
Teepees and Tomahawks:

Aboriginal Cultural Representation at the 1976 Olympic Games

Janice Forsyth*

Noted Aboriginal scholar Philip Deloria has observed the paradox of being an Indian in the twentieth century, writing, "if Indians change, their culture is considered contaminated and they lose their "Indianess." If they do not change, they remain Indians, but are refused a real existence in the modern world."¹ In this passage, Deloria was commenting on how 'white' ideas about 'the Indian' have severely limited the ability of Aboriginal peoples to gain acceptance and respect in a rapidly changing modern world. Deloria and other scholars have repeatedly pointed out that what is often overlooked or ignored is how Aboriginal peoples have creatively adapted to these cultural confines, finding new ways to express themselves through their cultures, while at the same time, trying to encourage non-Aboriginal peoples to develop a more rounded and complex understanding of what it means to be Aboriginal in a modern world.² This paper examines such a struggle.

The story revolves around two interrelated events. One narrative revolves around the construction of Aboriginal images for the Closing Ceremony of the 1976 Olympic Games in Montreal, Quebec. For the performance, which was promoted as a tribute to the Aboriginal peoples of Canada, Olympic officials invited local First Nations to take part in a display that was constructed for them by non-Aboriginal artists. Despite the complete lack of Aboriginal involvement in the organizational process, approximately 200 Aboriginal peoples from nine different First Nations participated in the celebration, having consented to share center stage with approximately 250 non-Aboriginal people dressed and painted to look like Indians.

The other narrative turns on the construction of Aboriginal images by the Mohawks of Kahnawake for their 'Indian Days' celebration, a 17-day cultural display planned to coincide with the Olympic Games.³ For Indian Days, Mohawk organizers hoped to attract Olympic spectators to their community, located about 40km southwest of Montreal, to experience Aboriginal life and culture as lived by the Mohawks in that region and to sell locally made arts and crafts to tourists.

The present paper analyzes Aboriginal images from the 1976 Closing Ceremony and Indian Days celebration and discusses how the images designed by Olympic officials for the Closing Ceremony, and by the Mohawks of Kahnawake for Indian Days, were constructed to serve diverse ends and interests. While the Olympics organizers drew on their own, white understanding of 'the Indian' to sell a particular vision of Canada and the Olympic Games, the Mohawks of Kahnawake constructed their own symbols to show the richness and diversity of Aboriginal lives in Canada. Despite the different aims and objectives, what was promoted in each arena and advertised through the press resulted in the same stereotypical understanding.

Images from 1976: Olympic Celebrations

For the 1976 Olympic Games, festival organizers utilized the platform of the Closing Ceremony to promote particular nationalist and Olympic ideologies.⁴ To do this, organizers chose an Aboriginal theme. Their intent was to depict Canada as a multicultural country, one that respected its Indigenous populations.⁵ In addition, organizers aimed to distinguish the Olympic Games from other major international sport competitions by portraying the event as a humanizing force, capable of bringing diverse groups of peoples and cultures together in peace, harmony, and friendship.⁶ In order to convey the ideas of multiculturalism and oneness, Olympic organizers appropriated a multitude of popular Aboriginal images and arranged them in a vivid and dramatic display, complete with teepees, tom-toms, feathered headdresses, flags, and buckskin outfits – all color-coordinated to match the five colors of the Olympic rings. For the final performance, the Aboriginal performers marched in arrowhead formation as they entered and paraded around the track, erected five massive teepees in the center of the stadium, dispensed feathered headbands and beaded

* Janice Forsyth is a doctoral student at The University of Western Ontario in London, Canada.

necklaces to the athletes and spectators, danced and played the drums – all to the tune of the *La Danse Sauvage*.⁷

Although Olympics organizers stated publicly that the Closing Ceremony was being held to honor Canada's Aboriginal peoples, the organizers did not consult with the populations who they professed to respect in the construction of the program. From start to finish, the celebration was designed by Olympic organizers for Aboriginal peoples. To prepare for the show, the Aboriginal participants were bused in for one all-night practice. It was explained to them that funding for the ceremony was extremely limited and that the organizing committee could not afford to transport them to and from their communities for regular practices.⁸ Since the Aboriginal participants would not know how to move through their own ceremony, the organizing committee hired a professional Montreal dance troupe to train and practice for the show.⁹ In the end, non-Aboriginal performers dressed and painted to look like 'Indians' led the Aboriginal participants through their own commemoration.

