

'Calgary is not a Cowboy Town' - Ideology, the Olympics, and the Politics of Identity

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In *It's How You Play the Game*, Frank King suggests that "no other Olympic host city had ever resisted the departure of the flame so openly."¹ The chairman of the Calgary organizing committee's sentiments remained consistent with the official protocol of vacuous Olympic discourse, devoid of substantive meaning yet powerful and diffuse enough to serve in the reproduction of the event which Juan Antonio Samaranch, in an invocation similar to King's, refers to as a "miracle of friendship."² Predispositions of professional Olympic advocates aside, the fact remains that over 9,000 Calgarians volunteered countless hours of their time over several weeks in preparation for, and the hosting of, the Winter games. Within the context of the polythetic significations of the Olympic 'world', constructed over the past 100 years, the importance of King's remarks, insofar as they concern the large-scale mobilization of Calgarians and the Olympic ideological and physical residue that remains in the city today, bears elaboration.

In the spring of 1993, on its early morning show, local radio station 107KIK FM announced that Lillehammer, Norway had withdrawn from hosting the Winter Olympics of 1994 and that the games had been awarded to Calgary. The announcement, of course, turned out to be an April Fool's joke, which was rather timely nonetheless, given some of the recently publicized problems experienced by Norway organizers. Of interest, however, is the temporary excitement generated in Calgary by this seemingly simple prank, five years after the 1988 games. The Olympic experience obviously had had an impact on Calgary's citizens.

Hiller suggests that the event was unique and should be "destructive" because it was transformed into something with which urban residents felt comfortable and in which they became involved.³ In the social construction of identity through the experi-

ence of hosting the games, not an unmediated and absolute penetration of Olympic ideologies into civic consciousness was at-stake; rather, Calgarians were encouraged by organizers, through various aspects of participation, to identify with particular aspects of the games, thereby aligning them closer with officially produced significations. Although as Hiller argues, the games were transformed into an appealing and festive urban celebration, we disagree with his contention that the elitism of the Olympics was somehow negated in the process.⁴ We would argue, following Bennett⁵, that the specific form of civic training brought to bear through the bidding, preparation, and hosting phases of the games reproduced a different kind of consumer, predisposed, thereafter, to accept a rationality of civic life and urban planning which was in fact constituted through a close alignment of urban boosterism with an elitist Olympic movement.⁶

Consequently, Olympic ideologies came to be accommodated or, perhaps more appropriate, incorporated in practice, through personal and local involvement and affiliation with the games - a saturation of preconstructed experiences - and not because individuals reflected upon the ideologies that were distributed by the IOC through the 'normal' channels of influence. There are few critics of the Olympic movement in Calgary. Indeed, much of the local tourist and sporting infrastructure derives its symbolic value from the Olympic 'legacy' that the organizing committee had undertaken to create. When the bid to host the games was secured in 1981, discursive strategies were immediately focused towards the idea of urban identity, images of modernity, and the financial windfall that could be generated by the Olympic games.

Images of Calgary

In the aptly titled book, *Stampede City*, Chuck Reasons briefly, but critically, discusses the implications of city image construction. Reasons cites a tourism report, presented by Travel Alberta, in which visitors to the city claimed that Calgary was a "poor and superficial imitation of the 'true' cities of the world" - trying to be something that it was not: "sophisticated, urbane and cosmopolitan" and even representing the worst characteristics of Toronto and Dallas.⁷ In *The Urban Prairie*, Melnyk laments the limited penetration of urban images into the tradi-

tional and dominant mythologies of the west⁸, noting that identities are predominantly based on agricultural, 'backwoods' metaphors, or often constructed through historical political tensions with the east. Indeed, the bid representatives traveling to Baden-Baden confidently served up the traditional flapjack breakfast of Calgary's annual Stampede; displayed uniformed members of the royal Canadian Mounted Police, the chief of the Blood tribe and his wife; the Gary Buck Calgary Western band and the Canadian Brass.⁹ Part of the formal bid, however, was predicated on the existence of modern urban facilities, i.e., a demonstrated ability to accommodate large numbers of people, and, less formally, on the images of western hospitality projected as an historical tradition. In the end, when the bid was secured, the construction of a new, modern image of the city of Calgary on a world stage became a convenient metaphor for federal, provincial, and local spending and enthusiasm. On a page of a November 1982 issue of the *Calgary Herald*, an article elaborating on the problems of site selection is juxtaposed with a piece on the high rates of unemployment in the city and the slow down in construction.¹⁰ With soaring figures of office, warehouse, and housing vacancies,¹¹ the time was opportune for local elites to secure and legitimize an influx of government capital, initiate mega construction projects, and to promote the imputed economic gains promised to accrue for the city from hosting the games.

