

“R*dmen, we are not”
Redressing the McGill “R*dmen”:

A Scholarly Critique of Racist Athletic Naming
History at McGill University
and Why It Needs to Go

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Cherokee Chief Dugan reflects on a North Carolina campaign to ban an “Indian”¹ high school mascot. “All the schools had the same names and same colors. Warriors. Braves. They liked maroon and gold and red, of course.”² Scholar Vine Deloria Jr. has commented how this objectification is a continuation of “virulent racism”.³ Anti-“Indian” mascot activists have recognized that these situations reveal the “unstated values of school’s administrators.”⁴ “Indian” mascots perpetuate inappropriate, inaccurate, simplified, and harmful ideas about living people and their cultures. Challenging these mascots developed from a “broader movement to reclaim sovereignty, redress historical inequities, and assert a socio-political identity.”⁵ For the context of McGill—as formally unrecognized Kanien’kehá:ka territory, whose founder profited from slavery by owning black and Indigenous slaves and trading commodities from the Peculiar Institution—what does all of this mean?⁶ The origin, narratives, and the associations of the “R*dmén” name have been policed and regulated. Our case is not so clear cut as other schools experiences with problematic mascots. I will first contextualize the “R*dmén” name as a colonial legacy through several scholars works on recreation and Indigeniety, before outlining the history of athletics naming at McGill, *why* the “R*dmén” name is no longer acceptable, and *who* gets to determine its “honour” or offence.

¹ I (I wish to recognize myself as a cis-sexual, gender questioning, white, queer, Euro-Settler, able bodied male) am consciously using the term “Indian” emulating the constructed “Imaginary Indian” over other terminology

² Carol Spindel, *Dancing at Halftime: Sports and the Controversy Over American Indian Mascots*. (New York: New York University Press. 2000), 242.

³ Vine Deloria Jr. “Foreward” in *Team Spirits: the Native American Mascots Controversy*, C. Richard King, and Charles Fruehling Springwood. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), ix.

⁴ Ann Marries Amber Machamer, “Last of the Mohicans, Braves, and Warriors: The End of American Indian Mascots in Los Angeles Public Schools” in *Team Spirits: the Native American Mascots Controversy*, C. Richard King, and Charles Fruehling Springwood. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 214.

⁵ C. Richard King, and Charles Fruehling Springwood. “Introduction: Imagined Indians, Social Identities and Activism” in *Team Spirits: the Native American Mascots Controversy*, C. Richard King, and Charles Fruehling Springwood. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 7-11.

⁶ Charmaine Nelson, “Slavery Up North” Lecture, ARTH 353: The Visual Culture of Slavery, McGill University, Montreal, QC, February 13, 2014; Charmaine Nelson. “Portraiture and Identity.” Lecture, ARTH 300: Oh Canada!: Nation, Art and Cultural Politics, McGill University, Montreal, QC, October 17, 2013.

The Canadian national conscious needs to step off of its moralistic high horse when it comes to “Indian Policy”. As Thomas King said best “no need to send in the calvary with guns blazing. Legislation will do just as nicely” referring to colonization as an always violent process.⁷ The Indian Act of 1876 was a multi-colonial-tool of cultural genocide. In mandatory Residential Schools for over 100 years from 1880 to 1996, these church and state institutions dominated Indigenous children's lives.⁸ In Residential Schools, Euro-Canadian or Settler sports had assimilationist goals. For example, sport days were held in conjunction with celebrations like Dominion Day, trying to replace First Nations identity and patriotism with that of the Settler state.⁹ Pre-1951 these “modernizing” activities took the form of military drills to stimulate the underfed, often sick children to attempt to improve their health in impoverished and underfunded schools.¹⁰ Sports like basketball, baseball and hockey were used as “discipline” by withholding play time for disobedience: “it was not a right but a reward.”¹¹ Post-1951 sport became a powerful public relations tool for the blemished Residential School system.¹² Officials began to value sports ability to assist in assimilation.¹³

Simultaneously, while the Settler state is trying to erase First Nations identity and culture, Non-Indigenous are turning to the constructed “Imaginary Indian” for a sense of belonging. Settler towns saw the inclusion of “Indian Villages” and parades as integral to the identity of the Prairie Rodeo.¹⁴ Similarly, mascots and symbols have been revered as being *crucial* to Settler

⁷ Thomas King. *The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative*. Toronto: Anansi Press, 2003. 143

⁸ Janice Forsyth, “The Indian Act and the (Re)Shaping of Canadian Aboriginal Sport Practices,” *International Journal of Canadian Studies*, 35 (2007), 100.

