The Vancouver 2010 Olympics: Conflict of Stolen Indigenous Land

KIN 105- History of Indigenous Sport

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The violation of Indigenous rights is a major topic up for discussion when reviewing what happened at the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic Games. There is much discrepancy about how the First Nations people were recognized and what parts of Aboriginal history were “put on display”. Events leading up to the games, years in advance, also propose questions about the intentions of VANOC (Vancouver Organizing Committee for the 2010 Olympic Winter Games). Many aspects of Indigenous culture and history were selectively chosen and incorporated into the ceremonies and theme of the games, meanwhile the hardship and violence were completely forgotten. The Aboriginal right to land was also pushed aside without consideration and in some cases, VANOC paid off different nations to use their land. This land claim issue is something that finds its roots back in the times of formal agreements made between the Aboriginal people of Canada and the Government including the Royal Proclamation, Indian Act, and Treaties. Due to the deception, disrespect, and manipulation of the Indigenous peoples of British Columbia at the 2010 Vancouver Olympics, a large amount of tension still exists today: the conflict of “Stolen Native Land” is one that has managed to stay disguised in the eyes of the public

A primary factor of the conflict between VANOC and the First Nations is that the 2010 Winter Games will be held on Indigenous land that has not been surrendered. As such, it is important to look at the political history of the indigenous peoples and their interactions with the Crown in the past to better understand why this legal land issue is causing so much turmoil. Many scholars believe the entire dispute about land claim is due to a miscommunication between the British Government and Sir James Douglas (considered “the Father of British Columbia”). According to Christine O’Bonsawin (2010) this resulted in a misunderstanding of the criteria outlined in the Royal Proclamation of 1763 which ultimately stopped the formation of treaties. As such the formation of treaties ceased after the 1850’s and the Indigenous people began to question their title to the land (O’Bonsawin, 2010). The Constitutional Act of 1867 gave parliament control over “Indians and land reserved for the Indians” (Land Management, 2017). During this time period, Indigenous people desperately wanted to state legal claims to their land and were eventually allowed to due to the Indian Act. The Indian Act of 1867 outlined the land management responsibilities and rights of First Nations people and included that “land cannot be seized by legal process or be mortgaged or pledged to non-members of a first nation” (Land Management, 2017). This is precisely why the campaign ‘No Olympics on Stolen Land’ resulted in so much conflict leading up to the 2010 Vancouver Olympics and why the topic is still up for debate today.

However, the concept of the Games being held on ‘Stolen Territory’ is not an over exaggerated claim. “According to Canadian law, BC has neither the legal nor moral right to exist, let alone claim land and govern over Native peoples” (O’Bonsawin, 2010). Even though legally the leaders of British Columbia and VANOC have no right to the land, the government continues to make profit off of the land while the indigenous people suffer from some of the highest rates of disease, poverty and suicides (O’Bonsawin, 2010). In other words, the government has no respect for the Indigenous peoples and deceptively used their partnership with the FHFN to cover up the fact that they legally have no right or claim to the land. Not surprisingly, this conflict resulted in the repetitive dismissal of this issue by VANOC, which is disrespectful and unprofessional. Rights of people who have a history filled with violence and inequality that have a legal right to land are being pushed aside again and their rights, in a more modern way, have been neglected. ‘No Olympics on Stolen Native Land’ is a campaign that continues to bring attention to the issue of Indigenous rights that still exists today.

During previous years, before the Vancouver 2010 Olympics, Canada has had the opportunity to host the Olympic games and to include the First Nations in the programing and theme. Unfortunately, the organizing communities have difficulty accurately displaying and portraying honor to the First Nations communities. This failure to include major historical events in the ceremonies was not only seen at the Vancouver 2010 Olympics but at the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics and the 1976 Montreal Summer Olympics as well. The 1976 Games attempted to honor the First Nation people; however, the nations being honored were never consulted with and the Aboriginal inclusion in the Games was strictly designed by the Olympic organization for the Indigenous people, there was no collaboration (O’Bonsawin, 2010). At the 88’ Olympics in Calgary, the closing ceremonies which were supposed to be a commemoration ceremony for the selected nine First Nations (Abenaki, Algonquian, Atikamekw, Cree, Huron, Mi’gmiq, Mohawk, Montagnais, Naskapi) turned into a dance that consisted of 200 Indigenous people who were led by 250 non-indigenous peoples that were painted and dressed as ‘Indians’ (O’Bonsawin, 2010). The idea of this closing ceremonies program was to honor the First Nations peoples; however, due to the fact that the non-indigenous dancers lead the ceremonial procession and were in costume to look like ‘Indians’ the First Nations history was falsely portrayed, and as a result offended those of current Aboriginal status. The conflict that resulted from the 2010 Winter Olympics and the Indigenous representations have deep roots in the past: a past full of inaccurate representations and disrespect for the truth behind the history.

