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August, 2021

# Sport, Space and Gender: Embodying Alternate Girlhoods with The Wolves

Kim Solga

**Sport, Space and Gender:  
Embodying Alternate Girlhoods with *The Wolves***

By Kim Solga, Western University

*1. Trouble at the Gym*

Do you remember gym class? I do. I grew up in the 1980s, in a suburban city on the Canadian prairies. I was chubby, awkward, uncoordinated. I did great academically, but I wasn't good at sports. I wasn't good at doing my hair the "right" way, either. My clothes were never a great fit.

In other words, I was a pretty ordinary girl.

Gym class sharpened the contradictions shaping my young body. It was the place where I felt most embarrassingly seen and yet also most hopelessly invisible; where I faced that clean, wide open sprung floor and could not imagine myself more hemmed in. The gym was a paradox: it was a meritocracy organized by implicit hierarchies, dividing those who seemed able to do everything and those who only ever seemed to fail at trying. It was supposed to be a place of learning—a huge classroom with toys!—but I always felt like I was meant already to know all the moves (I did not). It was a place promising expansive bodily freedom in a building otherwise defined by rule-based confinement, yet one "bad" or "wrong" move quickly brought on a deep desire to run and hide.

It was also, of course, a place organized acutely by binary gender difference. For those of us not great at performing gendered expectations at the best of times, an hour in gym clothes was an exercise in spectacular humiliation. During dodge ball the bullies could be violent with abandon. My grade 8 gym teacher was a bully himself, greeting every failed pull up or weak somersault with cries of "retard!" (This language was as offensive then as now, though not nearly as taboo.<sup>1</sup>) The attractive girls got a pass, though not for long: the heteropatriarchy

that sustained our gym teacher's authority dictates that pretty girls "too good" at sport are to be regarded with suspicion.<sup>2</sup> As for me, who was neither pretty enough nor good enough with the ball: I just wanted to disappear.

The gym made me wish the problem of my physical self would vanish for good. If I was strong—if I held the promise of a powerful woman inside me, alongside the scared, smart, squirming kid I was—my school gym was the last place on earth that power could be actualized.

## *2. Enter the Wolves*

A pounding drumbeat rises over the din of audience chatter; lights dim to focus on the green astroturf that covers the thrust stage. Nine young women march into the space. They walk with purpose, arms swinging, some smiling with obvious pride. They are dressed in identical soccer uniforms: red jerseys and knee socks, black shorts. They form a circle, facing inward, facing each other. They lunge forward in formation.

These are the opening moments of Sarah DeLappe's 2017 Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Wolves*, as realized in the Howland Company / Crow's Theatre production mounted in Toronto in 2018.<sup>3</sup> When the lights come we are in an indoor soccer field, "somewhere in suburban America,"<sup>4</sup> but the set includes only the artificial green turf of the team's prep area and the strong young female bodies that populate it. No bleachers; no spectators. Nobody is watching, as far as these young women are concerned. Over the course of six scenes, the Wolves warm up for games; it is their junior year of high school, the year that scouts from colleges will come to watch them play. But not now and not here: this field we see is their rehearsal space, and as they stretch, warm up, and perform aerobic drills in preparation for the work ahead of them,

they body forth a hopeful, shared future moment. They work in unison, with precision: they are athletes, friends, teammates. This field is *their* space, made from the collective motion of their powerful bodies—and, as DeLappe writes, “there should be the sense that [it] goes on forever.”<sup>5</sup>

My junior high school gym days clearly looked nothing like the wide-openness of this scene; little did I know as I was living them, however, that they were in the process of being theorized by Iris Marion Young.<sup>6</sup> In her iconic essay, “Throwing Like a Girl,” Young writes that women under patriarchy “live a contradiction”: they experience themselves as subject and object simultaneously,<sup>7</sup> their bodies materially constrained by the gendered cultural norms that insist women take up as little room as possible. Young pays careful attention to the phenomenal consequences of this contradiction for women engaged in sport, noting that “the space ... which is *physically* available to the feminine body is frequently of greater radius than the space which she uses and inhabits. Feminine existence appears to posit an existential enclosure between herself and the space surrounding her.”<sup>8</sup> This reluctance for many girls and women to use the whole space seemingly available to them, Young argues, explains the similarly constricted movement patterns that characterize what comes to mind when we hear the phrase “throwing like a girl”: “motion is concentrated in one body part” rather than dynamically traversing body and space fluidly; the body resists reaching, extending, leaning and stretching to its full capacity.<sup>9</sup>

Thus do women learn to make their bodies small.

Nobody in *The Wolves* “throws like a girl,” but everybody in this play *is* a girl, through and through; the contradiction between the cultural expectations attached to the label “girl”

and the powerfully agentic embodiment lived by nine actors playing nine characters who nevertheless fit that label animates my chapter. *The Wolves* reframes the terms by which postfeminist neoliberalism commodifies girlhood for our pleasurable consumption, and it does so by telling girlhood stories through a critical blend of sportful embodiment and deliberately fractured, frequently hilarious narrative. The Wolves are allowed to own—to move freely, independently, and dynamically within—a space that grade 8 me could barely dream of. What difference, I ask, does that kind of spatial orientation, that kind of ownership *by and for the body*, make to the way young women are able to inhabit, and indeed to shape, the world beyond them?