⁹ Forsyth, “The Indian Act and the (Re)Shaping of Canadian Aboriginal Sport Practices,” 99.

¹⁰ Forsyth, “The Indian Act and the (Re)Shaping of Canadian Aboriginal Sport Practices,” 101.

¹¹ Forsyth, “The Indian Act and the (Re)Shaping of Canadian Aboriginal Sport Practices,” 102.

¹² Forsyth, “The Indian Act and the (Re)Shaping of Canadian Aboriginal Sport Practices,” 106.

¹³ Forsyth, “The Indian Act and the (Re)Shaping of Canadian Aboriginal Sport Practices,” 105.

¹⁴ Mary-Ellen Kelm, “Riding into Place: Contact Zones, Rodeo, and Hybridity in the Canadian West, 1900-1970,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, vol. 18, issue 1 (2007): 118.

institutions self branding. For example, activism against the Chief Illiniwek figure at University of Illinois met fierce opposition as organizers noted he had “become part of their identity.”¹⁵ Heavy resistance to change signals a searching for Settler identity in stereotyped Indigenous peoples.¹⁶ Settlers at Rodeos could be seen sporting redface and “playing Indian” in a highly racialized and sexualized space featuring desegregated dance halls known as “Sq**w Hall”.¹⁷ I wish to emphasize that Settlers were “playing Indian” at the same time the Potlatch Ban Amendments to the Indian Act in 1885 made First Nations cultural practice illegal.¹⁸ This is the fallacy of Settler-colonial redface and appropriating regalia, chants, pipes, feathers, dances etc. For sports, “the exploitation of Indian mascots, logos, and nicknames in schools is, in reality, an issue of decolonization and education equity.”¹⁹ How then can we even begin to reconcile appropriating romantic, savage, and constructed “Indian” figures for Settler sports culture?

The first known “Indian” mascot appeared in 1894 at Carlisle Indian School, an American Boarding School.²⁰ It should be no surprise that it was Non-Indigenous institution authorities who thought it would be acceptable. A similar critique could be said today about the homogeneity (ie. whiteness) of North American professional sports teams and college sports administration. It is common for schools to look to regional, thus colonial histories of Indigenous land dispossession in search of mascots and identities.²¹ Furthermore, it is the “prevailing socio-

¹⁵ Spindel. *Dancing at Halftime*, 12

¹⁶ Laurel R Davis and Malvina T. Rau, “Escaping the Tyranny of the Majority: A Case Study of Mascot Change” in *Team Spirits: the Native American Mascots Controversy*, C. Richard King, and Charles Fruehling Springwood. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 232.

¹⁷ Kelm, “Riding into Place: Contact Zones, Rodeo, and Hybridity in the Canadian West, 1900-1970,” 119.

¹⁸ Forsyth, “The Indian Act and the (Re)Shaping of Canadian Aboriginal Sport Practices,” 98.

¹⁹ Cornel D Pewewardy, “Playing Indian at Halftime: The Controversy over American Indian Mascots, Logos, and Nicknames in School-Related Events”. Clearing House, 2004. 77 (5): 180.

²⁰ Pewewardy, “Playing Indian at Halftime”, 181.

²¹ C. Richard King, and Charles Fruehling Springwood. “Introduction: Imagined Indians, Social Identities and Activism” in *Team Spirits: the Native American Mascots Controversy*, C. Richard King, and Charles Fruehling Springwood. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 3.

historic conditions” that “made it possible, pleasurable, and powerful for Euro-Americans” to fabricate these athletic mascots.²² Specifically, the “R*dskin” name first appears professionally in Boston in 1933 in “an era of Indigenous team branding.”²³ Anti-mascot activism has existed ever since Indigenous people felt objectified by such stereotypes and brands. Documentary film maker Jay Rosenstein, cites 1991 as an important year for Anti-mascot activism since the World Series involving the Atlanta Braves was played in Minneapolis, Minnesota—home of the American Indian Movement and a sizeable urban Indigenous population—as well as the 1992 Super Bowl involving the Washington R*dskins.²⁴

Similar schools have played off of the blatant colonial race coding embedded in the colour red, such as Simpson College’s “R*dmen”.²⁵ Scholar, Suzan Shown Harjo originates the “r*dskin” and “r*dmen” terms to colonial bounty hunters, when the heads or scalps of killed Indigenous people would be traded for more connivence.²⁶ These grotesque commodities were inevitably bloody, and the colour thus gained a racial significance with anti-Indigenous Settler racism.²⁷ McGill historian Stanley Frost cites that the “R*dmen” name refers to James McGill’s Scottish decent, (ie. Celts and red hair) as well as the schools colours and was originally written as two words.²⁸ The “R*dmen” name first appears in the student published 1928 yearbook as one word—not two—with reference to the school year (1927-8) and the prior 1926 men’s football

²² King, *Team Spirits*, 3.

