

Transcript: Foreword, Season 1 Episode 1 “Indigenous Mascots”

Aired: 8 July 2020

Episode Title: Indigenous Mascots

[Alison] Welcome to a new episode of Foreword, a podcast where we meet researchers from Brock University’s Faculty of Humanities. I’m your host, Alison Innes.

[Theme music]

[Alison] Before COVID-19 took over our news headlines, Canadians were worried about other issues. There were bushfires in Australia, impeachment in the United States, and royals leaving the United Kingdom. Here in Canada, one of the growing issues making headlines were the spreading demonstrations in support of the Wet’suwet’en protest against Coastal Gaslink Pipeline in BC.

At the time, Brock’s Centre for Canadian Studies was hosting a researcher in Indigenous activism as part of the international Fulbright program. Dr. Jason Black from the University of North Carolina was at Brock to work on research for his new book project.

I spoke with Jason in February, when the Kansas City Chiefs had just won the Super Bowl and the COVID-19 pandemic crisis had not yet disrupted the school year. At the end of our conversation, we have an update from Jason on how the pandemic situation is impacting Indigenous activism.

[Theme music]

[Alison] Joining me in the studio today is Dr. Jason Black, the 2020 Fulbright Research Chair in Transnational Studies with the Centre for Canadian Studies at Brock University. Dr. Black is visiting from the Department of Communication Studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte where he is a professor and the chairperson. He holds a PhD in Rhetorical Studies from the University of Maryland and has researched and published extensively on rhetoric and discourse around LGBTQ and Indigenous activist movements. His most recent publications include *Mascot National: The Controversy over Native American Representations in Sports* (co-authored with Andrew Billings) and *Decolonizing Native American Rhetoric: Communicating Self-Determination*. While at Brock, he is teaching CANA3V92 “Social Activism and Culture in Canada and the United States.”

So welcome!

[Jason Black] Thank you very much Alison, I appreciate being on!

[Alison] So, with so many issues in the news these days, and so many seemingly more important things going on, why do Indigenous mascots matter? Why is it worth digging into this, educating, pushing back?

[JB] Right, right. It's a fair question, and it's certainly a ubiquitous question. It's one I get quite a bit, you know, in the face of things, at least in the United States, ah, issues such as increase in diabetes and public health and drug and alcohol abuse, which often these are stereotypes of Indigenous folks in the US and on reservations, called reserves here, ah, and in the face of things like the Bureau of Indian Affairs not returning money, or the US government as a whole not fulfilling treaties, what is this mascot thing about and why does it matter? I think it matters for a number of reasons. Everything that I just mentioned, which are governmental, historical, material problems and health problems we're grappling with, are imprecated or woven through the mascot itself, right. So public health and personal health, the internalization on the part of Indigenous folks when they see this imagery and what that does for self-esteem and what that does for self-worth, that's a public health problem. That's a public health complication. That connects with depression, that connects with suicide, suicidal ideation, drug abuse, alcohol abuse, that connects with in those ways. And on the other side of it stereotypes attached to mascots allow non-Indigenous folks to continue to play in the stereotypes, which just further complicates the way that Indigenous folks may see themselves, not just personally but as part of a larger public, whether the US or Canada. So there's a public health part of it as well. Mascots also, when, umm, when folks see the mascot as representing and almost eclipsing Indigenous identity, for instance, in Florida, or in the United States, when one can't think of Chief Osceola or the Seminoles in any form except the gross caricature of Chief Osceola on the field atop his horse at the beginning of a football game throwing a flaming spear in a field while people do a tomahawk chop to a song called "Massacre," ok,

[Alison] That's a lot to unpack!

[JB] It's a lot to unpack and you know, when that's what people see or understand of the Seminole nation, then we've got a real difficulty of what happens when reform is on the table, what happens when policies need to be changed, and all people think about is, this is playful.

[Alison] Mmm.

[JB] Native Americans disappear, right, like in the 1890s after Wounded Knee and after reservation systems were, you know, firmly in place. Ah, so we can play around with this. So why the heck would we vote to pay money or repatriate land or something like that. So what I'm basically saying is that stereotypes through the mascot make, make this fun, make this a joke, so that when it comes time for real material change a larger public is less likely to engage in reform. And honestly, everything is connected, right?

