Canada's "National" Sport

Representations of Lacrosse at the Canadian Museum of Civilization

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**ABSTRACT**

Canada is a country that at its genesis was comprised of more than two cultures, each of which had its own unique language and set of traditions. Although these cultures were united into a single state, there has never been a common ethno linguistic quality or shared past on which the country could found a nation (Des Granges 8). This has manifested itself in constant efforts by the state to construct a pan-Canadian nation that can encompass all people within the country’s vast territory (Des Granges 8). One of the most consistent mediums used to create a nation has been sport, most notably lacrosse. A traditional game of the Aboriginal peoples of the Plains and eastern Woodlands, lacrosse was the most popular sport in North America at the time of European contact (Jette 14). Through a process of amateurization and codification described by Michael A. Robidoux, the game was appropriated by non-Aboriginal Canadians and used to define the Canadian nation. This is represented in the National Sports Act of Canada (1994), which designates a modernized version of lacrosse one of the country’s national sports. This article draws on the research of Benedict Anderson, who argues that nations are social constructs considered to be homogenous by their members. It discusses the role of sport in the creation and perpetuation of national identities and describes the role of lacrosse in the development of Canadien and later Canadian identity. It then explains the process by which lacrosse was amateurized, modernized and appropriated, illustrates how the National Sports Act created an imagined Canada and finally, it outlines how representations of lacrosse in the Canadian Museum of Civilization fail to contextualize the sport in terms of other socio-economic and cultural shifts throughout Canadian history.

**KEYWORDS**

Lacrosse, Appropriation, National Sports Act, Canadian identity
Lacrosse is the oldest team sport in North America (Jette 14). A traditional game of the Aboriginal peoples of the Plains and eastern Woodlands, it was the most popular sport on the continent at the time of European contact (Jette 14). In the years before and directly following European arrival, lacrosse was an important part of the cultural lives of a number of Aboriginal groups. Maurice Jette (1975) argues that the sport served an array of purposes, such as fitness, combat training, prayer, healing, commemoration, diplomacy and education (Jette 18). Through a process of amateurization and codification described by Michael A. Robidoux (2002), Canada’s elites have stripped lacrosse of its original meaning. The process of modernizing the sport, it is argued, was used by the elite to dictate a desired set of Canadian values while removing undesirable people from play. This process allowed for the appropriation of the game by non-Aboriginal Canadians beginning in the late nineteenth century. James H. Frey and Stanley Eitzen (1991) assert this is the case because sport is a vehicle through which elites are able to reinforce power structures (Frey and Eitzen 511). This can be seen in the Canadian context in the National Sports Act of Canada (1994), which designated the modernized version of lacrosse one of the national sports of Canada.

Using contemporary analyses of sport and identity to investigate the meanings of the National Sports Act (NSA) and text found in the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC), this paper argues that lacrosse can act as a case study through which the concept of appropriation of Aboriginal culture can be understood. It suggests the representation of lacrosse in the CMC uses “selective tradition” – highlighting certain events while relegating others to the background in order to create a specific account of history – to present the sport as having existed outside of any political-economic context (Furniss 74). This use of selective tradition legitimizes the colonial history of Canada by allowing European-Canadians to claim the sport as their own and thereby claim indigeneity.

The analyses will be organized in five parts: first it will discuss the role of sport in the creation and perpetuation of national identities. Second, it will describe the role of lacrosse in the development of Canadien and later Canadian identity. Third, it will explain the process by which lacrosse was amateurized, modernized and appropriated. Fourth, it will illustrate how the National Sports Act created an imagined Canada.
And finally, it will outline how the representation of lacrosse in the CMC fails to contextualize lacrosse in terms of other socio-economic and cultural shifts throughout Canadian history.

**Sport and Nation-building in Canada**

Canada is a country that at its genesis was comprised of more than two cultures, each of which had its own unique language and set of traditions. Although these cultures were united into a single state, there was never a common ethno linguistic quality or shared past on which the country could found a nation (Des Granges 8). In rejecting the traditional “nation-to-state” model found in England and France (where Canada receives its European heritage), Canada has been the site of constant efforts to construct a pan-Canadian nation that can encompass all people within the state’s vast territory (Des Granges 8). One of the most successful attempts to create a nation has been through the use of sport.