To begin, I bring *The Wolves* into conversation with another play about neoliberal girlhood—Caryl Churchill’s *Top Girls*—in order to locate DeLappe within a theatrical genealogy that deconstructs the toxic postfeminist distinction between what girlhood studies calls the “can-do girl” and the “at risk girl.”<sup>10</sup> I then examine how *The Wolves*’ movement patterns function as a space-making tool, one that gives members of the team the opportunity to “take up space” for themselves as strong young women by generating what Carrie Noland (after Judith Butler) calls the “gestural performative,” a modality that allows the gendered body’s felt experience power and agency in the quest to make cultural change. Finally, bringing Noland back into conversation with Butler’s later work, I cast the play’s movement-generated, dialectical space as an example of what Butler calls a “performative act of assembly,”<sup>11</sup> a place for girlhood advocacy beyond “can do” and “at risk.”

The cultural and economic framework called neoliberalism<sup>12</sup> relies on girls as one of its primary cultural ambassadors. In her 2014 book *Spectacular Girls*, Sarah Projansky argues that

young twenty-first century women are consistently represented in the media as “spectacles” of success or failure on market-based terms. Here, Projansky picks up on landmark insights by Anita Harris,<sup>13</sup> who made the case for neoliberal economics’ dependency on images of young women as “vanguard[s] of new subjectivity,”<sup>14</sup> a barometer for coping with significant cultural, political, and technological change at the turn of the millennium. We already know this, of course, from (pre-*Lemonade*) Beyoncé: girls run the world! They are free to become PR reps, basketball coaches, trade analysts, or pop stars; they are free to spend their money on glamour products while also bossing the boardroom or the Superbowl halftime show. Good neoliberal girls—“can do” girls who are “independent,” “confident,” smart and resilient<sup>15</sup>—then grow into “postfeminist” young women who understand that success means something they achieve on their own terms, because, as Angela McRobbie argues, they have learned that they are important *only to themselves*.<sup>16</sup>

The “can do” girl, however, is also a successful athlete, in contrast with the “at risk” girl who smokes behind the bleachers and gets pregnant in grade 11.<sup>17</sup> Given this pair of stereotypes, we might expect *The Wolves* to present us with a series of postfeminist poster girls, demonstrating the power of soccer to motor millennial female success. The picture DeLappe offers us is in fact very different; sport is not a neoliberal handmaiden in this play. Instead, it is a framework that actualizes a shared, interdependent space of subject-formation for a group of young women who actively confound the oversimplified divisions of neoliberal “girl power.” The Wolves are each what Projansky calls “alternative” girls—no less “spectacular” than we might anticipate from the internet, but significantly more complicated in

their physical virtuosity and emotional agility than postfeminist frameworks can account for. It is sport that makes them so.<sup>18</sup>

### 3. *She's Not Going To Make It*

When I was eight, something changed in my body. In photos from my grade two year (aged 7), I was skinny and had long, straight hair. A year later, my grade three class photo reveals a fat girl with intense, unruly curls and terrible buck teeth in an ill-fitting blouse and skirt. I'm not sure what happened, but somehow, I'd become doubled: at once a good little girl, no worries here, full of ordinary promise, and also a girl covered in red flags—weight gain, problem smile, bigger than the others in her year by far. In the space of a moment now vanished in time, I'd gone from can-do, the girl who could “run the world,” to “at risk”<sup>19</sup> of falling off a gendered cliff, in need of constant eyes-on from parents and teachers lest I get fatter, or lest the inevitable bullying push me into all kinds of trouble.<sup>20</sup>

That same year, 1982, Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* opened at London's Royal Court theatre. *Top Girls* tells the story of Marlene, a “high flyer” at a central London employment agency.<sup>21</sup> Churchill contrasts Marlene's can-do attitude with her angry sister Joyce, who lives on the poverty line in the small town where she and Marlene grew up, who is a staunch supporter of organized labour, and who is raising Marlene's disavowed child, Angie. For her part, Angie bears all the marks of the “at risk” girl. She doesn't like school—though she loves writing and imagining worlds with her much younger friend Kit. Joyce calls her a “big lump” (Act 3), pathetically too big for the pretty dress she's just tried on (a gift from “Auntie Marlene”). When Angie escapes to the big city and heads straight for Marlene's office, Marlene welcomes



her with consternation. Marlene is “self-making, resilient, and flexible,”<sup>22</sup> the ideal late-modern subject who regards herself as an individual success and other women as competition to be bested. Rejecting feminism as outdated and unhelpfully anti-capitalist, she celebrates Margaret Thatcher, and she has long since sized Angie up. Bluntly, Marlene concludes to her colleagues: “she’s not going to make it” (Act 2, final line).