Ever since Edmonton was awarded the status of provincial capital and named the site of the provincial university early in the century, the two cities have engaged in a rivalry in commerce, tourism, and sporting competition. With Edmonton hosting the Commonwealth games in 1978, and later the World University games, the notion of government-funded facilities and improved infrastructures linked to the showcasing of one's city became more a matter of civic prerogative than merely of subsidized economic development. Edmonton, based on the recent successes of its professional sporting teams, claimed the title of 'City of Champions', and erected signs to that effect at all major inter-provincial highways. The awarding of the Winter games to Calgary, of course, provided further grist for the mills of the local boosters.

Calgary's uneasy political and economic relationship with the cities of central Canada was also a

significant factor in the promotional campaign of games organizers. Reasons argues:

If there is one thing uniting nearly all Calgarians, it is an anti-Eastern, anti-federal government ideology. As self-appointed protectors and promoters of free enterprise, Calgarians believe many of the policies and practices of the federal government undermine rugged individualism, free-spirited competition and economic success.¹²

As Bennett argues for Brisbane and Expo '88, a similar construction of city image holds for Calgary: in this sense, the Olympics served as an "instrument that was both to effect and signal its transformation from a provincial backwater into a world city representing the very cutting-edge of modernity."¹³

In resolving the tensions that existed in promoting the traditional features of Stampede hospitality in concert with the spirit of progress and modernity, ostensibly embodied in the global presentation of Olympic rituals and events, organizers adopted discursive strategies that emphasized only the most 'modern' aspects of the festival. Mayor Ralph Klein exclaimed, "This is our chance to tell the world we are a major player in North America"¹⁴ - Calgarians were encouraged to think globally, implicit adducing 'world class' status for the city from the Olympics' global television coverage. King even enlisted the metaphor of 'western backwardness' in the same cause, turning a supposed disadvantage into a marketable asset, when he suggested: "We are a vibrant, modern city eagerly awaiting the opportunity to be introduced to the world ... Our mountains, foothills and sparkling clean air will provide an ideal arena for fair athletic competition."¹⁵ To follow, so the argument implied, was a massive influx of tourism dollars into the city of Calgary and the local ski industry; and a permanent Olympic 'legacy' to be utilized by Calgarians and admired by visitors in the future. In a sense, Calgary was to be vaulted ahead of national time, temporarily, as 'the' place to be, basking in the glow of world attention.¹⁶ Within this context, the reputation of the city and its inhabitants as gracious hosts was invoked immediately; critical concerns about the Olympic movement were never raised and resistance to the event was limited to differences of opinion over site selection and the hiring and firing of personnel.

Codes of Consumption

In establishing the Olympics as a field of cultural production¹⁷ over the past 100 years, members of the IOC have successfully assumed the role of purveyors of the 'bland'. Olympic ideologies, produced and reproduced, altered constantly to fit the shifting political currents created by dominant nations, represent categorical frameworks of "circular ideas."¹⁸ In this field, regulated by the IOC and its massive infrastructure of administrative and intellectual supporters, there is little room for the critical examination of such concepts. Hence, a standardized production of meaning is conducted uncritically through every event and through the tertiary programs operating between festivals. The history of contradictions and current practices, the reproduction of particular ways of seeing, patriarchal hierarchizing, commodification and quantification of human endeavours, legitimation of corporate ideologies, practices, and institutionalized oppression, is reduced to an administrative issue.¹⁹

