

'Don't Mess With the Relay - It's Bad Medicine' Aboriginal Culture and the 1988 Winter Olympics

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Introduction

In the Olympic stadium, brilliantly coloured streamers symbolically representing a Native teepee; feathered headdresses and beaded garments in the opening ceremonies; an expansive exhibit of Native artifacts borrowed from around the world -- these were prominent features of aboriginal involvement in the 1988 Winter Olympics in Calgary. The connection between Canadian aboriginal cultures and the culture of the Olympics was neither easily made nor readily discerned, yet it was the unifying intent of a pervasive Olympic ideology based on the *topos* of 'peace, unity and the family of nations' -- and its local rendering, "Come together in Calgary"-- that required the practical integration of aboriginal culture into the Olympic festival's stated frame of relevance. At issue are the forms of Native involvement in the Olympics, delineated within this frame of relevance, as often as not, by the organizers rather than by Native people themselves.

Images of the West

Initially, the organizers sought to capitalize on the international recognition achieved by the Calgary Stampede, employing that event's dominant theme of 'Western hospitality'. Calgary's bid, the Olympic event itself, and many tertiary events occasioned by the Olympics, made continual reference to 'Western hospitality' and 'Western heritage'. For example, as part of the effort to secure the Olympic bid for Calgary, flapjack breakfasts, mounted police, Native dancers, and cowboy hats made an appearance in the staid southern German town of Baden-Baden, where the IOC's final decision was announced.¹ The hosting of the Games in Calgary involved a larger-scale and more elaborate production of these themes.² The specifically 'Western' character of Calgary's hospitality was

expressed through continual reference to those archetypal inhabitants of the west, the Mountie and the cowboy, and their symbolic complement, Indian people. It was within this normalized understanding of the West that Canadian, and more specifically, Albertan Native cultures found themselves positioned.

The common-sensical appeal of these peculiar coordinates of Western heritage induced the Calgary Stampede Board to suggest that an 'Indian attack and wagon-burning' should be included as a part of the opening ceremonies.³ The denigration of Aboriginal culture implied by such ignorance met with general criticism. Organizing committee president Bill Pratt had at an earlier point taken a more defensive position while attempting to attract the interest of Native leaders with more material arguments, advising them that they should expect to be a major tourist attraction during the Games.⁴ Thus, the attraction of Native culture in respect of the touristic excitement created by the Olympic games was to be actualized by connecting that culture to yet another institution of the West that would appeal to the stereotypical understanding tourists and visitors might have of the area, viz., the rodeo. In view of the considerable popularity of rodeos among Native people, this was not an incongruous connexion. Yet the discourses and scripts detailing the modes of Native involvement were written *for* Native people rather than *by* them.

Positioned in this manner as a generalized complementary signifier expressing this stereotypical understanding of the West, Native culture also found entry into the structures of signification of the Olympic athletic competitions, at the point of most conspicuous valorization. The Olympic medals themselves display a ceremonial Indian headdress composed not of eagle feathers, but of stylized representations of winter sporting equipment: Downhill skis, ski poles, sleighs and toboggans protrude from a headband worn by an Indian chief depicted in stem profile. Greg Smith of the Peigan tribe, for one, argued that the medal design, while purporting to "show the international community that Indians [were] a part of the games,"⁵ was in fact a deliberate attempt to distract attention from the Native resistance to the Games.

The Glenbow Exhibition: *The Spirit Sings*

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Indeed, a sustained act of resistance to the Calgary Olympics was mounted by the Lubicon Cree and their chief, Bernard Ominayak, whose home territory is located some five hundred miles north of Calgary. Ominayak had called for a boycott of the Olympics as early as 1986, arguing that “[t]hose who support the games are supporting the genocidal politics of the Alberta government and their oil company allies”⁶ -- politics which, he claimed had brought about the desperate social and economic state of the Lubicon Lake band. The refusal of the federal government to recognize the Lubicon’s inherent rights through a land claims settlement agreement and a reserve, had left them powerless to stop the destruction of their traditional hunting and subsistence economy by oil companies which drilled more than 400 oil wells within a 15 mile radius of their community.⁷ The Lubicon and Ominayak had no objection to the athletic aspects of the Games per se; rather, their opposition was motivated by the involvement in the Olympics of a small group of wealthy and powerful interests in Alberta, in particular the oil companies which, Ominayak contended, “were trying to wipe us out.”⁸

