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Borrowing Power Racial Metaphors and Pseudo-Indian Mascots

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On 1 October 2003, Rush Limbaugh, perhaps best known for his popular radio show that regularly offers acerbic assessments of social affairs, resigned from ESPN's "Sunday NFL Countdown." The previous Sunday, the conservative icon had suggested that the media overvalued and even hyped Philadelphia Eagles star Donovan McNabb because they wanted a black quarterback to succeed. Although Limbaugh, like Jimmy "The Greek" Snyder before him, had his supporters, many of whom insisted that the radio-talk-show host had meant no harm, that his comments were not really about race, and that the media firestorm was little more than political correctness run amok, his comments sparked a public outcry. Presidential candidates Wesley Clark, Howard Dean, and Al Sharpton issued statements demanding the ouster of Limbaugh, while the NAACP rebuked the commentator for what it termed "bigoted and ignorant" remarks. And Jeffrey Lurie, the owner of the Philadelphia Eagles, labeled the incident an example of institutional racism, imploring "Let's not hide it. Let's not make believe the problem is a single person. It's far from that." ("Rush to the Exit," *Sports Illustrated*, 2 October 2003).
[End Page 189]

The day before Limbaugh resigned, the U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C., overturned a ruling by the Trial Trademark and Appeal Board (TTAB) that had cancelled federal protection of Washington Redskins' trademarks. Whereas the TTAB had found the team's trademarks to be disparaging, bringing Native Americans into contempt or disrepute, the District Court decided that the plaintiffs, a collection of six American Indian intellectual and political leaders, including Suzan Shown Harjo, Vine Deloria Jr., and Manly Begay, had not met the burden of proof and had failed to file their complaint in a timely fashion. Little indignation greeted the decision. In fact, much of the press and public hailed the ruling. While critical comments circulated in editorials and conversations, General Clark, Dr. Dean, Rev. Sharpton, and the NAACP all remained silent. Even Jeffrey Lurie, the perceptive critic of institutional racism in the Limbaugh affair, did not mention the ruling in his remarks, nor connect race and power to the upcoming game between the Eagles and the Redskins. Less noticeable was the manner in which individuals reacted to the ruling: it was not just a victory in the culture wars, though many would assert this, nor an occasion to celebrate the Redskins and the propriety of their pseudo-Indian imagery, though this happened as well; rather, for some it was an opportunity to challenge and rearticulate common-sense notions of race, expanding them beyond black and white through racial analogy. An online discussion at freerepublic.com nicely illustrates this pattern (<http://freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/993089/posts>). A sampling of comments:

Judge Colleen Kollar-Kotelly
found the litigant's case to be smelly
so Washington wins
sing "Hail to the Redskins"
And go put some beer in your belly

U.S. District Judge Colleen Kollar-Kotelly, where do I mail her a Christmas Card?

yay! thank God for that too, otherwise the Fighting Irish would be sued by Irish people, and the Falcons would be sued by birdwatchers! **[End Page 190]**

At least they don't call themselves the "Washington Savages," or the "Washington Firewater Drinkers."

I guess the Vikings now need not worry about changing their name. I myself would have no problems with a team being named Palefaces.

All this controversy makes me hungry. Think I'll go get some Oriental food, and after debate the judge's decision with my Negro neighbors.

Yup, likely would be a completely different result. As usual, the American Indian takes it in the kisser for the sake of 'being honored.' But I agree with Chad, it's not something to make a federal case of.

I'd imagine that the court's ruling would've been different if the team in question were named the "Yellowskins" or the "Blackskins."

Well, I personally find the term "redskin" as offensive as if someone called blacks "BlackSkins" . . .

I don't like the excessive PC movement (what is currently happening to Rush is a good example of that). . . . Most people here would not make mocking reference to black Americans (publicly, at least). Why do people who would never dream of making unflattering stereotypical references to black Americans seem to feel American Indians are somehow fair game?

it's OK to insult whites in the world . . . yes, I'm most of European descent (Irish, German, and a bit of Cherokee Indian) . . . and the subtle message is that only whites are racist, which is completely ridiculous . . .

