

Notes on a World Class City: Why I have declined to participate in the Olympic Celebrations

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In the early 1950s when George Woodcock moved to Vancouver there were few fellow writers and virtually no publishers in the city. By 1994, the year in which Woodcock was awarded the Freedom of the City (Vancouver's highest civic honour) our writing community had matured and our growing number of publishing houses rivalled the older literary presses in Eastern Canada. Woodcock was an anarchist so he did not have a love of government but he enthusiastically agreed to accept the award because he believed that the city was a bastion of intellectual freedom and that his association to Vancouver through this honour would help ensure that our tradition of mental and physical freedom would not be lost.

As a city, we should not forget George Woodcock and we should not forget the stories that have been recorded by our writers over these years since he first came to this "terminal city" that was dubbed rather unambitiously, the Liverpool of the West. If we are told in 2010 that Vancouver is a world class city then it is our literature that tells us how we got here. Perhaps the question at hand is whether we are indeed a world class city and I would argue that we are but for different reasons than the world will see during the Olympics.

While the Cultural Olympiad is surely impressive: of the 193 events listed on the VANOC website only 6 of them are labelled literary events and only two of them actually are literary events that include local writers: The Vancouver International Writers Festival's *Spoken World* and *Candahar*, a recreation of a Belfast pub that will host readings and performances as curated by Michael Turner, and may turn out to be one of the most inspired creations of the Olympiad.

There are Canadian writers involved in a few of the other 193 listed events but when it comes to the celebration stages our writers are not just neglected, they are totally ignored. As Poet Laureate I was offered time on one of the celebration stages where I would be allowed to read poems that corresponded to themes as provided to me by an Olympic bureaucrat. One of the themes was "equality" but since VANOC had blown the chance of making these Olympics the first gender inclusive Olympics in history by including a female ski jumping event I didn't think they would appreciate a reading of the one Olympic poem I had written on equality: "In Praise of Female Athletes Who Were Told No: For the 14 female ski jumpers petitioning to be included in the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver."

In fact a reading of this poem would violate a clause in the contracts that Vancouver artists signed in order to participate in the Cultural Olympiad:

"The artist shall at all times refrain from making any negative or derogatory remarks respecting VANOC, the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games, the Olympic movement generally, Bell and/or other sponsors associated with VANOC."

I do find this to be an unjust attack on free speech but more importantly it shows that VANOC is misrepresenting Vancouver. Vancouver is the most politically progressive city in North America with a strong history of political activism which most Vancouverites are proud of. Rather than finding a way to celebrate these important attributes VANOC has gone the other way and tried to suppress them. As George Woodcock teaches us: our freedom as a city is a tradition that should be protected and we should not underestimate an attack on that freedom whether symbolic or otherwise.

The muzzle clause, which VANOC says is standard procedure despite the fact nothing like it was included in the Torino or Salt Lake City games, came at a time when our provincial government announced its plans to cut arts funding by as much as 90%. This has put many cultural organizations in jeopardy and created tension in the arts community between those who are now prevented from speaking their mind because of their contracts and those who feel it is the right time to speak up.

In a bold act of ignorance the Federal government has announced their intentions to cut funding to cultural magazines with a circulation of fewer than 5000 copies. This issue needs to be highlighted as it illustrates a lack of understanding of the literary community and the purpose of these magazines. Our small press literary magazines should not be judged by the numbers of their readership but in their important role of cultivating Canadian writers. The combined effect of arts cuts at all levels but the civic level means that many important literary publications are in jeopardy. To add it all up from the point of view of the writing community: 2010 is not the year for writers to put on their red mittens and smile.

Vancouverites should also be concerned about the grilling that independent journalist Amy Goodman received while trying to come to Canada while on a book tour. Goodman had no plans of speaking about the Olympics while in Canada and told this to Canadian border guards but they interrogated her on the subject anyway, insisted on reading her notes and then examined her computer in an attempt to find out if she would say anything against VANOC or the Olympics. In the end they allowed her into Canada but served her with a document that demanded she leave the country within 48 hours.

Goodman is a world class journalist whose politics are more closely aligned to that of Vancouverites than those of either our Federal or Provincial governments. Even still you don't need to share Goodman's politics to be concerned by the fact that she was restricted from staying in Canada because she has the power and tendency to discuss and report on important political subjects.

If the muzzle clause, the harassment of journalists and the decimation of our cultural funding structures on the eve of the Cultural Olympiad were not enough to upset the ghost of George Woodcock then I'm sure this internal Library memo sent out to Vancouver Public Library staff should do the trick:

"Do not have Pepsi or Dairy Queen sponsor your event. Coke and McDonald's are the Olympic sponsors. If you are planning a kids' event and approaching sponsors, approach McDonald's and not another well-known fast-food outlet. "

"If you have a speaker/guest who happens to work for Telus, ensure he/she is not wearing their Telus jacket as Bell is the official sponsor."

“ If you have rented sound equipment and it is not Panasonic or you can’t get Panasonic, cover the brand name with tape or a cloth.”

“If you are approaching businesses in your area for support and there is a Rona and Home Depot, go to Rona. If there’s only a Home Depot don’t approach them as Rona is the official sponsor.”

If this is coming from our libraries, the custodians of the written word, where do we find the civic freedom that George Woodcock cherished and represented? Where do we find the essence of our highest civic honour, The Freedom of the City?

As darkly comic as much of this is, I am still not anti-Olympics. For this reason I made two suggestions to an Olympic organizer. The first was that a Canadian poet read one poem each night on one of the celebration stages. The second suggestion was that they somehow incorporate Al Purdy’s great Canadian poem “Say the Names” into the celebrations. Both of these suggestions were rejected and I in turn declined their offer to publically appear during the Olympic celebrations.

I believe in our literature and I believe it is a better representation of who we are (and from where we have come) than the vision being presented about us by VANOC. I remain excited about events in the Cultural Olympiad but in regard to the Olympic celebrations, without a significant involvement from our writing community, and with restrictions on our freedom, the Olympics are a world class celebration happening in Vancouver rather than a world class celebration of Vancouver.

The great irony is that when we look to celebrate ourselves in 2010 we have simultaneously, if only temporarily, allowed Olympic bureaucrats to ignore and distort the basic principles that make Vancouver a city to be envied. There was something important that Woodcock saw in Vancouver: the freedom to be a great citizen as judged by a civic criteria that was so respectful of freedom that it could even include an anarchist like him as one of its most decorated citizens. Through our artists and through Woodcock and the writers who came after him, we have become a home to great thinking and artistic expression. That needs to be celebrated not muzzled or ignored.

From “SAY THE NAMES”
by Al Purdy

--say the names say the names
and listen to yourself
an echo in the mountains
Tulameen Tulameen
say them like your soul
was listening and overhearing
and you dreamed you dreamed
you were a river
and you were a river
Tulameen Tulameen