Inspired by Brecht, Churchill’s play deploys a range of defamiliarizing tools to skewer the promises of neoliberal capitalism for “can do” women, and one of the several ways Churchill makes her case against Marlene’s postfeminist worldview is by channeling Iris Marion Young, subtly foregrounding the limits of physical embodiment her “girls” experience in exchange for their public success. *Top Girls* never speaks of sport directly, but as in *The Wolves* the foundation of the play’s feminist critique is postfeminism’s celebration of girls’ “power” alongside its simultaneous curtailment of the strong female body. In Act One, for example, Marlene invites a host of successful women from myth, art, and history to a fantasy supper; the guests are all supportive words and group cheers until the wine starts to flow and their corporeal sacrifices heave into view. The women she has invited share stories of remarkable endurance: Isabella Bird was a nineteenth-century world traveler and fearless adventurer; Lady Nijo, an author and Buddhist nun in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, walked the length of Japan; Dull Gret (a Flemish folk hero painted by Bruegel the Elder) led an army of mothers into hell. These are feats of physical power, yet they emerge here only to be effaced. Isabella reminds the table that while her rugged exploits garnered a lot of media attention, she “repudiated strongly any suggestion in the press that I was other than feminine.” Nijo, a Japanese female aristocrat, was

defined in life exclusively by her relationship to men, and she speaks nostalgically and with growing sadness about her silk court clothing throughout the dinner.

Save Dull Gret (who is practically invisible to the others, anyway, not least in the moment she tells her incredible warrior's story), these women work extremely hard to make themselves as small as possible; they provide an object lesson in taking up less space, in the requirement that being a successful woman means being seen not to be "too big" for that success. Marlene herself knows how to constrict her physical presence; she reminds her Act One dinner guests that she won't wear trousers at the office: "I could but I don't." Angie is regarded by everyone around her as "at risk," a body-in-failure, because she's just so *big*, but she is also scripted by Churchill to be played by an adult woman in a gestic reminder to audiences to take seriously the physical space a young woman actually requires in order to become herself on stage. Words clash with body, and the body speaks back<sup>23</sup>—a technique that DeLappe deploys to powerful effect 35 years later.<sup>24</sup>

#### *4. Room To Move*

But that was 1982, right? Today, on Broadway, nine young women can take the field and nobody is telling them they kick like girls, that they can't occupy this turf. It's tempting to suggest Churchill's "top girl" reality, Iris Marion Young's "throws like a girl" reality, represents our feminist history—but that's the false promise of the postfeminist fantasy. Projansky's work on Venus Williams' early-career success in the late 1990s is a sobering reminder that women even now who excel at sport must work hard to contain the spectre of femaleness (both sexual and racial) that goes hand-in-glove with their athletic virtuosity—or expect the media to do it

for them, through constant surveillance and well-placed acts of shaming.<sup>25</sup> The afterlife of Projansky's analysis is palpable in online, body-shaming reactions to Serena Williams' post-natal physicality, as well as to the success of the 2019 US women's soccer team. As Rachel Allison notes, "Many of the traits valued in sports are violations of the qualities we expect women to embody. The result is that women athletes face a double standard: people still react negatively when women express the competitiveness and aggression that are routine in men's sports." "Can do" girls are allowed to enjoy success on the field only if they fit neatly into the modest, self-effacing container built for them off the field, preferably while accepting significantly lower pay and wearing "tighter shorts."<sup>26</sup> Bossy girls who demand the right to take up space both on and off the field, using both their bodies *and* their voices (Venus Williams, Megan Rapinoe) call attention to the raced, sized, and gendered double standards that shape sport as a commodity under neoliberal heteropatriarchy. In the process, they also place themselves "at risk" (of trolling online, of game sanctions, or worse).

So Anita Harris's "future girls" are expected to kick soccer ass, but they are still not really permitted to be anything less than quiet, demure, petite and "feminine" about it (as Isabella Bird might say). Sarah DeLappe's response to this still-contemporary political problem is literally to body forth the ways in which normal, unspectacular, sportful girls go about achieving their personal and shared goals—that is, to foreground girlhood as an experience lived, understood, and reckoned with through the body and in concert with other, different bodies. Carrie Noland has theorized the ways in which the languages of power (the "discursive formations" of Foucauldian poststructural critique) and quotidian human embodiment interact in the production of what she calls, building on Judith Butler, "gestural performatives."<sup>27</sup>

Noland's critique of Butler astutely points to the ways in which the living body, its felt experience, and the agential capacity of embodied reactions to gendered discursive formations ghost *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), yet remain untheorized because Butler's critical debt to Foucault, Lacan, Austin, and Derrida struggles to admit the worlding limits of language. Reading Butler's early work for its lacunae, Noland argues that Butler's urge toward feminist resistance can best be found in the gendered (and raced) body's capacity to feel awkwardly or uncomfortably in relation to linguistic performatives and their physical demands:

