUEERING THE MALE BODY THROUGH THE EXPLORATION OF THE THEATRICAL PERFORMATIVITY OF THE EVERYDAY AND THE COSTUMING RITUALS OF FOOTBALL FANDOM AND DRAG CULTURE**

### **ABSTRACT**

Saskatchewan's football team The Roughriders has the biggest fan base within the Canadian football league. Male fans show their complacency to the ideology of orthodox masculinity by cheering the team and transforming the physical space of their own bodies to unconsciously participate in the stimulating voyeurism of the dedicated fan. This action stretches the limits and boundaries of the traditional theatrical space; green make up, wigs and masks and even watermelon helmets queered their bodies as a performative action that constructs and reconstructs their identities. The interaction of fans with each other, with the geographical space, and the performative space of their own bodies in Drag enables a consideration of the material body against and within the representational body, which affects and destabilizes the experience of the performative body and its engagement as theatrical event.

The paradoxical possibilities of the Roughriders queered body's male fan, proposes a new theatrical space produced by the usage of established cultural images transformed, destroyed and rebuilt for the creation of the new carnivalesque and performative space.

The presentation I propose, explores the question of performance and the performativity of the carnivalesque queered body of the Roughriders male fan base. I aim to analyze this performance through the lens of the theatrical event and to explore it as subject matter in the way that gender identities are constructed and reconstructed in the world of sports.

Key words: costume, theatre, space, body, gender

## INTRODUCTION

This article aims to explore the question of performance and the performativity of the carnivalesque queered body of the costumed male fan base of the Canadian football team the Saskatchewan Roughriders. I aim to analyze this performance through the lens of the theatrical event and to explore it as subject matter in the way that gender identities are constructed and reconstructed in the world of sports. Although more and more women are participating in football as players and as avid fans, and it is a vast topic of research in itself, the focus of my exploration orbits around masculine capital in the world of professional sports and the theatricality embedded in the act of male fans queering their bodies with feminized choices in garments and accessories that create a fascinating ground for the study of masculine capital in sports and the performance of gender in the ambit of the everyday. Drawing on diverse theoretical and methodological approaches, I search for ways to link fandom practices, such as the costuming rituals of the male fans, with concepts such as the dressed body in the ambit of the everyday, the costumed body as a theatrical event, and the idea of masculine capital through the exploration of orthodox masculinities in football vis-à-vis the queered male body of the fan base in sports.

The examination of the body in performance will help me to analyze and highlight the relationship between the male queered body and the dressed body in performance as an intricate system of performance practices as well as the performative aspects of the costumed body in relation to gender, class, power, sexuality, history, nation and contemporary performance culture. This exploration will allow me to see the costumed body as narrative, with the performance of the male body in sport culture and fandom as ritual and the consumption and performance of theatricality from a wide range of interdisciplinary, theoretical, and methodological perspectives.

This examination creates a set of questions:

- Does masculine capital in the world of sports create a sense of cathartic release where the blending of gender roles through costuming allows the fans to liberate themselves from fixed normative views of gender in society?

- Is the performance of gender for male fans a way to submit to the dominant masculinity in the field which is the players?
- Are these carnivalesque queered expressions purely a result of the newly peep dominated society where we want to be seen no matter what?

Through the exploration of my topic, I hope I will be able to answer some of these important questions, or at least, to create a new set of questions that will lead to the construction of new paradigms in the study of the theatrical event in non theatrical spaces such as the space of the male body in the ambit of the everyday, and the new space for performance: the virtual space. This new space and its potential for theatricality and performativity is a vital part of my study since the performance of the self and the performativity of the body in cyberspace is an unavoidable part of the puzzle in post-modern society. Social media and digital technologies have changed the way we see each other and also the way we want the others to see us. We no longer feel happy with just living the everyday, we want to broadcast it. We want to post selfies of the every minute of our lives for the others to see as well as we want to see what the others do. As Hal Niedzviecky explains it:

In Peep [Culture] we feel the cathartic release of confession, the allure and danger of gossip, and the timeless comfort of ritual. When we peer in on each other, we experience the trill of performance, the purge of the talking cure, the erotic frisson of forbidden sex. (Niedzviecki, 2009: 4)

