Indian Mascots: Naturalized Racism and Anthropology

Society for Linguistic Anthropology
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The month of September ushers in another season of professional football. Native Americans across the country will have to endure yet another year of public humiliation. The professional football team from Washington DC continues to use their racist moniker with impunity. How is it, in the Nation’s capital, such a public display of racist language can continue to be defended as honorific discourse presumed to elevate the public imagination of the entire population of the Indigenous peoples of North America? This is a social imaginary unworthy of a nation that purports to endorse the best values of the American People as established in the founding documents of the United States.

The contemporary manifestation of the Indian mascot phenomenon is a social imaginary grounded in the long history of American colonialism. Discourses of discovery and the debates regarding the humanity of the indigenous peoples of the “New World” set into motion centuries of colonial stereotyping of indigenous peoples of the Americas as noble and ignoble savages. The colonial imaginary reached a particularly devastating entrenchment during the Manifest Destiny period of American expansion. Nineteenth-century race science coupled with Manifest Destiny ideology created a fertile ground from which naturalized racism would develop into the routinized gross caricatures of Native Americans. Caricatures such as Chief Wahoo of the Cleveland Indians or the offensive moniker of Washington DC's professional football team (to name just two) are the daily insults Native Americans endure. As long as these offensive caricatures and racist monikers are in public circulation we must also recognize that the United States is still a colonial state that continues to exercise naturalized racism against its Native American citizens. It is time we all respect the diversity of Native American experience.

What can the AAA do to help change such egregiously racist behavior? In 2014 the Language and Social Justice Task Force Mascots Subcommittee initiated a statement condemning the use of mascots by professional sports organizations. The statement has been endorsed by the Society for Linguistic Anthropology, the Committee on Minority Issues in Anthropology, and the Association of Indigenous Anthropologists. It is an important public gesture in the right direction for our discipline and our professional organization. On March 25, 2015, the association affirmed the work of the sections and interest
A cartoon by the author. Image courtesy Bernard Perley

groups and issued a public statement condemning sports organizations for using egregiously offensive mascots. The statement condemns the overt linguistic racism displayed in the mascot issue as exemplified by the Washington NFL club. AAA President Monica Heller states: “While these organizations may feel they are honoring Native Americans, many in that community view it to be a degrading and painful symbol of racism.”

As a Native American and an anthropologist, I try to find ways to express how the ridiculous “honoring Native Americans” argument masks ongoing colonial imaginaries of domination and oppression of the native peoples of the Americas. While doing so, I also recall the best values of the American people. The “best values” when juxtaposed to naturalized racism creates a tension that I hope can lead to conversation and change. This short essay is one way of accomplishing that task. The cartoon reproduced below is another.

One of the most unsettling aspects of the Washington football moniker is the dancing, the feathers-and-buckskin costume and war paint wearing, and war chanting fans is that everyone is playing Indian. Men and women, whites and minorities, young and old are caught up in the false notion that they are honoring Native Americans. In the AAA Mascots Statement, Monica Heller adds, “Research has established that the continued use of American Indian sports mascots harms American Indian people in psychological, educational, and social ways. Frankly, I don’t see where the honor is in that.”

The AAA statement condemns the insidious and covert racism that is masked by discourses that purport to “honor the fighting spirit” of American Indians. Such covert racisms against American Indians reflect how deeply naturalized racism and colonialism has masked settler/colonial society’s continued social injustices against Native Americans.

The association’s public statement and condemnation of overt and covert racism against American Indians is the latest effort of generations of anthropologists who have worked and continue to work with Native American communities to promote social justice for the first peoples of the Americas. There is more work that needs to be done. The association can honor the native peoples of the Americas by inviting native peoples to welcome them to their traditional homelands where the annual meetings are held.

Our next annual meeting will be held in Denver. Denver has a thriving Native American community and I am hopeful that we may witness the beginning of a
new tradition for the AAA. I hope the association will be welcomed by the local Native American communities to their traditional homeland. I am also hopeful that the association will continue to work with local Native American communities to share knowledge and develop strong and mutually respectful relationships. This will require openness and willingness to work together between Native American communities and the AAA.

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I am also hopeful that we will see the same openness within our discipline and welcome scholars who come from indigenous communities outside of the United States as well as indigenous anthropologists who through historical circumstance are not affiliated with a federally recognized tribe. If anthropology is to set an example for redressing colonial wrongs it must start within our discipline. The Denver meetings will provide opportunities to begin new conversations with allies from a range of indigenous communities as we all work toward eliminating the daily humiliation represented by sports mascots.

Woliwon (thank you).

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