Obviously, this discussion, like most exchanges about race today, whirls about, moving in multiple, even contradictory directions as its participants invoke an array of incommensurable ideological positions. In these fragments from larger conversations, we glimpse (a) celebrations of the status quo, (b) the resentments of the new Right, (c) codings that work to **[End Page 191]** minimize, contain, dismiss, and trivialize critical readings of pseudo-Indian imagery and racism generally, and (d) a series of statements intended to make the inappropriateness and violence of Native American mascots, and the Redskins team name specifically, tangible to skeptical interlocutors. Particularly intriguing here is the prevalence of racial analogies: the comparisons between Native Americans, as captured in the naming and imaging of the Washington NFL franchise and its fans, and other racial groups, including Euro-Americans (palefaces, Irish, Vikings), African Americans (blackskins), and Asian Americans (yellowskins).

When read against the Rush Limbaugh debacle, these interpretations suggest an interesting contrast: whereas Limbaugh's comments and the ensuing controversy highlight the contours and limits of the rearticulations of race and racism in the color-blind discourse of post-civil rights America, the comparative reframings of the racialized common sense that naturalizes "the Redskins" illuminate one set of efforts to locate new strategies with which to expose the workings of race. Racial metaphors have proven themselves to be a fecund and increasingly prominent element of contemporary cultural politics. They allow commentators to reframe historical and contemporary social relations, to claim a voice anchored in the moral authority of others' sanctioned identities and (often traumatic) experiences, to name and narrate themselves in terms audible to a broader public. The Holocaust, for instance, has come to occupy a central place in efforts to clarify the historical traumas suffered by other racial groups, particularly to make legible the genocides practiced upon them. Thus, both the historical experience of Native Americans after 1492 and the Middle Passage have been described as holocausts. More recently, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals has drawn direct parallels between the genocidal projects of Nazi Germany and the structures and effects of industrial farming. Even some white supremacists have drawn on this motif to express their sense of the condition of white America: under siege, suffering oppression, and facing a certain fate without resistant action. These borrowings and reworkings, like the use of racial metaphors more generally, are designed to heighten recognition and shift perception. They emerge from both vernacular and established **[End Page 192]** contexts, in support of radical and reactionary racial projects, as passing references and intricate analyses.

Oddly, these comparative racializations have received little scholarly attention. Indeed, much has been said about Euro-American appropriations of difference, such as the traditions of blackface and playing Indian.

Accounts of the history and significance of such metaphoric recyclings rightly underscore the articulations of power, representation, and racialization, unpacking the ways whites have used (enacted, really) signs of difference to formulate identities, craft community, author national narratives, and consolidate racial hegemony. Taking the experiences of others and remaking them, literally transforming them into meaningful symbols to reframe, reclaim, and rename, also has a long, unrecognized past in marginalized spaces and racialized communities. Often, in such social fields, juxtaposition, analogy, and metaphor have operated as forms of cultural critique, nurturing alter/native, comparative racial imaginaries.

Here, I do not so much want to offer an exhaustive overview of racial analogy. Instead, I have more contained ambitions. Through a close reading of such strategies in the ongoing opposition to pseudo-Indian imagery in athletics, I hope to make sense of how Native American activists and their allies speak truth to power, countering the invisibility of Indian issues and the silencing of indigenous voices, and in turn, what these practices reveal about the shape of the comparative racial imagination in the contemporary United States and the emergent formulation of post-treaty discourse in Indian country. More specifically, I focus on the use of racial metaphors to unsettle Native American mascots. I concern myself with the ways in which critics draw analogies between the imaging and experiences of Native Americans and those of other racial groups. After a brief account of the uses and understandings of indigenous imagery in American athletics, I trace the history of racial analogies in the oppositional movement. Against this background, I examine the significance of hypothetical and analytical juxtapositions. Then, I discuss the strange career of the "Fighting Whites," a multiracial intramural team at the University of Northern Colorado that became a national sensation for a brief moment in 2002, arguing it is best **[End Page 193]** understood as a failed metaphor. In conclusion, I return to broader questions about racial politics and cultural critique.

