

“Let the Games Begin”: Pageants, Protests, Indigeneity (1968–2010)

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Fig. 1. Lil'wat Hoop Dancer Alex Wells

### Overture

On the Government of Canada website that tells the “official” story of the 2010 Winter Olympics is a photograph of three-times world champion hoop dancer Alex Wells, a member of the Lil’wat nation, whose traditional lands extend to the Whistler ski fields not far north of Vancouver. He is arrested, mid-movement, as if holding up the five Olympic rings.<sup>1</sup> Instead of appearing in two interlocking rows, the rings follow the contours of the performer’s body, describing a shallow arc from one outstretched arm, across his torso, to the other. A sixth circle seems to float in the air at the furthest end, but it soon becomes apparent that the camera has choreographed the scene. The extra “ring,” emblazoned on a wall in the background but transposed by the angle of the shot, is actually the logo of the Four Host First Nations who played an integral role in securing the Vancouver Games and on whose (unceded) territories they were staged. According to the website, the photograph records the public announcement of plans to run an Aboriginal pavilion in the city’s downtown area as part of the Olympiad, using the latest technology to showcase indigenous Canadians’ achievements in art, business, culture and sport. The composition of the audience seems to confirm that Canada’s First Nations have a significant stake in the hoop dance as several of the pictured dignitaries are dressed in regalia marking their status as Aboriginal chiefs or community leaders; the rest appear to be government functionaries. All are focused so intently on the performance that we can almost sense a collective hush. For those who know that hoop dancing is

also a dynamic form of storytelling, another figure could be forming in the weave of the hoops along the dancer's limbs – perhaps the trickster, Raven, about to take wing? If so, a very different kind of spectacle is imminent. The website tells us who was there, attending (to) the dance, but not how the story unfolds.

I begin with this photograph for several reasons. In narrative terms, it foreshadows an open ending to the account I will give, as an outsider, of a particular, decades-long “glocal” movement forged in the crucible of performance: the broadly connected struggles by indigenous peoples in Canada, Australia and the United States to stamp their authority on an enduring complex of cultural enactments instrumentally (re)produced by the Olympics. That such an endeavor involves a reckoning with the exoticizing power of spectacle should be obvious, even if strategies to isolate, counteract, evade or harness that power are not. The camera hints at this conundrum: it registers the presence and diversity of the onstage audience, thereby mirroring our own (invisible) stance as culturally-located spectators, yet it insistently directs our gaze back to the hoop dancer, packaging his body, art and energies for our enjoyment. In that constitutive process, we can glimpse something of the intricacies of spectatorship in action. Thus, the photograph becomes a prompt to thinking about what diverse investments could be at issue in the cross-cultural encounters at the heart of the performance and how they might play out in artistic, political and material domains. To probe investment in these terms not only helps to clarify our own and others' roles in the making of spectacle but also enables us to slant discussions away from tired arguments about its totalizing effects. Such arguments, readily wheeled out in scholarly analyses of Olympic opening ceremonies, the main kind of spectacle discussed in this essay, grant little space to the more subtle aspects of the pageants concerned or the diverse cultural agendas they negotiate. Moreover, a blinkered focus on commodity paradigms constrains indigenous performers to appear as exoticized, unrepresentative, inauthentic or at best “traditional” peoples in expressive forms that are set apart from the real sphere of contemporary indigenous politics. I will endeavor to piece together a different story, one that considers indigenous as well as non-indigenous investments in these global mega-events, while also tracing the performative themes and forms that connect their articulations of indigeneity – however contingent or contested – across place and time.

The issue of investment offers a critical window on the “politics of interweaving cultures in performance” as the key problematic of this book. In mobilizing the term “interweaving” to describe the dynamic aesthetic transitions and modes of productive reception that have happened (in-)between cultures in various parts of the world since the beginning of the twentieth century, Erika Fischer-Lichte declares her desire to move away from the intercultural turn in performance studies and towards concepts less freighted with the ideological baggage of Westernization. Such baggage, she argues, leads us not only to hierarchize the cultures encountering each other in and through theatre but also to overlook their essential heterogeneity.<sup>2</sup> This caution aligns with my own assessment of interculturalism as a compromised site for both working and theorizing across cultures,<sup>3</sup> yet there is little doubt that the concept has spawned useful debate over the last few decades and accrued considerable analytical purchase by provoking us to grapple with the complexities of cultural difference. What this trajectory emphasizes is that pioneering new ways of thinking about theatre and performance – or any other comparable cultural practices – is dependent upon specific, long-term investments. As a way into the history of modern theatre in global terms, the idea of a processual interweaving of cultures in performance could proffer new and nuanced ways of reconceptualizing the grounds of aesthetic exchange, although its attendant premises are yet to be fully tested, elaborated, critiqued, modified and articulated in (and with) a range of sites and circumstances. Getting at political issues is a particularly vexed undertaking in all of this. Fischer-Lichte is alert to the importance of that task, as this book attests, but the mechanisms for matrixing the political with the analytical amid dissent and difference are not yet as clear as the aesthetic vision driving the interweaving project. Only time and dialogue will tell us if a theory of

cultures interwoven in performance has the fabric (the substance, the texture) to improve upon those flawed and fractured discourses it seeks to displace.

In this context, I am hesitant to embrace “interweaving” as a direct conduit to the political, despite the appeal of its emphasis on process.<sup>4</sup> The contested geopolitical project of postcolonialism teaches us that the warps and wefts of politics can be as subtle as they are profound, especially in terms of agency and recognition, the two main issues that interest me here. Axiomatically, a postcolonial take on the idea of “interweaving cultures in performance” starts by problematizing the metaphor so that we apprehend the gaps between its terms of reference – the concept of “interweaving” in English, or “verflechtungen” in German – and the various artistic processes, political layers and aesthetic textures discernible in the performances at issue. Here again the photograph of the hoop dancer is evocative since it shows a different kind of art, which we might also call weaving, as it wends the human form into fluid, open patterns so that shapes of animals and abstract symbols crystallize and morph momentarily in the body–hoop configurations. Both the culture and the labor of the dancer (the storyweaver) become visible in that creative process, suggesting not only the specificities of the performance taking shape but also the corporeal effort involved in its execution.

