



## Redskins: Insult and Brand

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## Review

**Redskins: Insult and Brand.** By C. RICHARD KING. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press. 2016. Pp. 256. US\$24.95, CAN\$34.95, UK £16.99. ISBN 9780803278646.

*Redskins: Insult and Brand* by C. Richard King provides a comprehensive overview of the controversy surrounding the National Football League's Washington DC team name. His monograph is simultaneously a history of racism against Native Americans, an indictment of successive owners of the Washington football franchise who refuse to remedy the problem, and a call for change, not just of that team's name and mascot but of the underlying attitudes that demean and stereotype Native Americans across the US. King prefaces the book with a note about language and about his use of terms. Specifically, he introduces the usage *r\*dskin(s)*, with the asterisk, which he employs throughout the text "to underscore [the] unspeakable, problematic nature" of the term in question (xiii). Out of respect, I will emulate that usage in this review, except where King's text utilizes the full form of the word.

The book consists of 11 chapters, with notes, 12 illustrations, a bibliography containing 353 sources, 10 of which are authored or co-authored by King, and an index. King's sources include academic authors, columnists, reporters, Native activists and leaders, past and current team owners and officials of the National Football League, and several politicians. The range and diversity of King's sources are essential to the integrity of his argument in the book, but while King seeks to represent fairly the perspectives of different stakeholders in his analysis, he nevertheless makes his own stand on the issue clear, from the first page onward:

*Redskin* is a problem. . . . The word has deep connections to the history of anti-Indian violence, marked by ethnic cleansing, dispossession, and displacement. It is a term of contempt and derision that targets indigenous people. As much a weapon as a word, then, it injures and excludes, denying history and humanity (1).

This book is written in an approachable and engaging style. While the text rests on sound scholarly methodology and the analysis is grounded in theories of race and white privilege, it is not aimed primarily at an academic audience. For an academic audience, one might expect a denser prose with a higher proportion of citations from theoretical sources and slightly less redundancy. However, the use of the term in question as a team name touches the lives of both Natives and non-Natives every day, and the book is written in a style that is accessible and usable by people of all walks of life, not just by academics.

Chapter 1 introduces the problem and sets the tone of what will follow in the book, without actually providing an introduction in the traditional sense of outlining the specific arguments to be made in the subsequent chapters. King's thesis makes it clear that, as offensive as the term *r\*dskin* is, the problem is deeper than the term alone:

Ultimately, the name, the team, and the brand matter not just because they reference an offensive racial slur or profit on hurtful stereotypes. They have pressing significance because of how they encourage anti-Indian racism, reinforce white privilege, and perpetuate distorted understandings of people and the past (9).

The rest of the book elaborates on these themes.

Chapter 2, "Origins," sets out two competing etymologies for the term *r\*dskin*. The first suggests relatively benign origins. Specifically, linguist Ives Goddard claims that the term arose as

a translation of the French term *peaux rouges*, first attested in 1769, and it then gradually made its way into public discourse in the nineteenth century (13–14). This hypothesis suggests that what started as an inoffensive term used of and by a specific group of people in a particular region gradually spread and became generalized to all Native people, eventually turning into a racial epithet. Supporters of the continued use of the term as the name of the Washington DC football franchise often cite this hypothesis of the benign origins of the term as a justification for its continued use, arguing that in its original meaning it was a term denoting courage and pride. The alternative history also dates the term to the mid-eighteenth century but postulates that it arose as a term to refer to Native American bloody scalps, at a time when a bounty was paid for such scalps. Whether or not the term's origin derives from the practice of killing and scalping Native Americans, it is intricately linked with that practice and, for many contemporary Native Americans, the term can never be cleansed of those associations. Thus, King argues, regardless of its earliest uses, the use of the term today evokes the centuries of violence against Native Americans.

Chapter 2 goes on to explain that the Washington DC NFL team was originally based in Boston, and in 1933 the team's owner, George Preston Marshall, changed the team's name from the *Boston Braves* to the *Boston Redskins*. In 1937, the team relocated to Washington DC, retaining the same team moniker. King cites newspaper coverage at the time of the name change in 1933 to demonstrate that it was already controversial then. The name was justified, in part, by arguing that, since the coach at the time, "Lone Star" Dietz, and several of the players were Native American, the name could not be racist, but King and others question Dietz's claims to Native American ancestry and also question the validity of declaring the term inoffensive because of the inclusion of Native Americans on the team. Organized opposition to the use of *r\*dskin* as the team name goes back at least to the early 1970s and continues to the present time.

Having set the scene in Chapter 2, King uses the rest of the book to develop and expand on the arguments he sets out in that chapter. King examines the varying ways in which the Washington DC franchise and its supporters have used and understood Native Americans down through the decades. He demonstrates how the use of the team's name and Indian head mascot has served to erase authentic Native cultures, substituting in their place misrepresentations and distortions of the history, cultures, and experiences of real Native Americans. Furthermore, King argues that widespread adherence to a contemporary belief in "colorblindness" with respect to race and ethnicity places the psychology of fans and supporters who claim to have positive feelings about Indianness above the lived experiences of Native Americans who face racism daily and who may be deeply wounded by the appropriation of their lives and their cultures for the entertainment and enjoyment of others.

King further argues that understandings of race and racism in the US tend to revolve around understandings of blackness and whiteness, with the result that racism against Native Americans is ignored or tolerated or both. In the case of the Washington DC franchise, the team and its supporters attempt to appropriate and simulate Indian voices in order to make a case that Native Americans actually support the continued use of the team's name. King does not try to hide the fact that Native Americans have varied responses to the use of the term. He does, however, point out that, for Native Americans living off the reservations, the experience of racism may be more omnipresent, leading to their greater likelihood of opposing the use of the term *r\*dskin* in the team name, in contrast with Natives living on reservations, who may not directly experience racism as frequently in their daily lives and who may, as a result, feel less strongly about the issue.

In the final two chapters, King calls for the Washington DC team's name and logo to be replaced with something that does not appropriate Indianness. He also looks beyond the specific example of the Washington team's use of Indianness and asks the reader to reflect on the context in which the kind of racism reflected in the team name and logo is supported by the racism that still inheres in American society, in spite of the advances made during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. King wants the Washington DC team name changed, but, even more fundamentally, he wants to see the country embrace "a new semiotic economy," which would fundamentally alter the way Indianness is perceived and understood (172). King's book, a discussion of one sports

franchise's team name, is actually a call for all of us, Native and non-Native, to re-envision our relationships with one another and with one another's cultures.

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