### **THE SASKATCHEWAN ROUGHRIDERS' FOOTBALL FANS**

The Saskatchewan's football team *The Roughriders*, has the biggest fan base within the Canadian football league. Male fans show their complacency to the ideology of orthodox masculinity by cheering the team and transforming the physical space of their own bodies to unconsciously participate in the stimulating voyeurism of the dedicated fan. This action stretches the limits and boundaries of the traditional theatrical space; green makeup, wigs and masks, and even watermelon helmets, queered their bodies as a

performative action that constructs and reconstructs their identities. The interaction of fans with each other, with the geographical space, and the performative space of their own bodies in Drag enables a consideration of the material body against and within the representational body, which affects and destabilizes the experience of the performative body and its engagement as theatrical event. The paradoxical possibilities of the Roughriders' male fans' queered bodies, proposes a new theatrical space produced by the usage of established cultural images transformed, destroyed and rebuilt for the creation of the new carnivalesque and performative space.

Imagine this: before a sporting event, crowds of enthusiasts gather hours before the event to see and be seen in their costumed selves, to share the space of the game, the spirit of the occasion and during the game, to see and be seen as part of this specific community. Full families bring themselves to the stadium fully dressed in the colours of the team, and accessorized with wigs, skirts, makeup, bras, flags that function as super hero capes, and even watermelon hats that serve as the characteristic costumed trait that identifies the fan and divides the real fan from a simple spectator. Hardcore fans go as far as buying expensive imported watermelons in the fall season, to turn them into helmets. Then, the question arises; what motivates the participants to make a commitment as a group and to create a ritualistic performative event?

### **COCONUT BRAS, WATERMELON HATS AND MASCULINE CAPITAL**

Being a male fan in football goes beyond the enjoyment of the game. It connects to identity as presented and dictated by normative views of orthodox masculinity in society. The body of the fan here becomes a space for performance where masculine capital is being gained and performed. Football is a sport that grants immediate masculine capital to male athletes and, by association, to fans. Eric Anderson's book "In the Game" explores the connection of social agency and the game of football in male students. He describes how marginalized boys at school only reinforce their lower status when transgressing gender rules as opposed to athlete students practicing football, who are

socially high ranking boys who can transgress gender rules without any threat to their masculine status due to the high masculine capital obtained by the game (Anderson, 2005:104). Therefore, the players on the team of a professional sports club are granted immediate masculine capital. They can transgress sexual boundaries without any doubts of their masculine capital.

The game is the performance of identity. Professional players epitomize the ideal of masculinity. I find a clear example of this reinforcement of orthodox masculinity and the performance of gender in New Zealand's All Blacks Rugby team performance of the traditional Haka warrior call in the field before every game they play, where they clearly send a meta message through the violent act of performing the ideal of masculinity. I argue that through the players in the field, fans of the sport aim for masculine capital in order to have a bounded identification with what seems the ultimate expression of masculinity according to normative views in society. In the ambit of professional sports, this masculine capital can also translate in actions by the players that transgress gender rules, this ideal of masculinity becomes a costume, masculine capital becomes then a wearable costume. A clear example of this is the case of professional basketball player Dennis Rodman who's high status as an accomplished professional athlete granted him masculine capital which allowed for flamboyancy in and out of the game. While cross dressing became a common gesture, his masculine capital never decreased. The transgression of gender in the world of sports has always come hand to hand with masculine capital. In the 1950s, professional British wrestler Ricky Starr created this effeminate character, a wrestler that combined soft and delicate ballet movements and jumps with wrestling keys and throws. Playing the underdog, he would win and would be loved by the fans since he, after all, was up in the ring playing a sport that was highly considered in the 1950s a manly sport. Another example is the case of other players who reinforce the ideal of orthodox masculinity through violence. Players like Ray Rice from the Ravens football team in the USA who in 2014 beat his wife in an elevator, and many others, whose acts of domestic violence have granted them bigger masculine capital due to their status as athletes.

