

# THE POWER OF SOCIAL PROTESTS: *BLACK LIVES MATTER* AND THE WASHINGTON R\*DSKINS FOOTBALL TEAM

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Marked by Protests, demonstrations, the presidential campaign, a global pandemic and the death tolls that have come along together with mask wearing, 2020 has been a year characterized by dramatic happenings. This year US society has been co-existing with the news on two lethal viruses: on the one hand, the COVID-19 virus spread deeply affected our reality on a micro and a macro scale, while on the other hand the issue of institutionalized racism surfaced with renewed force. The Black Lives Matter protests took the streets and the social media to fight against established structural racist practices intrinsic to the US state. These demonstrations have begun to change the course of action of some cultural, sociological, political discourses, and practices that have been fostering the reproduction of racism in the United States.

2020 has shown that history is always standing on the shoulders of giants, especially when it comes to minorities. This year African Americans and other minorities in the country have been gaining ground as the Black Lives Matter movement has shown. The protests after the killing of George Floyd on May 25 2020 in Minneapolis for allegedly using a counterfeit bill at a convenient store have ignited the spark of protest and, possible, future change. However, the Black Lives Matter movement is not a creation of this year, over a century ago W.E.B. DuBois (1903) already stated that the problem of future generations would be a problem of color. In fact, a trend towards change can be observed in sports. Sport events are powerful cultural signifiers whose discourse is in constant change; such impulse toward change is visible in football in particular, where the need for innovation to acknowledge diversity and avoid racist practices has been pervasive (Black et al., 2001).

This article will stand on the literature focused on the history of minorities and its relationship to sports in order to explore how the Black Lives Matter protests, with

their transformative power, have help put an end to the discriminatory use of the name R\*dskin by the Washington Football team. A name that reminds us of colonial times because “colonialism is not just about holding distant lands and peoples in subjugation; it is about establishing and perpetuating systems of power” (Grose 2010, 696), and the Washington R\*dskins with their name have withheld a position of power for quite a long time.

### THE WASHINGTON R\*DSKINS’ NAME CONTROVERSY

Following the Declaration of independence, equality is one of the foundations of the United States because “all men are created equal, [...] they are endowed [...] with certain unalienable Rights” (Armitage 2008, 25). However, Native Americans have not enjoyed an actual position of equality. In fact, even Thomas Jefferson in the early 1800s claimed that Native Americans had two options in the country: assimilate or face removal and extinction (Restad, 2015). Jefferson’s words follow the notion of manifest destiny. Manifest Destiny was a political driving force in the 19th century. It shows how American settlers viewed the land as a new chosen one for themselves (2015). It was a term coined by the journalist John O’Sullivan in 1845 with reference to the annexation of Texas. White settlers had supposedly the mission to redeem the local native populations on the basis of their superior moral virtues and culture. Moreover, strictly related to manifest destiny is American Exceptionalism, a philosophical current that argues that historically the United States sees itself as a different nation with a unique role to play. It relies on the belief that God chose the United States as a new Earth where Anglo American settlers had the mission of suppressing the heathens [Native Americans] given that their culture was allegedly “inferior” (2015). Manifest Destiny is influenced by the religiosity of early settlers and the Founding Fathers belief in exceptionalism (Miller, 2006). These ideas gave apparently rights to White settlers to conquer the continent disregarding earlier inhabitants. Thus, “equality” was not opened to everyone.

Native Americans have long suffered the consequences of these ideologies which justified both their annihilation and the conquest of their lands. As Fenelon highlights, the European colonists and their descendants “rationalized their extensive violence and theft of Native American lands by framing and dehumanizing the indigenous societies as uncivilized and un-Christian” (2017, XI). That is why the use of the racial slur R\*dskins as the name of a football team is a reminder of the racism implicit in ideologies such as Manifest Destiny and Colonialism. Besides:

In tracing the origins of Redskins terminology [...] and seeing race as critically important to the construction of the modern world-system and development of capitalism, through expropriating land and labor, along with natural resources, we observe

racist language as part of systemic racism. So, Redskins becomes another tool of symbolic domination of racial conquest and racist supremacy. (2017, 27)