[Alison] Mm-hmm.

[JB] Especially when it comes to colonization. Especially when it comes to a history of coloniality. Everything is connected. Certainly in Western culture, even more so in eastern culture where the idea of wholism is so firm. But the circle, in Indigenous communities itself, right, if we respect Indigenous voice we understand perhaps their ontology, their way of being, their lifeways where everything is connected. Mascots are connected to larger historical difficulties, connected to contemporary material problems on reserves and on reservation, it's connected with racism, anti-Indianism in the US and in Canada. And at the end of the day, we can handle multiple things as human beings. We can handle multiple issues. I'm watching the debates as we get closer to the presidential election in the US. There are at least eight top issues, ranging from health care all the way to border walls and immigration reform and all of the in-betweens. If we're able to handle large, and think through, large issues all together, surely we can manage multiple parts of a larger problem of coloniality. And what I think about is, if the whole goal of our community is to engage in a more perfect union in the US or a more solid confederation in Canada, or what have you isn't it important to ensure that is a responsible public and that is a responsible citizenry. That's how I connect it, everything is interlaced in a way. Yeah.

[Alison] Yeah. There seems to be this really interesting tension, then, between the aspects of Indigenous life that nineteenth century colonial in particular and continuing since has sought to destroy, being adopted as these rituals and these fan, um, motifs, and that, and that kind of thing. Like, where does that come from? Like, why, I don't know, it's just an observation, and I'm just wondering if there's, there's kinda more to that.

[JB] Yeah! And so more to the ways fan engage and playing through their mascot--

[Alison] Yeah, yeah.

[JB] And forming their identity? I mean, this is a beautiful question, honestly, and it's sociological and it's ideological, right. Basically the way that I come at this and the way that a number of people do is that really our identities as groups, whether it's individual groups or national groups or identity-based groups, based in gender, race, ethnicities, sexualities, etc, religions, especially religion, we know each other through symbol-making. We know each other through language. What does it mean to be an American? Well, complicated question, but most likely it's going to be things like, I believe in freedom, and democracy and liberty, right? I believe in our revolutionary spirit, I respect the flag and everything that it represents, and I celebrate the Fourth of July and I... right, sort of. These are all symbols. They are all discourses that come together. There's a historian named Benedict Anderson who talked about imagined communities and the essential point of his work is countries and groups and identities don't grow from the ground or fall from trees. It's all rhetorical. We craft our identities. How does this connect to team spirit, if you will? Well, teams are communities. And so, to me, sports groups, sports doesn't make community, sport fandom is community. Community isn't built on top of the team. The team is the community itself and its fandom is the community itself. And so how people get together and share that community, and share their joint identities, and then take the joint identities away to their individual lives, well, ritual. The same rhetoric I just talked

about. Key terms—life, liberty, pursuit of happiness, right, and that can be your cheer that you do at the stadium. Or I am, I respect the flag and all it represents. Well, I respect the team colours and the mascot and all it represents. Right? So.

[Alison] So then when you're a Kansas City Chiefs fan you're wearing the headdress, you're wearing the jersey, you're putting on the face paint to say I belong to this community.

[JB] Correct. Correct.

[Alison] This fan community.

[JB] Absolutely. Absolutely. Now, you know, fans, dress up and assume their rituals, right, at schools and professional teams that aren't Indigenous in scope or Indigenous in, sort of, character. Umm. The question becomes with building fan identity around Indigenous symbol-making and names and visuals and then the performances themselves is—Are there any other culture groups, living, with a colonial past, that are fodder for mascotting? Can you imagine in the United States or anywhere, African-American mascots, white people, or at least non-Black folk, non-Black POC folk even, wearing blackface, right, as they go to the New York African-Americans football game, that has a caricatured African American man on a helmet. Right. The question becomes why, why is it that we don't have east Asian or south Asian mascots, we don't have, um, as I mentioned, African-American mascots, we don't have Jewish mascots, right. And the answer is multi-fold, and very complicated, but essentially it's the idea in the west that we can, we can wear Indianness because they have always been seen as other, savage, uncivilized, defeated in war, in Canada and the United States. And once on reservations and reserves, safely tucked away, that they then become something that you can play with. Think about, in the US, historically, the Boston Tea Party, which was one of the first really big revolutionary moments of resistance, where the tax on tea was so incredible that a bunch of rag-tag American colonists decided to through tea in the harbour as protest to the Crown. Under the dead of night, they hop aboard a ship, and throw the tea over. But often times what's not reported is that they dressed as natives,