The fact that we so rarely register the pressure of unpleasant sensations is proof that even the larger engendering techniques of the body (such as modest smiling or curtsying) have a remarkably firm grip on the body. The socially preestablished meanings of these acts are difficult (and sometimes impossible) to dislodge ... However, when enacting a gendered gesture produces unpleasant sensations that can no longer be tolerated, when "efficacy" is eclipsed by tension or pain, then pressure from *something other than language* has made itself felt. ... *Finally, it is the doing-body, not the speaking body, that senses most urgently the dissonance, the lack of adequation, between a cultural meaning and the embodiment of that meaning, between what the subject is supposed to be signifying and how she feels.*<sup>28</sup>

Noland's argument resonates strongly with material feminist theatre practice: where better to locate a feminist gestural performative than in the collision of embodied action and scripted text on stage? In Churchill's *Top Girls*, Angie inhabits the dissonance of a feminist language/body dialectic; gendered judgements about failed futurity awkwardly overlay her

visibly, audibly, tangibly grown woman's body, and audiences are compelled to read her experience in contrast with the tamed, contained postfeminist bodies surrounding her. In *The Wolves*, however, this dialectic structures the play as a whole—it is the play's substance. DeLappe weaves a repertoire of constant, shared, syncopated movement into the spoken dialogue of the Wolves' interactions, precisely so that the characters' bodies might, as Noland terms it, "speak back" to our narrow expectations of what proper girls look, sound, and feel like, opening up possibilities for what the physical experience of girlhood means or could mean, to them and also to us.<sup>29</sup>

DeLappe specifies in her notes that "Each scene is a warm-up for a game. The warm-up is a series of exactly timed stretches and exercises: squats, jumping jacks, quads, hamstrings, butterfly, etc. The team executes it wordlessly, in perfect unison and with military precision."<sup>30</sup> Audiences can perceive the critical effects of this movement score immediately in scene one ("The Cambodian") when the "military precision" of the team's practice contrasts directly (and hilariously) with their opening dialogue, a mash-up of talk about the Khmer Rouge and getting one's period while playing soccer (pads or tampons?). As in Churchill's Act One, the rush of overlapping dialogue impedes full audience comprehension, though a few punctuated lines remind us that we are listening to a group of young women talk seriously about the ethical fallout of genocide *and also* about caring for their growing female bodies in awkward physical situations. Meanwhile, as words fly through the space, the movement sequence grounds spectators in its compelling rhythm, providing a thrumming, embodied counterpoint. Telescoped through this dance of movement precision and messy dialogue is *The Wolves'* central challenge to audiences: can we recognize the ways in which these young women, both

in and beyond their physical capacity, are at once remarkable and vulnerable, socially awkward yet full of genuine, explosive power? Can we see in them many alternative girls, simultaneously?<sup>31</sup>

*The Wolves'* repertoire of feminist gestural performatives comes into its own in scene three.<sup>32</sup> The Wolves are coming off a loss to "Fusion," a team inferior to them. They are embarrassed. The scene opens with punishing, high-intensity drills set by #25 ("Defense, Captain. Classic (ex)coach's daughter"<sup>33</sup>): high knees become butt kicks become grapevine, all seamless. The team criss-crosses the stage, working hard and fast, not smiling, focusing. What spectators see here is a version of theatre-of-the-real: while DeLappe does not specify that The Wolves be played by either girls or adult women (and productions have used both), she nevertheless relies, like Churchill's Angie, on the politically dissonant upsurges of "real" female bodies working constantly, athletically, and often toward exhaustion, on stage.<sup>34</sup> We witness the characters' immense skill within, indeed because of, the performers' capacity for that same skill. None of the characters in *The Wolves* are "doubled" in the traditional sense, but every time the actors execute these intense or high-skill moves, they become queerly doubled. Character and actor become athletes together; individual bodies become a team. Rather than shrinking small, into themselves, these performers literally become *more than* themselves, powerfully excessive.

After the HIIT sequence ends, #25 brings a bag of balls onto the stage and asks the team to pair up for passing drills. Small groups of players bounce on and off the stage, mid-conversation, each time engaged in a live, for-real game of pass-and-touch. Again, the line between fictive and real blurs to political effect: the actors work a balancing act, their dialogue

operating call-and-response style while they hold the passes (and fumble for real, occasionally) as spectators try (and fail) to keep up. Then, in the middle of this sequence, #46 (“Bench. New girl. Awkward, different, just wants to fit in”<sup>35</sup>) emerges from the crowd to embody DeLappe’s gestural performative in one of the most electric moments in the play.

Number 46 is not from around here, hasn’t played in the league before, doesn’t know the warm-up sequence; when she opens her mouth she says often inappropriate things. During this drill she’s been working the ball with #8 (“Defense. Childlike and determined to stay that way”) and #11 (“Midfield. Brainy, morbid, budding elitist, thoughtful”).<sup>36</sup> Throughout the preceding scenes some of the team has bullied her, because her mom is a “witchy” weirdo<sup>37</sup> who writes travel narratives, and apparently they live in a yurt (which the others mock-name a “yogurt”). Following Harris and Projansky we might characterize #46 as a girl with potential but “at risk”; #46, however, has other ideas about how she might be characterized. She has felt the teasing, and at this moment she decides to turn her feelings into soccer. She intercepts a pass, then “juggles their ball / she is amazing.”<sup>38</sup> She chants a song, made up on the spot, as she works the ball:

