

Summer 2014

Review of Contesting Constructed Indian-ness: The Intersection of the Frontier, Masculinity, and Whiteness in Native American Mascot Representations by Michael Taylor.

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Abstract

Michael Taylor opens his new book with a narrative describing his compelling observations of Salamanca City high school students at a pep rally in which a fellow student embodied their mascot, the Warriors. The plot thickens as we learn that the young man in the buckskin outfit is Seneca. Reading further, we gain a deep insight into the positionality of the ethnographer when he reveals that this encounter took place when he was still a high school student and that he is also Seneca. Taylor thus sets the stage for his analysis of the construction of an imagined Indian identity in the United States that has been adopted across the nation by both Euroamericans and occasionally Natives themselves. His study of Indian mascots is one of the most extensive to date, as he researches universities that gave up their Indian mascots early, such as Syracuse; universities that have intensely fought the pressure, such as Illinois and North Dakota; and schools that retain Indian mascots as a part of their relationships with local Native communities, such as his own high school on the Allegany Reservation as well as Florida State University. He combined archival sources with ethnography to present a rich set of materials describing each school's relationship with its mascot and its Native and non-Native students, employees, and local residents.

Disciplines

American Material Culture | American Popular Culture | American Studies | Other Languages, Societies, and Cultures

Comments

This review is published as Gish-Hill, C. Review of Contesting Constructed Indian-ness: The Intersection of the Frontier, Masculinity, and Whiteness in Native American Mascot Representations by Michael Taylor. *Journal of Anthropological Research* 70(2): 317-318. Doi: [10.3998/jar.0521004.0070.206](https://doi.org/10.3998/jar.0521004.0070.206). Posted with permission.

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Contesting Constructed Indian-ness: The Intersection of the Frontier, Masculinity, and Whiteness in Native American Mascot Representations by Michael Taylor

Review by: Christina Gish Hill

Source: *Journal of Anthropological Research*, Vol. 70, No. 2 (SUMMER 2014), pp. 317-318

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24393795>

Accessed: 13-06-2018 21:03 UTC

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arisen in collaboration with indigenous actors at the turn of the twenty-first century, specifically in the fields of ethnography (Chapter 11) and museology (Chapter 12). Both provide nice, short overviews of postmodern approaches to representation that value accountability, multivocality, dialogue, and the advancement of projects of repatriation and sovereignty.

This book is clearly aimed at an undergraduate/popular audience, each chapter opening with a highly engaging anecdote. Page counts for several chapters number in the single digits, so for a fuller and more academic treatment readers should look to other works by Strong. However, as a pedagogical resource for the teaching of representations of Native Americans, this book is invaluable. Educators can use this text to ground other readings, topics, and enrichment activities such as museum visits or film screenings. Especially helpful is the "Bibliographic Note" that Strong has included at the end of each chapter recommending further reading. This book would be useful for any class addressing Native American contemporary issues, representation, or expressive culture. I certainly intend to use it in mine.

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Contesting Constructed Indian-ness: The Intersection of the Frontier, Masculinity, and Whiteness in Native American Mascot Representations. *Michael Taylor*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013, 154 pp. \$54.00, cloth.

Michael Taylor opens his new book with a narrative describing his compelling observations of Salamanca City high school students at a pep rally in which a fellow student embodied their mascot, the Warriors. The plot thickens as we learn that the young man in the buckskin outfit is Seneca. Reading further, we gain a deep insight into the positionality of the ethnographer when he reveals that this encounter took place when he was still a high school student and that he is also Seneca. Taylor thus sets the stage for his analysis of the construction of an imagined Indian identity in the United States that has been adopted across the nation by both Euroamericans and occasionally Natives themselves. His study of Indian mascots is one of the most extensive to date, as he researches universities that gave up their Indian mascots early, such as Syracuse; universities that have intensely fought the pressure, such as Illinois and North Dakota; and schools that retain Indian mascots as a part of their relationships with local Native communities, such as his own high school on the Allegany Reservation as well as Florida State University. He combined archival sources with ethnography to present a rich set of materials describing each school's relationship with its mascot and its Native and non-Native students, employees, and local residents.

Taylor's argument sheds new light on the mascot debate by positing that Indian mascots embody a particular settler colonial construction of history that depends on the glorification of a mythic frontier and the hegemonic narrative that accompanies it. This narrative of usurped place represented by Indian mascots works to erase Native presence from the land, making the people a symbol of a mythic past that validates the United States as triumphant. Euro-Americans, particularly males, are invested in these mascots because they represent the success of the colonial enterprise. He

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argues that such appealing constructions of whiteness are reified by symbols of Native resistance—famous warriors such as Osceola—who have been defeated and can now be modified and displayed according to preferred readings of Indianness. Taylor demonstrates that the intense emotions white males experience in relation to Indian mascots emerge from their power to justify Euro-American domination of both Native peoples and the American landscape as a moral outcome of settlement.

His goal is to reverse the scholarly lens and document the Native voice by bringing his own critical perspective as a Native scholar to bear on the constructions of Indianness presented in cultural performances of non-Native Americans. While he correctly asserts that public critiques emanating from Native communities and activists have not been given the legitimacy they deserve, he needs to complicate what he means by “Native voice.” Taylor recognizes that even among Native peoples there is not a consensus about the mascot issue, but he still seeks to amplify what he calls “the Native voice.” He believes that internalized, institutionalized racism is the driving force behind a general acceptance of Indian mascots. Using rich examples, he illustrates how these mascots create a hostile environment, leading students to hide their Native identity. The solution for Taylor is to retire all Indian mascots, from the most cartoonish and problematic, like such as Washington Redskins, to the ones that garner support from local Native communities, such as the Florida State Seminoles.

Yet it is unlikely that retiring Indian mascots will quash institutionalized racism. Certainly ending such a public portrayal of the Euro-American construction of Indianness would take away a powerful symbolic validation of the mythic narrative of Western settlement. To fully develop his interrogation of the white American male fantasies surrounding Indians, Taylor needs to more fully explore why these sports fans are so emotionally invested specifically in mascots. He clearly illuminates the moral justification of claims to land, the erasure of Native presence, and with it, any guilt over a violent conquest. At the same time, would retiring these mascots force white Americans to look beyond the mythic history they have constructed? Other public representations of America’s past also validate this narrative, from national museums to grade school textbooks. What is it about the public performance of a fictionalized Indian identity, specifically as the emblematic rallying point of a sports team, that can so powerfully reify these social hierarchies of power? What might the answer to this question tell us about American investment in its founding narratives?

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Yuchi Indian Histories before the Removal Era. Jason Baird Jackson, ed. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012, 280 pp. \$30.00, paper.

Scholarly books sometimes call into being their objects of analysis not because authors invent these objects but because scholarship makes evident important phenomena that had been rendered unknowable by the existing academic order of things. Such books encourage further research and can prompt reflection on the structure of knowledge production. *Yuchi Indian Histories before the Removal Era* is such a book.

Journal of Anthropological Research, vol. 70, 2014