[Alison] Mmmm

[JB] And you fast forward through and you have wild west shows that happened at the end of the Indian wars. You look at the Boy Scouts of America and the fact that you're a part of a tribe, well, now it's a den, but it used to be a tribe. And you get the golden arrow or the silver arrow and the ultimate ascension you have in the boy scouts is Eagle Scout, eagle, of course, being a religious symbol of Indigeneity in North America, right, if not beyond. So we have these, and then mascotting culture pops up, advertising culture pops up, Land O'Lakes butter, Redman chewing tobacco, ah, Indian motorcycles, etc. Hollywood depictions of nativeness as well, oftentimes played by non-Indigenous people, I mean, Sal Mineo, an Italian-American actor in the 50s, right, early sixties I believe? He plays, you know, a chief in a, in a Disney movie, well that's not a surprise, and so you know, Peter Pan or any other Disney movie that brokers in Indigeneity. So this trend has been around and so people don't think, oftentimes, they don't

think twice, they just engage in, ah, play. And they call it play. It's just a game. It's just sports. It's just on any given Sunday. [Pause] Well, for you. But what about folks who wear those symbols, who wear that identity and the hot breath of history breathes down their neck every day of their lives. They can't leave the Cleveland baseball stadium and become a white person who's, who's easily and safely and in a privileged way folded back in. They have to live with the stereotypes of savagery and bellicosity, of war and violence that non-Indigenous folks broker in. So that's... it's very... it's very very complex.

[Alison] As we as a culture and certainly within the university as well have begun to engage with and grapple with these issues of truth and reconciliation, one word that comes up a lot and it comes up in your work as well, is the idea of decolonization. So it's a term we hear a lot but I'm not sure if it's one that we ever really hear explained out for us.

[JB] Right, right.

[Alison] So what do we mean with this idea of decolonization?

[JB] Sure, it's a complicated term, and it's complicated in a number of different ways, I mean, there are intellectual, there are academic definitions which a lot of us write about, academic definitions are always contested, and they're contested because they're also public definitions, and there are multitudes of publics who engage in something like a policy or practice of decolonization. Feeds back into the scholarship and so there are kinda debates about what it means. For me, if I were describing, as I do to my students, and they give me a mobius strip back [laugh] feedback loop, the way that I describe it is that decolonization is an antidote to colonization, and so I don't, I hate to have to start with colonization, but we kind of have to get a sense of what decolonization is responding to. And colonization is the historic and contemporary control of land and labour, bodies, cultures and symbolism of typically marginalized people in a colonial setting of the time, right. And so colonization are the acts themselves, is how I sort of frame this. So colonization are the acts. The more insidious part is coloniality, because that's more of an ideology. It's a super structure, a moving sidewalk, that allows colonization as acts to move forward. And so often times, at least in the States, people will say well, you know, Native Americans are on reservations, and they have casinos and tax breaks and they can sell cigarettes at, you know, a buck a pack, or whatever it is, racism is over. Right? Anti-Indianism in the United States is over. Well, that's not necessarily the case, because coloniality is still pulled through. Um. Not only are acts taking place, but the overall, um, feeling and philosophy and ideology of coloniality is going on. And then decolonization and decoloniality is the antidote. Decolonization are material acts and symbolic acts that are taken to dismantle the logics of coloniality, to recentre Indigenous communities and Indigenous voice and the process first, if not before anything else, destroying white privilege, questioning white fragility, and the process of the centuries-long colonial relationships, creating material changes, educational changes, and in any form possible. That's decolonization. Decoloniality is the overall way of knowing and being decolonial. It's the antidote to coloniality. It's the philosophy, the ideology that's long standing and so acts are built on top of the ideology and philosophy. Sort of like in the United States the Black Power movement. Malcolm X, whose documentary

right now is out, it's actually out because I was watching it on Canadian Netflix last night  
[laughs]

