

Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities

Volume 4

Issue 1 *Threats to the American Dream*

Article 13

2015

Historical Racism and the Daily Show: Catching racism clip

Cyrus M. Hair

Macalester College, cy.hair@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/tapestries>

Recommended Citation

Hair, Cyrus M. (2015) "Historical Racism and the Daily Show: Catching racism clip," *Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 13.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/tapestries/vol4/iss1/13>

This Structural Healing: Impacts of Racism on Health is brought to you for free and open access by the American Studies Department at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.

Historical Racism and the Daily Show: Catching Racism Clip

Cyrus Hair

This essay focuses on “The Redskins’ Name: Catching Racism” skit that aired September 26, 2014 on the *Daily Show* with Jon Stewart. This skit was created in response to the uproar surrounding the mascot of the professional Washington, D.C. football team. Members of the Native American community advocated for the *Change the Mascot* campaign in response to the team owner’s claim that team name, “...represents honor, represents respect, represents pride, hopefully winning” (Allen, 2014).

The reporter on the *Daily Show* interviewed Native American activists and Washington football fans about their opinions regarding the football team’s mascot. Given the general nature of the Daily Show, comedy assuages participant and viewer about uncomfortable situations. For example, the interviewer asked, “...if you brought a Native American, wouldn’t they be a little upset?” One fan responded, “I think sometimes the conversation that’s happening right now, is that [we] need to be sitting down and talking to the people that actually are offended (Central, September 26, 2014).” Immediately after this comment, the interviewer brought in Native American activists to have this conversation with the fans. Although they had initially desired dialogue with the activists, immediately after participating in this Daily Show piece, the fans went to the Washington Post and claimed they felt “threatened” and “ambushed” in their conversation with the Native American activists (Central, September 26, 2014). This conversation represents an ongoing cultural dissonance between White and minority individuals in general - Native individuals in particular - that is ultimately rooted in historical racism. In addressing this dissonance, my essay will engage the effects of historical racism to refute the arguments provided by Dan Snyder and the Washington football fans who aimed to keep the Washington football team’s mascot.

Historical racism will be used to analyze this situation because Native Americans have been subjected to stereotypical caricatures for centuries. The *Change the Mascot* campaign is

pushing to change the Washington football team mascot due to complaints of the mascot creating an inaccurate social representation of Native peoples. Social representation in this paper takes the form of Native American caricatures that I believe to be offensive and stereotypical. Both the name and the logo of the team perpetuate racial stereotypes of Native Americans by utilizing a racial slur as the team name and having an image of a Native American that is dark brown—with a hint of red tint—with feathers in the caricature’s hair. I will examine these racial caricatures and stereotypes of Native Americans by using a framework based in Critical Race Theory to analyze historical racism and make sense of how mascots are offensive to some Native Americans, including the differences in perceptions of the Washington mascot within the Native community. Belcourt-Dittloff, and Stewart (2000) have described *historical racism* as, “...the atrocities and mistreatment, such as broken treaties and attempted genocide, have fostered in many American Indians a great deal of mistrust for both the government and many non-American-Indian people. Past exploitation is a frequently given reason for Native American people being suspicious” (pp.1166).

Historical racism experienced by Native Americans can give insight to their endured trauma . The connection between the historical trauma of Native American people and the current mistrust towards the government and non-American-Indian people are due to the past exploitation of Native Americans (Belcourt-Dittloff & Stewart, 2000). In order to fully understand how historical racism can be applied to the Daily Show’s experiment, it is imperative to focus on the historical trauma of Native American people and the etymology of the R-word. During the Daily Show interview, one of the Native American activists went against Snyder’s claim that the mascot and the R-word “honors” Native American people and the players, further claiming that the R-word is defined in the dictionary as “a bounty” (Central, 2014). This comment signifies Brave Heart’s concept of

historical trauma, which is the “cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations, including the lifespan, which emanates from massive group trauma” (as cited in Brave Heart, 2003, 1998, pp. 284).