Canadian historian Michael A. Robidoux, who has studied the history and development of hockey in Canada, argues that sport has been the most consistent expression of Canadian nationalism since Confederation (Robidoux 209). Similarly, academics Frey and Eitzen suggest that, while sport may be based upon competition, in giving diverse populations something to share in the name of national solidarity, sport can “counteract internal racial, ethnic, regional and class diversity and conflict … [and] contribute to a national identity or sense of nationalism that temporarily overrides differences” (Frey 511).

This occurs because sport is one of the most important socializing tools in western society. It is an arena where fundamental human issues such as success and failure, the nature of man, and the need for social order and control are explored (Haerle 45). In dealing with these issues, sport becomes a medium through which the patterned behaviours, social structures and inter-institutional relationships that define a given social group are learned (Frey and Eitzen 503). For this reason, sport can be defined as a “sacred institution” (Haerle 44) in western society which serves the primary purpose of reinforcing “recurring beliefs which seem so basically true to people that not only are they seldom challenged [but] they
form a basis of thought and evaluation” (Haerle 44). People have become comfortable enough with sport serving this role that, even as value systems in society shift, it remains the preeminent vehicle through which dominant ideas and beliefs are transferred (Haerle 44). In this way, sport offers an ideal medium to reinforce the hegemony of societal arrangements (Frey 505).

With few exceptions, this hegemony is used to create a semblance of national unity – as evidenced by national sporting events such as the Vancouver Olympics of 2010 – and, although it enforces a structure within a given group, it is generally not used to disjoint peoples living in a single state. This paper addresses one of these exceptions: lacrosse. The game of lacrosse serves as an interface between Aboriginal and European-settler culture in Canada. While the adoption of the sport by European populations is said to have united the two groups, the standardized version of the game adopted by European Canadians differs greatly from the traditional, pre-contact activity it is meant to have descended from. In changing the nature of the game, lacrosse serves as an example of cultural appropriation rather than integration. As Richard Gruneau explains:

The ongoing marginalization of certain traditional sports practices or their incorporation into more “respectable” and “useful” ways of playing … were all part of a broader process of cultural conflict and social change in Canadian society. Within this broader process, the specific struggles of men and women, social classes and racial and ethnic groups, over different versions of how to live, how to work and play, and what to value can be seen (Gruneau, 21).

In this light, lacrosse can be considered a medium through which the struggles between Aboriginal and European-Canadian populations can be seen. The implementation of regulations that altered traditional conceptions of the sport and prohibited Aboriginal participation was preceded by a period during which lacrosse carried great spiritual and cultural significance. The following section will provide background information about the sport prior to its eventual appropriation by a Canadian state attempting to legitimize its claims on the land it occupies.
Challenges to a Native Canadian Identity

The development of lacrosse in Canada is long and complex. Though the sport was not to become widespread among European-Canadians until the mid-19th century, the game is said to be an original Aboriginal custom that dates back several centuries (Jette 14). Unlike the game practiced in Canada today, prior to European contact, the sport held significant religious and cultural importance. Consider this passage written by historian Maurice Jette:

… [W]hen a mita (probably an older member of the tribe) felt that he had sinned against the precepts of the gods, he would show regret and pledge future sincerity by giving a ball game. A game was also sometimes given as an offering to a god when a member of the family was sick, this offering being equivalent to giving to the poor (Jette 17).

In the centuries preceding Confederation, lacrosse was the most popular of all Aboriginal sports (Jette 18). There existed two types of the game: “traditional” and “ritual”. The former involved the participation of a large number of people and was used to increase muscular strength and fitness in preparation for war; the latter was played as an appeal for divine intervention such as a request for rain or healing, as a penance for sins and as a means to mourn the dead (Jette 18). These games were played in a manner so distant from the European framework of sport that it both fascinated and repulsed early settlers (Robidoux 212). One early traveler characterized lacrosse as being “so violent that [players] tear their Skins, and break their Legs very often in striving to raise the ball” (Eisen 4).

