

STAGING AN OLYMPIC MYTH: DEMOCRACY AND 2010 VANCOUVER OLYMPICS

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Jacob Roberts is a recent master's graduate from the department of Environmental and Urban Change, York University. He is also a recipient of the SSHRC CGS-M Award (2023-2024).

Tell us about your professional experiences before starting your current studies.

I graduated from Queen's University in 2019 with an honours in Classical Archaeology and Geography. Following my undergrad, I became a licensed commercial archaeologist, leading digs throughout Ontario. The experiences of collaborating alongside First Nations Liaisons, excavating complex Indigenous archaeological sites, and travelling through Ontario's picturesque landscapes were exciting, stimulating opportunities.

However, as I sought a career as an archaeologist, the unexamined ethical contradictions of Ontario's commercial archaeology industry gave me pause. While excavating deeply sensitive indigenous artifacts, inevitably each dig felt to me like a packaged product to be rid of its Indigenous politics, for the primacy of the real-estate sector. The process of commercial archaeology "emphasizes" the technical application of knowledge and expertise, work[ing] effectively to render wider political debates about the legitimacy of cultural and social claims on the past as non-political (Smith, 2004, p. 11). As a vehicle of disaster capitalism and/or statecraft of neoliberalization (Hutchings and La Salle, 2015), questions of power relations were routinely ignored. I found the culture was steeped in a discourse of de-political doublethink, where "(re)affirming" archaeology's ideals of saving or protecting the past reinforce group beliefs and are thus accepted without hesitation" (Hutchings and La Salle, 2015, p. 709), while also overlooking archaeology's role in colonial violence.

The ethical dilemma of archaeology's contradictions and ignorance of power-relations disturbed me and pushed me to pursue a master's at York.

Tell us about your dissertation and how it relates to the study of Canada.

My dissertation diverges from my professional experiences, as I sought to investigate the discursive politics of the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics. I use a post-foundational lens, employing the political philosophy of Jacques Rancière to examine the symbolic and material (re)production of space in Vancouver, during the bidding and planning stages of the 2010 Olympics. Rancière's philosophical contribution to my theoretical framework is invaluable, as he provides an aesthetic and spatial definition of politics (Rancière, 1999, Blakey, 2021).

My theoretical framework also diverges from the more spectacular moments of the Olympics, as I investigate the research gap on the politics of the bidding and planning stages, the only moment for questioning the normative relevance of the Olympics (Lauermaun, 2016). Examining the politics of the Olympic Games, informed by Rancière's (1999) aesthetic approach of radical politics, and method of equality within this temporal and spatial context, prompts conversation of how the Games toyed with democracy.

I intended to answer two research questions: (1) what are the normative discourses that ordered (Ranciere, 1999, Dikeç, 2007) Vancouver's society to accept the Olympics as a necessary event for the city. and (2) what are the politics of Vancouver, according to these articulations?

Furthermore, how are the Vancouver Olympics articulated as natural and a “normal” feature of the city?

How did you come to choose this topic?

As I was visiting friends in Vancouver a few years ago, I walked along the Seawall in False Creek. Framed by the beautiful North Shore mountains, dozens of luxury glass and steel-clad condominiums, like the Olympic village line False Creek. While only a fifteen-minute walk north lies Canada’s poorest postal code. How could two extremities of wealth exist so close to one another in a city of proud historic progressivism? I was curious how the interplay of the urban project of the Olympics, and Vancouver’s politics, constituted the redevelopment of the city leading to many of the unaffordability crises the city deals with today.

What are the main takeaways you want others to come away with?

The 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics are spoken about through themes of inevitability and resignation by interviewees expressed as: i) the games were destined to arrive, and there was overall acceptance of the event; ii) urban infrastructural projects are a discursive articulation of this inevitability.

The repeating theme of inevitability illustrates that the Olympics became a depoliticized object and process. The Games no longer were spoken about as a debatable processor object. These articulations, spoken about as a natural feature of Vancouver, generate a specific sayable, thinkable, and understandable truth (Rancière, 1999).

Vancouver’s politics was social-spatially ordered (policed) through these themes of inevitability, infrastructure projects, and this is how research participants justified the Olympics. This constitutes the neoliberalization of Vancouver, as each transit infrastructure project was designed, built, financed, and operated through public-private partnerships. The more ‘efficient’ private sector and free market outweighed a public option, and this discourse became naturalized.

Tell us about the challenges that you as a researcher are experiencing or had to overcome to do this work.

I found the fieldwork and writing process difficult. Conducting semi-structured interviews, avoiding leading questions and assessing my own positionality as an interviewer was a challenge as a junior researcher. My research participants were a broad mix including volunteers, city politicians, senior Olympic committee members, and protestors. I deeply sought to reflect on the uncomfortable and perceived status of myself as an ‘expert’ to some interviewee’s while simultaneously possibly being a subordinate to senior Olympic members. Chatting with my supervisor and friends in the program deeply helped me wade through these complex questions of positionality and reflexivity.

What advice do you have for those starting their academic journey?

Make profound friendships! Creating friendships with other classmates in my program, and collegial connections with other faculty really grounded me and gave me a sense of momentum during writing blocks. It was also a source of inspiration, when bouncing off theoretical or fieldwork ideas/challenges with friends whose research was disparate from my own.

2. Viewing your research as a series of manageable projects. I first felt overwhelmed when approaching my thesis, seeing it as a massive singular project. Rather, envisioning it as a set of smaller, achievable goals motivated me.

What are the next steps in your research?

I am in the process of fashioning my thesis into a research paper for publishing! My thesis defense was stimulating and provoked many more questions for further research on the discursive politics of neo liberalization in Olympic mega-events.

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