MYTH 13

"Sports Mascots Honor Native Americans"

At an Atlanta Braves baseball game, fifty thousand fans are whipped into a frenzy, many of them dressed in Halloween-costume-style feathered headbands, their faces unself-consciously painted in "war paint," doing the "tomahawk chop" to a contrived Indian drumbeat. The same thing happens at Kansas City Chiefs football games. The Cleveland Indians flaunt Chief Wahoo, a cartoon Indian that was likened to a "red Sambo" by Cleveland councilman Zack Reed.[1] In Dallas, a gay pride parade annually features a float called "Kaliente" with a banner that reads "Honoring Native Americans." The float and accompanying marchers are dressed in all manner of Halloweenstyle Indian garb, and the float is a mishmash of pseudo-Indian symbols ranging from totem poles to a life-size papier-mâché buffalo. At music festivals like Coachella, Sasquatch, and Bamboozle, where fashion matters as much as music, Native headdresses have become all the rage. These are only a handful of countless examples of Native American cultural appropriation that can be named, a phenomenon that is so complex and persistent that the topic has filled volumes. Because of the vast scope of the issue, we devote the next two chapters to the most egregious and common aspects of it.

Sociologist James O. Young writes that cultural appropriation happens when people from outside a particular culture take elements of another culture in a way that is objectionable to that group.[2] According to Young's definition, it is the objection that constitutes appropriation, as distinguished from cultural borrowing or exchange where there is no "moral baggage" attached. Native American cultural appropriation can be thought of as a broad range of behaviors, carried out by non-Natives, that mimic Indian cultures. Typically they are based on deeply held stereotypes, with no basis

at all in knowledge of real Native cultures. This acting out of stereotypes is commonly referred to as "playing Indian," and, as Philip Deloria's research so eloquently revealed, it has a long history, going at least as far back as the Boston Tea Party.[3] Some forms of appropriation have been outlawed, as is the case with the Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990 (IACA). Responding to the proliferation of faux Indian art (which undermines economic opportunities for actual Native American artists), the IACA is a truth-in-advertising law that regulates what can legitimately be sold as Indian art. No such possibility exists, however, for the vast majority of appropriations American Indians endure daily.

Non-Native people play Indian whenever they don any garb that attempts to replicate Native culture (however serious or trivial their intent) or otherwise mimic what they imagine to be Indian behavior, such as the tomahawk chop, a fake Indian dance, or bogus war whoop.[4] Native American appropriation is so ubiquitous in US society that it is completely normalized, not only rendering it invisible when it occurs, but also adding insult to injury. Native people are also shamed for being "hypersensitive" when they protest. Halloween costumes, popular fashion, and children's clubs and activities (such as the YMCA's Indian Guides and Princesses programs and other summer camps) are some of the more obvious ways cultural appropriation occurs through Indian play in mainstream society, but perhaps its most visible form is in school and sports team mascots. Campaigns to put an end to the turning of American Indians into mascots began in the early 1960s when the National Indian Youth Council began organizing on college campuses to remove Indian sports stereotypes.[5] Then in 1968 the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), the largest pan-Native representational and advocacy organization in the United States, established its own anti-mascot initiative. [6] Once obscure, the movement to eradicate Indian mascots has snowballed into mainstream awareness.

In 2013 the NCAI issued a report outlining their position on Indian mascots. It mentions numerous resolutions that have been passed by the organization over the years, including one in 1993 imploring the Washington professional football team referred to as the "Redsk*ns" to drop its name, and another in 2005 supporting the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) ban on native mascots, nicknames, and imagery.[7]

The report summarizes the negative impacts that Indian mascots have been shown to have on Native youths, citing, for example, a study by cultural and social psychology scholar Stephanie Fryberg. Her 2004 study revealed that when exposed to stereotypical "Indian" images, the self-esteem of Native youths is harmed, eroding their self-confidence and damaging their sense of identity.[8] This is crucial given that the suicide rate among young American Indians is epidemic at 18 percent, more than twice the rate of non-Hispanic white youth, and contex-tualized by the fact that Native Americans experience the highest rates of violent crimes at the hands of people from another race.[9] Since the early 1970s thousands of public and postsecondary schools have dropped their Indian mascots, and hundreds more professional and governmental institutions have adopted resolutions and policies opposing the use of Native imagery and names, including the American Psychological Association, the American Sociological Association, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the US Commission on Civil Rights. In 2015 California became the first state to ban "Redsk*ns" as a mascot name in public schools.

As the NCAI report indicates, the "Redsk*ns" name is particularly offensive to Native peoples. According to the report,

> The term originates from a time when Native people were actively hunted and killed for bounties, and their skins were used as proof of Indian kill. Bounties were issued by European companies, colonies, and some states, most notably California. By the turn of the 20th century it had evolved to become a term meant to disparage and denote inferiority and savagery in American culture. By 1932, the word had been a term of com-modification and the commentary on the color of a body part. It was not then and is not now an honorific. . . . The term has since evolved to take on further derogatory meanings. Specifically, in the 20th century [it] became a widely used derogatory term to negatively characterize Native characters in the media and popular culture, such as films and on television.[10]

Over the last twenty-five years, at least twenty-eight high schools have abandoned the name, but the Washington football team's owner, Dan Snyder, has stalwartly insisted that he will never change the name, despite mounting legal challenges to its trademark and public outspokenness by President Barack Obama and other political leaders about its offensiveness.[11] A growing number of media outlets and prominent sports reporters have vowed to stop using the name, and even NFL commissioner Roger Goodell has acknowledged its insensitivity.