* * *

Euro-American individuals and institutions initially imagined themselves as Indians for a myriad of reasons, including an institutional link with Native Americans, an effort to play up or play off of regional history, or even coincidence. Euro-Americans were able to fabricate Native Americans as mascots precisely because a set of social relations and cultural categories made it possible, pleasurable, and powerful for them to incorporate images of Indians in athletic contexts. First, Euro-Americans have always fashioned individual and collective identities for themselves by playing Indian. Native American mascots were an extension of this long tradition. Second, the conquest of Native America simultaneously empowered Euro-Americans to appropriate, invent, and otherwise represent Native Americans, and to long for aspects of their cultures destroyed by conquest. Third, with the rise of public culture, the production of Indianness in spectacles, exhibitions, and other sundry entertainments proliferated, offering templates for elaborations in sporting contexts.¹

Native American mascots increasingly have become questionable. Individuals and organizations, from high-school students and teachers to the American Indian Movement and the National Congress of American Indians, passionately and aggressively have contested mascots, forcing public debates and policy changes. A handful of institutions (like the University of Utah) have revised their use of imagery, while many others, including St. John's University and the University of Miami, have retired their mascots. At the same time, many school boards, like the Minnesota Board of Education and the Los Angeles School District, have opted to require that schools change them.

For all of its success, activism against mascots has met vigorous reactionary responses. Indeed, many Euro-Americans and some Native Americans do not understand such criticisms or grasp the significance of implementing such changes. Consequently, some schools have retained them, often fomenting intense protest and controversy. **[End Page 194]**

From this overly brief synopsis, I want to underscore the fundamental conjunctions of race, appropriation, and power: Euro-Americans borrow power.

* * *

In the early 1970s, racial metaphors emerged as an important rhetorical strategy. In 1972, in the context of a lawsuit against the Cleveland Indians, Russell Means openly critiqued the team mascot, Chief Wahoo: "That Indian looks like a damn fool, like a clown and we resent being portrayed as either savages or clowns." Means did not content himself with an attack on stereotypes, but turned to racial analogy to advance his argument against mascots. "Take the Washington Redskins . . . Redskin is a derogatory name . . . what if we called them the Washington Niggers, or Washington Rednecks, or Washington Pollacks?" Hyperbole in turn joined analogy as Means directed his ire at the Atlanta Braves and their former mascot, Chief Noc-a-Homa, who did a stereotypical dance outside his tepee every time the Braves hit a home run. "What if they called them the

Atlanta Storm Troopers and every time there was a home run a man in a German military uniform came out and knocked a few Jews on the head with a baseball bat? Or Atlanta Negroes, and an old black man came out of a shack and did a soft shoe dance?" (Carley 1972). Chief Noc-a-Homa also troubled Jeffrey Newman, assistant director of the Association for American Indian Affairs, who drew on racial analogy as well: "It is outrageous, I feel, to have a man dressed as an Indian, sitting in an alleged tepee outside the outfield fence, doing a silly dance every time some player hits a home run . . . would they hire a black man to sit in a tar paper shack out there and come out picking cotton every time a player hit a home run? No, they wouldn't dare." Newman lamented the ease with which young and old rooted for the Washington Redskins, when they "wouldn't think of calling a team the 'Blackskins' or the 'Yellowskins'" (Ralbovsky 1971).

In 1972, Native American students at Stanford University presented ombudsman Lois S. Anderson with a petition calling for the removal of the Indians and the mascot, Prince Lightfoot, portrayed by Tim Williams, a Yurok Indian and advisor to then Governor Ronald Reagan (Springwood [End Page 195] 2001). They were especially concerned about the distortions and degradations associated with the school symbol. The students dubbed Williams an "Uncle Tomahawk," an obvious play on the more familiar disparaging phrase then in use in the African American community to label a "sell-out," Uncle Tom. At the same time, they also used the more easily recognizable oppression of other racial groups to materialize the import of their circumstance and their cause. The name, the Stanford Indians, displayed the insensitivity, injury, and lack of understanding at the heart of the issue: "No one would show such ignorance by choosing the name 'The Jews,' or 'The Negroes,' for a school team" (Petition 1972).

Twenty years after the initial use of racial analogy, activists still employed it to challenge Native American mascots. In his biting essay, "Tribal Names and Mascots in Sports," Dennis Banks, a founding member of AIM, again poses the uncomfortable query: "The Cleveland Indians or the Atlanta Braves—why not change their names to the Niggers? I wonder how many blacks would play for them (or whites for that matter)" (Banks et al. 1993, 5). And Charlene Teters, a leading opponent of Native American mascots, has long critiqued the authenticity and appropriation central to playing Indian at halftime. Like her peers, she has been concerned about the misunderstandings of Indianness and humanness cultivated by mascots, and the misuses of Indian symbols and spirituality central to their performances. She compares mascots to "'Black Sambo' or the 'Frito Bandito'" (quoted in Rodriguez 1998, 22).

