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Hockey as a Cultural Artifact:
Game Eight of the 1972 Summit Series

On September 28, 1972, Moscow's Luzhniki Sports Palace played host to the eighth and final games of the "Summit Series." Hockey fans, players, and journalists had expected the series, played between the Soviet national team and an all-star squad of Canadian-born National Hockey League players to be the moment when Canada would reassert its international hockey dominance. For years the best Canadian hockey players, professionals in the NHL, had been denied the opportunity to play state-funded Soviet

teams, while those same Soviet teams had come to dominate weaker Canadian amateur teams in Olympic and world championship competitions. Game Eight, as it has become colloquially known across Canada, was the deciding game in the series.

A number of interpretations of the 1972 Summit Series, especially those by Donald Macintosh, focus on hockey's role as a tool of Canadian diplomacy. Less has been written on hockey as an element of Canadian popular culture and its role in creating the myths of what is considered "Canadian." This paper questions the cultural messages that accompanied the broadcast of Game Eight. What messages about the importance of this game, about Canadian unity, and about Canada's stature in the world were Canadians to take away from this event? This analysis makes use of recently restored video footage of the original telecast. It encompasses both the on-ice action and the television broadcast (choice of camera angles, use of replays, and the narrative provided by commentators). In Canada, both national networks broadcast the game and as many as 12.5 million Canadians stopped what they were doing to watch and listen as Foster Hewitt and color commentator Brian Conacher described the action from Moscow. These on-air analysts were important mediating agents in transmitting messages back to Canada and their comments are an important element of the conclusions reached in this paper.

Paul Rutherford suggests that artifacts of Canadian popular culture can be considered lenses through which to view certain aspects of Canadian culture. Game Eight turns this notion on its head, operating as a "wide-angle" lens, not highlighting a particular aspect of Canadian culture but presenting a panoramic view of that culture as a homogeneous whole. Pan-Canadianism, the image of a unified Canada, would become evident in three discourses that run throughout Game Eight: contest, unity and individualism.

From the beginning, Game Eight, indeed the entire series, was about contest and rivalry, the quality and style of our hockey against theirs. This element of contest, even conflict, has often been linked in sports to symbols of nationalism and patriotism. Yet sports television broadcasts often attempt to play a neutral role and highlight achievement, rather than conflict. In Game Eight, the drama and tension of the moment quickly stripped away these pretensions. To succeed in this "us versus them contest," Canada had to unite. Elements of Canadian diversity could be celebrated, provided that unity was preserved, and preserving unity meant sustaining national identity. This was, after all, Canada's game and the discourse of unity was repeated throughout Game Eight. But, while hockey might unify Canada, Canadian society still privileged diversity and individualism. The very nature of the contest between the Soviet Union and Canada, East versus West, highlighted the distinctions between these two societies. Hockey superiority and individual skill represented all that made Canada unique. From the opening moments of Game Eight, television, appealed to the supposed value Canadians place on individual excellence.

Game Eight provided Canadians with the hockey victory they had expected from the beginning. But, more importantly, this game encouraged Canadians to think of themselves as a unified, homogeneous force, heroically turning back the Soviet challenge. As one out of every two Canadians stopped what they were doing to tune in to Game Eight, they were treated to what they would later be told was Canada's defining moment.

Victory in an international contest had demonstrated the strength of a unified Canada through individual excellence. The importance of the broadcast in constructing the meanings of Game Eight should not be ignored. In connecting hockey to Canadian pride, the broadcasters were speaking to one Canada. That is, the cultural significance of Game Eight was that it consciously obscured Canada's diversity. To watch the game and appreciate the telecast's message meant that you were truly Pan-Canadian.