I live in a yogurt

My feelings don’t get hurt

Yogurt for breakfast

Yogurt for lunch... (86)<sup>39</sup>

In the Howland / Crow’s production, Ula Jurecka transformed DeLappe’s sparse stage direction (“she juggles their ball / she is amazing”) into a series of cool moves that allowed her to own, and then almost forget, the words coming out of her mouth. She began with rapid toe-touches

upstage, the first few lines shouted with frustration. Quickly, though, her movements became a pleasure, a game: bouncing the ball expertly on high knees; balancing the ball across her shoulders; precision, balletic walking with the ball perched on her concave back, a huge smile plastered across her face. The tease was forgotten and the chant was a tool, a way to keep time as she tested how far her balance would take her. Finally losing it, she fell to the turf and her ball bounced toward #00, the intense, quiet, anxious and talented goalie played by Amaka Umeh. They locked eyes for a moment before Jurecka ran offstage.

When #46 runs away it's tempting to think she's simply hurt (of course she is), that this has been a simple reaction to bullying (of course it is), but the residue of her embodied act of linguistic sabotage is far more complex than ordinary "at-risk" narratives permit. The other players express surprise, but also massive respect: "so weird / but so good at that" says #8. Shortly after Jurecka departs, Umeh's #00 grabs the ball and begins an agility sequence on the floor, chiming out "I live in a yogurt."<sup>40</sup> This is not mocking: it's *training*. The new girl, the "weird" girl, has transformed her difference, and her hurt, into skill; her experience of her difference among the others on the team has now become part of the team's drill, their collective labour and their shared physical repertoire. Her athletic, talented young woman's body has run headlong into the kinds of teasing we might expect when the "can do" and "at risk" girls hang out together, but the collision has blown up the binary, leaving behind the capacity for growth, transformation, change—and shared success.

##### 5. *Stand With Me*



From French sociologist Henri Lefebvre<sup>41</sup> we know that space is not a given; it is produced through shared social interaction and governed by the power dynamics that organize human relations into implicit and explicit hierarchies of ownership and control. Feminist geographer Doreen Massey<sup>42</sup> reminds us that our spacing powers are attached to an ethics: because social and economic ordering always result in some being privileged with greater ownership over space than others, it is our responsibility to consider how our assumptions about who belongs (or not) in what spaces make room for some just as they take worlds from another (think of Trayvon Martin, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd). Finally, with performance studies scholar Laura Levin<sup>43</sup> we know that space is gendered in both theory and practice, and that Anglo-European philosophy reads women as “ground” for the place-making projects of men.<sup>44</sup> You may have noticed hints of all of these theories traveling alongside my discussions of the work of Young, Projansky, Harris, Churchill, DeLappe, and Noland in previous sections: women who “take up space” (rather than act as ground, disappearing themselves) are sanctioned by patriarchal terms and conditions that cannot make sense of a world in which women might be space-*makers*, physical as well as political power-brokers with the capacity to shape lived reality differently.

*The Wolves* shows us what a space built by and for young women—who are free to take it up, play with it, enjoy it, and maybe even fight over it—looks like. Active, elite, strong bodies allow these young women (actors *and* characters—*more than* we see before our eyes) to work on and share this turf, and through it they are able to practice, physically as well as mentally, different ways of occupying space in the wider universe. While I’ve danced with *The Wolves* as a feminist space-making enterprise throughout this chapter, I want to end by dwelling here, in

order to argue that DeLappe's interest in the way girls produce space alongside one another—create a space of their own where alternative models of girlhood can thrive—offers a unique political intervention.

Between scenes five and six, #14 (“Midfield. #7’s insecure sidekick”<sup>45</sup>) is killed by a car while out on a morning run.<sup>46</sup> Scene six opens with only #46 on stage; it has been a week or two since the funeral. Others slowly trickle into the space; there’s some question as to whether they will have to forfeit. As they arrive the players sit around, talking quietly. Earlier scenes are shaped by their determined and powerful warm-ups, but here the girls literally slow down, are together on the turf in a new way. Their shared physical ownership of this space throughout the play allows it to hold them now in a different kind of endurance, the endurance of grief. Eventually, the game is declared “on” and #25 gets the warmup going.

They begin stretching, and for the first time other people appear on the horizon. The team recognizes Coach Patrick in the stands, along with Louise (#25’s new girlfriend), #46’s mom, and #8’s brother, Kevin. Brash striker #7 (see note 29), who is injured, arrives on crutches, exclaiming at the “huge fucking crowd.”<sup>47</sup> We can’t see these spectators but their presence is welcomed by the Wolves—it reads as an extension of the world on the turf they have curated for themselves. They bring this audience’s invigorating presence into their bodies and their circle of movement with an ease in their stretching that feels new, more relaxed.

Then, suddenly, #14’s mother runs onto the stage.