Responses to a *USA Weekend* opinion poll underscore the popular appeal and broad acceptance of racial analogies. In fact, of the 175 comments opposing the continued use of Native American mascots, over 40 offered analogies. Comparative examples included: New York Niggers, New Jersey Niggers, Cleveland Jews, Jersey Jewboys, Washington Wops, Mississippi Blackies, New York Wops, Atlanta Rednecks, Washington Niggers, Cleveland Niggers, Cleveland Honkies, San Francisco Slanteyes, Washington Blackskins, Atlanta Slave Beaters, Washington Palefaces, New York Forked Tongues, Alabama Niggers, Los Angeles Spics, and Chicago Pollacks.

Racialization is visual, as well as verbal. In fact, a number of editorial cartoonists have drawn amusing and unsettling images. Thom Little Moon, for [End Page 196] instance, in 1995 encouraged readers of *Indian Country Today* to reflect on the appropriateness of Chief Wahoo, mascot of the Cleveland Indians, by having two children pondering the question, "Which one is the mascot?" as they look at four portraits: One is of Chief Wahoo, labeled "Indians"; the second, dubbed "Blacks," features the same smiling visage, darkened with a large afro and pick comb in place of Wahoo's feather; the third, named "Jews" renders a smiling Hasidic Jew complete with yarmulke; and the final image, labeled "Chinese," has slanted eyes and a goatee. A year later, in December 1996, he presented two football helmets with stereotypic images, one for the Washington Blackskins and the other for the Kansas City Zulu Chiefs, asking "Would African Americans like Being Mascots?" And the National Coalition Against Racism in Sports and the Media have fashioned a moving poster that features pennants for imaginary sports teams—Fighting Jews, Blacks, Latinos, Orientals, and Caucasians, alongside the real pennant of the Washington Redskins.

* * *

Racial juxtaposition is largely imaginative, frequently operating in the realm of the hypothetical. Ward Churchill's essay, "Let's Spread the Fun Around," illustrates the importance of imagination. In this satirical and biting piece, Churchill suggests that if mascots are indeed an honor, then a greater variety of such racial symbols should be fashioned that offer flattened and false visions of others, particularly Euro-Americans and African Americans. The exaggeration and absurdity of Churchill's proposal, of course, is designed to expose falsehood about honor and dignity and promote greater appreciation of race and power.

Perhaps this combination is what makes hypothetical juxtapositions so appealing to editorial columnists. They are particularly fond of the hypothetical, moreover, because of their perceived audience and pronounced

intention. That is, they seek to hail a white readership, ideally activating them through displacement. For instance, Brian Barnard, a Salt Lake City attorney, asked in a 1994 editorial: **[End Page 197]**

Could you cheer for the Denver Darkies? Would you paint your face and go to a football stadium in freezing weather to scream for the Spokane Spics? Could you support the Kansas City Kikes? Would you watch the World Series as the Georgia Crackers took on the Nashville Niggers?

(Desert News, 6 August 1994 , A9)

He posed these queries to foster empathy and reflection, hoping his reader would "have a better idea why American Indians should not be mascots and why doing so insults them and their heritage." In a similar vein, Terri Andrews, editor of *The Good Red Road*, offers the following scenario:

Let's, for a moment, create an analogy so that you might better understand the severity of this situation. Say that Georgia started a new baseball team—the Georgia Jews. The logo was that of a caricature of a stereotypical "Jewish-looking man" wearing ringlets and a yarmulke, playing with a dreidel *[sic]*. The fans chant "Shalom" over and over when the team is up to bat and the vendors sell t-shirts and keychains with the Star of David printed on the front. While at the concession stand, where a manora *[sic]* is brightly burning, you overhear the rival team's fans talking about how their team's going to "Smoke the Jews."

(Andrews 2003)

And Demian Bulwa (1995) opens a commentary against pseudo-Indian imagery, in light of the 1995 World Series between the Atlanta Braves and the Cleveland Indians, with a detailed account of a basketball game between the Philadelphia Amish and the New York Jews, asking, "Do you find this tasteless and degrading? Do you feel as ludicrous reading it as I do writing it? If the answer is yes to either of these questions, then you should feel very uncomfortable about this year's World Series."