The fan's deep connection with the athlete in the field, who rightfully epitomizes orthodox masculinity, gives the fan the possibility to reconstruct his identity through fandom. However, and this is the focal point of my exploration, the fan's connection to orthodox masculinity is through submission to the hegemonic normative masculinity which is represented by the athletes in the game. Consequently, the fan first subjugates his body to the dominant masculinity: the athlete. The fan then costumes himself and, in a ritualistic manner, offers his body to the dominant presence.

### **THE QUEERED BODY AND THE SPACE OF BELONGING**

Dress, as we know it, has primarily separated us from animals. We have used clothing as a means to protect our bodies from the elements, but this primary need was also rapidly supplemented by the use of garments for adornment and power relations in society. We quickly learned how to enhance our position as humans and to distance ourselves from the beast as we have given cultural connotations to what we wear and how we wear it. Dressing becomes then an identity signifier where the body becomes a space where we perform what Amir Ben Porat calls our affective, experiential and symbolic selves (Porat, 2010). According to his categorization, we perform our affective selves through cathartic experiences where our bodies create mechanisms to bond with our cultural environment, so we as devoted fans, cheer, scream, boo, get happy or upset and move in a carnivalesque choreography that resembles a pagan ceremony. In addition to this cathartic level we wish to achieve, we, as humans, have this innate need to belong; so one way to bond is through clothing in order to connect with the ideological environment. We follow fashion trends, bond with national colours that create citizenship, or in the case of the fans in football, dress in the colours of our team and create unique signifiers that only the same group can identify. This works together with our experiential selves. We create cognitive relations with the environment and our dressed bodies; we justify our placement in this environment; we belong there and the identification is justified by the created need. When looking at the Roughriders fans' gusto for costuming, this gesture generates the best cognitive justifier. We have to be

part of the group because we believe of belonging there, in the world of football - “men do what men do”, so identification is essential, no matter what the social situation is. For the Roughrider’s fan then, in order to belong, cross dressing as the stereotypical image of a Hawaiian female dancer, with a plastic Hawaiian skirt, a plastic minuscule coconut bra with tassels on our bare hairy chest, full green makeup and a fancy carved watermelon in our head totally makes sense from this perspective. In addition, and most important, is it through the symbolic level of experience of our bodies through dressing up for the game that the fan transcends the level of submission and becomes the same as the player on the field? I propose then that following Porat’s categorization, in the game, with other members of their community, the fan no longer has the position of “the submissive self” where he has symbolically, fully subordinated his body to the dominant force, he is now a player in the field. The communion has been performed and the body of the fan has created a gesture, an utterly theatricalized space where masculinity has been performed.

In order to go deeper into the idea of the production of queered space in the body of the male fan, I wish to use Henri Lefebvre’s concept of the production of space and to propose a parallel with the idea of the affective, the cognitive and the symbolic in the space of the body. Lefebvre’s main idea of the production of social space is that such production is a social construction and this action influences our relations with the space (Lefebvre, 1991). He creates a triad where he divides the space in three categories: the perceived, the conceived and the lived. For Lefebvre, the perceived space is the spacial practice, the relationships we create with the space. The conceived space for Lefebvre’s is the representation of it, the conceptual, the utopian. The third space in his classification is the representational space or “the lived” the spaces where we actually live. This space is created by the experiences created between the relations of the first and second space. In the space of the body, and particularly the queered space of the male fan, the perceived space here works as the experiential self, where the queered costumed body establishes relationships with the space around it. This space is not real, it is the myth that we create as the relationship in the space with the environment has been established and become effective. Consequently, the costumed queered body of

the fan has found a suitable relationship with the environment. Its performance is justified in the space of the stadium, the other fans, the players, and especially, the normative space of the male body. The body as space has the need to conform with the environment so it creates relationships as Joanne Entwistle explains:

bodies which do not conform, bodies which flout the conventions of their culture and go without their appropriate clothes are subversive of the most basic codes and risk exclusion, scorn and ridicule ( Entwistle, 2001:.33 )

As a result, the queered body of the male fan conforms to the conventions of fandom; costuming and transgressing the rules of dress codes is right in this environment, it becomes part of the perceived space.