On the following morning, newspaper reports in Montreal and Ottawa suggested that the Olympic organizers had achieved their goals, heralding the celebrations as a tremendous success. The *Montreal Star* characterized the evening gala as a "display of breathless joy."¹⁰ Similar praise came from the *The Gazette*, where the event was recorded as a "simply delightful spirit of happy song and dance."¹¹ In Ottawa, *The Citizen* described the show as a "dazzling celebration of unity" and "innocent exuberance" that was perhaps unmatched in Olympic history.¹²

Given that these images were culturally demeaning and fraught with serious ideological implications, why would Aboriginal peoples participate in the Closing Ceremony? In the case of the Mohawks of Kahnawake, some residents understood their participation in the Closing Ceremony as part their cultural identities, one that spoke to their involvement as 'show Indians' in the entertainment industry. Indeed, the Mohawks of Kahnawake had a long and proud tradition as Aboriginal performers in various Wild West shows, movies, world fairs and exhibitions, and sport tours.¹³ Their last major performance was at Expo '67 in Montreal, Quebec, where Jean Drapeau, then mayor of Montreal, was so pleased with their presentation at Expo that he had agreed to call on them for future public performances. The Closing Ceremony thus provided Mohawk participants with a meaningful opportunity to connect with a part of their heritage.

Some Mohawks viewed the Closing Ceremony as a means to promote and strengthen the presence of an emerging pan-Indian identity in Canada. This was an important element for the Mohawks, who had sustained a particularly harsh blow in 1955 when the federal government began appropriating large parts of their reserve to develop the St. Lawrence Seaway.¹⁴ Although radical factions had been trying to politicize and restore a sense of Mohawk cultural identity based on traditional values and ideals, the government's unilateral decision to take away a sizeable portion of their land left many residents with a profound sense of alienation and despair. Thus, Mohawk participation was a symbolic show of a much larger movement of Aboriginal cultural persistence in Canada.

Still others saw the Ceremony as a unique diversion from their everyday lives. Here was an opportunity to take part in a massive celebration that would be broadcast worldwide and a rare chance to meet some of the best athletes in the world. So it was, when the Olympic Games came to Montreal, the Mohawks of Kahnawake welcomed the opportunity to participate in the show.

Images from 1976: Indian Days Celebrations

But at the same time the Mohawks were attempting to work within the limits of Canadian understandings of Indians and Indianness, they sought to overcome them by utilizing the audience and mass media at the Games to forward their own images and ideas about who they were as contemporary Aboriginal peoples through their Indian Days celebration.

Originally, organizers for Indian Days requested that the project be incorporated into the Olympic Arts and Culture Program for the 1976 Games. The proposal, written by the Indians of Quebec Association, included 150 Aboriginal performers and exhibits from different regions throughout Canada. At first, the proposal was rejected on the basis that the Olympic organizing committee feared "a feather show," referring to the possibility of Indian demonstrations.¹⁵ Organizers were concerned that Aboriginal peoples would utilize the public forum to make explicit statements about *their* social, political, and economic situations. However, when George Hill, national coordinator for Canadian Indian participation in the 1976 Games, approached the Olympic organizing committee with a mandate from the National Indian Brotherhood, the national political body representing First Nations throughout Canada, to organize Indian participation in the program, he was told by Olympic organizers that it was not "official" since the Olympic organizing committee itself had not commissioned him.¹⁶ Olympic officials later denied the Indian proposal on the basis that it was too expensive to fund.¹⁷ The estimated cost for the proposal was \$220,000. The message from Olympic organizers was clear – Aboriginal participation would be generated and controlled directly by the Olympic organizing committee.

Frustrated with the hassles of trying to officially belong to the Olympic program, the Mohawks of Kahnawake decided to host the Indian Days celebration in their own community and invited the general public at the Olympic Games to their reserve to see and experience how Mohawks 'really lived' in Canada.¹⁸ Kahnawake residents generally welcomed the opportunity to challenge the dominant stereotypes that visitors had brought with them to the Montreal Games. One Mohawk woman highlighted the fascination many visitors had with Indians, noting, "One of the first things many Europeans ask when they arrive here for the Olympics is

'Where are the Indians?'"¹⁹ Thus, Indian Days was arranged primarily for the benefit of tourists whose perceptions of Aboriginal peoples were shaped largely by Hollywood movies, memories of Wild West Shows, world fairs, exhibitions, museums, and popular novels rather than from any personal experiences.