Resistance to the hosting of the games was limited to a protest organized by the Lubicon Cree Indians of Northern Alberta, against the 'The Spirit Sings' exhibition of Native artifacts at the Glenbow Museum. Responding to an intervention by the band, 29 museums refused to participate in the event that was sponsored by Shell Canada and the federal government. The boycott was organized in response to abusive treatment of the Lubicon by the federal government and the destruction of trap lines by oil companies. Essentially, the Lubicon, accused of attempting to 'spoil Calgary's show', were ignored. Historically, dominant cultural attitudes towards Native peoples in Canada have been and remain consistently oppressive. The names of Calgary streets, shopping malls, and even the site of the downhill skiing events, Nakiska, romanticize and invoke a symbolic connection with Native culture. Crowchild, Deerfoot, and Blackfoot Trails, and Crowfoot Centre, legitimize Native tradition only in name. The outward 'partnership' displayed between the corporate games and Native traditions utilized in ceremonies, insignia, medal designs, and the Native dancers at Baden-Baden served as grim reminders of the weak attempts by Canadians to conceal historical oppressive relations between cultures, a rather hideous past, and a tension-filled present. A

message to portray successful multi-culturalism in Canada was an important subtext of the games.²⁰

Frank King utilized the metaphor of the Olympics as "a priceless gift entrusted to Calgary,"²¹ demonstrating a clear perception of the event as a pre-designed ideology and standard facilities caravan that travels from city to city every four years. Indeed what followed, in the seven years after Calgary was proclaimed host to the XVth Winter games by Samaranch, was an intensive educational program of Olympic discourse directed by the organizing committee toward the media, citizens, volunteers, and children of Calgary and surrounding areas. By the time the games opened in 1988, Calgarians were saturated by 'Olympic' information. Volunteers, in the end totalling approximately 9,400, were provided with codes of conduct and information packages, including a series of self-tests on Olympic-related information. For these people, required to work countless hours, the Olympic experience was preconstructed. They were reminded in their *Volunteer Training Manual* that "Calgary is famous for its hospitality and true western warmth", to "smile and be friendly", that "the time you are on duty, you are 'at work' -please behave accordingly", to be "well groomed and aware of overall appearance" and "to be sensitive towards cultural differences and have a genuine interest in people from diverse cultures." Even the "genuine" was subject to policing.

As is the case with all Olympic festivals, attention was directed through various texts and subtexts toward dominant cultural messages that were encoded in the multi-media presentations of the host city and country. Calgary's corporate-driven economy, oil-boom skyscrapers, and the transnational sponsorship of the games were highly visible aspects of the Olympic production process. Behind the scenes, an analogous corporate mentality and bureaucratic control was enforced by games organizers in the name of efficiency and success through a "screw it, let's get it done" approach.²² Following a brief period of unrest among staff and some employee and volunteer conflicts, a 'pep-talk' was provided to the Calgary games' staff by the corporate-fashioned 1984 Olympics orchestrator, Peter Ueberoth, who suggested that firings and resignations were just part of the process.²³

Yet, some tension or identity crisis, rooted in the contradictions of the corporate order was evident in

the images and ideologies being pitched to Calgarians - particularly in the case of 'educating' the volunteers to develop the appropriate attitude. Further, Reasons' assertions relative to the invocation of free enterprise, rugged individualism, and free-spirited competition are particularly relevant in view of the underlying philosophy organizers expressed in the *Volunteer Training Manual*:

Calgary is a western city, unique in Canada. It was founded by rugged pioneers who valued the warmth and friendliness of humans meeting in the wide and vast expanses of the west. Our city grew, fuelled by industries that thrived on risk and vitality. Today we are a modern city, culturally rich, technologically fruitful, and future oriented. But in our best tradition we still retain the qualities that distinguished the pioneers.²⁴

Perhaps the identity crisis unfolding from the modernizing project of volunteer education, ensuring that the workforce was up to the Olympic task, is best represented in the *Manual's* capsule history of the city that reads: "In spite of its reputation, Calgary is not a cowboy town."²⁵