The second space for Lefebvre, “the conceived”, relates to the affective body where the body creates a space shaped by the imagination, a utopian space. So in the space of the male fan, dress connects the body with that utopian space where masculinity is being performed, where the fan becomes one with the player and plays on the field. So the performative body uses this costuming as the connection with that other space, the unachievable one where only the dominant masculinities perform. Through a reverse role playing, the transgression of the queered body allows the space to perform the dominant hyper-masculine self. The combination of these two experiences allows the queered body to arrive at the symbolic space, a space where, as Lefebvre’s “lived space”, is the space where the body creates a performative gesture established by the combination of the other two spaces.

### **MUSCLE MARYS AND THE COSTUMED MALE BODIES: A NEW KIND OF MASCULINITY IN CANADIAN CULTURE**

“Muscle Mary”, a term widely used in gay culture world-wide, defines a man that looks, according to the dominant views of gender, as a “masculine” man, with a defined and muscular body, and most important, with strong feminine-like behaviour, or just the fact that they are gay acting. Being defined as a “Muscle Mary” implies that you are not

really “a man”, you are a parody, a representation of a normative masculinity accepted and not contested. Being a Muscle Mary allows you to navigate in the world of “real men”, along with them in a parallel world -but not in the same world- without being excluded and mostly, being “allowed” to inhabit the normative world of “real men”. Men like “Russian Facebook darling” Pavel Petel, who has taken the world of social media by storm with his hyper masculinity turned into DRAG. His Drag persona is so unapologetic that it passes as normal in the space of normative sexual behaviour. His body, big, muscular and tanned with masculine features creates a performative gesture that brings him to the world of the everyday as the real thing, a theatricalized version of masculinity, a denaturalized self.

The reason I wish to use this term and this example is the fact that this very type of masculinity has become mainstream as a new kind of masculinity, since physically these “supermen” have all necessary attributes to be considered masculine in spite of their feminine-like performative gestures. This example allows me to ask the question: is the physicality of the male body enough to override prejudices about masculinity in the ambit of the everyday? Is this considered a “costume”? a kind of mundane theatricality that allows these individuals to exist outside “the stage”? Are these individuals considered part of the everyday reality or, are they just an extension of a theatrical performance that comes out of some theatrical expression?

With this example, I wish to explore what I call “the new masculinities” which include dominant views of masculinity within queer culture. These views on masculinities have been rapidly advanced and spread in mainstream society through social media and mass communication, with accepted views of “queer” by this new wave of “celebrity drag characters” such as Ru Paul and all the contestants appearing in the popular show “Drag race” and their new found popularity in social media. Other theatrical expressions of queer are promoted through social media: queer celebrities emanated from the everyday such as Russian Facebook darling Pavel Petel are world wide viewed and have influenced normative views of gender. Petel created his hyper-masculine persona (who is the perfect example of an average Social Media user), who constantly pushes gender boundaries through costuming, seeking to destabilize heteronormative views of masculinity. Him, having a typical muscular and stereotypical physique (masculine accord-

ing to heteronormative views of gender in society), considered “masculine” in all aspects, would rock these views with theatricalized images of femininity that immediately queer the ambit of the quotidian with his Kitschy colours, shapes, and hyper-feminine clothes and accessories: he is not “the man” western society is accustomed to see, neither “the femme” we would expect in the ambit of the quotidian. It is the combination of an Alpha male, mixed with the hyper-femininity of a drag persona, a character who would traditionally be seen onstage in a gay bar or in the movies. Instead, we see him on the street portrayed through images and videos, as an ordinary person walking on the streets and sharing the same space that you and I share. the space of the everyday. It is gestures like his, as well as expressions of the everyday such as the costumed male fans of the Roughriders, that expose the theatricality embedded in the costuming as a transformative and transgressive theatrical practice rather than a position or identity. The space of the body here becomes the location that affects the gesture. In the case of fans of football, queering a masculine body through costuming, any masculine body in the ambit of the everyday, reinforces the idea of a new masculinity rather than the idea of re-creating existing stereotypes. Every space, every body becomes a new space to queer and to establish a different kind of masculinity. It is not the queerness of the drag queen onstage, or in the case of the fans of football dressed in feminine clothes, a recreation of the pattern of “femininity”, it is about the creation of a fissure in the regular and heteronormative rules of dominant gender, and most important, the creation of a theatrical expression in itself.

