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Cultural Appropriation of an Orientalized Inuit Culture within the
Canadian "North"*

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Observing the “Inukshuk” at the Vancouver Olympic Games: Cultural Appropriation of an Orientalized Inuit Culture within the Canadian “North”

ABSTRACT

Canada’s identity, with the idea of the “North” as a central element, has taken the Inuit cultural artifacts to represent the country as a whole. Adopting the processes of Orientalization, cultural appropriation and iconification, the southern Canadian authorities eliminate the original context of the Inuit cultural artifacts to use as national symbols that allegedly represent the “North”. This paper looks at the idea of the “north” as vaguely defined by southern Canadians as apart of Canadian identity, while the original Inuit voice is silenced. A distinct example of this vague definition is the use of “Inukshuk” as the symbol for the Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver, Canada in 2010, demonstrating the southern Canadian portrayal of its identity through the listed processes in order to “other” itself internationally through cultural uniqueness, all the while interpreting Inuit cultural artifact with its own definitions of the “northern” identity.

KEYWORDS

Orientalism, Inuit, Appropriation, Canada

When one thinks of Canada, the first images that come to mind are those of a vast landscape - cold, and with a lot of snow. These impressions were derived in part from the artistic movement originated by the Group of Seven, which directed Canada's national identity towards geographic nationalism. Thus, Canada has been using the concept of the “North”, which was developed and popularized by the Group of Seven in their paintings, as a central element of its national identity. However, without specifying the identity of the inhabitants in the “North”, Canada develops a vague explanation of this identity. The national anthem states that Canada is the “true North strong and free,” but the country has never succinctly explained what the “true North” means. An example of capitalizing on the idea of the “North” is the Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver in 2010, when a colorful Inukshuk was used as the logo to represent the hosting country. This action received disputes and opposition from the Inuit community because the Inukshuk is originally an Inuit symbol created for directional purposes with complex Indigenous meanings. Therefore, using it to represent Canada as a whole is a problematic process that disables the Inuit people to perform their own identity with Aboriginal cultural interpretations. The Inukshuk, which was appropriated by Canada as its own cultural artifact, not only provides an unclear image of the “North”, but also reveals an act of cultural dominance, a process of “Orientalization” of the Inuit culture.

In this paper, I argue that the idea of the “North” promoted by Canada as its own identity is the process of Orientalization, appropriation, and iconification of the Inuit culture. Making the Inukshuk a national symbol is an example of this process because of the elimination of the original context of this cultural artifact. To support my argument, I will define Andrew Said's theory of ‘Orientalism’ and ‘othering’, and show that Canada uses these concepts to interpret the Inukshuk in its own way, in order to ‘other’ itself from other countries. I will introduce the context of the idea of the “North” as a Canadian national identity and how it was derived from the art movement popularized by the Group of Seven. The “North” misrepresents Canada by blurring the gap between the representations of the western, urban Canadian population living close to the border, and that of the Inuit population living further north. Cultural appropriation is the method that Canada uses to take the Inukshuk away from the original Inuit context, and this process will be explained in my paper. Finally, Jeff Ruhl's analysis of “iconification” as a process of nationalizing the Inukshuk is my fourth stance to demonstrate that Canada's identity as the “North” is a problematic concept because of its underrepresentation of the Inuit people, and its inability to represent Canada as a multicultural nation.

Definition of Orientalism and the “Orientalized” Inuit

Orientalism, a theory developed by Edward Said, is mainly about the Western conceptions of somewhere that is connected to the West, but is also far away: particularly to the Middle-East and further. The ‘Orient’ is usually conceptualized as being somewhere exotic and different in terms of lifestyle and culture. In his book, Said offers several aspects of his definition of Orientalism. First, this term is created based on the “Western experience” of the Orient, while helping to also define Europe because of the provided contrast in lifestyle, personality, and image, within the European conceptions of the “Orient”(Said 2). Second, this term is a thought