The R-word is representative of both collective and individual trauma in this situation. The collective trauma stems from when Europeans actively sought to either kill Native Americans, or force them to assimilate into European standards of living. The R-word was used in this context to represent a Native American who was killed and scalped for a bounty. In a more contemporary context, other fans debate that the word connotes the skin color of Native American people, which is viewed as *not* being offensive (Central, 2014). This collective trauma of the R-word feeds into the element of mistrust within the historical racism definition by exposing the history of how Native peoples have been systematically subjugated by the United States government. Historical racism affects the biopsychosocial functioning of Native Americans based on the history of oppression, discrimination, and racism towards the group (Belcourt-Dittloff & Stewart, 2000). Given the different perceptions of the Washington football team mascot, it is also important to examine the psychological effects of Native American imagery on both Native American and non-Native American people.

Native American mascots have become so pervasive in the American culture that large organizations are starting to take note of how offensive they are. The American Psychological Association recognizes that Native American mascots have had negative impacts on the psychological health of Native American communities and have urged psychologists to conduct research on this phenomenon (APA, 2005). Mascots, as a form of Native American imagery, contribute to the implicit biases towards Native American people. Implicit biases are the unintended cognition and behavior that arise from stimuli (Cooley, Payne & Phillips, 2014). Chaney, Burke and Burkley (2011) found that the implicit

bias against Native American *mascots* is positively correlated to the implicit bias of Native American *people* among White participants, which means White people think negatively of Native Americans because of Native mascots. Although correlation does not mean causation, this finding gives insight on how non-Native Americans perceive Native Americans. Fryberg and Watts (2010) support the finding that non-Native people have congruent amounts of implicit bias towards mascots and Native Americans, based on the lack of visibility of contemporary Native Americans and the hypervisibility of Native American caricatures. However, one main question still remains: *why are sports teams with Native American mascots still being supported?* The only way to get to this answer is by revisiting the Daily Show piece and understanding why the Washington football fans went to the Washington Post and voiced their discomfort.

In the clip, the Washington football fans were all wearing team memorabilia in the interview and claimed that the team name should never change. This was under the presumption that the R-word was used in the “sports context”, which, they claim, nullifies the racism associated with the word (Central, 2014). However, the conceptualization of a “sports context” does not negate the historical racism of the R-word. In a “sports context” there are Native Americans that are unoffended by Native mascots. The “sports context”, herein, creates tension between Native American people who are against Native mascots and those who are indifferent. Some Native American activists believe that, “Indians who support Indian mascots are less likely to be involved in Indian communities and/or less likely to have experienced reservation life (Jacobs, 2014, pp. 325-6).”

Jacobs (2014) suggests that this polarization can be due to the lack of cultural competency amongst Native American members. Another suggestion is that it is not the fault of the individual, but that of society. Steinfeldt et al. (2012) had responses from participants that indicated societal indoctrination. In other words,

the presence of Native American mascots and logos is not perceived as negative by some Native Americans because it has become normalized (Steinfeldt et al., 2012).

The insidious nature of historical racism is evident within the Daily Show piece, as well as the *Change the Mascot* campaign. Historical trauma has negatively affected the Native American community based on prior instances of discrimination, racism, and oppression this group has experienced. Whether in the “sports context” or on Comedy Central, Native American mascots and logos have been used in a manner sense that is detrimental to United States society. The hypervisibility of Native American mascots has created a sense of ambivalence within the Native American community, as mentioned by Jacobs (2014), which has further caused Native American communities to oppose one another in the debate over the naming and representation of Native mascots.