Conceived as an artistic distillation of larger world-making encounters, the dancer’s embodied weave, an ephemeral tissue, can be understood as consonant with what Tim Ingold calls the “meshwork,” the entangled pathways, human and non-human, that make up the fabric of the inhabited world. In Ingold’s schema, as elaborated in *Being Alive*,<sup>5</sup> space is integral to the mesh and action does not arise from an agency that is distributed around pre-existing points or connecting structures, as in a network, but instead “emerges from the interplay of forces that are conducted along the lines of the meshwork.”<sup>6</sup> It is this idea of “encounter” as a dynamic, constitutive process, a spatiotemporal entangling of different actions, interests and trajectories, that underlies the following account of indigeneity and performance in Olympic contexts. Although Ingold is not concerned in any direct way with the actual politics of culture – his book’s broad aim is to theorize perception, knowledge and creativity in terms of interactions between human beings and the environments they inhabit – his attention to the specificities of embodiment in an unfolding field of relationships suggests a way through (rather than around) the differently invested acts of performance and spectatorship that produce the world’s most obtrusive spectacle. Working with this idea of analytical “wayfinding,” I follow particular threads and knots in a meshwork of performances that have brought indigeneity and Olympism into dialogue, however agonistically. To determine what may be at stake in that relationship, my discussion moves back and forth between scales, from the macro-narratives embedded in globally telecast ceremonies and demonstrations to the micro-moments at which the vested energies of those involved – indigenous and non-indigenous – become evident as a politics of (cross)cultural practice.

### **Olympic performances, (post)colonial modernities**

The story of Indigenous peoples’ participation in Olympic pageants begins well before the first notable instance, on the eve of the 1968 Games in Mexico City, of indigeneity being mobilized as a (contingently) valorized marker of the host nation’s distinctiveness. In 1904, the modern Olympic movement revealed an early investment in the spectacle of cultural difference when organizers for the third Games, in St Louis (Missouri), heralded the main competition with a lead-up tournament that married sport with ethnological performances. This controversial event, promoted under the title of Anthropology Days, was designed to test the physical abilities of so-called primitive races while also giving the Olympiad a vivid cultural dimension. Among the hundred or so featured contestants were Native Americans, including members of the Crow, Sioux, Pawnee, Navajo and Chippewa nations, along with indigenous peoples from Africa, Asia and South America. Most of them had been recruited from exhibits at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, a new World’s Fair under whose auspices the St Louis Games were being staged. Cast as foils against which the

neoclassical ideal of the modern athlete would take on both pedagogical and affective force, these special recruits were inveigled to engage in standard Olympic sports such as the 100-yard dash and the high-jump, as well as contests supposedly closer to their “ancestral practices”: mud slinging, pole climbing and archery, for instance. Some of those assembled also performed songs, dances and dramatic sketches in shows they organized themselves in the intervals between the competitions. Unsurprisingly, the tournament played out as an embarrassing failure, not least because many of the recruits refused to take the contests seriously. Set alongside the racial hierarchies underpinning Olympism at the time was the spectacle of white men trying to coax “natives” into sports they did not understand, apparently to the amusement of both players and audiences.<sup>7</sup>

Although this ill-conceived sideshow tends to be quickly glossed over in mainstream Olympic histories, seen as an instance of (American) bad taste, it was symptomatic of early struggles to pitch the Games to spectators who could readily access a surfeit of other mass entertainments forged in the nexus of colonialism, capitalism, industrialization and evolutionary science. In this sense, the genealogy of the modern Olympics stretches back before the singular vision of its founder, Pierre de Coubertin, to the “polymorphous performativity”<sup>8</sup> of the nineteenth century, when theatricalized displays of difference among human beings became a way of making sense of the frisson attached to encounters with other cultures.<sup>9</sup> The Human Zoos and Wild West Shows staged by famous impresarios such as P. T. Barnum and Buffalo Bill Cody were only the most visible versions of this phenomenon. Such spectacles, although roundly disavowed today, came to inflect the ways in which Olympic pageantry was (and is) constructed, popularizing modalities of spectatorship that have been hard to dismantle, especially across international scales. The characteristic dramaturgies of these colonial entertainments have also endured in the scenarios of encounter and discovery that have become set pieces in opening ceremonies staged by “new-world” nations. In this historically overdetermined context, questions about investment open a window onto official performances of “culture” as part of the Olympics and should alert us to the possibility that the indigenous efforts and talents apparently co-opted to (re)enact them may be equally directed towards unofficial ends.