²³ Suzan Shown Harjo. “Fighting Name Calling: Challenging the “Redskins” in Court” in *Team Spirits: the Native American Mascots Controversy*, C. Richard King, and Charles Fruehling Springwood. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 191-193.

²⁴ Jay Rosenstein, “In Whose Honour? Mascots, and the Media” in *Team Spirits: the Native American Mascots Controversy*, C. Richard King, and Charles Fruehling Springwood. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 249.

²⁵ King, *Team Spirits*, 3.

²⁶ Harjo. “Fighting Name Calling”, 190.

²⁷ Harjo. “Fighting Name Calling”, 190.

²⁸ Queen Arsem-O'Malley “Redskins, Redmen, racism?” McGill Daily, March 25, 2013, <http://www.mcgilldaily.com/2013/03/redskins-redmen-racism/>

season.²⁹ In 1950 McGill introduced an intermediate “Indians” football team that coexisted along the senior “Redmen” team.³⁰ In 1953 the school introduced an intermediate “Indians” basketball team, and finally in 1963 an intermediate “Indians” hockey team.³¹ In 1966 the women’s hockey team is recorded as the “Squaws”, evoking not just race, but also colonial gendered connotations and sexual violence experienced by real Indigenous women.³² The administration has never acknowledged this particular athletic history. In 1970 the intermediate “Indian” teams are stopped after a funding cut according to Zuckerman.³³ Unfortunately, the “Squaw” name spreads in 1974 to women’s basketball and is used for the last time in 1975 for both women’s basketball and hockey.³⁴ Zuckerman recognizes that in 1976 women’s team begin the Martlet moniker but, does not say why, why the previous name was dropped, and refuses to acknowledge what the previous name was.³⁵ This history is significant. Subsequent team names played upon Indigenous racial and sexual slurs, furthering what Spokane mother and graduate student of University of Illinois Charlene Teters, referred to as a “symbolic display of ownership” in these mascots.³⁶

Other recreational activities at McGill also adopted this racial colonial branding. From 1949 to 1974, Fight Band seemed to be known as the “Redmen Band” and is listed in students

²⁹ “1928 Yearbook” http://yearbooks.mcgill.ca/viewbook.php?campus=downtown&book_id=1928#page/262/mode/2up, 262.

³⁰ “1951 Yearbook” http://yearbooks.mcgill.ca/viewbook.php?campus=downtown&book_id=1951#page/32/mode/2up, 32.

³¹ “1953 Yearbook” http://yearbooks.mcgill.ca/viewbook.php?campus=downtown&book_id=1953#page/182/mode/2up, 183.; “1963 Yearbook” http://yearbooks.mcgill.ca/viewbook.php?campus=downtown&book_id=1963#page/244/mode/2up, 245.

³² “1966 Yearbook” http://yearbooks.mcgill.ca/viewbook.php?campus=downtown&book_id=1966#page/164/mode/2up, 165.

³³ Queen Arsem-O'Malley “Redskins, Redmen, racism?” McGill Daily, March 25, 2013, <http://www.mcgilldaily.com/2013/03/redskins-redmen-racism/>

³⁴ “1974 Yearbook” http://yearbooks.mcgill.ca/viewbook.php?campus=downtown&book_id=1974#page/70/mode/2up, 70.; “1975 Yearbook” http://yearbooks.mcgill.ca/viewbook.php?campus=downtown&book_id=1975#page/144/mode/2up, 138.