At Indian Days, Kahnawake residents sold locally made crafts, including necklaces, medallions, bracelets, and watchbands. As well, they set up displays and conducted interactive cultural activities to encourage greater understanding of Mohawk lives and culture. They also hoped to raise enough money from their sales to fund the construction of a new wing to the local hospital. The cost for the new wing was estimated at \$250,000.²⁰

However, Kahnawake residents were upset with the overall turnout at Indian Days, receiving nowhere near the 125,000 visitors they expected. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal comments in the national press demonstrate the racial tensions that surfaced during the Games. Some residents blamed the disappointing turnout on the lack of media attention; others blamed the "Whites" for not sending family, friends, and tourists to Kahnawake.²¹ The reporter blamed the Indians generally for the lack of hospitality they typically showed to "Whites," writing, "In a way Montrealers can't be blamed for staying away. Whites who drive through reserves just to look at Indians usually are not welcome. There also is a \$50 fine for trespassing."²² By objectifying the Indians as something 'to look at,' the reporter reinforced and legitimized the colonial tourist version of seeing and interacting with Aboriginal peoples. In doing so, the reporter eliminated other explanations for the lack of public interest in Indian Days and placed the blame squarely on the Mohawks of Kahnawake for not being more hospitable to the stares of non-Aboriginal observers.

During the course of the celebration, community members became increasingly concerned that visitors would be interested only in the stereotyped displays produced by some Kahnawake residents, and not in anything that promoted greater cultural understanding and awareness. They were primarily concerned that many visitors would completely overlook the handicrafts being sold for the hospital fund and end up buying the "spoof products" from Chief Poking Fire's Indian Museum.²³ Poking Fire's display included "genuine snake oil remedy (made in Pakistan), Indian t-shirts (made in India), bronze ashtrays and 'real' rubber Indian arrowheads (made in Japan)."²⁴ The reporter commented on the commercial aspect of the display, noting, "The chief and his family are waiting for the Europeans. They perform twice every morning and afternoon, serving up tribal rites and fire dances, and two of the chief's grandsons pretend to tomahawk themselves to death for the benefit of applauding tourists."²⁵ Chief Poking Fire added, "Business is good. We have an extra show in the afternoon and three on Sunday." From this, the reporter surmised, "A dollar is a dollar."²⁶ Cultural identities are commodities too.

As Trudy Nicks points out, it is not so easy to dismiss the performance of Chief Poking Fire and his tomahawk chopping sons as bereft of cultural meanings. "Poking Fire's village provided tourists with a restricted view of the lives of citizens of Kahnawake, but not one without local cultural and historical relevance. If the choice of representations accommodated twentieth-century tourist's expectations, it was also an authentic expression based on a long history of negotiating cultural encounters with Europeans."²⁷ The struggle between Kahnawake residents over the images displayed at Indians Days illustrates the varied and complex ways Kahnawake residents understood themselves as twentieth century Indians. Over the years, they had learned to manipulate 'Indian' imagery for their own advantage, recognizing the symbolic importance non-Aboriginal peoples attributed to 'the Indian' and 'Indianness.'

Olympic Legacies

Whether as the 'noble' Indian or 'savage' Indian, Aboriginal peoples have been typecast in ways that emphasize their differences from the mainstream. When these differences were placed on the platform of the Closing Ceremony at the 1976 Olympic Games, they became powerful ideological tools that made it impossible for there to be any meaningful cross-cultural dialogue between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples at the Games. In trying to promote Canada as a country that respects cultural differences and diversities, Olympics organizers reinforced fixed notions about Aboriginal peoples being culturally static, homogeneous, and unfit for modern society. Thus, public support for the spectacle was not the result of having gained a deeper respect for Aboriginal lives and traditions. Rather, the support was only an emotional response to specific images and ideas that had taken on tremendous symbolic meaning for non-Aboriginal peoples worldwide. At the Closing Ceremony, spectators and participants easily identified with the teepees, costumes, and feathered flags, images that they accepted as being 'Indian.'