Racial analogy also has punctuated successful efforts to retire mascots. Challenges to Chief Moccannooga, the long unquestioned mascot of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, offer a vivid example. Tom Kunesh, spokesperson for the Chattanooga Inter-Tribal Council, endured countless personal attacks during the campaign against the school symbol. He advanced familiar arguments about stereotypes, misappropriation, disrespect, **[End Page 198]** and racism in the face of questions about his Indianness, tradition, innocence and frivolity. In response to a letter to the editor by William Killeffer, Kunesh reiterated the centrality of race through analogy:

If the mascot isn't racist . . . Mr. Killeffer: please go to a UTC Mocs basketball game dressed as a fictional African "Chief Shaka-zulu" and in black-face, and at halftime perform a stereotypical Native African dance for the entertainment of the observing audience. If the imitation is not racist, then, I presume you will not have offended our Brothers and you will live. . . . Or just ask the UTC Athletic Department of Public Relations Office what they think of the idea. Better, just ask the African American fraternities and sororities if they think it's a fun, non-racist idea. My bet is every African American on the UTC campus can easily spot the superficial racism that hides behind white boys acting out their ideas of African warriors. Is it that great a leap for white students to make in understanding that the same kind of racism is latent within white boys playing in Native American regalia?

(Letter to the Editor, 1996)

Kunesh, here, relies on absurdity, the nearly unimaginable idea of dressing in blackface without understanding its racial meanings, to highlight the unique possibilities, disturbing pleasures, and racist power of playing Indian at halftime. In essence, he argues, in common with others who endeavor to write against Native American mascots in the hypothetical register, no one would think of doing to any other racial or ethnic group what mascots do to American Indians. Pseudo-Indian imagery makes Native Americans exceptional, subject to images that disrespect and dehumanize indigenous peoples in a fashion no longer conceivable, let alone acceptable for others.

Opponents of pseudo-Indian imagery in athletics often turn to hypothetical scenarios in an effort to foster understanding and empathy. It is as if the only way to make the *real* import and effects of mascots plain is

through *imaginary* scenes. This rhetorical strategy seeks to interrupt, forcing readers to pause and reflect for a moment, to see falsity, and ideally to find themselves compelled to change the world. The realm of the hypothetical speaks to those with power, those invested in the system, those comforted and even blinded by racial common sense. It subtly encourages these **[End Page 199]** individuals to recognize oppression and privilege. Importantly, to craft reflective spaces promoting transformation, imaginative juxtapositions rely on a limited notion of race and racism. They recycle familiar derisive phrases, fighting words, and well-worn stereotypes to evoke an individualized, personal reaction, *taking offense*; this emotional/moral response stands in for and arguably displaces the broader sociohistorical structures and ideological formations that in fact give life and significance to Native American mascots.

* * *

Critics of the continued use of pseudo-Indian imagery in sports also formulate elaborate, contextually grounded comparisons between the experiences of Native Americans and other racialized groups, most notably African Americans and Jews. Although not specifically concerned with mascots, a passage in Noam Chomsky's "The Manufacture of Consent" (1984) affords a glimpse of how more analytic invocations of racial juxtaposition operate.

During the Thanksgiving holiday a few weeks ago, I took a walk with some friends and family in a national park. We came across a gravestone, which had on it the following inscription: "Here lies an Indian woman, a Wampanoag, whose family and tribe gave of themselves and their land that this great nation might be born and grow." Of course, it is not quite accurate to say that the indigenous population gave of themselves and their land for the noble purpose. Rather, they were slaughtered, decimated, and dispersed in the course of one of the greatest exercises in genocide in human history. Current estimates suggest that there may have been about 80 million Native Americans in Latin America when Columbus "discovered" the continent—as we say—and about 12 to 15 million more north of the Rio Grande. By 1650, about 95 percent of the population of Latin America had been wiped out, and by the time the continental borders of the United States had been established, some 200,000 were left of the indigenous population. In short, mass genocide, on a colossal scale, which we celebrate each October when we honor Columbus—a notable mass murderer himself—on Columbus Day. **[End Page 200]** Hundreds of American citizens, well-meaning and decent people, troop by that gravestone and read it, apparently without any reaction; except, perhaps, a feeling of satisfaction that at last we are giving some due recognition to the sacrifices of the native peoples, presumably the reason why it was placed there. They might react differently if they were to visit Auschwitz or Dachau and find a gravestone reading: "Here lies a woman, a Jew, whose family and people gave of themselves and their possessions that this great nation might grow and prosper."