³⁵ Earl Zuckerman, “Origin of the McGill sports nickname ‘Redmen’” posted by JDM April, 4, 2007, <http://www.cisfootball.org/forums/archive/index.php/t-154.html>

³⁶ “In Whose Honor?” YouTube video. 8:59. Posted by “Kevin Hansen”, uploaded May 6th, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8IUf95ThI7s>, originally directed by Jay Rosenstein

activities, but never has a page of its own in the yearbooks.³⁷ Previously, in 1906 a disturbing head-of-the-class type list is titled “Arts Scalps” and the header has an “Indian” caricature complete with feathers, knife, and angry grin scalping a man (Fig. 1).³⁸ Similarly, a sports photo is playing off a distinctly Indigenous meaning of the “R*dmn” name, by referring to an injured hockey player as a “R*dmn Scalped” (Fig. 2).³⁹ This is significant as students in the 1958 year have conceived of, and understand the “R*dmn” name as not benevolent, but as an “Indian” mascot humanizing the colonial history of bounty hunting and scalp collecting.

Between 1981 and 1992 McGill adopted what can be described as an “angry Indian Chief in Plains headdress” logo for football and hockey (Fig. 3). Zuckerman explains that in 1981 the School had a logo submission contest and a student submitted what would be the winning logo.⁴⁰ This furthers that not only in 1958, but also in 1981 students are making associations to the “R*dmn” with Indigeneity. Zuckerman wrongly cites that the logo had been in place since 1982, as evidence of it is seen in the 1981 yearbook, referring to the 1980-81 football season.⁴¹ Zuckerman narrates that the McGill Athletics Board in 1992 decided to remove the “just an aboriginal logo” because it “had nothing to do with the origins of the team name.”⁴² He does not acknowledge activism on campus done by notable alumni Professor Ned Blackhawk, who as an undergrad on the track team was appalled by the logo and in 1991 formed a Native Awareness

³⁷ “1952 Yearbook” http://yearbooks.mcgill.ca/viewbook.php?&campus=downtown&book_id=1952#page/223/mode/1up, 223; “1974 Yearbook” http://yearbooks.mcgill.ca/viewbook.php?&campus=downtown&book_id=1974#page/258/mode/1up, 258.

³⁸ “1906 Yearbook” http://yearbooks.mcgill.ca/viewbook.php?campus=downtown&book_id=1906#page/158/mode/2up, 148.

³⁹ “1958 Yearbook” http://yearbooks.mcgill.ca/viewbook.php?campus=downtown&book_id=1958#page/338/mode/2up, 338.

⁴⁰ Earl Zuckerman, “Origin of the McGill sports nickname ‘Redmen’” posted by JDM April, 4, 2007, <http://www.cisfootball.org/forums/archive/index.php/t-154.html>

⁴¹ “1981 Yearbook” http://yearbooks.mcgill.ca/viewbook.php?campus=downtown&book_id=1981#page/290/mode/2up, 290.

⁴² Earl Zuckerman, “Origin of the McGill sports nickname ‘Redmen’” posted by JDM April, 4, 2007, <http://www.cisfootball.org/forums/archive/index.php/t-154.html>

Coalition.⁴³ Professor Blackhawk remembers stepping onto the field and seeing a big “Plains Chief” logo, as well as not attending football games hearing second hand about inappropriate chants coming from students.⁴⁴ Once again, in the 1990’s students have a popular understanding of the “R*dmen” name with an “Indian” connotation. The unofficial and colloquial actions of the chants, and other spectators antics are often what are perceived as the most hostile by Indigenous spectators. These actions only exist because they have a name to propagate from.

One cannot simply say that the past is in the past. To historicize these actions would be wrong since the “R*dmen” name is still in use, and still carries overt racial connotations just as it did in 1926. So how do we begin to move forward knowing this history? Springfield College successfully eliminated its “Chiefs” mascot, because like McGill there were two different mascots for the two genders athletics.⁴⁵ What does it tell us about McGill athletics and the branding of masculinity in sport, that the “R*dmen” continues to be used over the “Martlet” brand? Professor Blackhawk recalls a 1991 SSMU endorsement to remove the logo, and “R*dmen” name based on grounds of gender equity as well as racial stereotyping.⁴⁶ In a North Carolina college, the ethics board found that when “the oppressed group is a numerical minority, democracy may not be the appropriate strategy for reducing oppression.”⁴⁷ In the McGill context, the low population of Indigenous students and faculty are in a similar situation. A likely solution to the “R*dmen Problem” would be to phase out the name and educate the schools population on the inappropriateness of the name.

⁴³ Ned Blackhawk, “Guest Editorial” in *KANATA Volume 5: Undergraduate Journal of Indigenous Studies Community at McGill*, (Montreal, Winter 2012), 10-12.

⁴⁴ Blackhawk, “Guest Editorial” 10-12.

⁴⁵ Davis “Escaping the Tyranny of the Majority”, 233.