In attempts to resolve the contradictions posed by the project of modernity, local elites invoked a festival atmosphere, counterposing the rigidity of corporate hierarchy and order. This, of course, remained a stark contrast to the discourse of futuristic vision and technological advance. Klein announced before the games: "Hold onto your stetsons and prepare for a global hangover, Calgary style."²⁶ Although the content was muddled, the message was clear - have fun but behave yourself, the world is watching. As Hiller suggests, an urban festival was created.²⁷ Calgarians flocked to Olympic Plaza nightly, to enjoy the celebratory atmosphere of medal presentations and fireworks. Attendance averaged 35,000 each night. Yet, Hiller's assumptions about the levelling process apparently created by the presence of skijumper Eddy 'the Eagle' Edwards and the Jamaican bobsled team are misplaced. He suggests that the ordinary image projected by these athletes brought them closer to the populace, in an inversion of elitism. Edwards' appearance on the Johnny Carson show, the radio song of the sled team and the t-shirt sales promoting both parties did not encourage social 'levelling'; rather, a different sort of celebrity status was constructed through tertiary

social exchanges that brought, more, public attention to the non-egalitarian values promoted through the Olympic games. Even though the performances of these athletes and their social exchanges outside of competition could not be ignored by the IOC, the boundaries of the pre-constructed Olympic experience were never crossed. Although participation in the production and consumption of Olympic culture may have been satisfying and enjoyable for the average Calgarian, the ideas of glory and Olympic celebrity and connected rewards were only attainable through symbolic affiliations and vicarious consumption.

As Inglis argues, ideologies both "general and vague ... allow groups and classes to find in them what suits them, and makeshift a social identity out of that."²⁸ The boundaries of cultural experience - or opportunities for finding an identity - had been delineated by organizers, federal, provincial, and local politicians, and through the distributed ideologies of the Olympic movement in the years leading up to the games. Similar to what Bennett suggests for Expo '88 and the people of Brisbane, citizens of Calgary were "rehearsing new consumption codes in a custom-built environment."²⁹ Citizens and volunteers had to be educated - they had to be modernized.

Calgarians became active consumers of the Olympic experience that they helped to produce. Formal education was not limited to volunteers, however; a massive campaign directed toward schools was initiated prior to the games. Olympic Education Resource Kits providing information about Olympic values and events were distributed to 13,500 elementary schools across the country. Children were encouraged to be knowledgeable about all events related to the Olympics, to be excited about the games, and to participate in various Olympic-related projects. Almost a half-million Alberta students were involved in these curriculum activities. A similar sort of information distribution was conducted for Expo '86 in the schools of British Columbia, what Ley and Olds refer to as attempts to "rivet public consciousness."³⁰

Post-Olympic Residue

The legacy promised by the organizing committee - facilities, civic and national pride, and general Olympic hype - was delivered. While Reasons cor-

rectly anticipated the value of the legacy to the average Calgarian, he did not foresee the ideological remnants that had been constructed during and after the games and would be continuously reproduced by professional Olympic facility support staff and volunteer Olympic enthusiasts in the city. The Olympic facilities have become a significant part of the urban landscape and the tourist programs in Calgary. The Olympic experience is constantly invoked in support of locally held national and international events, competitions, and funded by the large trust accounts left from the profits collected in 1988. Olympic symbols are highly visible around the city on such places as the transit system, Olympic Plaza, Canada Olympic Park, and the University of Calgary. Further, the Olympic Hall of Fame and Museum, funded through a private donation, recently held public events to create enthusiasm in conjunction with the 1994 Winter games. The University of Calgary, similar to the tourism programs of the city, utilizes the Olympic image and the idea of world class facilities to market itself to prospective students and to legitimize its position within the community. The symbolic ties to the Olympic movement are unavoidable when civic or local image is in question or particularly when urban landscape utilization is concerned.

The residual outgrowth of these deep ideological inscriptions is particularly evident in the collective imagination of the city, where matters of the Calgary Olympic experience or current issues of the games are concerned. Analogous to the IOC's strategies regulating access to information, Calgary's archival records are, for the most part, organized and administered by professionals with some alignment to the interests of the games. Tourism, urban boosterism and civic image, citizens' personal experiences with the games, and Calgary's position relative to the rest of the nation are closely linked to the hosting of the games in 1988.

Records are split between the city of Calgary Olympic Archives, Olympic Museum, and University of Calgary libraries. Close ideological alignments of officials, staff personnel, and volunteers to the Calgary games, make any sort of critical analysis or scholarship a rather difficult project.