(121 -122)

Here, Chomsky seeks to complicate prevailing understandings of the (Native) American past; he hopes to demystify and unsettle naturalized notions, while disrupting the ease with which readers engage in personal recollection and public ritual alike. Foregrounding genocide, before drawing a parallel with the mass murder of Jews in Nazi German death camps like Dachau, he identifies resemblances or homologies in dominant attitudes, marginal positioning, and historical mistreatment. The Jewish experience grants Chomsky a powerful voice, grounded in the moral authority of trauma and victimization, which in turn strengthens his rendering of the (Native) American past.

The use of grounded comparisons in the movement against mascots works in much the same manner. Two detailed examples suggest the force of racial metaphors.

Intermittently for over a quarter of a century, with increased intensity during the past decade, students and faculty at the University of North Dakota have striven to retire the school symbol, "The Fighting Sioux." In the late 1990 s, a multiracial coalition united in a renewed movement. During this most recent period, activists have woven together two new tools: the Internet and racial analogy. On the organization's homepage (<http://www.und.edu/org/bridges/jew.html>), it makes a detailed contrast between a fictional team named after Jews in Germany, "The Auschwitz Money-Grubbing Jews," and the Lakota in the United States, the University of North Dakota's "Fighting Sioux" (see [table 1](#)). Twelve axes of comparison structure the analysis: people, history, adjective, population ratio, conformity, oppression, residence, location, depiction, future legacy, object status, humanness. **[End Page 201]**



Click for
larger view

Table 1

The Auschwitz Money-Grubbing Jews vs. The UND Fighting
Sioux

Read closely, the contrast clarifies that both are proud people, minorities forcibly relocated in planned spaces of confinement, who were stereotyped, oppressed, murdered, dehumanized as objects, yet survived as people. As in the Chomsky passage, the acknowledged horrors of the holocaust endow what for many must be counterintuitive conclusions: it seeks to make the invisible visible; to give displacement, exploitation, and genocide their **[End Page 202]** proper names; to clarify the place of indigenous people in North American history and society; to let the violence and malevolence of then and now commingle to speak truth to power.

Clem Ironwing and Matthew Richter have fashioned a more elaborate and arguably more charged series of racial analogies (www.iwchildren.org). Ironwing and Richter simultaneously endeavor to render a forceful critique of the (mis)use of Native nations in athletics, and to forge multiracial alliances between Native Americans and African Americans. They draw upon images, experiences, and interpretations of African Americans and Jews to clarify the significance of Native American mascots. First, they juxtapose a photo of school children in blackface in 1941 with an image of elementary students dressed as Indians in 2000. Next, they present parade imagery, contrasting an image of children marching in a Nazi preschool primer and a photo of children marching in support of their primary school symbol, "the Papooses." Then, referencing a billboard welcoming folks to "Redskin Country," Ironwing and Richter make an explicit comparison between Redskin Country and Hymie Country. Against this background, noting that both Jews and Indians were killed for practicing their religions, they present a pair of disturbing photos: one of Nazi soldiers poised above a pit where they are methodically killing Jews, the other of a burial trench at Wounded Knee in which U.S. soldiers prepare to place Indian corpses. Finally, they probe the rich similarities between Native Americans and African Americans, noting in word and image the lynching of African Americans in the South and the equally arbitrary killing of Native Americans at Wounded Knee. The anonymous African American youth lynched by a laughing crowd of Southern men poignantly contrasts with the frozen body of Bigfoot after the massacre at Wounded Knee. Throughout, they pose unsettling questions: Is the NAACP racist? Is there a difference between the legacies of African slaves imported to the Americas and the indigenous peoples? Have African Americans forgotten the racist past? More troubling, Ironwing and Richter use uneasy language in their efforts to hail African Americans. For example, in describing the nationally televised forum in Houston as part of President Clinton's initiative on race in Houston, Texas, they rage at African American athletes who do not acknowledge the import **[End Page 203]** of Native American mascots. They describe the black athletes in attendance as "black handkerchief heads," "ham bone artists," and a "hand selected banjo picking watermelon head, sambo squad." And they make incendiary comparisons between existing sport franchises and imagined teams: the Washington Redskins become the Washington Jungle Bunnies, and the Cleveland Indians become the Cleveland Mau Maus. Again, moral authority and political significance is claimed through the experience of others. Comparison between Native Americans and other racial and ethnic groups materializes the oppression of indigenous peoples, while binding Native Americans to African Americans and Jews. The reliance on racialized language to bring African Americans into line is more than a little disturbing, and suggests the limitations of the racial juxtaposition.

