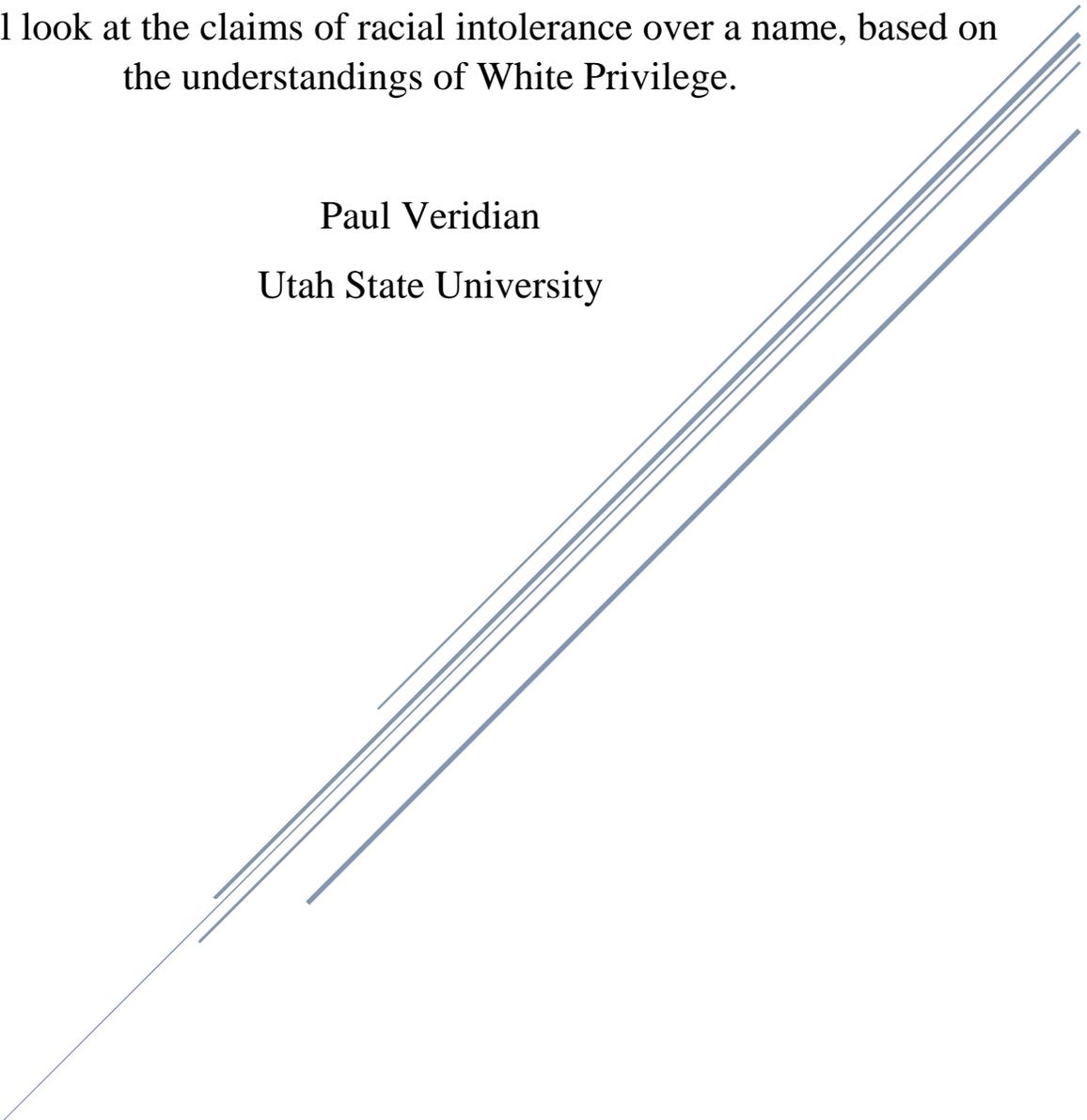


Blindingly White:

A critical look at the claims of racial intolerance over a name, based on the understandings of White Privilege.

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“I from within the belly of the beast, will endeavor to describe the visage of the beast I live within.”