While it first kept settlers at a distance, the rough nature of lacrosse eventually appealed to young French males who, unlike their English counterparts, lived among First Nations peoples and made efforts to learn...
their language, customs and social practices (Robidoux 213). As successive
generations of French settlers and “anciens Canadiens” lived among
Aboriginal peoples they began to more extensively borrow traditions and
cultural values from First Nations peoples. Most prominent among this
cultural borrowing was an alternative model of masculinity (Robidoux 214).
For a group who had grown to more closely relate to Aboriginal lifestyle
than that of their European counterparts, French settlers realized that
European conceptions of gentlemanly masculinity no longer spoke to them
(Robidoux 214). Understanding this, they began to associate with an
Aboriginal conception of identity defined by physicality, stoicism, and
bravado (Robidoux 214).

In doing so, this group of settlers began emulating Aboriginal males,
sharing in activities such as canoeing, snowshowing, hunting and lacrosse
(Robidoux 214). Moreover, through interaction of French, English and
Aboriginal languages, a new language was formed that gave uniqueness to
this burgeoning identity. The difference between this new group – later
called Canadien – and their forefathers from France had become so
apparent that, before the end of the 17th century, members of the French
elite considered them to be a unique people (Thomson 73).

This was challenged in the 18th century when British colonial elites
began to recognize the value of sport as a way to impart desired social
characteristics on a population. It was believed that “refined” British sports
such as cricket and curling would be able to correct persons living in the
colonies who partook in vulgar vernacular pastimes (Robidoux 211).
Moreover, popularizing English sports was thought to have symbolic value
in terms of marking the land as uniquely British (Robidoux 211). These
alternative forms of supposedly more “rational” recreation were
proliferated through the schools later in the century (Gruneau 20). These
games were meant to transmit ideas of the moral usefulness of games,
middle-class respectability and gentlemanly propriety (Gruneau 21). These
games were thus meant to produce British hegemony in the colony by
reproducing a Victorian social order in Canada (Robidoux 212).

In response to this cultural imperialism, a Canadian nationalist from
Montreal named George Beers, began to advocate for the appropriation of
lacrosse from the Aboriginal peoples. Beginning in the mid-19th century,
Beers urged Canadians to stop participating in British sports and to adopt lacrosse as Canada`s national game (Robidoux 215).

Canada’s “National” Game

The emergence of modern lacrosse in Canada was part of a larger process of cultural conflict and social change. In Canada, the beginnings of notable urban growth during the first half of the 19th century were accompanied by a whole set of regulations over drinking hours, and “allowable” recreations (Gruneau 20). The change in society from agrarian to industrial was paralleled by a shift in sport from traditional to modern. Traditional sport is unorganized, local and governed by differing rules while modern sport is highly organized, codified and regulated (Gruneau 12-13). Modern sport emerged in the wake of technological and social developments which, in improving productivity, allowed people leisure time (Gruneau 9). The modernization of sport can be understood in terms of the breakdown of pre-industrial tradition in favour of a new “rational” industrial order based on achievement (Gruneau 14).

As this happened, the idea that there was only one correct way to play a sport – as dictated by those with higher social status – became popular. More than that, several activities were defined as illegitimate altogether (Gruneau 14). The development of modern sport can thus be characterized as the growing expression of class power, social control and the dominant ideology in sport (Gruneau 23). This would manifest itself in the late 19th century in the creation and proliferation of a class of amateur sport, which was meant to espouse characteristics of “civilized” and “gentlemanly” people (Gruneau 30). At this time, it was believed that sport should impart culture, which was considered more important than money and even victory (Gruneau 28). This idea would become problematic because gambling had a negative connotation in British society. Aboriginal peoples traditionally gambled on games to the point where they would “win from each other all that they possess, even to the lappet with which they cover their private parts” (Eisen 10). In order for a game to be gentlemanly, it would have to be above commercial considerations (Gruneau 28).