She is “manic with grief,”<sup>48</sup> and in the 2018 Toronto production Robyn Stevan’s entrance was timed to correspond to the moment the warmup shifted from standing to sitting—she appeared just as the actors all folded, in sync, to the ground. Understandably desperate to be in

the team's orbit again, this woman only wants to be once more the soccer mom who spends Saturdays cheering on her can-do daughter, helping her prep her best game so she can get a full ride to a great college. Her monologue begins haltingly; she dwells on her "likes" and "uhs"—on how she seems to sound like Megan (#14) sounded when she wasn't watching her language, wasn't paying attention to how she needed to sound in order to be taken "seriously" in the world.<sup>49</sup> Then she catches herself and shifts into mom-speak, coach-speak:

now we want to see a win out there!

today!

win! win! win! [...]

so none of that

none of that stuff with the Fusion

let's see some uh some smart soccer today

smart passing smart listening smart eyes.<sup>50</sup>

Stevan's momentary turf-stealing throws into profound relief the ground for alternative girlhood this production has built up to this point. Her voice manifests normative social hierarchies: parent vs child; coach vs player; "can-do" language vs gently moving bodies, warming to their task. And with those hierarchies, the category "girl" ("it's you guys! it's our gals!"<sup>51</sup>) rushes into a space that has until now been sustained by and for the Wolves alone, in all their young and messy strength and vulnerability. The Toronto cast's comportment revealed the players' embodied awareness of how they are "supposed" to act when an adult like this one appears and starts shouting: they react with compassion, but their bodies are noticeably quietened by her presence, her voice, as she steps into the centre of their warm-up circle.

They slightly, almost imperceptibly, shrink into themselves.

I find it politically productive in this moment to recognize the Wolves' space-making labour throughout the play as an example of what Judith Butler calls a performative act of assembly: an "assertion of plural existence"<sup>52</sup> that stages a "calling into question of the inchoate and powerful dimensions of reigning notions of the political."<sup>53</sup> Channeling implicitly, if not explicitly, Noland's work on the gestural performative, Butler argues that assembling together physically in public spaces across lines of lived difference allows social actors to embody "nascent and provisional versions of popular sovereignty"<sup>54</sup> that are not reducible to an oversimplified singular voice or goal. The "'I' is [...] a 'we,' without being fused into an impossible unity,"<sup>55</sup> she argues, and the space-making gesture of the performative assembly is to actualize and then honour the space "between" the two of us, between "I" and "we," a space of alliance where we can appreciate and fight for shared rights and needs, and where we can both "bind" and "differentiate" at once.<sup>56</sup>

Standing up against the refusal of lived difference as it shapes politics as usual, performative assemblies hold their ground "on terms of equality with other humans" and thereby work to transform marginalized bodies into political actors.<sup>57</sup> Plural performativity, Butler argues, operates on two political levels. It "seeks to produce a rift within the sphere of appearance," calling into question the rules that determine who may appear how, where, and when in public space, generating a "critique of the differential forms of power" by which the "sphere" of public appearance is constituted.<sup>58</sup> This Foucauldian move is then matched by an Arendtian one, in which the "[p]lural and public action" of joining together to oppose the

erasure “of the right to place and belonging” brings new “space[s] of appearance,” affectively and materially, “into being.”<sup>59</sup>

Stevan’s soccer mom, it turns out, has forgotten something in her car: orange slices for the team. She runs to find them. After she leaves, a whistle goes; the spell breaks. Number 25 gets up, takes charge, clears tears from her eyes. “Wanna do the cheer?” she asks #7, who had turned to leave.<sup>60</sup> The teammates huddle tightly together, inward, form their circle. We see their backs, their arms around one another. They speak into their shared, sovereign space. They chant quietly: *we are the Wolves*. These sounds are for them alone. Then, the volume rises as they break into their power; little leg pulses become bounces become collective, overwhelming, shared energy and then they HOWL, break apart, step out and back once more with fists pounding the air.

#### *6. Sport is a Feminist Issue*<sup>61</sup>

By the early 2000s I’d left the bad gym class memories behind and decided to get fit. Like most grown women, my initial forays into the “adult” world of the gym were based in a desire to lose weight; the toxic, pervasive cultural messaging that links exercise for women to weight loss is, of course, yet another manoeuvre designed to shrink us, not power us up. By 2012, though, I’d realized that not only did I love spin class—I loved riding bicycles, period. No longer for me the fixed machine in the windowless former department store. I bought a road bike and decided to claim the open road.

I was on a cycling trip in the French alps in May 2013 when I met Jo, a woman who changed my life. She was one of the guides on our organized journey, a coach and also a gifted

racer. I was the newest, slowest, most nervous person on the trip; I'd only been riding with any real kind of intent for about six months, and day one in Morzine revealed the gap between me and the others. After that first day, though, I found myself feeling good. I'd kept up. I'd survived!

Jo came into the common room in our shared living space as we were finishing our post ride snack and coffee. Out of the blue, she asked: who wants to join me on a run up the mountain? The mountain she spoke of was Avoriaz, a frequent Tour de France ascent: 14 kilometres long, 840 metres up, and all pain.

For some reason I said I'd come.