**Note: The piece contains racial slurs that may be offensive to some. To maintain the integrity of direct quotes, racial slurs have been left as is. Other than the initial usage of the word for context, all other times, when I refer to a racial slur the word will be referenced as its socially acceptable usage of understanding.*

What makes something racist? In this paper I will look at the National Football League (NFL) team name ‘The Washington Redskins’ and the rhetorical choices to keep the name and deny the connotations of ‘White Privilege’ in modern America. I will do this by showing the different associations being made by those claiming the team’s name is a racial slur and those being made by the Washington team’s owner and the commissioner of the NFL. I will also cover parts of stasis theory that is the basis for the differing claims that shape much of the contention. By the end of this paper I intend to show how the R-word can be understood as a racial slur while simultaneously remaining a source of intended respect and pride by certain people.

The focus of this paper will not be on the contentious issue of the name change itself, but rather the rhetoric that defines the cultural viewpoints, i.e. White Privilege, of a modern white American. The question I will endeavor to answer in this paper is, are the rhetorical choices being made based out of a culturally privileged view of the world or out of an intentionally racist view? The reason why this is an important topic of discussion and analysis is that racial inequality in America has reached a tipping point. The cultural hegemony of white Americans continues to be questioned and awareness of White Privilege brought to light. As this privilege is still largely unseen and unknown by the majority of white American recipients, analyzing the responses of those being accused of racial intolerance is key to understanding their motives.

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I will be applying the understanding of White Privilege throughout this paper as a basis to understand the rhetorical choices being made. The first aspect that needs to be understood and defined is, what is and meant by White Privilege, also known as White Skin Privilege. White Privilege as a social relation is defined by Kendall Clark (2014) as “a right, advantage, or immunity granted to or enjoyed by white persons beyond the common advantage of all others; an exemption in many particular cases from certain burdens or liabilities.” Former director of The Southern Poverty Law Center’s Teaching Tolerance initiative, Jennifer Holladay (2000) states that:

“White skin privilege is not something that white people necessarily do, create or enjoy on purpose. Unlike the more overt individual and institutional manifestations of racism [...], white skin privilege is a transparent preference for whiteness that saturates our society. White privilege shapes the world in which we live - the way that we navigate and interact with one another and with the world.”

One of the first publications about White Privilege by a white person was in 1988, by Peggy McIntosh. In an excerpt of her publication, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” she compiles a list of fifty advantages white people have through unearned means, just for being white. McIntosh goes on to state that white people are not taught to see the oppressive behavior of White Privilege and to only recognize racism when it is through acts of “meanness” and never the “unsought racial dominance” inherit in the American culture. In essence Clark, Holladay, and McIntosh are stating that White Privilege is a cultural construct that dominates our society in such a way that the privileges given to white people are invisible and unintentional based on our cultural values. Privileges given to or received by white people may not be recognized by the recipient or other white people around them as these privileges are societal norms. However, all other racial groups that do not share in these same privileges would be acutely aware of these privileges given to and received by white people around them. This

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unintentional racism defines minorities' cultural understanding of the American hegemony to which they are not apart.

The second aspect we need to understand is what the controversy currently being battled is about and what is really meant by the rhetorical claims being made by the Washington team and those offended by the Washington team's name. The controversy is centered on the usage of a racially charged slur that is representative of a racial minority of people as the team's name. According to Dictionary.com a racial slur is "a derogatory or disrespectful nickname for a racial group, used without restraint" (2014). The opposition to the team name comes from a majority of the minority racial group to whom the name directly refers to, i.e. Native Americans, represented as a whole by the Indian Nation, as well as many others racial groups who find it intolerant towards the Indian Nation at-large. I will refer to these groups of people (Native Americans and others racial groups who find the word intolerant) as the Opposition. The defendants of the name and its usage are the owner of the Washington team (Dan Snyder), the commissioner of the NFL (Roger Goodell), and many fans of the Washington team who deny the usage of the name as derogatory or racially charged. This group of people (Owner, Commissioner, and supporting fans) will be referred to as the Defendants. The issue is as NFL Hall of Famer Art Monk stated in an interview with D.C. radio station WTOP, "[If] Native Americans feel like Redskins or the Chiefs or [another] name is offensive to them, then who are we to say to them, 'No, it's not?'" (D. Uliano, 2013). The response by the Defendants is that the intention of the usage of the word is to pay respect towards Native American's and not to defame them in any way, and that the context of the usage of the word is what defines it.