Sports are rooted in America's powerful bourgeois social order and, not surprisingly, "[they] are embedded in the development of mass societies" (Markovits & Hellerman 2001, 39). The uncritical use of Indigenous names—or words overtly referring to Native tribes and their history as colonized people—in sports shows that there is no shame or remorse for the context of subjugation Native Americans have experienced. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, pointed out:

Our nation was born in genocide when it embraced the doctrine that the original American, the Indian, was an inferior race [...]. We are perhaps the only nation which tried as a matter of national policy to wipe out its indigenous population. Moreover, we elevated that tragic experience into a noble crusade [Manifest Destiny]. (1964, 160)

Furthermore, as Hylton argues, "in sport and leisure the lexicon of policymakers has promulgated a vocabulary that legitimates rather than challenges the notion of race" (2008, 5). The Washington R\*dskins with their name are an example of modern subjugation. The term R\*dskins dates back to a moment in time when Native people were hunted and killed and their skin was the proof of the Indian killing. In the 20th century it is a term that denotes inferiority and savagery (NCAI, 2013).

The NCAI<sup>1</sup> has fought relentlessly to put an end to the use of Native American stereotypes in popular culture, media and sports. Moreover, as Grose claims, "[using Native American stereotypes] is a national insult and does nothing to honor the Native peoples of this country" (2010, 698). Additionally, the fight to change the name of the Washington R\*dskins can be explored in different contexts. In the legal arena, we can signal the Harjo Case in 1999. The resolution stated that "R\*dskins is not and has never been one of honor or respect, but instead, it continues to be a pejorative [...] and racist designation for Native Americans" (2010, 704). On the NCAI webpage we can read that the word R\*dskins traces back to colonial times. Also, every major English dictionary defines the word as an offensive term to Native Americans because it connotes racism and genocide for Native peoples. Native Americans also suffer psychologically with the use of Native names. For instance, it has been noted that "the name R\*dskins (...) has a detrimental effect on the well-being and self-esteem of Native American

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<sup>1</sup> The NCAI is the National Congress of American Indians, the oldest and largest organization of Native Americans. On the NCAI webpage we can read that they "advocate for and protect the civil rights, social justice, and racial equality of all Native people in all parts of American society". They also point out that we live in an era in which racism is accepted because the dominant culture uses "Indians" to grow their own multi-million-dollar franchises. Retrievable at <https://www.ncai.org/proudtobe?fbclid=IwAR0QvimIgmKT-f6VtuBqbXX-fVhxyoLX3Ujeu6LluO3JxgBw6lG3skF6TOc&page=2>.



Children” (2010, 695). In fact, on the NCAI webpage we can read that the use of R\*dskins is an attack on basic human rights given that it has a negative impact on their self-esteem and even academic achievement on young Native Americans.

However, the professional sports industry—and specifically the National Football League and teams’ owners—“have failed to address the racist origins of deplorable race-based marketing strategies of the past. Often citing a long-held myth by non-Native people that Indian mascots [and names] honor Native people” (NCAI 2013). This is because while they justify themselves with this myth, they continue to profit from this stereotype created in a moment of White superiority.

This debate on the name exemplifies a postmodern discourse of power. Following Foucault’s ideas on language and power as expressed in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), power can be interpreted as the ability of one entity to influence the action of another one through discourse. Therefore, the Washington Football team has constructed a discourse on the topic to support the idea that using Native names represents a way of honoring instead of denigrating Native Americans. This type of discursive mechanism has the power to influence the public sphere and shape the public stance on the matter. Furthermore, Fairclough claims that power can be exerted through coercion and consent. He argues that “ideology is the key mechanism of rule by consent, and because it is the favored vehicle of ideology, discourse is of considerable social significance in this connection” (1989, 33). Therefore, ideology is a mechanism of power in modern society and language plays a key role to exercise this power. Adding to this idea, Foucault (1977) explains that individuals undergo and exercise power. However, unlike Native Americans, the team’s owners have always been in power.