When we finally reached the summit, just over an hour later, Jo took me aside. You know, she said, I was watching you climb. After those first couple of kilometres I was not getting any distance on you; you were pacing me. You're really strong, really good at this. You should train; you could race.

I did train for a while, quite seriously; I never did race, though. (I don't want to, and I have found I don't need to.) But every time I get out on the road, hit the gas up a climb, pass a group, fight for the summit, I think about Jo—and I think about that girl who was too scared to be present to her body in that space overwritten by her teacher's offensive, belittling, supremacist language all those years ago. Usually, she makes me smile—and then I just keep on riding.

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<sup>1</sup> The gym of my youth (and maybe yours too) was also organized by overt ableism and fat phobia. I'll have a bit more to say about the latter below.

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<sup>2</sup> Consider the media explosions that dogged the 2019 US women's soccer team during their successful world cup bid. See Rachel Allison, "The Sexism Behind the 'Controversy' over the U.S. Women's Soccer Team's 13 Goals," *Washington Post*, June 14, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/06/14/sexism-behind-controversy-over-us-womens-soccer-teams-goals/>. In *Spectacular Girls*, Sarah Projansky explores similar discourses surrounding Venus Williams. See Sarah Projansky, *Spectacular Girls: Media Fascination and Celebrity Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> *The Wolves*. Directed by Courtney Ch'ng Lancaster, performances by Rachel Cairns, Aisha Evelyn, Ruth Goodwin, Annelise Hawrylak, Ula Jurecka, Brittany Kay, Heath V. Salazar, Hallie Seline, Amaka Umeh, and Robyn Stevan, The Howland Company and Crow's Theatre, Toronto, 2018. Archive Recording. All further references to performance moments from *The Wolves* will be to this production. My thanks to Crow's and Howland for granting me permission to access the archive video recording.

<sup>4</sup> Sarah DeLappe, *The Wolves* (New York: Overlook, 2018), n.p.

<sup>5</sup> DeLappe, *The Wolves*.

<sup>6</sup> Iris Marion Young, "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality," *Human Studies* 3, no. 2 (1980): 137-56.

<sup>7</sup> Young, "Throwing," 141.

<sup>8</sup> Young, "Throwing," 149, emphasis in original.

<sup>9</sup> Young, "Throwing," 143.

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<sup>10</sup> Anita Harris, *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 13-35. See also Marnina Gonick, "Between 'Girl Power' and 'Reviving Ophelia': Constituting the Neoliberal Girl Subject," *NWSA Journal* 18, no. 2 (2006): 1–23.

<sup>11</sup> Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> David Harvey defines neoliberalism as "[the free-market-driven model of governance that] proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade" (2). See also Kim Solga, *Theatre & Feminism* (London: Palgrave, 2015), 8-9.

<sup>13</sup> Harris, *Future Girl*.

<sup>14</sup> Projansky, *Spectacular Girls*, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Projansky, *Spectacular Girls*, 2.

<sup>16</sup> Angela McRobbie, "Top Girls? Young Women and the Post-feminist Sexual Contract." *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 4-5 (2007): 718-37, quoted in Kim Solga, *Theatre & Feminism*, 10-11, emphasis in original.

<sup>17</sup> Projansky, *Spectacular Girls*, 7.

<sup>18</sup> DeLappe does not script race, class, size, ability (beyond soccer ability), or gender-conformity markers into the characters listed in the dramatis personae, but a team of suburban girls playing indoor soccer can be assumed to be relatively affluent and relatively able bodied. While a fully intersectional analysis of the play is beyond the scope of this short chapter, I want to note that the openness of DeLappe's character framing has so far yielded racially diverse casts



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across different productions. For example, the Broadway production included Latinx, Asian, and Caucasian performers; in Toronto the cast was majority Caucasian, yet two of the most thematically different roles—#00, the anxious, driven star goalie; #7, the take-no-guff star striker—were played by Black actors Amaka Umeh and Aisha Evelynna. On Broadway, #7 was played by a Caucasian actor. Colour-conscious casting is one tool directors and creative teams can use to work this script in order to further complicate audience perceptions of girlhood; casting physically powerful and athletically talented fat actors is another.

<sup>19</sup> Anita Harris, *Future Girl*, 13-14.

<sup>20</sup> The “at risk” girl is not often characterized directly as fat, but as Jennifer-Scott Mobley points out, “To be fat is to be aberrant, to be ‘othered,’ and to be stigmatized in America... Fat is the physical manifestation that signals an individual’s unwillingness to live up to the American Dream; it is a semaphore that marks a body as lacking in self-reliance, a failure of free will and self-determination, and it exposes our weakness as a culture.” In this sense, while not all “at risk” girls are fat, all fat girls are likely to be characterized as “at risk” by narratives conforming to convention. See Mobley, *Female Bodies on the American Stage: Enter Fat Actress* (London and Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014), 1-2.

<sup>21</sup> Caryl Churchill, *Top Girls* (1982). *Drama Online*,

<https://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com/plays/top-girls-iid-119470>. Accessed 14 May 2020

References to the play are given in the text by act or scene.

<sup>22</sup> Anita Harris, *Future Girl*, 6.