which is created to distinguish the ideas of the Orient and the Occident. On top of the imposed definitions of the “Orient”, the third key aspect of the definition of Orientalism is that it is the “Western style of dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 3). Using Said’s definition of Orientalism, one can see that it also defines the Canadian conceptions of the “North” and the Inuit. The ‘North’ is the ‘Orient’ of Canada because it is a defined space by Canadian authorities as unique, and a feature that makes Canada different from other places in the world. This is also a process of ‘othering’, which Said elaborates in the conclusion of his book. Said states that the construction of an identity involves the construction of an ‘other’ to continuously demonstrate their differences and distinguish from ‘us’ (Said 331). When constructing the ‘northern’ identity, the Canada in the south “others” itself from the United States through distinctive features such as the northern landscape and climate, and through producing a corresponding culture that is different from its Southern neighbor. However, during this process of ‘othering’, southern Canadians also ‘other’ the Inuit people because they are the actual inhabitants of the north, yet excluded from the landscape. The southern Canadian conception of ‘North’, therefore, is different from the Inuit concept. However, the southern Canadian authority still takes aspects of the Inuit culture as building blocks of its ‘northern’ identity, which practices the process of ‘orientalizing’ the Inuit by ‘restructuring’ their culture and ‘having authority’ over the community, in accordance to Said’s definitions (Said 3). This process of “Orientalization” and appropriation of culture can be demonstrated by the logo for the Vancouver Winter Olympic Games in 2010, portraying a smiling Inukshuk, which represents “friendship.” The use of the Inukshuk not only shows Canada’s Orientalization and ‘othering’ of the Inuit culture, but also the problematic definitions of the ‘Canadian North.’

The Imagined “North” As Canadian Identity

For Canada, a young country with a British background and a culturally diverse population, a unifying national identity is very significant. During the 1920s, a “new English-Canadian cultural nationalism” emerged which looked to disconnect Canada from Britain. The subsequent artistic movement inspired by Canadian landscape painting by the Group of Seven popularized the idea of the ‘North’ in Canadian literature and visual art. (Kaufmann 685) However, given the fact that the Group of Seven’s landscape painting was inspired by Tom Tomson’s painting in “the Algonquin Park region of Ontario,” (Kaufmann 686) the objects of the Group’s paintings were mainly “the rougher, rawer elements of the Canadian north (primarily the shield country of northern Ontario)” (Kaufmann 685). It is a good start that the Group relates Canada’s landscape to the idea of “Canadianness”, however, their paintings are lacking the element of human population, which is an important factor of identity construction. Meanwhile, the limited portrayal of landscape in the Group’s paintings, located mainly in Ontario, overlooks the Aboriginal presence further north. The Group of Seven provided a useful method to construct Canada’s cultural identity. This method, however, lacks and problematizes the definition of the “North”, and it is uncertain how Canadians, regardless of their ethnicity, can identify with it. The Inuit people, who are the actual inhabitants of the north, are also invisible in the paintings of the “North” that the Group created. Therefore, it is difficult to derive and construct a concrete identity from the Group of Seven’s landscape paintings. In Eva Mackey’s article *Death by Landscape: Race, Nature, and Gender in Canadian Nationalist Mythology*, she holds that

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“identity,” specifically national identity, is formed based on the idea of “imagined nation” developed by Benedict Anderson, and “definitions of similarity, continuity, and different versions of identity work to include and exclude populations in specific ways”(Mackey).” Therefore, similar to Said’s concept of ‘othering,’ the process of constructing an identity is a process of inclusion and exclusion, in order to create the sense of belonging and unity. In Canada, ‘North’ as a national identity excludes the Aboriginal population from the landscape, especially the Inuit community whose cultural elements are taken by Canada to represent its “northern” identity. Mackey’s “specific way” of exclusion in Canada is to appropriate the Inuit culture as “Canadian” while taking away its context and origin.

The idea of the “North”, in the current Canadian context, carries blurred definitions. According to Victor Rabinovitch, the “North” “did not necessarily mean the Arctic,” instead, it can also refer to “urban centers” closer to the border”(Rabinovitch 17). However, in cultural terms, the “North” is defined as the “vast Canadian frontier and an idealized Canadian personality,” and it is portrayed as a “near-mythical wilderness of rivers, forests, tundra, and ice fields, defining our sense of space, environment, and visual identity”(Rabinovitch 19). Rabinovitch mentions that the geographical nationalism that the idea of ‘North’ creates for Canadians is the sense of belonging that is based on the visual views of Canada, which are demonstrated as the “near-mythical wilderness,” and the sense of being close to nature (Rabinovitch 19). However, these ambiguous definitions of the “North”, either based on Canada’s location and natural scenery, or the image of the “North” as “wilderness” and a mythical landscape, are missing the important element of Aboriginal presence. Primarily, if the “North” can be found in urban centers, then one can find the “Northern lifestyle” in every metropolitan district in the world. Secondly, although the “North” as a wilderness is a good way to portray Canada’s natural scenery and create “a physical dimension to community identity,” (Rabinovitch 19) the Inuit population, as the real population that adapts to the ‘North’, is invisible in this “wilderness,” because it is perceived as mystical and empty by the national identity.