Besides, the title of one of the chapters in Jamaica Kincaid’s *My Garden (Book)*— “To Name is to Possess” (2000, 85) reflects on the role of the early Spanish conquistadors in America. These men named the nature that they saw around them, thus making it theirs forever:

This naming of things is so crucial to possession – a spiritual padlock with the key thrown irretrievably away – that it is a murder, an erasing, and it is not surprising that when people have felt themselves prey to it (conquest), among their first acts of liberation is to change their names. (2000, 91)

The Washington R\*dskins team was named by a conqueror (someone belonging to a White elite) and this same elite cannot effectively justify or understand their own racist language (Fenelon 2017). This is an example of Native Americans still enduring the trauma of the conquest and the consequences of manifest destiny. Following Bhabha, this could be said to relate “the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence” (1997, 448). Moreover, for Fidecaro, “the past becomes the product of a practice that creates and invents, in an ongoing



process, what it remembers” (2006, 206) and the R\*dskins name makes Native Americans remember genocide.

Therefore, the use of a Native American name by the Washington R\*dskins shows that ideologies related to Manifest Destiny are very much alive, as well as the structural racism intrinsic to capitalist America. If “equality” is one of the principles characterizing the country, preserving Native American names and sacrificing their well-being for the sake of lucrative purposes does not make much sense. In fact, it shows that Native Americans are a commodity on whom it is still acceptable to impose cultural superiority.

### THE POWER OF SOCIAL PROTESTS: PERFORMATIVITY AND INTERSECTIONALITY

In the previous section, it was shown how the Washington R\*dskins have had the upper hand by using their name perpetuating, in this way, their cultural superiority. However, the Black Lives Matter protesters have made the team rethink their racist practices. These protests are an example of the transformative power of performances as a motor for social change. In a simple way, we could say that any action, event or behavior is a performance. However, performativity within the framework of performance studies is closely related to postmodernism. This means that performance is not only to be found in a stage but we are performing in everything we do (Schechner, 2002).

Moreover, the struggle for equality on the part of the African American community is not a new issue. Using Critical Race Theory, Raengo claims that, “slavery produced an entity that was not part of the human fold – the slave as a sub-person” (2016, 3). This idea is very much linked to color blindness given that black people are not seen as equal and makes blackness emerge as an antithesis of person. As it can be read in Wallenfeldt:

Since the arrival of the first slave ships in colonial America, freedom and equality have been the goal of African Americans, who, as a people, refused to accept institutionalized segregation and the unfulfilled promise of constitutionally guaranteed rights. (2011, 25)

Some of the sites of struggle of the community worth remembering are the slave plantations, abolitionism, emancipation, or segregation. The battle for civil rights throughout the 50s and 60s is of paramount importance. Here, we have to remember movements such as Black Nationalism and Black Power, characterized by the presence and agency of people as relevant as Malcom X or Martin Luther King.

Therefore, we could say that the history of African Americans and Native Americans has been marked by a recurrent and persistent effort to expand the scope of inclusion



in mainstream America. The struggle of Native Americans and African Americans was not the same but similar given that they have an enemy in common: the mainstream White society who does not take them seriously. This is because they belong to an America that is still regarded as “the other,” the America composed of minorities who do not enjoy the essential rights of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” (Wallenfedt 2011, 78) and who suffer the consequences of manifest destiny. As Fanon argues, “the effect consciously sought by colonialism was to drive into the natives’ heads the idea that if the settlers were to leave, they would [...] fall back into barbarism” (1963,210-11). Homi Bhabha (1994) goes a step further by showing the relationship between colonialism and performance. He indicates that during colonial times natives performed by adopting the language or habits of their colonial rulers. This concept is colonial mimicry, “the desire for a reformed, recognizable other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (86). However, no matter how hard the colonized subjects tried to be part of the mainstream community by adopting their ways and assimilating to the dominant culture, they were always seen as inferior. The protests for equality even in 2020 emphasize this idea.