The associations being made by the Opposition are that the R-word is a derogatory and racist word that negatively represents Native Americans. According to an article by Lakshmi

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Gandhi of National Public Radio, Kevin Gover the director of The Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, himself a Native American, said the word was "the equivalent of the N-word" (2013). In that same article, Suzan Shown Harjo, a leading advocate for American Indian rights, is quoted as saying "the name is one of the last vestiges of racism that is held right out in the open in America." Probably the most impactful claim, however, is the one written by Baxter Holmes for Esquire magazine. Holmes (2014) states:

"But "redskins" is not just a twisted compliment, like "Savages," "Warriors," "Braves" or "Red Men." It represents a trophy of war—the bloody scalp of a murdered Native American, slaughtered for money, the amount dependent on whether it was a man, woman or child. The team has had the Redskins name since 1933, when it was based in Boston, so it's easy to say, "We've always done it this way." But if America "always did it this way," then terms like "Wetback," "Negro," and its much uglier cousin would still be a part of our lexicon. We learn. Also, consider the history of Native Americans, a race all but annihilated because of genocidal policies instituted by people like Spencer Phips. Our identity has been stripped away, lost to time, yet the most offensive word toward us still exists—where else?—but in this nation's *capital*. "He's going to change the name," my mother says. "He has to." Snyder has called the term a "badge of honor." He's said, "We'll never change the name. It's that simple." But here's how simple it really is: If he has any decency, he will change it, because it is not and never was just a word."

Holmes states eloquently here what many within the Opposition scream. The word is not just a word and the context cannot be separated from the associations so ingrained into a people and their history.

In direct contrast to those associations of the R-word, the claims of the word being made by the Defendants are that the name is a badge of honor. The Commissioner of the NFL Roger Goodell stated in an interview with Sports Illustrated that "this is the name of a football team ... [and it has been] presented in a way that honors Native Americans. The name is a unifying force that stands for strength, courage, pride and respect" (C. Burke, 2014). Dan Snyder, owner of the Washington team stated in an interview with John Barr of ESPN that "a

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Redskin is a football player. A Redskin is our fans. The Washington Redskins fan base represents honor, represents respect, represents pride” (J. Barr, 2014). Dan Snyder is denying the association of the Opposition through the associations of positive intentions and meanings in the context of how he and the fans are using it. In an ironic twist, the Defendants are trying to reappropriate the word away from Native Americans to hold a meaning different than the meaning understood by Native peoples. This tactic illustrates the height of privilege. The idea that a once commonly used derogatory slur toward an entire race of people can be reappropriated by the racial group whom coined it, rather than the racial group it represents.

In a press release by the Oneida Indian Nation (2014), Representative Ray Halbritter and Executive Director of National Congress of American Indians Jackie Pata responded to remarks made by Dan Snyder, claiming that “Washington team owner Dan Snyder’s comments are proof that he is living in a bigoted billionaire bubble if he is unable or unwilling to see that huge numbers of Native Americans and others from various walks of life all across this country find the team’s name incredibly offensive.” Based on the rhetorical choices by Dan Snyder and the NFL Commissioner, both white billionaires, they do not believe their use of the R-word is being used in any context representative as disrespectful based on their understanding of the word through their cultural understanding or White Privilege. This belief is evident in their inability to understand that the word is offensive to an entire race of people. Also their privileged understanding that they themselves have the ability to choose the meanings of words that refer to other races, and that those races themselves have no say in the meanings. When we apply McIntosh’s advantages (Independent School, 1990) towards Dan Snyder and Roger Goodell we also see the following advantages:

“#18. the ability to defend their choices without people attributing these choices to their bad morals or race. #19. [the ability to] speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial. #22. [the ability to] remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color ... without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion. #30. If I declare there is a racial issue at hand, or there isn't a racial issue at hand, my race will lend me more credibility for either position than a person of color will have. #31. [the ability to] choose to ignore developments in minority writing and minority activist programs, or disparage them, or learn from them, but in any case, I can find ways to be more or less protected from negative consequences of any of these choices. And #32. My culture gives me little fear about ignoring the perspectives and powers of people of other races.”