Although arguments to justify the usage of Native images in the world of professional sports are weak at best, there are some instances where the use of Native mascots has been deemed acceptable at the college level, according to the NCAI report. The NCAA ban, for instance, includes a "namesake exception" that allows universities to keep their Native American nicknames and logos when they are based on a specific tribe and they have been granted the permission by that tribe. Such permission was granted for Florida State University ("Seminoles"), Central Michigan University ("Chippewas"), and the University of Utah ("Utes"). The University of North Dakota, on the other hand, due to opposition of the name "Fighting Sioux" from local tribes, was not granted an exemption. At the high school level, at least one high school in New York State has successfully fought to retain its Native mascot despite a request from the state's education commissioner to boards of education and school superintendents to end their use of American Indian mascots and team names. Salamanca Central High School (SCHS) is located within the boundaries of the Seneca Nation, 26 percent of its student body is American Indian, and the team name "Warriors" is represented by an accurate depiction of a Seneca sachem rather than the cartoonish Plains-style Indian so typical of Native mascots. A name change was opposed by the Seneca Nation of Indians Tribal Council, the SCHS administration and student body, the Salamanca school board, and the Salamanca city council in a show of cross-cultural solidarity.[12]

Native cultural appropriation via fashion is nothing new. It has been around at least since the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s. Pop icon Cher did her part when she appeared on national television dripping with silver and turquoise Navajo jewelry and singing about Cherokee "half-breeds." The same was true for an entire generation of alienated middle-class white youth who, adorned in beads and feathers, were moving into teepees on hippie communes. Things got so convoluted that when Sacheen Littlefeather went in front of the country to reject an Academy Award on behalf of Marlon Brando in 1973, dressed in full traditional regalia, she was accused of not being a real Indian and of renting her dress. So when a new generation began parading around in Native "war bonnets" and other Indian-inspired attire at music festivals and on fashion runways and magazine covers, it was simply business as usual—only there was a new generation of American Indians and their allies, who were well-informed,

mobilized, and unwilling to sit idly by and take it without vociferous criticism and even lawsuits.

Designer Paul Frank, for example, drew outrage from the Native American community in 2012 when he threw a high-profile, star-studded, Indian-themed bash (called "Dream Catchin' Powwow"), complete with plastic tomahawks, bows and arrows, war paint, and feathers. Getting the message loud and clear, the company issued an apology and announced a series of positive steps that included plans for a new collection by Native American designers, with proceeds to be donated to a Native organization.[13] That same year the Navajo Nation filed a lawsuit (which it eventually won) against Urban Outfitters for trademark violations after the company used the word "Navajo" for underwear and flasks.[14] And in 2014 —as if completely oblivious to what was happening in the fashion world— hip-hop artist and fashion designer Pharrell Williams appeared on the cover of *Elle UK* magazine in a costume version of a Plains-style feather headdress, for which he later apologized.[15] Even some mainstream US Americans understood the transgression when *Time* magazine published an online opinion piece spelling out just why the image was so odious. Pointing out that clothing designers are notorious for borrowing from other cultures for inspiration, and comparing fashion to cultural fusion in cooking, the author wrote, "The link between clothing and personal identity, however, means that putting on another culture's clothes is a greater claim to ownership and belonging than sampling sushi or buying a burrito for lunch. As long as nudity isn't a socially acceptable option, we are what we wear—and our desire to define ourselves through borrowed finery can either enrich or impoverish the source community."[16]

Among other things, it is this subtle claim to ownership that scholars of cultural appropriation unmask, especially in the realm of mascot names and images. With university and college examples like the Florida State Seminoles, the University of Illinois Fighting Illini, and many others, non-Native mascot defenders claim such representations honor particular tribal nations and peoples. But what they really do is assert an imagined indigeneity whereby white dominant society assumes control of the meaning of Nativeness. Professor of professional sport management at Drexel University Ellen Staurowsky characterizes these kinds of fraudulent claims to Indianness as a system of sustainable racism within a "sociopolitical power structure that renders Indianness tolerable to Whites

as long as it is represented on terms acceptable to them."[17] She also points out the inconsistency of tolerating objectionable university Indian mascots with the central mission of higher education.

The myth that Indian mascots honor Native Americans, then, appears to be little more than a carefully constructed rationale to justify the maintenance of a system of domination and control—whether intentionally or unintentionally—where white supremacy is safeguarded, what Robert F. Berkhofer Jr. famously called the "White Man's Indian." And particularly at the level of professional sports, the branding of Native American team names and images also serves more as a rationale to maintain financial empires (explaining the stubborn adherence to racist portrayals of Native peoples in organizations like the Washington Redsk*ns), than dubious claims to be honoring them. But the justifications for American Indian cultural appropriation don't end with sports team mascot battles and fashion debacles. Appropriating Native cultures by playing Indian permeates US society so broadly it strikes at the very heart of Native American cultures, their spiritually based systems of belonging and identity, which we turn to next.