Nevertheless, is it logical that categories to classify people according to their race still exist nowadays in the multicultural world we live in? If we consider race as a social construct or a performance, racial identifications change according to culture-specific forces and race—as gender—is performative, as Schechner points out:

Does one “become” Black, White, Brown, Red, or Yellow in the same way that one becomes a woman or man? Does skin color, hair, a set of facial or bodily features, or any single attribute, or combination of attributes, indicate that a person belongs to one race or another? (2012, 154)

This idea is directly related to the stereotypes associated with minorities. As Weissinger, Mack and Watson show, “these retrograde representations [...] are often represented to the public through various aspects of mainstream media” (2017, 123) and, as such, they capture our imagination through a manufactured or performed reality. This is an idea seen in Fanon’s *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952) where he showed that race and racism permeate psychology. This shows that race is a performance.

However, we need to understand how the Black Lives Matter protests transformed their anger of an unjust society for African Americans into a change for Native Americans. As Cohan evidences, “[the Black Lives Matter protests embody] this very ethos of transforming raw anger into disciplined anger in the search for change [...] challenging the status quo” (2017, 40). In fact, it has been the self-confidence “resulting from the power of their own performing what has managed to draw others into their magic circle” (Schechner 2002, 215). Within movements for social change there is the

need for allies<sup>2</sup> and the Black Lives Matter protests have obtained many allies from different social backgrounds and even countries. This idea explains how there is a point of connection in the struggle to gain voice between the African American community and the Native American community. This idea allows to argue that the Black Lives Matter movement has benefited the Native American community and the Washington Football Team's new name is an example.

The former paragraph is as well an example of intersectionality in action. Intersectionality means the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation, and how their combination plays out in various settings (Delgado and Stefancic 2001, 51). Crenshaw used this concept "to denote the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape multiple dimensions" (1991, 1244). In fact, intersectionality is for Co, Crenshaw and Mchall a concept to signal the "vexed dynamics of difference and solidarities of sameness in the context of anti-discrimination and social movement politics" (2013, 787). The Black Lives Matter protests following the death of George Floyd have put an end to the perpetuation of racism on the part of the Washington R\*dkins, who are now named the Washington Football Team. This change followed the statement of the 3rd of July on the team's webpage, where the board of the club wrote that they would review the name; subsequently, on 13th of July they officially announced the change. Therefore, these protests have shown the importance of people's agency to challenge the status quo. In other words, this movement has had such a powerful and intersectional scope that it has made this team change their racist name.

## THE NEW WASHINGTON FOOTBALL TEAM:

### WHITE BLINDNESS, INSTITUTIONALIZED RACISM AND THE FUTURE

The Black Lives Matter protests have shown how historically "the other" America has been continuously enduring institutional violence. As Aseltine points out, "institutional violence [...] can take the form of policies and practices that systematically deny the humanness of its victims and fail to protect them from psychological or social harms" (2017, 223). Moreover, Cohan (2017) asserts that there has traditionally been an inability on the part of Whites to hear the Black reality and in an intersectional way this has also been the case for Native-American's struggle to end stereotypes on popular culture.

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<sup>2</sup> For bell hooks (1984) allies are comrades in struggle. Also, Cohan writes that one does not need to be part of the minority struggling to share values with it or be committed to their struggle (2017).



The Black Lives Matter protests have signaled this White blindness<sup>3</sup> together with the tiring rhetoric of White supremacy. By doing this they have proved that it is not up to the dominant—and thus, offending—class to decide what offends the offended. In other words, it is not up to the White supremacist elite to decide if a name honors or not Native Americans. The protests have challenged the status quo by helping American society wake up and see how the perpetuation of stereotypes is an ongoing insult to Indigenous people and minorities (Fenelon, 2017). The idea of “waking up” means that American society is waking up from the consumption of myths related to manifest destiny so much alive in modern America. In other words, and following Barthes (1972), the world has been consuming the modern myths of “Black Lives don’t Matter” or “R\*dskins is a word of honor” for so long that they internalized these racist practices.

