

Comptes rendus / Book Reviews

ADAMS, Mary Louise – *Artistic Impressions: Figure Skating, Masculinity, and the Limits of Sport*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011. Pp. 294.

To imagine figure skating might be to picture a young woman in a sequined outfit gliding through a performance equal parts graceful artistry and pixie-like movements. This is a stereotype to be sure and does a disservice to the athleticism of the women *and* men who skate. Figure skating privileges both artistry and athleticism, but it is in the uneasy relationship between the two that Mary Louise Adams finds a space to adeptly explore the ways in which the sport's history reveals shifting gender norms for both men and women. The scholarship exploring the "artistic" sports into which women's participation has historically been marshalled (i.e. gymnastics, figure skating) often focuses on the barriers women have faced to compete in more "athletic" sports. Adams chooses the obverse course, interrogating the gendered nature of figure skating and examining the ways in which this presumptively feminine sport has exemplified shifting norms of masculinity, providing evidence of "how historically contingent our notions of men's and women's sport categories are" (p. 137).

In the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries skating was an almost exclusively male pastime, one that reflected the participants' "privileged class backgrounds and the gender norms that were particular to them" (p. 83). Skating was, Adams argues, a demonstrable exhibition of class boundaries "on display to anyone who happened to pass by the skater's frozen pond . . . skating made class differences visible" (p. 107). But there were national distinctions. On the continent, most prominently at the Wiener Eislaufverein (Vienna Skating Club), skaters used their entire bodies, arms included, offering expressive movements on the ice. But in Britain, in contrast to the international or continental style, skaters were much more rigid and precise in their movements. Bodies were stiff, arms at the side, as skaters traced precise movements on the ice.

These two approaches were both, over time, integrated into competitive figure skating as the pastime moved from recreational display to codified sport. The precise British figures are still reflected in figure skating's required technical elements, while the expressive movements of the continental style resonate within the sport's more subjective grades for artistic impression. These components also reflect a long-standing debate over the nature of figure skating: is it art or sport? As this debate played out, it was skating's social element that facilitated women's entry – as the partners of men – into a pastime

that was at the time a slightly more athletic form of a stroll through an urban park in the late-nineteenth century city. Figure skating was leisurely enough to be consistent with Victorian prescriptions on exertion by women while its gentility protected the class position of all participants.

In the early 20th century, Adams argues, debates on participation in skating centred more on issues of class standing than they did on protecting heteronormative gender ideals. In examining the texts (manuals, memoirs) of early-20th-century skating, Adams uncovers few fears among men over women's increasing competence at skating and no panic over men losing to women, as happened at some of the early competitions where there were not separate gendered competition categories. Moreover, for most commentators there was no apparent fear women would be masculinized by competing against men – unlike the narratives of other more typically male, to which as women struggled to gain access in the post-First World War, an era called by some the “golden age” of women's sport (an age that was not to survive the post-Second World War reassertion of traditional femininity).

As long as figure skating was seen primarily as “a social or artistic pursuit” rather than an athletic competition, “the easier it would be for women to choose to do it” (p. 120). But skating's popularity as a spectator sport and its formal inclusion in the Olympic programme beginning in 1920 heightened the sensitivity to gender barriers. The success of women skaters in the early-20th century became more problematic when “women began to surpass men in terms of skill and to outnumber them on rinks . . . figure skating came to be seen as feminine and therefore inferior to those sports in which men continued to dominate” (p. 137). The rise of Norway's Sonja Henie in the interwar years, first as a champion skater and later as a Hollywood star, contributed to the feminization of figure skating.

The sport became dominated by female participation after the Second World War, with Canada's Barbara Ann Scott projecting the feminine ideal. But skating's proponents endeavoured to protect “the reputations of men and to define skating to meet their ideas of how and in what types of public contexts male bodies should move” (p. 165). American Dick Button, Olympic gold medalist in 1948 and 1952, represented the shift in men's figure skating towards more athletic feats and an emphasis on jumping that Adams contends culminated in the hyper-masculine skaters of the 1990s, Canada's Elvis Stojko most prominent among them (artistic skaters such as Toller Cranston were viewed more as resistant outliers rather than inheritors of figure skating's expressive continental style).

Adams acknowledges that some may “take issue” with what she characterizes as an “uneven chronology and rather large geographic boundaries” (p. 10). She casts her net widely; the sources, literature, and anecdotes upon which Adams draws come from North America, Britain, and continental Europe. Rather than an in-depth study of a moment or place in time, Adams chooses to focus on “episodes” from the history of figure skating that “provide useful evidence of the ways in which discourses of class and gender came together to influence the look and experience of men's physical activities and pastimes” (p. 82). This is perhaps the greatest contribution made by *Artistic Impressions*. The codification of organized sport, beginning in nineteenth-century British public schools and incorporated into, for example, the modern Olympic movement, celebrated hyper-masculine performance contained within the boundaries of upper-middle-class values framed as the “amateur” ideal. The history of figure skating provides an opportunity to revisit this

narrative and “learn whether sporting masculinities are as coherent as they seem to be in the literature, where they are often lumped together under the undifferentiated category of dominant or hegemonic masculinity” (p. 104).

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ATKINSON, Michael – *Deconstructing Men & Masculinities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. 238.

Feminist scholars often point out that although men as a group tend to be dominant, men as individuals tend towards insecurity and crisis. The masculinities literature calls this a “paradox of masculinity” and argues that the social category masculinity itself is crisis filled. Since the 1980s, the literature has primarily been guided by R.W. Connell’s concept “hegemonic masculinity” that argues the socially ideal version of manhood that men are encouraged to strive for is largely impossible to achieve and attempts come with tremendous costs and usually fall short. Hence, the paradox and crisis that so many men experience. Recent years have seen challenges to the tradition inspired by Connell. *Deconstructing Men & Masculinities* by sport sociologist Michael Atkinson offers a postmodern-cultural studies perspective on masculinity crisis. Atkinson’s central argument is that the conditions of late modernity break down certainties of the past, such as the narrative of patriarchal privilege, which forces men to construct new ways of being a man in institutional spaces and social relations. A lack of certainty in old forms of patriarchy triggers crisis filled reactions to contemporary conditions. Some men, Atkinson finds, react to the new conditions by retrenching in older traditions of manhood while other men “discover innovative ways to reframe their bodies/selves as socially powerful in newly masculine manners” (p. 5). Atkinson calls this “pastiche hegemony” to signify how the new ideal is based on a creative bricolage that is responsive to changes in contemporary culture, gender relations, new social movements, the workplace, and neoliberal capitalism in order to reproduce masculine privilege. Although crisis is Atkinson’s central analytical category, he remains ambivalent about the claim that masculinity is in crisis since it “is one of perception, and not an objective, unchanging reality that has altered the life histories and experiences of all Canadian men” (p. 12). The bulk of the book is then organized around case studies that explore how different Canadian men respond to and negotiate the crisis filled conditions of late modernity. The case studies look at backyard wrestling, laddism, bugchasing, ultra-endurance running, straightedge culture, übersexuality, sport subcultures, hosers, and transhumanism. The book thus provides a kaleidoscopic view of contemporary (mostly youthful) Canadian masculinities.

Without a doubt, *Deconstructing Men & Masculinities* is an ambitious statement on contemporary Canadian masculinities and the masculinities literature. Atkinson’s pastiche hegemony has many potentially valuable insights to offer the literature. Unfortunately, the book falls short of its potential. Minor problems include typographical errors, citations missing from the bibliography, and an incorrect URL (p. 163). Others are more significant, such as when Atkinson locates the philosophical origins of libertarianism