⁴⁶ Ned Blackhawk, email to author, February 22, 2015

⁴⁷ Davis, “Escaping the Tyranny of the Majority”, 236.

Opponents to change might argue, why should I care? Comanche-Kiowa scholar Professor Cornel Pewewardy describes it as an “issue of education equity.”⁴⁸ Again, I would refer to the low number of Indigenous students, absence of tenured Indigenous faculty, and resistance to a formal territory acknowledgement as further evidence of education inequity at McGill. In other instances

supporters exclaim that *these* particular Indians or *those* particular Indians over there are not offended by the harmless images, and the insist that such opinions render moot all other criticism.⁴⁹

Tokenizing non-offended, but affected voices is not the way to move forward either. I would like to draw off of scholarship surrounding blackface minstrelsy that theorizes regardless of the intent of a practice—of course the *intent* is not meant to be racist—instead, it is about the *impact* of a practice that we should be concerned.⁵⁰ Therefore, the intentionality argument is rendered void—as is the origin story of the “R*dmen”—and instead “the affected party determines what is offensive.”⁵¹

Unfortunately the “R*dmen” legacy lives on (1926-present), haunted by its racist and sexist offspring the “Indians” (1950-1970) and the “Sq**ws” (1966-1975). Under ongoing legacies of Canadian colonialism, assimilation, and acculturation policies that regulated “who is Indian” and what cultural customs could be practiced, it is inexcusable for McGill Athletics to continue to “play Indian” with the “R*dmen”. Professor Blackhawk left readers of an article he penned for the McGill Daily in 1991 simply stating “R*dmen, we are not.”⁵²

⁴⁸ Pewewardy, “Playing Indian at Halftime”, 183.

⁴⁹ Charles Fruehling Springwood, “Playing Indian and Fighting (for) Mascots: reading the complications of Native American Euro-American Alliances” in *Team Spirits: the Native American Mascots Controversy*, C. Richard King, and Charles Fruehling Springwood. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 322.

⁵⁰ Charmaine Nelson, “Blackface and Minstrelsy” Lecture, ARTH 353B: Black Subjects in Historic and Contemporary Visual Culture, McGill University, Montreal, QC, January 28, 2015.

⁵¹ Pewewardy, “Playing Indian at Halftime”, 183.

⁵² Blackhawk, “Guest Editorial” 10-12.

Plate List

Fig. 1

“1906 Yearbook” http://yearbooks.mcgill.ca/viewbook.php?campus=downtown&book_id=1906#page/158/mode/2up,148.

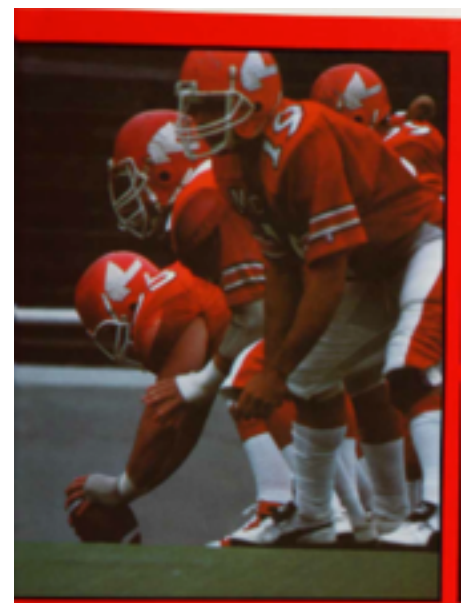


Fig. 2

“1958 Yearbook” http://yearbooks.mcgill.ca/viewbook.php?campus=downtown&book_id=1958#page/338/mode/2up,338.

Fig. 3.

“1987 Yearbook” http://yearbooks.mcgill.ca/viewbook.php?campus=downtown&book_id=1987#page/232/mode/2up,232.



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“1951 Yearbook” http://yearbooks.mcgill.ca/viewbook.php?campus=downtown&book_id=1951#page/32/mode/2up, 32.

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“1953 Yearbook” http://yearbooks.mcgill.ca/viewbook.php?campus=downtown&book_id=1953#page/182/mode/2up, 183.

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“1966 Yearbook” http://yearbooks.mcgill.ca/viewbook.php?campus=downtown&book_id=1966#page/164/mode/2up, 165.

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“1974 Yearbook” http://yearbooks.mcgill.ca/viewbook.php?campus=downtown&book_id=1974#page/70/mode/2up, 70.

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