* * *

Although critics of pseudo-Indian imagery in athletics have most frequently made comparisons with the experiences of African Americans and Jews, they have also drawn on whiteness in an effort to clarify the significance of mascots. Often, they have invoked either liminal or even transgressive whites, such as "trailer trash," slaveholders, or wife-beaters. Lakota artist Todd Brodeaux, intent on underscoring the connections between past and present forms of colonization, dehumanization, and (symbolic) violence, has even designed a parallel to the current NFL, which he dubs the Native American Football League, complete with teams like the

Cleveland Crackers and the Tampa Bay Treaty Breakers (Jesse Villa Lobos, personal communication, January 2001).

Undoubtedly, the Fighting Whites have proven to be the most famous example. In February 2002, members of a multiracial intramural basketball team at the University of Northern Colorado changed the name of their team from Native Pride to the Fighting Whites, hoping to educate a broader public about images and their dehumanizing impact. The use of a clichéd image of an Indian warrior—noteworthy for the manner in which its large nose and bare chest invoke the racially grotesque—to represent the local Eaton High School Fightin' Reds, combined with support for the school symbol **[End Page 204]** among residents, administrators, and alumni, inspired the selection of the name and mascot. The logo, in turn, was the bust of a white male, smiling, hair combed back, dressed in a suit and tie. Initially, the figure was positioned between the phrase "Go Fightin' Whites" and the player's number. Later, the smiling suit became much larger and more central, poised above the phrase, "Everythang's Gonna be All White."

While intended to direct attention to the continued use of pseudo-Indian imagery, particularly at the local level, the parody and protest became a national sensation. It fostered intense media coverage, attracting reporters from Fox Sports, NBC News, and even the *Guardian*, while eliciting commentaries from an array of pundits, from Clarence Page to Rush Limbaugh. As a result, the intramural team, overwhelmed with requests, began putting the logo on t-shirts, baseball caps, coffee mugs, and even mouse pads (see <http://www.fightingwhites.org>). In the end, merchandise sales exceeded \$100,000, endowing a scholarship fund for Native American students at the University of Northern Colorado.

Few took offense at the Fighting Whites. Nevertheless, school officials in Eaton, Colorado, found the image insulting, even as they continued to defend the innocence of the Fightin' Reds, and some Republicans in Colorado described the team's efforts as "Political correctness gone mad!" (Johansen 2003). Fewer still seemed to actually grasp the protest embedded in the parody. The symbol quickly became a joke, emptied of its political force, prompting reflection not on racial politics but on racial humor. In fact, most whites seem to have found the mascot amusing.

Rush Limbaugh relished in the symbol: "Now, I think that's great! The team chose a white man as its mascot to raise awareness of stereotypes that some cultures endure. I love this, and it doesn't offend me at all! I'd be proud to be on the team. . . . There isn't a white person around that's going to be offended by this. . . . In fact, let's rename the 101 st Airborne Division the 'Fighting Whites' . . . I really do wish I had authored this" (quoted in Johansen). The language of pride and pleasure foreclosed the possibility of education or introspection.