Another component associated with the Indigenous pushback towards the Games is the way that VANOC approached representing the Aboriginal history and how it strayed from what the Olympics are supposed to represent. The history of the Olympics and what it stands for goes back to the time of a French aristocrat, Baron Pierre Coubertin (1863-1937) who is credited with the development of the term ‘Olympism’ (O’Bonsawin, 2010). Olympism, as a general universal philosophy “is understood to be global coherent that speaks in truism of equity, anti-discrimination, mutual recognition and respect, tolerance and solidarity” (O’Bonsawin, 2010). Instead of focusing on equality, honour, and respect for all Nations, the primary focus for VANOC in preparation for the 2010 Games was the construction of new facilities like highways, roads, ski resorts, new bridges, port facilities, urban transit, and Olympic Venues. (Anonymous, 2007). The province of British Columbia under VANOC hoped to use the Olympics as a tool for development and expansion within their province as well; and would not accept the pushback of the First Nations to not use the unceded and non-surrendered indigenous land. Unfortunately, the benefits and honor of hosting an Olympic Games clouded the minds of organizers to the importance of Aboriginal history and the inattention to the Aboriginal rights to the land that the Games were being hosted on offended many.

An extended arm out to the First Nations people and an attempt to include the history of the Indigenous peoples can be seen in the images used for the Games. For example, the symbol for the Games that can be found on every piece of Olympic merchandise is the Inuksuk (a man-made landmark used by First Nations communities) and mythical creatures from the British Columbia First Nations were used as the mascots (Anonymous, 2007). Miga (legendary creature-half whale half bear), Quatchi (saskquatch), and Sumi (Salish guardian animal spirit) were the chosen mascots, and this effort to include First Nations history resulted in VANOC establishing itself as a partner and friend of the First Nations communities (Bourgeois, 2009). Some Nations argue that VANOC did an exceptional job of including the Indigenous history, whereas others continued to push-back and clash heads with the organization. One component that the Games made sure to revolve around was that an organization representing the Four Host First Nations (FHFN) were participating as the ‘Host First Nation’ together (Anonymous, 2007). This implied that all of the Nations in BC were in communication and agreement with VANOC; however this was not the case.

The relationship between VANOC and the FHFN was considered to be an ‘Olympic Movement’ and on the positive side was seen as a great gesture of inclusion. The formation of this relationship was the first time in history that a partnership with the local First Nations communities was made in preparation for a Canadian Olympic Games; many saw this as a pinnacle moment that would make a small step in mending the relationship with the First Nations people. The agreement between VANOC and the FHFN included criteria including that through the FHFN the nations would “cooperate as host nations to the Games, (the ‘Four Host Nations), welcome the world to their shared traditional territories as ‘Host’ Nations, and show visitors to the Games that the Nations have a positive vison for their future and welcome business opportunities from around the world” (Silver, J. J, Meletis, A. Z., & Vadi, P, 2012). Even though VANOC made what is seen as an attempt to join the Nations, it still did not solve the problem that the Olympics were being held on land owned by the Indigenous peoples and despite the conformation and agreements between some Nations to use the land, others stood still in their beliefs. This division made it difficult for VANOC to plan and the resistance by some and agreeance of others understandably put the organizing committee in a difficult place.