[Alison] [laughs]

[JB] Um, you know. Malcolm X is the prophet and architect of what we know as Black nationalism in the US starting in the 60s. The Black Power movement were the folks who acted, right. So he created the philosophy and ideology that supported that or punctuated that, they, you know, worked through the acts of the movement. I kind of see decolonization and decoloniality in those ways.

16:15

[Alison] As we're recording this, there's the developing story around the Wet'suwet'en and the pipeline protests—

[Jason] Right

[Alison] What's your perspective on that? As a non-Canadian but someone who is trained in these kinds of issues.

[Jason] Yeah, it's um, it's interesting because on the one hand you want to say this is unfortunate that we're still working through issues regarding environmental justice and Indigenous nations especially in a country like Canada who has this public imaginary and reputation as being so incredibly woke, so incredibly progressive, and so on the one hand there's sort of the disappointment and there's some shame attached to the fact that a pipeline is still being built after decades of reform, of course, and then reformed turned back into activism. On the other hand, it's enlivening to see people getting together in the same way that folks in the United States did over the NDAPL, North Dakota Access Pipeline protests back in 2016 and 17 did. People getting together in a collective to not just fight back against the top-down power, whether it's a capitalist power or a governmental power, that's a reaction, we've framed it that way, activists are just reacting. But building community is what's really going on in the midst of things like social protests, right, and movement. And so I'm, I'm looking at this as wow, this is really eye-opening being in Canada and seeing that the same types of issues are going on across borders, which reminds you that borders are human made.

[Alison] Hmm mm.

[JB] They're rhetorical. They're lines drawn on a map after warfare against Indigenous folks and other European powers, right. So it's eye-opening in that way and it's also eye-opening and heartening to see people get together and listen so the pipeline issue and the violence against protestors is happening all the way west. I mean, almost as far west as you can get, I think?

[Alison] Yeah [chuckles]

[JB] And yet what we're seeing this week is the disruption of the Via train line between Toronto, the largest city, right, um, kinda the —I hate to compare it to the United States—but kinda the New York of

Canada, right? [laughs] Like the epicentre of industry, the epicentre of banking, the epicentre right, all the way through to Ottawa, which is the epicentre of the government and to Montreal, which is the epicentre of, you know, Franco-Canadian culture and history. And so, you know, there is a disruption of the line all the way in the east. And I sort of pause to call it a disruption, because, umm, yes, a train line is being impeded as protestors in the east stand in solidarity, Indigenous and non-Indigenous folks, stand in solidarity with brothers and sisters and two-spirited folk across the expanse of five time, six time zones, right? Um. Well four, but, ok, but it's not a disruption, it's community activism, more than that. So it's hard to call it a disruption. But it's heartening to see that people are standing in solidarity, not just ally-ship—ally-ship is bumper sticker, right—

[Alison] Hmm mmm.

[JB] —a T-shirt. It's accomplice-ship, people putting their bodies on the line, reputations on the line, lives on the line, economics on the line, family on the line, and it's been really interesting to see that unfold as I'm here, I mean this has happened in the past few weeks.

[Alison] Well I wish we could continue this conversation—

[JB] [laughter] I wish we could

[Alison] and continue our sweet tea drinking—

[JB] Yes, thank you for bringing a bit of home to the table here!

[laughter]

[JB] I appreciate it, this is great.

[Alison] You're very welcome. Thank you so much for joining us today, and, uh, we may to check, check back in with you, um, depending how the news cycle goes! [laughs]

[JB] That sounds fantastic! Thank you so much for having me and I mean that in terms of the podcast and our conversation here but also as a university culture here, um, as a community, I really appreciate being here and as I work on more Canadian Indigenous mascot cases, I would be happy to share what I'm learning, for instance from Edmonton CFL team debate and from the McGill case and from some local cases in Ontario. So, um, I'm always happy to come back.

