

Native Americans on the Field:  
Sports Mascots and the Consolidation of an American Empire, 1920-2007

**Overview**

The essential questions of this dissertation, “what are the conditions of emergence that have given rise to, signified, and re-signified Native Americans as sports mascots?” and “what does this mean in the historical present?” offer an innovative approach to socio-historical analysis of race, popular culture, and Native American iconography through sport by charting the parallel histories of seven colleges and universities around the United States. Sport functions here as a multi-valent site for than on-field participants. It is an articulation of community-making that was buoyed by several processes: the circulation of knowledge, commercialism of collegiate athletics, and the expansion/diversity of the student body.

While other scholars have demonstrated the vital nature of the case study, this project takes a step forward by showing the movement of peoples between these institutions as local “innovators” of ideas within national circuits of knowledge that disseminated particular narratives of Indians to the larger public. This story identifies not just local individuals who can be held as the originators of mascot traditions but can follow the movement of these individuals to national institutions that then utilized Native American imagery as cultural iconography to impart a nationalistic project that affirmed elite white Americans (and later middle and working-class individuals) investment in preserving the masculinist foundations of American racial and class hierarchies. Importantly, this project considers three separate features of the use of Native Americans: naming, symbolism, and performances of Indianness, and joins them together under the rubric of intellectual property and in doing so, it challenges the contemporary rendering of these images in mascot debates as “locally contingent.”

Chapters on the University of Illinois, Florida State University, Miami University of Ohio, the University of North Dakota, Stanford University, and Alcorn State University intersect with cultural producers like university bands, literary magazines, Boy Scouting movements, museums, and World’s Fairs. In doing so, we find these aspects of student life and community as local manifestations of ideas circulating in the American consciousness. This project shows how cultural ideologies about Native Americans shaped the sporting world of higher education and how higher education, in turn, maintained the fictions of Indian stereotypes well into the present day. This story does not demonstrate sport as a liminal space divorced from racial, cultural, and social ideologies. Instead it argues these projects of Native American appropriation divulge a counter-narrative of sport where its exceptionalist status functions to elide the disciplinarian, nationalistic function that affirms particular social hierarchies and status. In revealing how individuals, these institutions, and national ideologies functioned symbiotically to negotiate power and difference to create local and national identities, this project reveals a project of systemic disfranchisement hidden behind the rhetoric of community development, inclusion, and fandom.