## **THE DUALITY OF THE THEATRICAL EVENT**

According to Jenna Drenten (2009), the experience of tailgate parties in football games, and I extend her idea to dressing up for the game, is a combination of several motives that allow the participant to develop a sense of belonging as well as making him or her feel unique. These motivations, according to her, create dualities for the participant such as camaraderie and competition or an identity duality about collectivism and individual-

ism. This means, a participant feels unified with his team by wearing the team colours, team uniform, feeling like a community, but also the experience makes him / her feel different from the rest, feel superior and unique with a sense of identity that only her / his team possesses. Amir Ben Porat's study on football and identity explains this duality as a struggle between the relationship that we establish with the exterior world and the relationship with ourselves. He writes:

Our struggle for identity and sense of personal coherence and intelligibility are centred on the threshold between interior and exterior, between self and others.” ( Porat, 2010: 278)

These dualities, which we constantly establish as we relate with society, and in this case, with ourselves and other fans, promote a theatricalization of the act, a performative instance where the body is forced to perform specific identities. Costuming here is also decontextualized and performed; the environment of the theatrical event with costumes made and thought specifically for this event; worn and performed. This action becomes a duality: theatre and identity bending. Costuming gets denaturalized and deconstructed for the purpose of the performance; the simple act of dressing up the male body to parade it in the parking lot and the benches of the stadium deconstructs the nature of the game. The bodies of the participants become a binary, a performative gesture, a symbol of the act of becoming a collective and at the same time being unique. The body performs as a new site for identity and the new environment that hosts it. I see this performative act of the body as the perfect example of what Henry Lefebvre calls the duality of the space where the space is concrete and abstract at the same time. The materiality of the space of the body makes it concrete, and at the same time, the queering of this same space turns it into a performative gesture, and abstraction of this same space. Joanne Entwistle in her book *BODY DRESSING* describes Merleau-Ponty's duality of the body through his analysis of perception and experience, where the world comes to the body via perceptive awareness through what he calls “corporeal or postural schema”. Therefore, the body is placed in the world as a temporal and spatial being where it reads the external space relationships and through percep-

tion, the body re-establishes the roots of the mind in its body and in its world (Entwistle, 2001: 44)

## CONCLUSION

After exploring several points of views on fandom, sports and masculinities, and also, after attempting to map the theatricality embedded in the act of queering one's body in a non traditional theatrical space such as the body in the ambit of the everyday, my research work poses more questions than answers. This exploration has also opened the door for the study of the virtual space as a space for theatricality and the performance of gender. The act of explaining the world of technological peeping within the ambit of the everyday enables my research to serve as a liaison to the new ways that theatrical performance is integrating itself into what I call techno-voyeurism. This act of performing gender through the performance of the virtual body breaks the rituals of traditional theatre forms and the ways we see the body in performance which enables new paradigms about the world of the gendered body viewed through peep culture, a voyeuristic world where new configurations of space create endless new theatrical paradigms for performance. Consequently, I would like to finish with the following reflection: the transformation of the body as a sculptural space within the setting of the football event, where the fan's male body is no longer a normative asexual body, invisible and disembodied, but the producer of a spatial gesture, places itself as an artifact for this theatrical setting. This theatrical event then, goes beyond football and fandom. The male body becomes the stage for eroticism and sexual identification. The experience of embodiment becomes part of the event with the questioning of identity, masculinity, and visibility. Is the male body taking the role of the sexed object, offering his flesh and sexual identity to the player or team? Is the male dressed body creating a place for resistance where identity dissolves to become a wearable costume for the sake of the carnivalesque in the lower stratum where individuals create relationships with objects and subjects, relationships with their surroundings that shape their identity? The event, then, is charged with a strong sense of identification that goes beyond the game.

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