By the time the Olympics came to Mexico, some sixty years after the indigenous recruits had tainted the St. Louis Games with what was seen as the wrong kind of “culture” for a tournament that aspired towards the epic character of the ancient Olympiad, ritual had become the modern means by which indigeneity could be harnessed more strategically – and more seamlessly – to Olympic spectacle. In the interim the International Olympic Committee (IOC) had developed an elaborate set of ceremonies and (re)invented traditions to dignify the event as a gathering of nations that eschewed the model of the world exposition, with all its apparent vulgarity. Among these traditions, the torch relay was ripe for reconfiguration after the Second World War, in need of a narrative bold enough to match its ever-increasing length. The 1968 relay, the first to bring the torch to the Americas, imagined no less than the mythical fusing of ancient European and Mesoamerican civilizations. Taking the explicit form of a commemorative journey that celebrated Europe’s “discovery” of the New World, the relay began in Olympia with the ritual lighting of the flame and stopped in Genoa to mark the birthplace of Christopher Columbus before following the route of his 1492 voyage from Palos in Spain across the Atlantic to San Salvador. From there, the convoy travelled into the Valley of Mexico, roughly along the path taken by Hernán Cortés in his conquest of the Aztec empire (1519–21), to reach the ancient pyramids at Teotihuacán just northeast of Mexico City at dusk on the day before the Olympics opened. A ceremonial pageant solemnized the flame’s arrival. This spectacular reception brought three thousand dancers before twenty thousand spectators in a studied revival of the ceremony of the “New Fire,” a pre-Hispanic ritual held every fifty-two years to observe the cyclical renewal of humanity. For the event’s organizers, Teotihuacán provided “a perfect setting to blend different myths”: the symbolic coalescence of the sacred fires kindled by Hellenic and indigenous gods and fanned by the daring spirit of human endeavor projected a vibrant, syncretic nation with prodigious cultural capital.<sup>10</sup> The next morning in Mexico City during the opening ceremonies of the Games, mestiza athlete

Enriqueta Basilio completed the triumphal relay. Not coincidentally, the Games had begun on a highly significant holiday: Dia de la Raza (Day of the Race), celebrated annually in Mexico on October 12 as the anniversary of Columbus's landfall in the Americas and the symbolic beginning of a new "race" fused from indigenous and Spanish cultures.

As Eric Zolov has argued, these carefully choreographed Olympic performances reflected an elite investment in casting the conquest of Mexico's original peoples as a generative process that culminated in the birth of the modern mestizo nation. The violence of colonial subjugation was elided from that vision, along with the ongoing reality of indigenous impoverishment.<sup>11</sup> With such erasures, apparently traditionalist enactments of indigeneity could be reified as heritage in line with the nationalist agenda of the *indigenista* movement that had emerged after Mexico's 1910–20 revolution.<sup>12</sup> Unsurprisingly, the Cultural Olympiad, lasting for the whole of 1968, capitalized on this agenda – and the archeological riches of the region's indigenous past – while also looking to silence skeptics who judged the nation insufficiently modernized to host the world's premier sporting event. In a program that has never since been rivaled in scale or scope, the Olympiad featured a massive World Folklore Festival alongside literally hundreds of "classical" and contemporary works in the visual and performing arts. The aim was to situate (bourgeois) Mexicans as proudly local but internationalist in orientation and urbane in taste. There were paintings by Dali, Picasso and Gauguin, plays from ancient Greek and Japanese repertoires, European musical masterpieces presented by the likes of the Berlin Opera, modern parables by Brecht and Ionesco and, not least, the latest in avant-garde theatre and dance, bringing to Mexico luminaries such as Grotowski and Martha Graham. In contrast to the modernists' auteur-driven experimentalism, the folklore festival showcased community arts as the "authentic" heritage of twenty-five (mostly non-Western) participating nations and nineteen Mexican states. The performers involved in these events apparently presented "outstanding ceremonial, ritual or festive expressions of indigenous folklore" that could only exist in "a stable, harmonious society."<sup>13</sup> Idealized versions of an indigenous folk aesthetic also infused "The Ballet of the Five Continents," a series of spectacles staged in various locations across the country. Along with international contributions depicting Eskimos and Australian Aborigines, Mexico's own "Aztec Ballet" drew costume and movement ideas from pre-Hispanic codices, presenting a blessing sequence for Moctezuma followed by a warrior dance.<sup>14</sup>

While the Olympic Organizing Committee's investments in indigeneity are fairly clear in all this puff, it is difficult to determine what roles (if any) indigenous peoples played in the particular cultural performances that represented them. The ballets, created and executed by well-established mainstream artists, appear to have acted out fantasies of indigenous lifeways in a retooled version of ethnological show-business that did not have to manage its unruly subjects, though some of the choreographers did claim inspiration from on-the-ground engagement with the cultures at issue. Philip Deloria's theorizations of what has been at stake for Americans in "playing Indian" over the centuries prompts me to read these dances in broad terms as performative acts that also materialized settler societies' anxieties over colonization and their desires for autochthonous connections to their homelands, and with them, legitimate belonging.<sup>15</sup> The pageant at Teotihuacán seems more obscure beneath its conspicuous splendor. Performers identifying as indigenous probably helped to shape, or at least present, the New Fire ceremony – without such participation it could scarcely have carried the weight of authenticity – but their contributions are invisible in reports and reviews of the spectacle. The World Folklore Festival, by contrast, traded in an indigeneity of (but not for) the people. Indigenous agency seems very limited in such circumstances; yet, as Deloria reminds us, native peoples also engaged in the strategic work of "Indian play," "assisting, confirming, co-opting, challenging, and legitimating" the performative traditions in which they became enmeshed.<sup>16</sup> In this respect, indigenous Mexicans might be credited as having played (within) the Games, even if their tactics are yet to draw the attention of commentators.



### **Visibility, voice, multiculturalism**

As well as marking a re-evaluation of indigenous cultures that continued into subsequent Olympiads, the performances gathered under the umbrella of the Mexico City Games established two main scenarios by which to stage indigeneity as part of the cultural capital (and commons<sup>17</sup>) of the host nation. One was the ceremonial welcome, a cross-cultural encounter that could work in multiple registers so as to align with the rituals and protocols of specific indigenous groups while seeming to dissolve the tensions of the postcolonial moment; the other was the coming together of many different cultures in a folkloric celebration that enacted a semblance of the nation's pluralism. As scenarios, these performances had "portable frameworks" that could be readily adapted to different settings and corporeal languages, and which "could bear the weight of accumulative repeats."<sup>18</sup> They lent themselves well not only to local and national specificities, but also to one of Olympism's key metanarratives: harmony in diversity. In 1976, Canada, already on the cusp of official multiculturalism,<sup>19</sup> promptly embraced the diversity scenario by including indigenous performances in its first Games as host nation in Montréal, a tack broadly repeated for the Winter Olympics in Calgary in 1988, albeit with different effects. The indigenous welcome modeled at Teotihuacán would reappear only in a minor key – or offstage – until the Sydney 2000 Games, when a significant Aboriginal element was incorporated into the opening ceremonies. The Salt Lake City and Vancouver editions of the Olympics followed suit in 2002 and 2010 respectively, staging welcomes infused with indigenous elements.