On top of stealing land, VANOC has also been accused of deception. Many First Nations communities and leaders have been ‘paid off’ for land. In fact, “To counter charges of racism and to better exploit native culture, Olympic organizers have spent millions of dollars to buy off indigenous peoples, especially band councils” (Anonymous, 2007). Leading up to the Vancouver 2010 Olympics, the Squamish and Mt. Currie/Lil’wat nations were given more than 20 million dollars (some of which was used to build a new cultural center) (Anonymous, 2007). There are also reports stating that Aboriginal organizations and youth groups located around Vancouver area have been given Olympic money (Anonymous, 2007). VANOC tried to keep the peace amongst the First Nations people but using money to buy off land or the ability to use land for the Games. This is where the claim ‘Deceptive Inclusion’ finds its roots, and why so many Nations are angry and refuse to collaborate with VANOC. A native chief interviewed by the *Globe and Mail* stated that, “We don’t want the white man’s money. What we want is a share of our resources” (Friesen, 2008). This Canadian Native leader along with others plan to “expose the damage done to Canada’s Indigenous people in the run-up to the 2010 Olympics in B.C” (Friesen, 2008). This push back is due to the American’s plan to run an oil pipeline from Canada to the U.S through Native land. All the First Nations ask is that they receive part of the profit: a reasonable argument considering their rights to the land.

Despite the central placement of the Indigenous theme and incorporations of the First Nations culture, many Nations continued to oppose the actions of the VANOC and this resulted in riots, protests and turmoil. VANOC described the months and years leading up to the Olympics as “frustrating” and “disappointing” and “unfortunate” (Anonymous, 2007). Despite the focus and intricacy VANOC placed on crafting a ‘multicultural’ Olympics, the “No Olympics On Stolen Land Campaign” continued to disrupt VANOC’s attempt at producing a multicultural environment. Native activists in cities across Canada allied with other social justice activists and disrupted the procession of the ceremonial Olympic torch and would not allow it to pass through their communities (Bourgeois, 2009). Members of these communities also prohibited the celebration of the Games on their traditional territory, making a bold statement about the preservation of true “Olympic Spirit” (Bourgeois, 2009). Another activist group that played a role in the conflict in preparation of the Games was the Aboriginal Women’s Action Network (AWAN). The argument of these women is that the Olympics is ultimately a potent source of prostitution and rape and that Aboriginal women and children have an even greater risk of this violence (Bourgeois, 2009). The history behind their argument is that Aboriginal women “were Canada’s first prostituted and brotheled women” (Bourgeois, 2009). They argue that with an Olympics hosted on First Nation territory that an increase in prostitution and rape will result and that this is an issue that needs to be seriously considered; an issue behind the riots and protests.

Ultimately, the issue behind the “Stolen Land” is that the rights and equality of Indigenous peoples are not being acknowledged. The cost of the Olympic Games themselves includes more than just the 900$ million spent to host the Games (Johnson, 2010), it includes the toll the environment took, as well as the price the Indigenous peoples paid. Ironically, the Vancouver 2010 Olympics was advertised as the “Green Olympics” however, despite this, a large amount of previously untouched land was destroyed for the construction of new roads, amenities, and various Olympic venues (Anonymous, 2007). This development destroyed parts of the environment instead of culturally enhancing what is known as “Beautiful British Columbia.” This destruction of land and resources, especially on land legally owned by the First Nations people, provides insight as to how this action can indefinitely be deemed as unjust and unfair. On top of the financial and environmental costs of the Games, the Fist Nations people also paid the price of having falsified events of their history “swept under the rug.” For First Nations peoples, “the cost of inclusion in the 2010 Vancouver Olympics is the erasure, and subsequent perpetuation, of the colonial violence they have and continue to experience in Canadian society.” (Bourgeois, 2009). The government was willing to spend hundreds of millions of dollars to destroy land and create new facilities to host the games, yet hesitated to build new community centers and facilities for struggling First Nations communities across the province. Overall, the cost of the Olympics was much more than a materialistic amount: the cost of environmental destruction and the misrepresentation of historical struggles was left out when calculating the final cost of hosting the Olympics, a grand total that many Canadians are unaware of.

In conclusion, there is no question that the rights of the First Nations people of British Columbia were disregarded in preparation for the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics. They were treated with deception, inequality, and were expected to go along with it all. Those who stood up to VANOC were presented in the media as incompetent and not many are aware of the real sources behind the conflict. This is an issue that needs to be exposed; however, unfortunately it has been pushed aside and disguised through the media. The way VANOC approached incorporating the Indigenous culture was hypocritically countered by their decision to pay-off certain First Nations communities to use the land. The research reveals that the cost of the Olympics was much more than the dollar value assigned to the preparation for the games, and that Indigenous culture paid the ultimate price once again. Overall, the hosting of the Olympics on “Stolen Native Land” resulted in conflict due to the deception and inequality surrounding the Indigenous inclusion: this disrespect has resulted in a clash between cultures that continues to exist today.

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