

Dressing Up: Arctic Council at 20

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Let me start with an image. An image that I thought was rather odd. There was a meeting of Senior Arctic Officials (SAOs) at Fairbanks Alaska in March 2016.



Source: Arctic Council. Arctic Council Photo Archives. Retrieved from: <http://www.arctic-council.org/index.php/en/learn-more/photos>.

As part of their deliberations a dinner was organized at the Fountainhead Antique Auto Museum. On the official website of the Arctic Council, it is noted that, “Many delegates took the opportunity to dress up in period outfits and pose on one of the cars. This photo features Canadian delegates [with the Canadian SAO Susan Harper in the driver’s seat]”. I have never really understood the appeal of dressing up as an adult, even though there is a long-standing British tradition of polar explorers doing so in the Antarctic.

While I appreciate the museum invites this sort of activity, it is interesting to think about what might be at stake. Ultimately it is about dressing up in ‘white clothing’ rather say donning gear more associated with native Alaskans. Otherwise that would have been potentially embarrassing or at the very least awkward. But then as I went further into the photo collection, I noticed another image with the caption, “This photo features a few of the Indigenous Permanent Participant delegates”.

Everyone appeared to have taken up the opportunity to dress up. Well nearly everyone, there was no dressing up to be done by state observers because it was not that kind of meeting.

Why focus on dressing up? Let me be clear I am using this episode as a way of exploring something of wider import rather than passing a judgement about that evening in March 2016 per se.

Dressing up as a cultural practice is potentially significant because it offers insights into how people imagine themselves, and a prevailing consumptive/visual culture, while revealing geographies of dressing up – where to do it and where not to. Dressing up can also be constitutive of identity and group politics – some do it and some do not. Some are invited to participate and others are not. But the choice of clothing, especially when looking backwards, is revealing. Donning Victorian or Edwardian era clothing in an antique motor museum, which celebrates the role of cars and roads in the ‘opening up’ of Alaska to white American industrial and resource-led development is an intriguing choice. So it might have been a bit of fun at the time but it strikes me as odd that those attached to a progressive-body, the Arctic Council, celebrating its 20th anniversary would wish to do that. Maybe the dinner was a good one. But did it convey at that moment a forward-looking vision for the Arctic and all its residents?

The practice of dressing up could be helpful in thinking about the Arctic Council and the futures that it might face and even anticipate. Over the last twenty years, it has developed an impressive array of activities ranging from SAO meetings, a permanent secretariat, and the scientific and technical work of working groups and task forces dedicated to the ‘dressing up’ of the Arctic region – assembling a region in a manner emphasising science, environment, international co-operation, economic opportunities, and crucially the long-standing autonomy and rights of indigenous peoples.

But one of the things that dressing up as a practice can do however is unleash the role of play and the imagination. Maybe looking ahead, future Arctic Council meetings should include other opportunities to dress up – and in doing so take a moment to reflect on the colonial and gendered histories and experiences of the Arctic, and how future ‘Arctics’ might be ‘dressed up’? Will AC representatives dress up in SAR costumes next year and pose next to equipment used to manage the aftermath of a disaster involving oil spillage? Silly? Inappropriate? Or perhaps it represents a future that we don’t really want to contemplate; an Arctic characterised by the worse case scenario and the worst kind of clothing.

When the representatives of the Permanent Participants attend meetings and workshops dressed in traditional clothing such as the Sami gákti, it performs an important cultural and political statement regarding indigenous occupation of the Arctic and indigenous culture.

When Canadian indigenous representatives wear sealskin waistcoats, the choice of attire reminds others not only of the vital importance of subsistence hunting (and the role of seal in providing food and clothing) but also the harm that is done by seal exports bans by others. ‘Dressing up’ as a political practice, is anything but a joke. It serves as a visual and affective reminder that whatever future faces the Arctic, there are people and organizations determined to fight for their rights, their land, their autonomy, and their very existence in the light of challenges that at their worst could be existential in the future.

So forgive me if I do not offer you lots of bold statements about the Arctic Council and its future. Whatever future is involved and invoked, there will surely be some ‘dressing up’ somewhere and by someone.