Behind the scenes, the organization of the Montréal Olympics was mired in difficulties linked to escalating tensions over the status of the French language and culture within Canada and, related to this issue, separatist sentiment among Québécois nationalists.<sup>20</sup> Indigenous groups could only play second fiddle to this discord but nevertheless saw participation in the Games as a potential opportunity. Unsurprisingly, the opening ceremonies projected diversity as stemming from the heritage of French and English settlers, with a few other European-derived folk elements added to the mix. Representatives from indigenous communities – namely the Abenaki, Algonquin, Atikamekw, Cree, Huron, Mi'gmaq, Mohawk, Montagnais and Naskapi nations – were invited to perform in the closing ceremonies where they ended up numbering about half of a 550-strong "American Indian" troupe, the rest being non-indigenous dancers, both amateur and professional. In resplendent, feathered head-dresses and color-coordinated outfits matching the hues of the five Olympic rings, the troupe entered in "arrowhead formation" to escort the athletes around the track, first to the strains of a symphonic suite augmented by tom-toms and rattles, then to the beat of *La Danse Sauvage* by celebrated Montréal composer André Mathieu. Next, they set up five massive teepees in the center of the stadium and, when the speeches had ended, danced a farandole with the athletes, giving them feathers and headbands. Newspapers lauded the event as a dazzling success and a celebration of unity.<sup>21</sup>

Scholars have justly criticized the appropriation of indigenous imagery in this ceremony, the recycling of well-worn stereotypes and, in particular, the organizers' cavalier treatment of the First Nations participants, who apparently were bused to Montréal for just one (all-night) rehearsal beforehand.<sup>22</sup> Yet, as Janice Forsyth notes, some members of the Kahnawake Mohawk community regarded the event as a meaningful celebration of their identities, "one that spoke to their involvement as 'show Indians' in the entertainment industry." In this context, it provided a "diversion from their everyday lives" and a chance to rub shoulders with athletes in an extravaganza that would be telecast globally. For others, the performances were testimony to the survival of indigenous culture in Canada and one means to foster an emerging pan-Aboriginal movement across the nation.<sup>23</sup> If we consider these responses as indicative of investments, it is possible to read micro-moments in the performance against the grain of unmitigated commoditization, even though the pageant as a whole no doubt served mainstream political agendas before those of indigenous peoples. Surely there was pride as the teepees were raised to pierce the air, a charge from the embodied energies of the dance, perhaps even laughter at the sight of such a disparate group of

people doing a farandole<sup>24</sup> to celebrate the cultures of Aboriginal Canadians. Such transient pleasures may seem insubstantial in the broader sphere of cultural politics and cannot be interpreted straightforwardly as agency, but they possibly sustained the work of being (and feeling) indigenous amid the image-making machinery of the spectacle. Alongside the clichés of multiculturalism in action, something else was being dramatized through the iconic images of “Indians”: the difficulty of becoming visible on any other terms as both indigenous *and* Canadian. Visibility involves more than literal vision or metaphorical seeing, as Rey Chow argues. In an epistemic sense, it also depends on “*the condition of possibility for what becomes visible*” – the complex of political, social and affective relations in play in any given circumstances.<sup>25</sup> Despite the effects of civil rights movements and other cultural initiatives, attaining image time and being represented on the ground was not enough to make Aboriginal Canadians visible as such in the nation-building exercise of staging the Olympics. In this respect, the overarching narrative produced by the pageantry seems symptomatic of the ways in which Canada’s “cultural mosaic” was envisaged in political discourses of the time: English and French Canadian protagonists took center stage, supported by a chorus of other immigrants, while indigenous peoples were recognized only belatedly as integral to the negotiations.

Twelve years later and two thousand miles westward, the opening ceremonies of the 1988 Calgary Winter Games unfolded against the backdrop of a giant steel teepee that rose 65 meters into the sky above the Olympic cauldron at one end of the stadium. Framed by this iconic structure, cameo performances by Native Canadians were seamlessly integrated into a pageant that dissolved the “two solitudes” of English and French Canada into a vision of a lightly indigenized modern settler society. In one segment, five First Nations elders, dressed in ceremonial regalia and feathered headdresses, drummed a welcome to the torchbearer as she entered the arena to skate the final leg of the relay. The other notable indigenous “touch” was a stirring rendition of the national anthem sung by Yukon native Daniel Tlen in the Southern Tutchone language of his people. Broadcasts of this segment include cutaways to the Canadian flag and a red-jacketed police choir whose voices swell the song with English and French versions, thereby folding Tlen’s performance into the national patrimony. Off stage, an Olympic arts festival showcased indigenous music, film, art and cultural demonstrations to highlight the distinctive heritage of Canada’s western provinces. These various inclusions situated the nation’s First Peoples as part of official multiculturalism in action, but their main function, evident in the city’s initial Games bid, was to help brand the event as an upscaled version of the Calgary Stampede, complete with its archetypal frontier figures – the Mountie, the Cowboy and their symbolic complement, the “Indian.”<sup>26</sup>

