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Venus, Thor, Athena: The Intercultural Olympiada at Fort Smith Northwest Territories, 1969-1972

From 1969 to 1972, an annual cultural and athletic gathering referred to by organizers as Olympiada was staged at the regional high school in Fort Smith in the Canadian Northwest Territories. The organizers intended to develop this multi-day festival as a counterpoint to inter-school athletic meets, which generally focused on superior athletic performance by a limited number of participants, at the cost of relegating the majority of students to the sidelines.

Olympiada was placed in opposition to interscholastic athletic meets in respect of its broad range of activities, and, more importantly, in respect of the complex system of significations developed by organizers to provide coherence to such disparate sets of activities. These significations were anchored around topoi taken from Greek, Roman, and Scandinavian mythology. Poems written by high school students elaborated on the significance of these topoi for the event, expressing the values Olympiada was understood to express.

The activities at Olympiada, ranging from “choral singing” and Bridge to “oratory,” “debate” and calisthenics, contained references to aboriginal traditions and games in the festival’s cultural and athletic segments of events that included “Indian folklore” as well as “Eskimo games.” In the context of the educational system of the time that had largely excised references to aboriginal culture, this inclusion constituted an important break with existing precedent. Olympiada was one of the few public

events of the time to provide a public, albeit peripheral, stage for the expression of aboriginal culture.

Yet while Olympiada provided a stage for the reproduction of aboriginal tradition forms, these forms found themselves in immediate representational competition with extraneous forms of expression such as calisthenics, oratory, or bridge. all in turn, intended to express the festival's dominant themes based in European mythology. This paper examines the position of aboriginal forms of cultural expression within the context of Olympiada, and many-layered system of significations produced at this festival. Although the mode presentation of aboriginal culture was ultimately determined by elements of signification extraneous to that culture itself, Olympiada provided a temporary stage for the rediscovery and public display of aboriginal culture at a time when references to aboriginal culture were largely absent from the curriculum of schools in the Northwest Territories.