Although a financial success, the Fighting Whites were a critical failure. The protest voiced in the name change went unheard by most. In many **[End Page 205]** respects, the Fighting Whites was an overdetermined project, doomed from its inception. In contrast to comparisons with other oppressed racial groups, such as African Americans or Jews, the analogy with whiteness neither interrupts the workings of racial common sense, nor invokes moral authority through trauma, marginalization, and violence. Judging from the public response, the Fighting Whites seem to confirm, rather than challenge, white-supremacist America—a white-centered, white-identified, and white-dominated society. Or, put another way, the name change and merchandising (a) did not disparage or dehumanize, (b) did not essentialize or stereotype, (c) did not terrorize or marginalize, (d) did not give most citizens or consumers access to an alternative reading of history and society, remaining one logo among countless others, and (e) did not leverage, let alone connect, to power. In fact, it appears that many Americans took comfort in the novel icon. The figurehead in a suit fit their notions of success and power. Moreover, the reception of the Fighting Whites confirms some of the tenets of racial discourse in the post-civil rights era, particularly the relativization of race (anyone can be racist), the erasure of social structures and historical context, the centrality of offense and respect to the evaluation of content, and intention over effects. In the end, perhaps the career of the Fighting Whites inadvertently and ironically reiterates the team slogan, "Everythang's going to be all white!"

* * *

In this paper, I have tried to offer an analysis of the place of racial analogy in ongoing efforts to challenge pseudo-Indian mascots and anti-Indian symbols in sports. They reframe mascots in powerful ways, offering important insights into race and representation in post-civil rights America.

A close reading of the verbal and visual uses of racial analogy suggest that such reframings seek to make race tangible, challenging mascots while affirming Indianness. They make the claim that Indians are a racial group like blacks, Jews, Asians, and Latinos, yet they remain distinct because Euro-Americans transform them

into mascots, making embodied Indians invisible. Racial analogy embraces race as a category in an effort to resist the [End Page 206] prevailing racial system: it marks oppression, making it nameable and knowable by self and other; it signals the place and position of Native Americans, highlighting genocide and erasure; it defamiliarizes, momentarily challenging the logic of racial privilege and hierarchy. Ironically, to establish the facts of Indianness through analogy, activists and their allies simultaneously reinforce race and reiterate stereotypes. It is troubling that the critical strategies deployed to demonstrate the inappropriateness and hurtful effects of Native American mascots pivot around ugly images and ideas about other marginalized groups, often recycling them in rather decontextualized ways.

Importantly, these struggles against racist iconography also say something important about racial politics in (Native) America. To problematize pseudo-Indian imagery, and literally enunciate the issue and its implications, critics and activists make a disconcerting move in which a language of injury delimits identity and experience; subjectivity emerges through and is conscribed by suffering (see Butler 1997). Trauma, violence, and transgression (caused by others) eclipse, efface, and literally negate indigenous survival, creativity, solidarity, and values. Moreover, they highlight and mirror the resurgence of cultural sovereignty and efforts to assert it, such as the broader Red Power movement, shifts in governmental policy, and changing public attitudes. Consequently, racial juxtaposition is an important departure from the standard idioms of Indian rights—particularly treaties and tradition—because it formulates a novel, critical vocabulary that centers on race, identity, and power. Indeed, racial analogy works (to the extent that it does) precisely because comparing Indianness with blackness, Jewishness, and so on borrows power, claims moral authority, and secures visibility from these already marked categories of identity, experience, and oppression. In contrast, comparisons made with whiteness, like the Fighting Whites, fail because they do not adequately displace it, in effect reiterating the fundamental patterns and relations animating white-centered, white-identified, and white-dominated America.

The prevalence of racial analogy in arguments against Native American mascots, as I have endeavored to suggest, says much about the creativity of vernacular engagements with racialized structures of power, evident both as it counters post-civil rights politics and endeavors to formulate an [End Page 207] indigenous critique beyond or in addition to treaty discourse. A rather pessimistic reading of the place of racial metaphors in the struggle against mascots (and in other liberational skirmishes as well) would rightly insist that while they hope to give pause, encouraging the contemplation of practices and privileges in relation to others, they also conform to a pervasive crisis in critical thought. In the absence of critical distance, the unifying metanarratives of modernity, or the assured rhetoric of the civil-rights movement, racial analogies at their worst pivot on hyperbole and superficial contrasts, substituting allusions for analysis, image for introspection, style for substance. A more optimistic reading would with equal insight note that racial juxtaposition marks a hopeful sign of the (re)emergence of the comparative racial imagination.

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Endnotes

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1. Useful introductions to the history and significance of Native American mascots include Connolly (2000), Davis (1995), King (2002), King and Springwood (2001a, 2001b), King et al. (2002), Pewewardy (1991), Rodriguez (1998), Spindel (2000), Staurowsky (1999), and Vaderford (1996).

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