In targeting the Olympics in general, the Lubicon took aim at the oil companies’ sponsorship of various aspects of the Games. The appeals for a boycott of the Olympics and the threat to organize blockades of the torch relay across the country received considerable public attention and press. The main protest efforts, however, were directed at an exhibition of Native artifacts borrowed from museums around the world. Entitled, *The Spirit Sings*, the exhibition at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary was sponsored by the oil company, Shell Canada, which referred to its financial contributions as part of “Shell’s ongoing partnership with the people of Canada.”⁹ Observing Shell’s sponsorship and involvement, Ominayak noted: The “irony of using a display of North American Indian artifacts to attract people to the Winter Olympics being organized by interests who are still actively seeking to destroy Indian people seems painfully obvious.”¹⁰ He added that it was hypocritical for the Glenbow to suggest that it was celebrating the “richness and continuity of Canada’s native cultural traditions” when it was well possible that under present conditions the Lubicon would not survive as a people.¹¹

The Lubicon began an international campaign in which

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they encouraged museums to refuse transfer of their artifacts to the exhibition. They secured support for the boycott from museums from around the world, as well as from European organizations who, pointing to the plight of the Lubicon, called into question Canada’s reputation in the area of human rights.¹² European support groups funded a two week tour for Ominayak and associates during which they attempted to obtain support for the museum boycott. Demonstrations were staged at Canadian embassies throughout Europe. The director of the Glenbow museum, Duncan Cameron, suggested to European museums that any support of the Lubicon boycott would be tantamount to an interference in Canadian domestic affairs; he argued that the Glenbow, by contrast, was “doing something that is very much in the interests of our native peoples, creating a heightened awareness of their rich cultural traditions.”¹³ Diplomatic pressure was brought to bear through Canadian embassies in Europe to undermine the boycott,¹⁴ while letters from the Glenbow to various museums falsely claimed to have reached an agreement with the Lubicon.¹⁵ In addition, the Glenbow compiled and distributed internationally a history of the Lubicon and their land claims which contained significant inaccuracies. It appeared as if the Glenbow was waging its own campaign to discredit the Lubicon.¹⁶ Anthropologist Joan Ryan resigned from the Glenbow program committee, greatly troubled by Campbell’s efforts to pressure foreign museums through diplomatic channels while at the same time ignoring the attempts by Native groups to involve themselves in the representation of their heritage that was in the making at the Glenbow.¹⁷ She later pointed out:

There has been pressure on the OCO from Indian bands since 1985. These groups have attempted to establish a significant role for themselves in the Olympics in which they could plan their own presentations. Instead organizers ignored them, hoping when time ran out that Indian presentations could fit the stereotyped expectations of the world: feathers, beads and dances - and possibly wagon burning.¹⁸

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A total of 29 museums refused to send artifacts to the exhibition, but the Lubicon's efforts would ultimately fail. *The Spirit Sings* attracted record crowds of more than 127,000 to the Glenbow.¹⁹ It was by far the best attended exhibition ever mounted by that institution.

Incorporation

When the boycott began to attract greater attention in Europe, federal government officials met with members of OCO'88 in attempts to divert attention away from the Lubicon's activities. Memos revealed that strategies discussed were to focus on "delink[ing] the Games from any Native land claims issues."²⁰ In addition, the incorporation of Native peoples into the Olympic proceedings was to be effected by means of a Native Involvement Program that was designed to "continue to try to gain some native friends -- specifically the Treaty 7 peoples" (to which the Lubicon are not a party).²¹ Federal Olympic coordinator Gerald Berger noted that these strategies served to keep the Olympic organizing committee, as he phrased it, "non-political."²² (We will return presently to a consideration of the strategic usages of the signifier, 'political', in these confrontations.) Six months later, in April of 1987, OCO'88 unveiled a Native Participation Program, which provided funding for, among other events, a Native trade show, a Native youth conference, and pow wow competitions.²³ Sykes Powderface, the Native liaison coordinator hired by the Treaty 7 bands to manage the funds, viewed the program positively as "a forum for our people on an international stage."²⁴ The Lubicon, by contrast, were more inclined to assume that the government was "throwing some money around to try and buy native support."²⁵ The program was structured to channel Native involvement into less controversial areas, and it was explicitly designed to counter the international publicity generated by the boycott of *The Spirit Sings*. If it hadn't been for the Lubicon's activities, Ominayak argued, the OCO would never have focussed its attention on the Native Involvement Program, in the first place.²⁶