Despite their lack of power to influence the Closing Ceremony, Aboriginal peoples did participate in the final event, and some, like the Mohawks of Kahnawake, found meaning through this cultural performance. Even though the imagery represented an extremely narrow vision of Aboriginal lives and cultures, the representation still spoke to an important part of Mohawk tradition as 'show' Indians. This story, then, tells about how the Mohawks have responded to pressures to conform to 'white' ideas about the 'Indian' by the continued reshaping of their world. As Kahnawake residents aimed for acceptance and respect by working within the restricted boundaries provided for them by Olympics organizers, they also sought to advance notions about what it meant to be Mohawk in contemporary Canadian society through their Indian Days celebration.

Still, one cannot ignore the power of the images of Indians playing Indian. Despite the oppositional meanings, Aboriginal par-

participation in the Closing Ceremony helped to sustain the dominant stereotypes that made Chief Poking Fire's display so popular. At Indian Days, visitors *expected* the frivolous – the snake oil, t-shirts, bronze ashtrays and rubber arrowheads, *anticipated* the spiritual – the tribal rites and fire dances, and *appreciated* the savage – through the simulated killer tomahawk show. Thus, in trying to resist the images of teepees at the Closing Ceremony, they helped reproduce the images of the tomahawks that many visitors undoubtedly took home with them.

It is critical that the scholarship on sport spectacles incorporates the voices of Aboriginal participants. Thus far, the histories have tended to construct these displays as though Aboriginal peoples have had no role in the making of their imagery. If the point of cultural theory is to encourage cross-cultural understanding, it is important to take into account the various ways Aboriginal peoples have creatively modified their cultures to fit contemporary times, and the accompanying limitations of such adaptations.

Endnotes

- 1 P. Deloria, "Being a Twentieth-Century Indian," in B. Ballantine and I. Ballantine, eds. *The Native Americans: An Illustrated History*, (Atlanta: Turner Publishing Inc, 1993), p. 402.
- 2 For further discussions on this point, see, Deloria, pp. 387-405; L. Moses, "Performative Traditions in American Indian History," in P. Deloria and N. Salisbury, eds., *A Companion to American Indian History*, (Blackwell Publishers, 2002), pp. 193-208; and E. Heaman, "Making a Spectacle: Exhibitions of the First Nations," in *The Inglorious Arts of Peace: Exhibitions in Canadian Society during the Nineteenth Century*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), pp. 285-316.
- 3 This paper focuses only on the Olympic experiences of the Mohawks of Kahnawake, due to the reality that other Aboriginal groups will have had different reasons for participating in the Closing Ceremony and will have derived different benefits in doing so.
- 4 V. Paraschak, "Aboriginal Inclusiveness in Sporting Culture: An Image Without Substance." Sport as Symbol, Symbols in Sport, *Proceedings of the 3rd ISHPES Congress*, Capetown, South Africa, 1995, pp. 347-348.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 347.
- 6 J. MacAloon, *Olympic Ceremonies: Historical Continuity & Cultural Exchange*, 1996, p. 29; and *Olympic Review*, May-June 1975, 163-165.
- 7 *Official Report of Montreal 1976, Games of the XXI Olympiad, Volume 1* (Ottawa: COJO, 1978), pp. 307-309 & 312.
- 8 Personal interview with Chief Andrew Delisle, Kahnawake, Quebec, March 14, 2002.
- 9 COJO, 1978, 312.
- 10 *The Montreal Star*, August 2, 1976.
- 11 *The Gazette*, August 2, 1976.
- 12 *The Citizen*, August 3, 1976.
- 13 T. Nicks, "Indian Villages and Entertainments: Setting the Stage for Tourist Souvenir Sales" in Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher B. Steiner, *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 301-315
- 14 G. Alfred, *Heeding the Voices of our Ancestors: Kahnawake Mohawk Politics and the Rise of Native Nationalism*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 158.
- 15 *The Montreal Star*, July 28, 1976.
- 16 *The Gazette*, July 31, 1976.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 *Ibid.*

19 *The Globe and Mail*, July 30, 1976.

20 *Ibid.*

21 *Ibid.*

22 *Ibid.*

23 *Ibid.*

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Ibid.*

26 *Ibid.*

27 Nicks, p. 303.