Although some Aboriginal Canadians no doubt benefitted from their brief moments on the global stage, the event’s real impact on cultural politics stemmed from an anti-Olympics campaign that caused a ruckus in the wings. This protest, enacting indigenous claims for social justice, targeted the Games’ main sponsors: a coalition of government bodies and resource-extraction industries seen as actively destroying Aboriginal communities by usurping their traditional hunting grounds. The Lubicon Lake Cree of northern Alberta initiated the campaign in 1986 by calling for an Olympic boycott to draw attention to the damage caused by oil drilling on their lands. Controversially, this boycott focused on the Glenbow Museum, which had accepted Shell Oil sponsorship to fund a major exhibition of Native North American art, titled *The Spirit Sings*, as the signature event for the Cultural Olympiad. As well as enlisting the support of leading American and European museums, some of which declined to lend exhibits, the boycott attracted considerable media attention as the Games drew closer, leading to solidarity actions in other parts of the nation. Among these, Ojibwe artist Rebecca Belmore presented herself as a museum artifact installed in the snow on the torch relay’s route through Ontario. In Calgary, demonstrators marched in front of the Glenbow Museum when its exhibition opened and maintained a picket there throughout the Games. These counter-performances can be understood as evidence of embodied investments, of agency emerging along the lines of the meshwork making up the Olympic spectacle. Ironically, the Games

had provided a global platform on which indigenous Canadians could become visible – and vocal – in registers different from those available in the official festivities. The effects were anything but transitory. As Karen Cody Cooper shows, the boycott acted as a watershed for representations of indigeneity in the museum sector, leading to profound and positive changes in policy and practice.<sup>27</sup> Protestors had also sounded a caution concerning the terms of indigenous peoples' involvement in any future Olympic happenings.

### **Reconciliation and renewal**

As the Sydney 2000 Games approached, there was little doubt that Aboriginal Australians would figure prominently in the cultural events – the politics of the day demanded no less – or that they would insist on negotiating the nature of their contributions. By then, a new postcolonial model for staging international mega-events had emerged through editions of the Commonwealth Games held in Auckland (1990) and Victoria, Canada (1994), each of which featured an indigenized welcome that explicitly observed the rituals and protocols of those on whose traditional lands the events were being held. As manifestations of the encounter scenario, these ceremonial welcomes contained the conventional ingredients of Olympic spectacle while demonstrating an official investment, however selective, in indigenous performance practices. Such expressions of welcome also staged an ethos of sharing that promised to harmonize conflicts over who could, and should, belong to the imagined community of each nation. This kind of performance seemed ideal for a postcolonial reworking of Australian cultural politics at the turn of the new millennium, after the change to a conservative government (in 1996) had stalled official processes of reconciliation aiming to address Aboriginal disadvantage and promote a united citizenry. An Olympic pageant that gave flesh and voice to the vision of a reconciled nation, built on mutual respect and an understanding of cultural differences, would appeal to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal constituencies. This vision also squared neatly with Olympism's call for "harmony in diversity."

Predictably, the opening ceremonies for the Sydney Games took a pan-humanist approach to the task of staging "Australia" in a broadly accessible but distinctly indigenized register. Creative artists Rhoda Roberts (Bundjalung) and Stephen Page (Nunukul) were engaged to direct "Awakenings," a pivotal part of the pageant, and spent months travelling around Australia to recruit and train indigenous participants, first in their home communities then in Sydney. When the moment came, the ceremonies began with various welcomes, followed by interlinked performance segments that sketched a distinctive, cosmopolitan nation apparently at ease in its cross-cultural relations.<sup>28</sup> In this made-for-media extravaganza, reconciliation featured not only as a recurrent (and powerfully affective) trope, but also as a structuring principle. The pageant unfolded as the dream-vision of a young, white schoolgirl (Nikki Webster), who meandered through a potted version of Australian history with Aboriginal songman Djakapurra Munyarryun as her guide. Amid acrobatics and pyrotechnics, the pair conjured a 1000-strong gathering of indigenous clans from across the country, a cross-section of exotic flora and fauna, a largely benign portrait of European settlement, and the arrival of immigrants from all corners of the world. In the finale, the protagonists ascended a symbolic bridge connecting white and black, youth and wisdom, to oversee a celebration of contemporary Australian society by 12,000 performers of diverse ancestry. Then, following the parade of nations, the evening culminated with the lighting of the Olympic cauldron by champion Aboriginal athlete Cathy Freeman.

At the time, journalists, politicians, members of the public and various Aboriginal spokespeople lauded this spectacle as a progressive vision of postcolonial rapprochement. Scholars have been more circumspect, criticizing the ceremonies' management of cultural difference within a paradigm of multicultural unity,<sup>29</sup> their incorporation of Aboriginality, as a national brand, into the fold of global capital<sup>30</sup> and, among other shortcomings, their tendency to effect a national catharsis that diluted the urge for political action.<sup>31</sup> As astute as they are, these analyses miss the complexity of the pageant in performative terms, as well as the Aboriginal investments at issue in its enactment.



If we attend to the embodied politics of the performances at specific micro-moments, some of these investments become visible. In the prelude, for example, the Aboriginal elders' "welcome to country" not only greeted the assembled audience in a ceremonial fashion but also cleansed the Olympic site with oratory and song, in keeping with the protocols of indigenous land custodianship. Sensory enactments of autochthonous belonging likewise anchored the Awakenings segment to indigenous epistemologies, even as it was packaged as entertainment for a vast media audience. As Munyarryun's song reverberated around the stadium urging spectators to "listen to the sounds of the earth," hundreds of barefoot dancers crisscrossed the arena to form the figure of a Wandjina (creation spirit), which then took shape on a massive cloth of red, black and gold – the colors of the Aboriginal flag. Some performers carried banners in similar hues, indexing not just cultural pride but also the decades-long political struggle that simmered beneath the fanfare. A running commentary by Aboriginal television personality Ernie Dingo reiterated that the segment represented a powerful ritual, bringing Australia's first peoples together "as one."<sup>32</sup> With these interwoven performances, spectators were called to witness indigenous resilience and rights to self-determination, alongside the public show of black–white communitas. Such subtleties were not at odds with anti-Olympics protests looking to expose the social cracks in the script of reconciliation, nor were they lost on foreign journalists. For example, a Japanese telecast of the ceremonies pointed to the genocide that European settlers had visited on indigenous communities,<sup>33</sup> while American (NBC) coverage began with footage of Cathy Freeman sprinting along a bush track with a voiceover casting her as "one who represents the struggles of a people, risen from a dreamtime."<sup>34</sup> As well as priming its audiences to see Aboriginal heroism against the odds, NBC identified reconciliation as a fraught national project and promised to give it airtime over the subsequent weeks. This coverage responded to targeted campaigns by activists to solicit international media interest in the realpolitik of indigenous peoples' marginalization within Australia, despite the premium value being accorded to their arts.