'Share The Blame': The Torch Relay

Controversy was also generated by the attempts of the

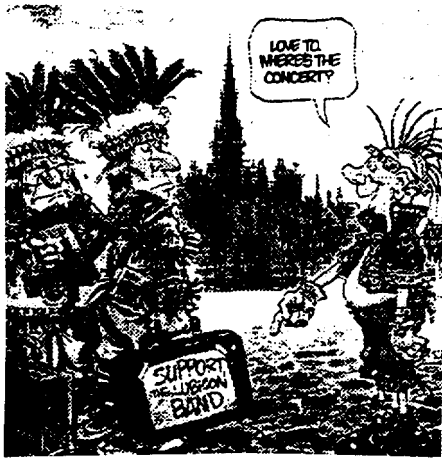
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Lubicon and other bands to protest the relay of the Olympic torch as it was making its way across Canada. This protest was intended as an extension of the activities directed at *The Spirit Sings*. The call to protest the torch relay met with mixed responses. Singer Winston Wuttunee, for example, refused to sing, O Canada, in a Native language in support of the boycott.²⁷ 500 members of the Peigan welcomed the flame with a camp of teepees and a program of traditional dances.²⁸ Treaty 7 Bands were involved with many aspects of the Games, even though they sympathized with the Lubicon's position; representative Sykes Powderface stated that they wished to keep politics separated from culture.²⁹ By contrast, the Assembly of First Nations, the World Congress of Indigenous Peoples, the National Congress of American Indians, Indian Association of Alberta, Metis Association of Alberta, and the Grand Council of the Cree in Quebec endorsed the boycott.³⁰ The torch relay was protested in Kahnawake, Quebec; Toronto; Edmonton; Lethbridge; and Calgary.³¹ 200 protested the arrival of the torch in Calgary and were pelted with snowballs, as the crowd attempted to tear the placards out of their hands. Matthew Coon-Come, grand chief of the Quebec Cree commented: "I say we should share the flame, we should share the blame, we should share the shame."³²

During the week that the Olympic torch left Greece, the Mayor of Calgary, Ralph Klein, embarked on a goodwill-tour of Europe in order to counter the publicity generated by the Lubicon and their supporters.³³ The *Calgary Herald* neutralized the underlying political issue, editorializing that the purpose of Klein's trip was to "keep our city's honour from being dragged over the cobblestones."³⁴ It remained unexplained how Klein's chivalrous campaign would contribute to the solution of a problem which, when cast in terms of 'honour' and 'dishonour', did not exist in reality. By implication, the phrase simply defined the problem away. A cartoon which made reference to the events in Europe, followed a similar approach. A group of Lubicon representatives is greeted with the full force of European ignorance, the representatives being mistaken for members of a rock band. A camera and assorted travel paraphernalia carried by the Lubicon betray the disingenuousness of what is implied to be the ultimately touristic motive for their journey. The

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encounter of unwashed European ignorance with Indian dishonesty sweeps the underlying political issue under the cobblestones.³⁵



A similar cartoon depicts a group of Natives who man a barricade in an attempt to hinder the progress of the torch relay. The Native protesters literally get burned by the stupidity of their "bright idea," viz., their attempt to deter the progress of something as forceful as the Olympic symbolism of good-will being carried across Canada.³⁶ The cartoonist, Vance Rodenwalt, responded to criticism levelled at the cartoon by Native groups, by stating, "I don't believe that being a minority, even a suppressed minority, gives that minority the license to disregard the law and become a major pain in the butt."³⁷

Boundaries of the Political: "Unrelated Targets"

This observation brings us to the main issue underlying this episode, the discursive delimitation of the 'proper' politics in the context of the 1988 Olympics. When the Lubicon's attempts to organize the torch relay boycott became known, the ensuing criticism was swift and severe. Calgary city police and the RCMP expressed fear of a violent backlash by Calgarians against the Lubicon or their supporters.³⁸ The chief of security for the 1984 L.A. Games suggested that the boycott represented a security risk of the same magnitude as that posed by the Palestinian attack on the 1972 Olympics.³⁹ *The Calgary Herald*

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editorialized: "The Lubicons deserve a reserve - but if they persist with their publicity blitz against the Olympics or other unrelated targets, they will be deserving of little respect."⁴⁰ Adding insult to historical injury, Charles Frank wrote that the Torch Relay was the wrong target:

A blockade of the Olympic torch route would give new meaning to the words Lubicon and native people - and it wouldn't be anything you or your people would be proud of, chief . . . so chief, if you want my two bits' worth, don't mess with the relay. It's bad medicine.⁴¹

The argument that the Olympics are an emphatically unpolitical event is of course well-rehearsed. The publicized discourse of the 1988 Winter Olympics employed it to censure the Lubicon's political actions on grounds of incorrect identification of target, thereby precluding any evaluation of the political act's merit itself. It was the Lubicon alone, so the criticism implied, who attempted to politicize the Olympic festival. The advocates for Games and cultural programs appropriated the discursive power not only to strategically incorporate Native symbols for the purposes of the Games, but also to minimize the impact of resistance to the structures of significations produced by such incorporation. The politics implied by an exhibition representing a historical unity of aboriginal cultures at the expense of noting their current problems were never objectified as such. Likewise, Shell's sponsorship of *The Spirit Sings*, and PetroCan's lucrative involvement in the torch relay, were never addressed as political issues. Public discourse derived a considerable part of its politically signifying force from what remained unsaid.