From how the “North” is portrayed as Canada’s national identity, the ambiguity of this process shows that the reality of the “North” is different from how it is demonstrated by the government and by commercial makers, to the Canadian public. When displaying the Canadian culture to the outside world, a number of Aboriginal cultural artifacts are used, especially artifacts of the Inuit culture, to support the “North” as a collective identity. The issue with this is that the Canadian concept and use of the “North” is “disconnected” with the actual functions and meanings of the Inuit artifacts in their original context (Robinson 222). Using Haig-Brown’s theory, this is a form of cultural appropriation because Inuit artifacts, like the Inukshuk, are used by non-Inuit, Canadian cultural producers close to the southern border to promote their own identity.

Cultural Appropriation: Haig-Brown’s Categorizations, and Their Practice in Canada

In order to facilitate the idea of the “North” as a unique identity, Canada uses cultural appropriation to collect geographical features, and elements of Aboriginal culture as a culture of its own. Cultural appropriation can be defined as “the adoption of some specific aspects of one culture by a different cultural group”(Haig-Brown 925). Due to the fact that cultural elements

from one culture are “imported” into another, the original context of these artifacts may be lost. There may also be a highly different meaning assigned by the cultural group that imported them. There are three types of cultural appropriation listed by Haig-Brown, which are commercial exploitation, modernist “affinity,” and post-modern quotation (Haig-Brown 925).

Commercial exploitation occurs when Aboriginal images and art are used in commercial products; for example, in advertising for tourism. It is a direct way of cultural appropriation of Aboriginal artifacts to serve for a commercial purpose (Haig-Brown 925). The use of Aboriginal images and artifacts by non-Aboriginal artists is the act of modernist “affinity” because of the missing original cultural context of Aboriginal art which is overlooked by the non-Aboriginal artist. Post-modern quotation refers to the “severing of the language from a specific meaning,” which may interpret Aboriginal words and thoughts differently in the non-Aboriginal reader’s or listener’s own terms.

The combined process of Orientalism, “Othering” and appropriation of the Inuit culture is used by the southern Canadian cultural producers to create a collective identity of Canada. Canada used the Inukshuk as a national symbol for the Vancouver Olympic Games, added the meaning of “friendship” on it, which is a positive action for non-Inuit Canadians and the world for nation-building and the portrayal of positive national image. However, the Olympic symbol is much different from the original meaning of the Inukshuk among the Inuit people. This process of using the Inukshuk as a national symbol, and selling it on souvenirs, fits in Haig-Brown’s commercial exploitation and the modernist “affinity” as methods of cultural appropriation. Because the Inuit culture can be associated with the image of the “North”, Canada chooses to appropriate the Inukshuk from this Orientalized area into its own national identity. This process silences the Inuit voice and disables them to interpret their cultural artifacts in their original meanings due to the commercialization and the patriotization by non-Inuit cultural producers in Canada.

“Iconification”: Offer of Meaning By Making the Inukshuk A National Symbol

In order to reaffirm the actions of Orientalism and cultural appropriation of Inuit culture in Canada, I will use the process of “iconification,” a theory that Jeff Ruhl analyzed in his thesis to unpack the use of the Inukshuk as a national symbol of Canada. Iconification is defined as offering an “iconic or symbolic status” onto something with the purpose of giving it a definition (Ruhl 29). This process is used by Canadian cultural producers in order to assign meanings to the nationalized Inukshuk. According to Ruhl, there are two kinds of Inukshuk: an Inuit one, and a nationalized one (Ruhl 15). In the Inuit culture, the “stone monument” is spelled inuksuk, whereas it is spelled Inukshuk in the Canadian culture (Ruhl 15). For the Inuit inuksuk, there is no singular definition for it because of its many forms, while the “nationalized” version of Inukshuk is a “myth” which is a “distilled, condensed, [and] reduced” version of the Inuit inuksuk, and is sourced from “romantic and one-dimensional notions of Aboriginal culture”(Ruhl 16).