CAPSTONE SEMINAR SERIES Belonging in Canada: Questions and Challenges Volume 2, Number 1, Spring 2012.
As struggles continued over the ability to decide what constituted “legitimate” uses of time (Gruneau 20), Beers attempted to define lacrosse as a legitimate medium through which Canadians could distinguish themselves from their European ancestors by merging European and Aboriginal culture as the Canadiens had previously done. Beers argued for the adoption of lacrosse as Canada’s national sport, saying it would “do as much for our young Dominion as the Olympian games did for Greece or cricket for our Motherland” (Robidoux 215). In his attempt, Beers would standardize the rules and eliminate all connections to Aboriginal culture (Robidoux 215). As documented by Robidoux, Beers had no problem appropriating the game because he believed it was a continuation of European presence in North America. Beers argued: “Just as we claim as Canadian the rivers and lakes and land once owned exclusively by Indians, so we now claim their field game as the national field game of our dominion” (Robidoux 215).

As Confederation passed and lacrosse grew in popularity, Beers and the newly-formed National Lacrosse Association made an effort to curb the violent nature of the game in hopes of making the sport more mainstream (Robidoux 217). When those efforts failed, it was decided “undesirables” would be prohibited from play. A large part of this group was Aboriginal peoples who, because of their gambling and race, were seen as extremely ungentlemanly (Robidoux 217). Eventually, the game would be amateurized, effectively barring Aboriginal peoples from the game that was originally theirs (Robidoux 218).

The National Sports Act (1994): Creating an Imagined Canada

As explained above, the traditional game of lacrosse differed in character and significance from the sport that was appropriated by European-Canadians and used as a symbol of the Canadian nation. The research of Benedict Anderson explores the idea of the nation as a social construct, imagined by those who claim membership within the group. His research will be used to contextualize the naming of lacrosse as one of Canada’s national sports and to emphasize the importance the appropriation of lacrosse has played in Canada’s national identity. This concept will then serve as a point of comparison for the case study later in this paper.
The NSA simply reads: “…the game commonly known as lacrosse is hereby recognized and declared to be the national summer sport of Canada” (Government of Canada 1994). The Act is constructed in such a way by the Federal Government that Canadians and people worldwide believe that lacrosse is a uniquely Canadian sport that extols characteristics that originated in and define the Canadian nation. In reality, the link between lacrosse, Aboriginal peoples and settler communities has been and continues to be wrought with problems. The realities in which the appropriation of lacrosse is linked to attempts to appropriate Aboriginal land and culture – as discussed above – do not feature in the NSA’s national narrative. Instead, there is an absence of any representation of Indigenous groups. This can be said to reinforce the idea that the appropriation of the game is not a part of the narrative that is important. This demonstrates a continued colonial mindset in which Canada continues to write a self-serving history that wipes out any reference to the original relations between indigenous peoples and Europeans (Alfred 34).

In claiming lacrosse as uniquely Canadian, the NSA places pre-contact Aboriginal history within the national Canadian narrative and forces Aboriginal peoples to negotiate within an invented identity. Anderson defines an imagined community as a nation where its members “will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson 6-7). In Landscapes, Memory, Monuments, and Commemoration: Putting Identity in its Place, Brian Osborne asserts that this communion is hard to imagine in Canada because geography, history, ethnicity and class evoke separations between the settler and Indigenous populations. He argues that, in order for the Canadian nation-state to function, the imagined communities must be able to identify with a particular place. This is done through the creation of a collective memory which is constructed in part by public displays and museums (Osborne 8).

Prior to Beers championing the appropriation of lacrosse, the Canadian state had very little to link it to the land it occupied. When Confederation took place in 1867, Canadians maintained ideas of
nationhood contingent on approval from European powers. This led citizens to search for ways to legitimize their claim over the Canadian territory. Although lacrosse was a “relatively minor sport” (Robidoux 216) at the time of Confederation it was seen as an acceptable means by which Canadians could ensure part of the national identity was “symbolized by certain qualities of that place [Canada]” (Osborne 4). If adopted, Canadians could be said to not only be playing a game that had been prominent on the land for centuries, but by virtue of the ability of the sport to espouse characteristics such as stoicism and physicality, would shape the Canadian people itself thus allowing them to resemble the native inhabitants of the land, as had happened with the Canadiens.