The next edition of the Olympic opening ceremonies, held in Salt Lake City in 2002, also looked to indigenous cultures to help heal a national wound, but not of the colonial kind. Americans were in still in mourning for the thousands of people killed by the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington just five months earlier, and indirectly, for the loss of power and authority those events had occasioned. In this context, Olympic pageantry supplied a ready vehicle by which to lift public spirits with the symbolic restoration of US pride.<sup>35</sup> Breaking with precedent, the ceremonies began with a memorial as a tattered stars-and-stripes flag from the World Trade Centre was brought into the arena, its passage punctuated (in NBC's televised version) by images of US soldiers in Afghanistan, and a close-up shot of a woman in the audience crying. The moment for public grieving then gave way to a defiant celebration of American nationhood, framed by the proclamation: "None of life's storms can darken the human spirit, once lit by the fire within."<sup>36</sup> As in the Sydney pageant, a child on the cusp of adolescence, this time an ice-skater carrying a lantern, epitomized the essence of the settler nation in a populist performance of its history. The Child of Light's journey took him from brutal winter storms into a mythical frontier inhabited by Native Americans, Spanish missionaries, English trappers, Mormon pioneers and various other ethnic groups, all celebrated as constituents of the modern American melting pot. Stirring songs and commentary gathered the disparate performance segments into an uplifting parable in which hard work and togetherness ensured the triumph of the human spirit in the face of adversity.

The Native American component, wedged between the parade of athletes and the drama of frontier expansion, and intercut with shots of flag-waving patriots, consisted of a spectacular welcome by the five First Nations of Utah: the Ute, Goshute, Shoshone, Paiute and Navajo (Dine) peoples. Their chiefs arrived in ceremonial regalia on horseback, heralded by the strains of native flutes and an apparently ancient saying: "Everything on the earth has a purpose, and every person a mission." With the leaders came representatives of their nations, dancing and chanting to the rhythms of powwow drums. In their own languages, each one offered an individual greeting to an

athlete, some simultaneously addressing the audience at large. Their welcomes were also blessings, solemn and heartfelt. Next, acclaimed rock singer Robbie Robertson took center stage to wrap up the segment with songs inspired by his Mohawk ancestry. A chorus of skaters dressed as eagles, a totem of strength in Native American cultures, augmented his act in tightly choreographed routines. The segment received rapturous applause and was praised in the US media for its contribution to the ceremonies' larger themes of healing and renewal. In that context, indigeneity was tasked to wash the nation's wounds in a redemptive spirituality that gave suffering a sense of purpose. What helped this affective work was the broadcaster's packaging of the performance to fit its specificities into opening ceremonies that were dramaturged as a powerful cultural front for the war on terror.<sup>37</sup> On their home ground, American journalists did not seem interested in issues concerning indigenous peoples, even though hints of their struggles were folded into the cultural performances. The lyrics of Robertson's song "Stomp Dance (Unity)," for instance, explicitly called together "all the First Nations" to dance, hearts beating "as one," in an intertribal assertion of Native sovereignty. Had the political rhetoric of the day been less jingoistic, the song's haunting refrain – "This is Indian country" – could have cast the welcome segment in a different light: as a reclamation of heritage on behalf of the dispossessed.

The 2010 Vancouver Olympics,<sup>38</sup> by contrast, thrust issues of indigenous sovereignty into the spotlight, not only in the pageantry but also, and more persistently, in the sustained protests that shadowed the spectacle. As official partners in hosting and organizing the Games, the Lil'wat, Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh Nations were in a position to make demands, namely that Aboriginal cultures and practices would be meaningfully incorporated into the event's planning and staging.<sup>39</sup> In this context, the Four Host First Nations' brand signaled an indigenous investment that could hardly be ignored. The salient feature of the opening ceremonies was the structuring of its segments so as to give priority and visibility to Aboriginal Canadians as partners and hosts in the Olympic endeavor. Accordingly, the expected indigenous welcome came immediately after the national anthem at the beginning of the proceedings, where it framed the whole pageant. As four ice-white welcome poles rose from the ground, their carved arms extended in a gesture of greeting, representatives from each of the four local host nations, clad in ceremonial regalia, welcomed the crowd (and the global audience) in their Aboriginal tongues. They then welcomed dozens of other Aboriginal nations from around Canada to the stadium for a long session of drumming and dancing to receive the athletes of the world, on behalf of all Canadians. For the first time in the history of the Games, indigenous leaders joined their country's head of state and the IOC dignitaries as part of the official party. Through its symbolism, oral utterances and kinetic inscriptions, this multilayered welcome sequence enacted Olympic hospitality as the right (and rite) of Canada's First Nations, affirming their claims to sovereignty as indigenous peoples. Such claims should be understood not as a demand for an independent state but as a bid to reconfigure political relations between center and margin. Following Scott Lyons's conception, sovereignty in this instance is "the ability to assert oneself renewed – in the presence of others. It is a people's right to rebuild, its demand to exist and present its gifts to the world."<sup>40</sup>