Fortunately, the Black Lives Matter protests have given agency to “the other” America and the rage that has been piling up for centuries has exploded into positive changes such as the Washington Football Team’s new name. Therefore, these protests have given people all over the country—and the world—agency to attack the blindness of a country that has been building “falsehood [...] upon falsehood, self-serving lies that tell us much more about Whites and whiteness than American [minorities]” (King 2014, 136).

Society is a powerful agent of chance specially in the online arena. As Bonilla and Rosa point out:

With the emergence of the online space, no longer will the scripted narratives of social injustice silence marginalized voices. The opposing view of the subjugated and the support of sympathizers against extrajudicial violence will be acknowledged. While various forms of communication, such as e-mail, television, radio, and print, have given us the capability of observing collective actions. (2015, 7)

In fact, the Black Lives Matter protests have not been diminished by a global pandemic given that White supremacy has been contested widely on social media. The social pressure exerted by the online protests resonated so much that even the Washington Football Team, ironically, took part in the fight through their Instagram account as it could be seen on the #BlackOutTuesday. Not surprisingly, many of the comments on this #BlackOutTuesday post of the team signaled the hypocrisy of claiming to support the Black Lives when their name was R\*dskins, here we can see again the connection between Native Americans and African Americans’ struggle.

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<sup>3</sup> As Fenelon shows, “[White supremacists use] racist names even as their supposed referent—Native people—protest their use” (2017, 16). This is because they believe in the myth of “using Native American names in sports honor Native Americans”.



This shows that the team is not really part of the Black Lives Matter movement but of the moment created by it. In other words, the team—after the long struggle the Native American community has endured for equality—has decided to change the name now because of the pressure exerted by demonstrations and sponsors. The team—as any product of late American capitalism—is moved by economical credentials. Thus, just because the team has decided to change its name, it does not mean that they have stopped believing in the myth of “the name honoring Native Americans.” As they pointed out on their communicate where they changed the name, they claim that it was done to “inspire our sponsors, fans and community for the next 100 years” (The Washington Football Team 2020). The order of the groups they want to inspire is extremely interesting given that the first one is their sponsors. In fact, several newspapers as *The Guardian*, revealed it was their main sponsors (especially FedEx and Nike) who urged the team to change the name or else they would lose their sponsorship.

Fortunately, The Washington Football team is not going to be referred as the R\*dskins anymore. However, any change needs adjustment. Contemporary societies are moved by constant change and remembrance of the past and the Washington Football Team’s new name is still on the catch-on phase. Nonetheless, in the same way that the R\*dskins were known before as the Boston Braves and barely anyone refers to the team with that name, most probably R\*dskins in the future will be a remnant of the past and even if the changing of the name does not alter Native American’s history or context, “changing the Washington Redskins name [is] a notable victory in the long war against this vast array of colonial and neoliberal means of cultural domination” (Fenelon 2017, 134).

## CONCLUSION

The article has used the long struggle of the other America to show that colonialism and cultural dominance are very much alive in postmodern America. As the analysis highlighted, the struggles of Native Americans and African Americans have put in relevance their common struggle against White supremacy and blindness. Furthermore, the episode after the death of Floyd within the African American community has given voice to the Native American community. By doing so, there are changes that can be observed in popular culture and one of these changes can be seen in the new name of the Washington Football team. The change puts in relevance the Black Lives Matter protest and their transformative power. This article shows that discourse is a powerful ideological tool in modern societies as well as its relationship to naming. This is because the awakening fostered by the Black Lives Matter movement has helped American society realize that the discourse used by the Washington R\*dskins to claim their right to use a Native American name was far-fetched. Thus, thanks to these protests, society has had the upper hand and agency to achieve a change.



All in all, the final reflection that I would like to put forward is that in the same way that every country is working non-stop to find a vaccine to put an end to the global pandemic, we should also put effort on killing the virus of racism that exists all over the world even before Covid-19. As James Baldwin stated, “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” This quote gives me the possibility of finishing the article with a positive outlook: the virus of racism has finally been acknowledged and more people are little by little waking up and getting ready to fight it off.

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