The idea that a nation had to be constructed through the use of an Aboriginal sport suggests that issues traditionally facing the Canadian state – namely nation-building and self-legitimation – were largely caused by a lack of appropriate symbols with which Canada could claim the land it is situated upon. In order to address the issue, the state found (and has continued to find) it necessary to appropriate Aboriginal symbols which give automatic claim to the land by virtue of Aboriginal peoples having been in present-day Canada for centuries. The NSA represents a manifestation of this appropriation which, by virtue of creating something tangible, allows the sport to become engrained in the Canadian collective memory and therefore, enable Canadians to more closely relate with the place of Canada. However, in doing so the Act does speak to the unequal relationship between Aboriginal and settler populations and demonstrates there is still a level of dominance the state is unwilling to relinquish. The treatment of lacrosse in the CMC follows this trend. While the First Peoples Hall (FPH) does feature a module that allows space for the sport, it remains entrenched in a settler narrative that does not recognize the sport’s cultural significance.

Case Study: Canadian Museum of Civilization

The FPH at the CMC is an exhibition space with a mandate to “highlight the cultural, historical and artistic achievements of Canada’s First Peoples” (Canadian Museum of Civilization, First Peoples Hall).
As museum representations have a significant influence over the formation of national public memory, by clearly locating Canada’s native cultures in time and space while highlighting native Canadians’ contemporary achievements, this exhibition is meant to contend Canada’s national narrative and open space for the inclusion of Aboriginal peoples. The space is meant to fit within the framework of Canadian multiculturalism by encouraging cross-cultural understanding among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians (Government of Canada). To serve as a case study for this paper, the representation of lacrosse in the Social Gatherings module in the FPH will be analyzed to determine the extent to which the imagined Canadian nation, as discussed above in relation to the NSA, appears in the space meant to highlight Aboriginal stories and contributions.

The Social Gatherings module is located in the “Arrival of Strangers” zone in the FPH which details the history Aboriginal-settler relations over the last five hundred years. Social Gatherings was one of the original features of the hall which, according to the CMC website, was installed on January 31, 2003 (Canadian Museum of Civilization, First Peoples Hall). The module consists of three zones that attempt to portray and explain traditional and contemporary Aboriginal social activities. These zones are: Religious Gatherings, Competitions and Gambling, and Pow-wows, Rodeos and Ranching. Only Competitions and Gambling will be reviewed in this paper as it is the sole zone to speak about lacrosse.

The introductory text for the zone reads: “Many Aboriginal gatherings include competitions. In the past, men competed in races, shooting, feats of strength and hunting. Women displayed sewing and porcupine quillwork. Families and communities paraded during Indian Day celebrations. Contemporary sports events are old competitions in new form” (Canadian Museum of Civilization). The framework of this exhibit is captured by this text. By relating modern versions of lacrosse to the traditional Aboriginal game that was appropriated, the CMC includes the sport played by Aboriginal peoples in present-day Canada pre-contact as part of the history of modern lacrosse which, by virtue of its declaration as...
a national sport, sees the Aboriginal game become part of the greater Canadian narrative. Not only does this cement Aboriginal peoples within the Canadian narrative and nation, as noted above, it legitimizes the state’s claim to indigeneity by virtue of its acceptance of a game that is native to the land.

The Competitions and Gambling zone consists of a mixture of traditional and contemporary artefacts that relate to Aboriginal participation in sport. A traditional set of clothes (including headdress) is front and centre. It is flanked by two contemporary lacrosse jerseys (similar in style to a hockey jersey). In the far back there is a painting of a man dressed in a headdress while antique lacrosse sticks sit in a separate display to the side. The spatial arrangement could be interpreted as an unmistakable emphasis on the continuity of Aboriginal sport in the modern day. Although it is featured, lacrosse is never mentioned directly in the panels. Rather, panels reiterate the notion that “many Aboriginal communities continue to play sports to celebrate important events” (CMC, Competitions and Gambling Panel). The inclusion of lacrosse in a narrative affirming the continued existence of “old competitions in new form” can be considered to constitute a Canadian nationalist representation wherein lacrosse as an Aboriginal cultural practice has been reconfigured in the nationalist framework and used to strengthen Canadian national identity. This can be considered a process of “selective tradition” whereby the unifying aspect of sport is highlighted while the negative aspects of appropriation and colonialism are relegated to the background in order to create a specific account of history in which the Canadian state is innocent of wrongdoing (Furniss 74).