<sup>23</sup> Carrie Noland, *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 195.

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<sup>24</sup> While a full engagement with Fat Studies is beyond the scope of this short chapter, it is well worth noting that in the many productions of *Top Girls* I have seen live, Dull Gret has frequently been cast with a large actor, and/or costumed to appear fat. The fact that she is a successful warrior (and not a cultural failure) aside, this casting and costuming align with the Anglo-American trope of large or fat women as “man eaters” and “voracious consumers” that Mobley identifies. (Mobley, *Female Bodies on the American Stage*, 63.) Gret is usually depicted eating with relish while the other women talk; she steals bread rolls to uproarious laughter from audiences. Gret is also doubled with Joyce, Marlene’s working-class sister, suggesting a direct alignment between perceptions of size and representations of economic struggle in the play. Similarly, Angie, who is written to be played by an adult woman, is doubled with Act One’s Waitress, a nonspeaking role that represents financial marginalization. Churchill’s achievement in this play is to call attention to these kinds of toxic alignments, but the play offers no direct critique of the fat-phobia that frames neoliberal womanhood (and from which it profits directly in Gret’s comedic scripting). By contrast, the relative freedom DeLappe offers to directors around characterization (see also note 31 below) provides real opportunities to cast against body type and thus further to challenge audience expectations about what a strong and successful girl looks like. See also my note 18 above.

<sup>25</sup> Projansky, *Spectacular Girls*, 127-54.

<sup>26</sup> Allison, “The Sexism Behind the ‘Controversy’ over the U.S. Women’s Soccer Team’s 13 Goals.”

<sup>27</sup> Noland, *Agency and Embodiment*, 170-205.

<sup>28</sup> Noland, *Agency and Embodiment*, 195, first emphasis in original.

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<sup>29</sup> Noland, *Agency and Embodiment*, 195.

<sup>30</sup> DeLappe, *The Wolves*, np.

<sup>31</sup> The characters in *The Wolves* are identified in the script only by their jersey numbers. Some of them are referenced by name in the narrative, but DeLappe gives them wide scope for becoming in the dramatis personae (see also notes 18 and 24 above). For example, #7 is “Striker. Too cool for school. Sarcastic, ‘fuck’, thick eyeliner. Almost seventeen” (np). Importantly, each number is identified by position before any potential character traits are listed. The characters in *The Wolves* are marked as *athletes* first.

<sup>32</sup> DeLappe, *The Wolves*, 74-108.

<sup>33</sup> DeLappe, *The Wolves*, np.

<sup>34</sup> For more on how “upsurges of the real” can affect our perceptions of precarity and uncertainty in neoliberal social relations, see Jenn Stephenson, *Insecurity: Perils and Products of Theatres of the Real* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019).

<sup>35</sup> DeLappe, *The Wolves*, np.

<sup>36</sup> DeLappe, *The Wolves*, np.

<sup>37</sup> DeLappe, *The Wolves*, 164.

<sup>38</sup> DeLappe, *The Wolves*, 86.

<sup>39</sup> DeLappe, *The Wolves*, 86.

<sup>40</sup> DeLappe, *The Wolves*, 88.

<sup>41</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Harvard: Blackwell, 1992).

<sup>42</sup> Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005).

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<sup>43</sup> Laura Levin, *Performing Ground: Space, Camouflage and the Art of Blending In* (London: Palgrave, 2014).

<sup>44</sup> See Kim Solga, *Theory for Theatre Studies: Space* (UK: Bloomsbury, 2019), in particular 31-36, and Levin, *Performing Ground*, 70-2.

<sup>45</sup> DeLappe, *The Wolves*, np.

<sup>46</sup> It is significant that #14 dies as a result of a mundane accident, because scene five ends in a fight between her and #7, who we learn tried to coerce #14 into having sex with a friend of her boyfriend. Though the scenario is classic “at risk girl” and the tension early in scene six seems to prime us for a different kind of tragedy, in the end DeLappe turns the tables on our expectations. There is nothing “spectacular” about #14’s death: she was exercising, it was dark, the driver hadn’t defrosted the windscreen.

<sup>47</sup> DeLappe, *The Wolves*, 168.

<sup>48</sup> DeLappe, *The Wolves*, 170.

<sup>49</sup> DeLappe, *The Wolves*, 171.

<sup>50</sup> DeLappe *The Wolves*, 172.

<sup>51</sup> DeLappe, *The Wolves*, 170.

<sup>52</sup> Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 16.

<sup>53</sup> Butler, *Notes*, 9.

<sup>54</sup> Butler, *Notes*, 16.

<sup>55</sup> Butler, *Notes*, 16.

<sup>56</sup> Butler, *Notes*, 73-77.

<sup>57</sup> Butler, *Notes*, 52.

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<sup>58</sup> Butler, *Notes*, 50.

<sup>59</sup> Butler, *Notes*, 59-60.

<sup>60</sup> DeLappe, *The Wolves*, 174.

<sup>61</sup> See [www.fitisafeministissue.com](http://www.fitisafeministissue.com).