Furthermore, historical racism is a relevant measure for understanding the racism involved with the Daily Show skit because it further exploits Native Americans. Earlier in this paper, a fan of the football team was referenced for saying that the fans needed to have a conversation with Native Americans who felt offended by the Washington football team mascot. When presented with the opportunity, the Washington football fans engaged in a debate with Native American activists, but later revealed their discomfort on the show from engaging in dialogue surrounding negative associations with the Washington football team logo. The fans were asked to talk about the

Washington football team and then felt “defamed” and humiliated afterwards (Central, 2014). This is an example of being exploited, in my opinion, from the fans failing to acknowledge the lived realities surrounding the R-word. For future analysis, I would suggest that this situation be examined through the media’s perspective and juxtapose the Washington football team’s exploitation with Native American mascots and logos to demonstrate how the Native community is regularly exploited. I would also suggest that possible intervention methods involved with the R-word and the trauma experienced by Native peoples be created to center on how historical trauma has, “...drawn attention to the enduring effects of colonization, marginalization, and cultural oppression in the lives of Indigenous peoples and communities. The recognition that the violence and suffering experienced by one generation can have effects on subsequent generations provides an important insight into the origins of mental health problems” (Kirmayer et al., 2014). It is imperative that both the pro and anti mascot supporters, who are Native American, come to this understanding of their shared history in order to address their differing perspectives (Kirmayer et al., 2014). Collectively, Native Americans must understand that the historical context behind Native mascots and logos will remain unchanged. More specifically, an interventional method should be developed using this critique of historical racism in the *Daily Show* clip, to challenge Washington football team fans that ignorantly support caricatures of Natives as their mascots.

References

- American Psychological Association. (2005, October 18). APA resolution recommending the immediate retirement of American Indian mascots, symbols, images, and personalities by schools, colleges, universities, athletic teams, and organizations. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/about/policy/mascots.pdf>
- Belcourt-Dittloff, A., & Stewart, J. (2000). Historical racism: Implications for Native Americans. *American Psychologist*, 55(10). (pp. 1166-1167). doi:10.1037/0003-066X.55.10.1166
- Brave Heart, M.Y.H. (1998). The return to the sacred path: Healing the historical trauma response among the Lakota. *Smith College Studies in Social Work*, 68 (3): 287–305.
- Brave Heart, M.Y.H. (2003). The historical trauma response among Natives and its relationship with substance abuse: A Lakota illustration. *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, 35 (1): 7–13.
- Brave Heart, M., Chase, J., Elkins, J., & Altschul, D. B. (2011). Historical trauma among indigenous peoples of the Americas: Concepts, research, and clinical considerations. *Journal Of Psychoactive Drugs*, 43(4). (pp.282-290). doi:10.1080/02791072.2011.628913
- Chaney, J., Burke, A., & Burkley, E. (2011). Do American Indian mascots = American Indian people? Examining implicit bias towards American Indian people and American Indian mascots. *American Indian And Alaska Native Mental Health Research*, 18(1). (pp. 42-62)
- Central, C. (2014, September 26). The Daily Show: The Redskins' name Catching Racism [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=loK2DRBnk24>
- Cooley, E., Payne, B. K., & Phillips, K. J. (2014). Implicit bias and the illusion of conscious ill will. *Social Psychological And Personality Science*, 5(4), 500-507. doi:10.1177/1948550613506123
- Fryberg, S.A., & Watts, A. (2010). We're honoring you, dude: Myths, mascots, and American Indians. (pp. 458-480).
- Jacobs, M. R. (2014). Race, place, and biography at play: Contextualizing American Indian viewpoints on Indian mascots. *Journal Of Sport & Social Issues*, 38(4). pp. 322-345. doi:10.1177/0193723514530568
- Kirmayer, L. J., Gone, J.P., Moses, J. (2014). Historical trauma: Politics of a conceptual framework. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 51(3), 436-458. doi:10.1177/1363461514531316
- Steinfeldt, J. A., Foltz, B. D., LaFollette, J. R., White, M. R., Wong, Y. J., & Steinfeldt, M. C. (2012). Perspectives of social justice activists: Advocating against Native-themed mascots, nicknames, and logos. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 40(3), 326-362. doi:10.1177/0011000011411736