Outside the stadium, there were many signs of this renewal – in performances staged as part of the Cultural Olympiad, in the displays and concerts presented in the Aboriginal Pavilion, in the coverage of the Games on Aboriginal Peoples Television Network and, not least, in vehement and highly visible protests across the country against a range of neo-imperialist activities in which the Olympics were instrumentally implicated. Chief among these activities was the development of infrastructure and elite sports facilities on land never ceded to settlers but still subject to treaty negotiations. Protesters were also angered that massive funds were allocated to hosting the Games amid scant efforts to ameliorate poverty and homelessness in First Nations communities. Urging social justice, they satirized Olympic events to expose their fundamentally corporate character, sometimes working in cross-cultural coalitions to produce counter-events that foregrounded the inequities at issue. The Poverty Olympics, mounted (for the third year) just days before the official

Games, was one such theatricalized initiative, featuring Chewy the Rat as mascot and, among other agit-prop skits, competitions called “Welfare Hurdles” and “Curling for Housing Promises.”<sup>41</sup> In a less playful vein, Aboriginal marches, blockades, vigils and ceremonies persistently turned attention to the cultural landscape surrounding the Games, as protestors rallied behind the slogan “No Olympics on Stolen Native Land.” What distinguished this dissent from broader anti-Games demonstrations was its deep historical grounding in sovereignty struggles stretching back to the colonial encounter. Using forms and forums that demanded recognition, the various performances worked to remember not only centuries of indigenous dispossession in Canada but also the embodied responses it has generated. Placards looking back to the Lubicon Cree struggle and the Oka Crisis (1990), for example, were among the many reminders that First Nations’ resistance to the dictates of multinational capital had been gathering for some time.

### **Conclusion/coda**

To see unprecedented levels of indigenous participation in the Olympics as inextricably linked with unprecedented protests by indigenous communities makes political and historical sense, whether or not the broken promises that attended the Vancouver Games left some stakeholders disillusioned. Protest, in some form, however constrained or marginalized, has increasingly become part of the Olympic story in most places in the world where its spectacular entertainments have drawn on the cultural capital of indigenous others to define or refashion the national self. This other story started with the St Louis Games more than a hundred years ago, when the “native” contestants coopted for the event, clearly more at home with theatrics than athletics, seemed to upstage the organizers. The subsequent pageants and protests have amplified, and often troubled, the Olympics’ world-making project, albeit in very different modes and registers and with a mixed impact on the ways in which indigenous peoples have been able to appear on the global stage. In the opening ceremonies particularly, the theatricalized ghosts of colonialism’s Others have often haunted the performances, raising the question of whether Olympic pageants are doomed by genre, tradition and expectation to reenact stereotypes of cultural difference for audiences that cannot be expected to understand their subtleties. Yet, as Jane Goodall argues, even in an era when the questionable science of ethnology worked to condition spectatorship, performance itself could convert “the ethnological gaze, which lingers on people as exhibited bodies,” into “the theatrical gaze, which follows a sequence of action and registers bodies as vehicles of communication rather than sights in themselves.”<sup>42</sup> “Show business,” she adds, “does not thrive on the grossest forms of exploitation, because the power of the live performer is its main form of appeal and the humiliated do not make good entertainers.”<sup>43</sup>

However compromised they may seem in terms of the politics of representation, the popular entertainments discussed here, and the protests that have stalked the Games alongside them, are part of the global meshwork through which indigeneity has been transmitted, actively as well as passively, in the wake of colonialism. Taking a lead from the hoop dancer with which this essay began, I have approached these performances as interwoven investments in the outcome of specific story-making processes. This approach casts the politics of interweaving cultures in performance into a contact zone alive to the forces of aspiration. Individually and collectively, the investments identified suggest a growing awareness among indigenous constituencies that public performance affords a foothold in the neoliberal order shaping their societies. Paths to cultural survival lead from such vantage points, as Margaret Werry intimates: “Performance, in the context of the state, is both a resource of the dominant culture (which requires repetition, participation, and witness to uphold that dominance) and of the powerless, who use it to navigate, to inhabit, and even to trick systems not of their making.”<sup>44</sup> That indigenous peoples have used this resource to play more than a bit part in shaping the cultural face of the modern Olympics, a neoliberal venture par excellence, is no mean feat. Opportunism has no doubt touched that enterprise across some fronts, but that should not diminish the gift of the cultural labor – the energies, the skills, the knowledges – contained in the performances, or the moments of agency they have afforded for those involved, however fleeting or

invisible to outsiders. If we read Olympic spectacle without attending to this gift, we risk assuming that the indigenous performers it has presented to the world are somehow “naked” as communicators<sup>45</sup> rather than actively engaged in the politics of embodiment, on the ground, in the moment and at the interface of cultures.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> "Events: 2009," *Canada's Games*, see <<http://canada2010.gc.ca/info/evnmt/evnmt-2009-eng.cfm>> (Last accessed 21 January 2012). The dancer is erroneously named Chris Wells, Alex's brother, in the caption that accompanies the photograph.
- <sup>2</sup> E. Fischer-Lichte, "Interweaving cultures in performance: different states of being in-between," *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2009, p. 399.
- <sup>3</sup> J. Lo and H. Gilbert, "Towards a topography of cross-cultural theatre praxis," *The Drama Review*, vol. 46, no. 3, 2002.
- <sup>4</sup> E. Fischer-Lichte, op. cit., p. 400.
- <sup>5</sup> T. Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*, London: Routledge, 2011.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 92.
- <sup>7</sup> The descriptive details given in this account of Anthropology Days are synthesized from various sources, notably S. Brownell, "Bodies before Boas, sport before the laughter left," in S. Brownell (ed.) *The 1904 Anthropology Days and Olympic Games: Sport, Race, and American Imperialism*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008, and C. M. O'Bonsawin, "'There will be no law that will come against us': an important episode of Indigenous resistance and activism in Olympic history," in H. Jefferson and S. Wagg (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Olympic Studies*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- <sup>8</sup> J. Kasson's term for the wide spectrum of "high" and "low" entertainments available in nineteenth-century North America. See J. Kasson, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West: Celebrity, Memory, and Popular History*, New York: Hill and Wang, 2000, p. 43.
- <sup>9</sup> See S. Brownell, op. cit. and C. M. O'Bonsawin, op. cit.
- <sup>10</sup> OCG 68, *Mexico 68: Games of the XIX Olympiad, Official Report*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1969, see <<http://olympic-museum.de/o-reports/report1968.htm>> (Last accessed 13 February 2012), pp. 627–8.