The Lubicon and other aboriginal groups showed themselves to be well aware of this state of affairs. For them, what constituted the connexion linking Shell and PetroCan to the Olympics qua sponsorship, as a political link, and thus demonstrably linked their own cultures to the festival on the political level, was their position as the victims of Olympic sponsors. It was, so they argued, through no design of their's that politics had come into play. An editorial in the aboriginal newspaper, *windspeaker*, retrospectively

suggested that the discursive injunction on political activity in effect during the Olympics could be circumvented by making the politics of Aboriginal marginalization itself the focus of a cultural exhibition. As an exhibition, the event would be part of the cultural and artistic events, and thus not raise politically divisive issues:

The *Spirit Sings* is a rip-off and an insult to Native people. At best, the exhibit is a sad reminder of the fact that much of our cultural heritage has been stolen, borrowed, transferred, lost, or given away. At worst, the exhibit is a galling reminder of Canada's treatment of Native people - a history marked by thievery and oppression. . . . *The Spirit Sings* deflects public attention away from contemporary Native people and contemporary Native problems. The appropriate response, therefore, would be to give the public a chance to see what a small slice of urban Native life is really like. *The Spirit Sings*, this exhibition of irrelevant beauty, needs to be balanced by a companion exhibit that would showcase the ugly and mundane reality of Native life. A counter-exhibit would be exceedingly simple - a group of Native people would just have to 'live' for some period of time in the goldfish bowl of a vacant downtown storefront. Passersby would see native school children doing homework, Native teenagers hanging out, Native adults watching TV, Native grandmothers knitting. A fitting slogan for the counter-exhibit would be The C.A.T.N.I.P. Stinks (C.A.T.N.I.P. - Canadian Attitude Toward Native Indian People) . . . *The Spirit Sings* is an object of beauty. It's a beautiful garment made of beads and buckskin, fur and feathers - a garment that Old Lady Canada put

on to welcome the world to the Calgary Olympics. Now that the party is over, maybe it's time we helped the Old Lady see the festering sore on her face.⁴²

Endnotes

1. See *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Oct. 1, 1981.
2. On the theme of western hospitality and the Calgary Olympics, see K.B. Wamsley and Mike Heinem "Tradition, Modernity, and the Construction of Civic Identity: The Calgary Olympics," *Olympika*, Vol. V, 1996, (in press).
3. *Calgary Herald*, Feb. 3, 1987.
4. *Calgary Herald*, Feb 11, 1985.
5. *Alberta Report*, 14(36), Aug. 24, 1987, p. 36.
6. *Calgary Herald*, Apr. 6, 1986.
7. Marybelle Myers, "The Glenbow Affair", *Innuit Art Quarterly*, Winter 1988, p. 12.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
9. *Alberta Report*, 10(6) Feb. 1989, p. 4.
10. *Calgary Herald*, May 17, 1986.
11. Myers, Op.Cit., p. 13.
12. *Calgary Herald*, June 18, 1986.
13. *Calgary Herald*, Sept. 15, 1986.
14. *Calgary Herald*, Nov. 21, 1986.
15. *Calgary Herald*, Nov. 15, 1986.
16. Myers, Op.Cit., p. 14.
17. *Calgary Herald*, Nov. 15, 1986.
18. *Calgary Herald* Mar. 13, 1987.
19. *Calgary Herald*, Nov. 2, 1988.
20. *Calgary Herald*, June 1, 1987.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Calgary Herald*, Apr. 4, 1987.
24. *Calgary Herald*, Apr. 25, 1987.
25. *Calgary Herald*, Apr. 25, 1987.
26. *Calgary Herald*, June 1, 1987.
27. *Calgary Herald*, Mar. 18, 1987.
28. *Calgary Herald*, Feb. 5, 1988.
29. *Windspeaker*, Apr. 4, 1987.
30. *Calgary Herald*, Nov. 15, 1986.
31. See *Montreal Gazette*, Dec. 12, 1987; *Windspeaker*, Feb. 12 and Feb. 19, 1988.
32. *Calgary Herald*, Jan. 15, 1988.
33. *Calgary Herald*, Nov. 14, 1987.
34. *Calgary Herald* Nov. 21, 1987.
35. *Calgary Herald*, Nov. 9, 1986.

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36. *Calgary Herald*, Mar. 15, 1987.
37. *Calgary Herald*, May 1, 1987.
38. *Calgary Herald*, Nov. 4, 1987.
39. *Calgary Herald*, Sept. 27, 1987.
40. *Calgary Herald*, July 28, 1987.
41. *Calgary Herald*, Mar. 18, 1987.
42. *Windspeaker*, Oct. 7, 1988, p. 5.