[Alison] Well let us know when the next book comes out!

[JB] Oh, I will!

[laughter]

[theme music]

[Alison] I'm going to hit record, and I'm going to ask you, it has been a long—the world is a very different place from what it was when we spoke way back in February, so I was wondering if

you had any insight that you wanted to share about what's happening with Indigenous activism now, during this pandemic.

[JB] Yeah, absolutely, so one of the, one of the worries in the midst of this pandemic is that efforts that were already underway or resistance or for social change for Indigenous communities across Turtle Island, so we're talking the US and Canada in particular, that those efforts will go away or will be diminished. So we're talking about things like pipeline protests, and anti-mascot protests, and MMIW girls and trans folks protests, those kinds of things. There's such momentum coming from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's reports up in Canada, of course, but also in the US, um, I don't know, more than other groups are really picking up steam in this election year in the United States for Indigenous rights, such good headway, there's a lot of velocity for these movements. And now, of course, we have a global pandemic and of course you know, issues that aren't seen as quote "essential" to a pandemic problem are marginalized even further and pushed to the side. So one of the worries is that those efforts that have already been gaining or had already been gaining so much momentum are going to be chiseled away. And I think to an extent we're seeing that. We're not seeing as many protests, we're not seeing as many efforts for social change, as we did before March of 2020. So there is the concern there. But what we now see with a lot of Indigenous groups as I've been attempting to get my department in shape and keep my university working as a small part as a department chair, but what I've been noticing is that we're seeing anti-colonial protest within the context of health, within the context of public health, tied to larger issues, larger historical issues of things like pandemic and epidemic. Um. And Indigenous folks in Canada and the United States who have faced decades and if not centuries and centuries of colonial, colonial health difficulties. Umm. Including things like smallpox genocide. Both in the United States and in Canada. Things like sterilization campaigns, um, diseases on reserves and reservations, right, ah, these sort of comorbidity issues that we talk about quite a bit, those have historically been linked to reservations and large numbers, residential schools, ah, and in the US and in Canada, the ways in which diseases allowed or was allowed to run rampant without a lot of check. You get the Spanish flu wiping out scores of native Alaskan villages, with absolutely no aid whatsoever. Same thing happening during the H1N1 where there was about a 300% more chance of contracting H1N1 if you were an Indigenous person in the United States. So at any rate, we're seeing a lot of protests or, not protests proper, we're seeing a lot of activism surrounding how do we get resources to Indigenous nations, to Indigenous peoples, on both sides. I think the United States is doing a [pause] worse job than Canada is, not just in the amount of money being afforded but in the speed of that money getting to health campaigns on reserves and, um, in Indigenous communities.

[Alison] And the Navajo nation has, ah, has been in the news a bit lately as well, they've been particularly hard hit there.

[JB] Absolutely. And that's sort of, that's kind of the, what you might call the flag individual or the flag event and that's typically there's one extreme example, or there's one really poignant example during social change that a larger social change community points to as how can this happen, and these are the ends to which this problem will reach if we don't stop it now with

the means we have at our disposal. And in this case, in this context of COVID-19, it's the Navajo nation that's being, honestly, it's being decimated. They have more cases than eight of their neighbouring states, many of those states never had a stay at home order. So consider that.

[Alison] Yeah.

[JB] So these are states that should have higher numbers per capita than other states, and they do, and yet those eight states that neighbour the Navajo nation are in much better shape and other SES issues, social economic status issues, such as bald-faced poverty, right, 30% of the Navajo nation live in poverty, those who are not living in poverty are making 60 cents on the dollar to a typical American and they're 19 times more likely to not have clean water and plumbing. So when we talk about people sheltering at home and keeping hygiene at the forefront of their minds and of their family's well-being and those kinds of things. It's sometimes complicated, if not all the time complicated on reservations in the US, keeping people sheltered in place, really, really difficult. And it's tied and intersectionally it's tied to class and to race.