- <sup>11</sup> E. Zolov, "Showcasing the 'Land of Tomorrow': Mexico and the 1968 Olympics," *The Americas*, vol. 61, no. 2, 2004, pp. 175–7.
- <sup>12</sup> The *indigenista* movement celebrated "authentic" (pre-Hispanic) aspects of indigenous cultures, but essentially as part of an integrationist plan to forge a unified Mexican identity through *mestizaje* (ethno-cultural mixing).
- <sup>13</sup> OCG 68, op. cit., pp. 419–20.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid. pp. 500–508.
- <sup>15</sup> P. Deloria, *Playing Indian*, New Haven, C.T.: Yale University Press, 1998.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 8.
- <sup>17</sup> I use the word "commons" here to evoke a managed yet publicly available resource that is seen broadly to belong to the populace.
- <sup>18</sup> D. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003, p. 28.
- <sup>19</sup> The 1970s saw the beginnings of this movement in government policy, with constitutional reforms being enacted through the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) and the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1988).
- <sup>20</sup> D. Latouche, "Montreal 1976," in J. Gold and M. Gold (eds) *Olympic Cities: City Agendas, Planning, and the World's Games, 1896–2012*, London: Routledge, 2007.
- <sup>21</sup> Details of this ceremony are drawn from COJO 76, *Montreal 1976: Games of the XXI Olympiad, Official Report*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1978, see <<http://olympic-museum.de/o-reports/report1976.htm>> (Last accessed 3 February 2012), pp. 306–12, and J. Forsyth, "Teepees and tomahawks: Aboriginal cultural representation at the 1976 Olympic Games," in K. Wamsley, R. Barney and S. Martyn (eds) *The Global Nexus Engaged: Past, Present, Future Interdisciplinary Olympic Studies*, London, ON: International Centre for Olympic Studies, 2002. The nine First Nations that were involved are listed in C. M. O'Bonsawin, "'No Olympics on stolen native land': contesting Olympic narratives and asserting indigenous rights within the discourse of the 2010 Vancouver Games", *Sport in Society: Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2009, p. 147.
- <sup>22</sup> C. M. O'Bonsawin, *ibid.*, p. 147.
- <sup>23</sup> J. Forsyth, op. cit., p. 72.
- <sup>24</sup> The farandole would presumably have registered for performers and audiences alike as a folk dance deriving from European traditions, even if its French origins were not known.
- <sup>25</sup> R. Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films: Attachments in the Age of Global Visibility*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007, p. 11.
- <sup>26</sup> K. Wamsley and M. Heine, "'Don't mess with the relay – it's bad medicine': Aboriginal culture and the 1988 Olympics," in R. Barney, S. Martyn, D. Brown, and G. MacDonald (eds) *Olympic Perspectives*, London, ON: International Centre for Olympic Studies, 1996, p. 173.
- <sup>27</sup> K. Coody Cooper, *Spirited Encounters: American Indians Protest Museum Policies and Practices*, Lanham, NY: Altamira, 2008, pp. 25–7.
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- <sup>32</sup> Sydney Olympic Games, Opening Ceremony, Channel Seven telecast (Australia), 15 September 2000.
- <sup>33</sup> M. Cohen, "Performance as artifact: objectification and agency in international spectacle," PhD dissertation, University of Sydney, 2002, p. 233.
- <sup>34</sup> Sydney Olympic Games, Opening Ceremony, NBC telecast (USA), 15 September 2000.
- <sup>35</sup> A. Tomlinson, "Picturing the winter Olympics: the opening ceremonies of Nagano (Japan) 1998 and Salt Lake City (USA) 2002," *Tourism, Culture and Communication*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2005, p. 87.
- <sup>36</sup> Salt Lake City Olympic Games, Opening Ceremony, NBC telecast (USA), 8 February 2002. Subsequent analysis of the 2002 Olympics is based on this recording.
- <sup>37</sup> J. Hogan, "Staging the nation: gendered and ethnicized discourses of national identity in Olympic opening ceremonies," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2003, p. 117.
- <sup>38</sup> My analysis of the 2010 Olympics is based on observations during fieldwork in Vancouver in the three weeks leading up to the event and in-person attendance at the opening ceremonies.
- <sup>39</sup> The official 2010 Games website lays out the agreement: "Four Host First Nations Society," *Canada's Games*, see <<http://www.canada2010.gc.ca/prtnrs/nations/050601-eng.cfm>> (Last accessed 21 January 2012).



<sup>40</sup> S. Lyons, "Rhetorical sovereignty: what do American Indians want from writing?" *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 51, no. 3, 2000, p. 457.

<sup>41</sup> Photographs and blogs on the Poverty Olympics (2008–2010) can be found at <<http://povertyolympics.ca>> (Last accessed 21 January 2013).

<sup>42</sup> J. Goodall, "Acting savage," in P. Tait (ed.) *Body Show/s: Australian Viewings of Live Performance*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000, p. 18.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* p. 25.

<sup>44</sup> M. Werry, *The Tourist State: Performing Leisure, Liberalism and Race in New Zealand*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011, p. xxxiii.

<sup>45</sup> J. Goodall, *op. cit.*, 25.