This process of condensing and reducing the original meanings of the Inuit cultural artifact to use as a national symbol of Canada in the south is a process of appropriation, while the differently

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interpreted meanings of the Inukshuk is also a process of “Orientalism” - Orientalizing the Inukshuk in the Western definition, and using it to perform Canada’s popularized “Northern” identity.

The nationalized Inukshuk is portrayed as a “stone man,” with a head, arms, a body and legs, popularly recognized as “the” Inukshuk; however, it is the simplification of the various forms of inuksuk in the Inuit culture into a “manageable form”(Ruhl 18). The simplification of the Inukshuk is important because it can receive mass understanding of it as a national symbol and a unique impression of the “North”, but it excludes the source, the Inuit culture, by using a vague explanation and representation of this cultural artifact as a “friendly stone man”. This process of simplifying meaning is, according to Ruhl, informing the colonial legacy that has “marginalized the Aboriginal peoples” throughout the history of Canada. Indeed, taking an Inuit cultural artifact and assigning a meaning to it in order to “iconify” it into a national symbol of Canada, is a process of appropriating the Inuit culture into Canadian without the original meanings. The symbol of an Inukshuk further strengthens the “North” as an identity which Canada seeks to construct, because this symbol intends to represent the culture of the “North” by demonstrating a supposedly “Inuit” figure. However, the inukshuk, as portrayed in the Winter Olympic Games in 2010, was a nationalized figure to represent the “Northern” identity as defined by southern Canadians.

The Olympic “Inukshuk”: Tension Between Original and Imposed Meanings

When the emblem for the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic Games was unveiled in 2005, it received disputes from different Aboriginal groups of its limitation of representation and lack of original meaning. Not only does the image of an “Inukshuk” not represent the Aboriginal groups who own the land where the Games take place, it also cannot represent the Inuit because of its oversimplified meaning of “friendship”(The Examiner 2010). Peter Irniq, a former commissioner of Nunavut, told CBC news after the unveiling ceremony of the Olympic emblem in 2005, that it “should not be called an Inukshuk”(CBC News). The Inukshuk is an Inuit symbol that serves as a “directional marker”, which should be built at certain locations and given specific and unique meanings. Similar to Ruhl’s argument which I elaborated earlier, Irniq states that the Inuit “never build Inukshuk with head, legs and arms . . . These are called ‘inunguat,’ [meaning] imitation of man, imitation of a person”(CBC News). Irniq also mentioned that he had seen stone figures built by “non-Inuit” with arms, legs, and a head. From this perspective, one can see that the use of the “Inukshuk” as the emblem to represent Canada in the Winter Olympic Games in 2010 was an act of cultural appropriation - the theory of modernist affinity coined by Haig-Brown which refers to the use of an Aboriginal symbol by non-Aboriginal artists or cultural producers. The symbol is interpreted with an “Orientalized” meaning of the original Inuit symbol, and “iconified” to be the national symbol of Canada. Meanwhile, due to the removal of the original Inuit meanings of the Olympic “Inukshuk,” this process is an example of modernist affinity within Haig Brown’s categorizations of cultural appropriation. Taking something from the Inuit community in the north to represent “Canada” as a whole also can be considered “cultural theft” which is another name for cultural appropriation (Haig-Brown).

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This paper discussed Canada's use of the inukshuk as a national symbol in the Olympic Games as a process of orientalizing, appropriating, and iconifying the Inuit artifact as a Canadian one. These three processes work together to eliminate the original context of the Inuit artifact, erases the multiple and complex meanings of the inukshuk, and makes it a national symbol which does not accurately represent neither southern Canadians, Aboriginal groups, nor new immigrants. Using the Inukshuk to represent "Canada", which usually indicates the people living close to the border to the United States, takes cultural elements away from the Inuit people and imposes a meaning of the "North" as an identity. The inukshuk, therefore, is not a suitable representative of the "North" as a Canadian identity that the southern Canadians promote. The reason for the misfit is that southern Canadians need to take an Inuit artifact for themselves as a collective representation to promote a 'northern' identity, which was vaguely defined by its originators, the Group of Seven. This shows that the identity of "North" itself needs further definition because it still hangs on the Group of Seven's interpretation of mystical and empty wilderness without inhabitants, especially aboriginal inhabitants.

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