In the post-games period, it is evident that citizens were indeed educated for a pre-arranged future, where participation in various aspects of Olympic consumption could be directly linked to personal

experiences and memories of 1988. In this sense, opportunities were provided on a grand scale for citizens to grasp some aspect of identity from the preconstructed ideologies that were widely distributed before, during, and after the games. More significant and permanent, however, is the position these ideologies have assumed in the process of construction of individual identity, producing a new form of cultural capital which was then transformed into a stake in the game of establishing dominant civic significations. It would not have mattered if Calgary had been a cowboy town.

Notes

1. F.W. King, *It's How You Play the Game: The Inside Story of the Calgary Olympics*, Calgary: Script: The Writers' Group, 1991, p. 2.
2. *Olympic Review*, March, 1988, p. 84.
3. H. Hiller, "The Urban Transformation of a Landmark Event: The Calgary Winter Olympics", *Urban Affairs Quarterly*, 16, 1, Sept 1990, p. 132.
4. *Ibid.*, pp 128-129.
5. T. Bennett, "The Shaping of Things to Come: Expo '88", *Cultural Studies*, 5(2), 1991, p.51-78.
6. Not surprisingly, this modernizing project was facilitated through corporate 'partnerships' - promoting political and economic enterprises through the alignment of national and transnational corporations with international sport festivals.
7. C. Reasons, ed., *Stampede City: Power and Politics in the West*, Toronto: Between the Lines, 1984, p.10.
8. D. Ring, ed., *The Urban Prairie*, Saskatoon: Mendel Art Gallery and Fifth House Publishers, 1993, p. 136.
9. King *op.cit.*, p.85.
10. *Calgary Herald*, Nov 11, 1982.
11. *Alberta Report*, 11, (36), Aug 27, 1984.
12. Reasons, *op.cit.* p. 13.
13. Bennett, *op.cit.*, p. 61. For further discussions of this point, see K.B. Wamsley and David Whitson, "Representations of Competitiveness: International Sport Festivals and Expositions in the Production of National Identity", paper presented to NASSH, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1993.
14. *Maclean's*, 101 (8), Feb. 15, 1988.
15. *Olympic Review*, No. 243-244, 1988, p.9.
16. From Bennett, *op.cit.* p.69.

17 P. Bordieu, *The Field of Cultural Production. Essay on Art and Literature*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

18. On this see, F. Inglis, *Popular Culture and Political Power*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1988, pp.123-126.

19. On these critical issues, see A. Tomlinson and G. Whannel, *Five Ring Circus; Money, Power and Politics at the Olympic Games*, London and Sydney: Pluto Press, 1984, and J. Hoberman, *The Olympic Crisis: Sport, Politics and the Moral Order*, New York: Caratzas, 1986.

20. See C. F. Feest, "Glenbow Incident: The Spirit Sinks", *European Review of Native American Studies*, 1, 1987, pp.61-63, M. Myers, "Glenbow Affair", *Inuit Art Quarterly*, 3, Winter, 1988, pp.12-16, and the coverage of the boycott in *Windspeaker*. For an analysis of the importance of Olympic significations for the field of Native sports in northern Canada, see Michael Heine, "Cognitive Dichotomies: 'Games',

'Sports', and Dene Cultural Identity", *Communication & Cognition*, 3 (1994), pp.78-96.

21. King op.cit., p. 106.

22. Bill Pratt, president of the organizing committee, also quoted as being known for his tolerance of "bullshit and wimps", *ALberta Report*, 15(9), Feb. 15, 1988. Numerous staff and volunteers were 'let go' after having expressed "philosophical differences' with Pratt.

23. *Alberta Report*, 14(48), Nov. 16, 1987.

24. op.cit., p. 21.

25. *Ibid.*, p.2.

26. *Calgary Herald*, Sat. Feb. 6, 1988.

27. op.cit.

28. op.cit. p. 108.

29. op.cit. p.68.

30. D.Ley and K. Olds, "Landscape as Spectacle: World's Fairs and the Culture of Heroic Consumption", *Society and Space*, 1988, 6, p.202.