Wa a o, wa ba ski na me ska ta!

"Indian" Mascots and the Pathology of Anti-Indigenous Racism

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The battle today is our own image. We are trying to reclaim ourselves.

—Charlene Teters, 1995

This kind of racism is buried so deeply in the American psyche that it may be impossible to resolve. . . . This profound racism rises so quickly to consciousness and is expressed before the individual realizes what she or he has said.

—Vine Deloria, Jr., 2001

When the Florida State University (FSU) football team rushes onto the playing field of Doak S. Campbell Stadium, it follows an athletic mascot wearing colored turkey feathers, riding a spotted pony, and carrying a flaming spear that he plants on the fifty-yard line with a war-whoop. While this activity unfolds on the field, over eighty thousand FSU fans chant a pseudo-Indian melody while swinging their arms together in a tomahawk chop. The FSU spectacle is a common one; resolute FSU fans recognize it as authentically Seminole, as authoritatively American Indian. For many American Indians
these sorts of activities are understood as offensive, as deeply fatal to the well-being of Indigenous nations, communities, extended families, and young people. Most Native professionals and our allies comprehend them as yet another disturbing appropriation in a long and ongoing history of colonization that includes forced removals and fraudulent land transfers away from Indigenous Peoples.³

Countless people experience “Indians” only as mascots—as braves, Indians, redskins, savages, and warriors, as fighting Chippewas, Illini, Sioux, and Utes, as Black Hawks and Blue Jackets.⁴ In every corner of the United States and accessible at all levels of competitive athletics—high school, college and university, and professional—acts that link Indians with sports amount to a pathology of anti-Indigenous racism. Three examples that represent Indians as mascots are instructive and are illustrative of the pathology of anti-Indigenous racism: the ongoing debate surrounding the professional football team in the United States capital; the favorable response to a Sports Illustrated publication entitled “The Indian Wars”; and reaction to an intramural basketball team in Colorado named the Fighting Whites. By assigning the term “pathology” to anti-Indigenous racism and these three examples, I mean to draw attention to a social disorder that requires intervention and correction. By “racism” in a U.S. cultural context, I mean white racial hegemony or white supremacy, a highly organized system of racialized oppression and a continuous and dynamic process of antidemocratic social control.⁵

According to Stuart Hall, people position themselves in relationship to media messages or “circuits of culture”—what I am calling “reality” and “communities of belonging”—in one of three ways: uncritical acceptance, negotiated acceptance, and resistance.⁶ Through “circuits of culture,” according to Hall, the lexicons and syntaxes of languages fill semantic breaches—understood as gaps in representation located between concepts being represented and the images or words or signs doing the work of representation. In the gap between a particular concept and the signs that labor to represent it, language provides passage, transporting and transmitting meaning, rendering this meaning accessible to people who then cohere around what they come to share similarly as “reality” and experience as communities of belonging. In the consumption of and participation in competitive athletics, for masses of fans and athletes in many other ways drifting apart, “Indian” mascots (understood as language) do the work of representation—they labor to fill semantic breaches located between signified concepts (certain desired qualities widely associated with normative forms of masculinity, sports, community, racial identity, and American Indians) and its signifiers (mascots, team names and logos, fan behaviors, and consumer apparel). Simply put, people invent and invigorate concepts such