[Alison] There have been a couple of incidences in Canada, one in the, one was with I think it was the Haida Gwaii in BC, um, turning back a ferry, the ferry, because people would, people were coming, white people were coming, and thinking oh, I'm just going to go camp in the woods or do whatever and kinda flee—this whole idea of fleeing the pandemic, right, and they were just stopping people and trying to send them straight back to where they came from, to protect their community because the community, these communities are so under resourced to being with that they can't handle people coming in and getting sick.

[JB] Absolutely, absolutely. And I think that if we look at the media representation and the media coverage of this, but also the way that politicians talk about, about this particular issue, protectionism of one's territory, one's sovereign land if you will, we see words such as hostile, or rogue being appended to Indigenous nations who are turning back those ferries, turning back those folks, or preventing cars from driving through a reservation, but now when white folks on the coast of Massachusetts do the same thing, it's a protection of property, right? Um. It's their civic duty to keep their communities healthy. There are vastly different ways in which Indigenous folks are framed while doing the same things that white folks are doing, and the ways that white folks are framed are vastly more positive, it's more like they're protecting their liberty if they're white and preventing ferries from coming over to Cape Cod or islands off the coast of Long Island, right, where there were a number of folks in Manhattan who wanted to get out to their summer homes or wanted to get out to resorts or what have you, in the Hamptons, and people turned those boats away, turned those visitors away. That's a protection, that's a right, that's part of your liberty to keep people out, but when it comes to Indigenous folks it's seen as hostile, you know, other disparaging verbs and nouns [laughter] that have been historically thrown around. It's a shame but you know the hypocrisy even though bold and overt is sometimes covered up so much and so when people say Why are native folks, why are Indigenous folks still fighting for this, don't they have casinos, don't they have federal funding, don't they have dual citizenship if they're in a US state and a member of a

registered tribe, you know, don't they have all these things, what do they need, what more do they need. Well, look at the ways that they can't even protect themselves and their communities in a time of pandemic without larger colonial structures coming down on them. It's you know getting back to the question of what does protest look like or what's happened, I think that's what we're seeing. We're seeing more of that anti or decolonial activism about this particular health issue, in other words, has opened up even more the can of coloniality that was being worked on before the pandemic. It exposes those creases and cleavages and rips even more.

[Alison] Yeah, it's, it's really showing the holes in our society and our society looks more like a colander than anything else. I know I've seen conversations on Twitter, and they've been saying you know, we can't do anything about homelessness and now suddenly yes we put homeless people in hotel rooms or find places for them to live. There's suddenly this urgency that shows that maybe it wasn't that it was impossible, maybe we just didn't want to do it.

[Jason] That's right. That's right. And the key here for activists moving forward, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, really, regardless of one's subject position or issue that folks are activists around, is to keep that momentum going because cultural amnesia is a real thing in the western world and particularly in the US and in Canada. And people, people will quickly forget once they're safe and they can go to their Starbucks and they can go to Whole Foods and they can go to Trader Joes or wherever, right, they're going to forget about what we've been through. Especially if it's not their narrative, right?

[Alison] Yeah.

[JB] And so reminding the larger cultures of hey, remember when we said we couldn't do it and then we had to do it because there was an emergency and we said we would never let it happen again but now we're at the mall and we're having an Orange Julius and we don't care anymore. Like

[Alison] Hmmm mmm.

[JB] Let's go back to that moment of emergency and remember how we were able to do it and how much better we could be if there is another pandemic, and even regardless of that, how much better human beings we could be as a result of this emergency. And I think that will be one of the sort of watch words or watch topics moving out of this.

[Theme music]

[Credits]

Thank you to listening to Foreword. Find our footnotes, links to more information, and past episodes on our website [brocku.ca/humanities](https://brocku.ca/humanities).

We love to hear from our listeners! So please join us on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @brockhumanities. Please subscribe and rate us on your favourite podcasting app so you don't miss an episode.

Foreword is hosted and produced by Alison Innes for the Faculty of Humanities at Brock University.

Our sound design and editing is by Serena Atallah and theme music is by Khalid Imam.

The credits have been read by me, Serena Atallah.

Special thanks to Brock University's MakerSpace and Brock University Marketing and Communications for studio and web support.

This podcast is financially supported by the Faculty of Humanities at Brock University.