According to Elizabeth Furniss, museums which only offer small sections of artefacts with very little interpretive commentary are only offering these partial histories (Furniss 72). As museums are the only institutions devoted exclusively to the collection, representation and celebration of the nation’s past, by displaying a partial vision of the history of lacrosse the extent to which the sport is framed as important to Canada’s national history is accepted as the official story (Furniss 72). This is especially true when considering a national museum – such as the CMC – which, by virtue of its authority, is able to transform selective traditions into historical truths which are considered to trump competing interpretations.
This then becomes the version of history communicated in all significant public domains and becomes vital in rationalizing other aspects of history, past and present social institutions, and structures of political authority (Furniss 53). This is important for two reasons: first, when these partial histories relate to the history of the colonization of North America, it relegates the process and effects of colonization to the background. Second, by presenting historical developments as having existed outside of any political-economic context, it assimilates the values and experiences of diverse subordinate classes and groups – including conflict, inequality, and struggle against domination – into a much more benevolent version of the past (Furniss 76).

In the context of this paper, the appropriation of lacrosse and relegation of its history to selective tradition can be said to support the frontier myth. The frontier myth is a historical epistemology that has emerged within the context of North American colonization that defines the dominant mode of historical interpretation on the continent. This myth puts forth the idea that at the time of contact North America was an uninhabited hinterland waiting to be settled (Furniss 54). This can be seen at the root of contemporary understandings of the past and present, national identities, and of relationships with Aboriginal peoples (Furniss 54). In Canada, although they are considered a founding nation, First Nations peoples in places such as Attawapiskat live in conditions that have been referred to as “our Third World” (CTV). Although knowledge of these conditions is well reported, very little action is taken because the frontier myth omits the impact of colonization and colonizer communities on Aboriginal peoples in Canada. This can be attributed to the fact that frontier histories provide non-Aboriginal Canadians with a sense of collective identity based on paternal benevolence and natural superiority constructed in opposition to Aboriginal peoples (Furniss 78). The CMC display perpetuates this idea.
Using contemporary analyses of sport and identity, this paper discussed the role of sport in the creation and perpetuation of national identities, described the role of lacrosse in the development of Canadian identity, explained the process by which lacrosse was amateurized, modernized and appropriated, illustrated how the NSA created an imagined Canada, and outlined how the representation of lacrosse in the CMC fail portray lacrosse within broader other socio-economic and cultural shifts throughout Canadian history.

This paper argued that the representations of lacrosse in the National Sports Act and Canadian Museum of Civilization erase Aboriginal authorship of the sport, claiming it for the Canadian nation in order to legitimate non-Aboriginal Canadians’ claim to the land. It explored the extent to which First Nations customs, traditions and conceptions of identity, which had great impact on constructions of Canadian identity, have been erased in the Canadian national narrative. This was done by exploring the development of lacrosse from its origin as a traditional Aboriginal game to its codification and regulation in the mid-19th century. It described the role lacrosse played in the development of Canadien and later Canadian identity and asserted that the NSA has created an imagined Canada in which Aboriginal history is seen as part of the national narrative. Additionally, supported by the scholarship of Benedict Anderson, this paper made the case that the CMC has perpetuated an imagined Canadian nation by reinforcing the notion that lacrosse was never appropriated form Aboriginal peoples. It argues that this is achieved through the use of selective tradition to place the sport outside of changing contexts. By only telling part of the story, the diversity of Aboriginal peoples is silenced while their importance in the Canadian narrative is marginalized. Until this partial history is addressed, the identity crisis that defines the Canadian nation will persist as there will continue to be a lack of markers of identity.
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CAPSTONE SEMINAR SERIES Belonging in Canada: Questions and Challenges Volume 2, Number 1, Spring 2012.