The two groups are arguing at every stasis. I will only cover definition, value, and policy. I will also only address the Defendants claims in detail at each of the stasis' they contend with the Opposition. This paper is not a critique about the contention between the two, but a look at the possible reasons why the rhetorical choices by the Defendants are being made.

The first stasis I will review is on the definition stasis that the R-word is a literally defined racial slur in modern dictionaries, and that the definition of the word is offensive to Native Americans and has significant negative impacts on the lives of Native American peoples. The Defendants deny this definition of the word and identify with the initial use and meaning of the word as well as the context they are using it in, rather than the more commonly understood and current definition of the word as a racial slur.

Applying the understanding of White Privilege to this rhetoric, we can see a clear example of the inability to recognize racism because the acts are not based on intentional harm by members of the group. McIntosh (1988) states that this type of racism is embedded and invisible.

“Embedded forms, which as a member of the dominant group one is taught not to see. ... I did not see myself as a racist because I was taught to recognize racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance on my group from birth.”

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The continued mantra of Dan Snyder and the team's attorney Robert Raskopf is that the context of how the word is used defines the term. The intention of the word trumps the definition of the word. Snyder continually states that the usage and meaning of the word, within the context that the Defendants use it, is representative of honor, respect, and pride. Raskopf stated in an interview "it's what *our* word means. You need to put the word in context" (E. Brady, 2014). The context is that the R-word, as the team uses it, demonstrates respect and that the team owns the word. However, the team disowns the word when used in a context of a slur. Snyder has stated that Native Americans refer to each other with the R-word and therefore the term cannot be racist. Luvell Anderson, a 2010 doctoral candidate at Rutgers University, states that:

"Slurs are prohibited terms whose occurrences are offensive. When enough people (or the right person or persons) say a word is not appropriate for referring to a particular group, then that word becomes a slur. However, the prohibition is not absolute. It does allow for some exceptions. Among those exceptions are non-derogatory uses by members of the targeted group. Immediately we can see why African Americans (and certain others) can use the N-word for camaraderie purposes while non-African Americans typically cannot. It is just built into the exception clause that the former can and the latter cannot. This explanation shows us why some can and others can't use the N-word."

This same sentiment goes for all of the 2,535 current total racial slurs used across the globe (The Racial Slur Database, 2014), by their respective members. The status of a racial slur, as a slur, does not get negated when the word gets appropriated by the race, nor does it become socially acceptable for non-members of that group to use the word. The inability for the Defendants to understand this sentiment and to cite it as reason to dismiss the claims of racial intolerance towards Native Americans, shows a type of privilege by them only held by the cultural hegemony. The inability to rationalize other cultural privileges that are not your own and feel a sense of reverse racism because of it, is a signifier towards your cultural privilege.

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The second stasis being contended is on the value stasis. The value of the R-word is being contested by the two groups. The Opposition to the word states that it is a racial slur, the most offensive slur towards their race, of the 80 distinct racial slurs directed towards Native Americans according to The Racial Slur Database (2014). The Defendants are stating that their intention and use of the word is in a way that it honors Native Americans and stands for strength, courage, pride, and respect. The fallacy in their argument however is based on White Privilege. The racial group that the word represents states unequivocally that to them, the word is racist and offensive. The idea that a completely separate racial group can dictate the meaning of a word, defining the other racial group, to mean something completely opposite than the way the word is being construed by them illustrates the height of White Privilege. It is as McIntosh (1988) states, “power from unearned privilege can look like strength when it is in fact permission to escape or to dominate. [...] Like the privilege to ignore less powerful people, distort the humanity of the holders as well as the ignored groups.” The Defendants are using their White Privilege to dominate the Opposition and ignore their claims while simultaneously distorting their humanity as mascots or things, rather than as people.

The final stasis being contended is on the policy stasis. The Opposition is requesting a change in the policy of the team, specifically the name of the team. The leading group requesting the policy change boasts a long history of victories in policy changes based on requests, starting in 1969 with the change of the Dartmouth College nickname (Changethemascot.org). The policy the group wishes to change is the presentation of a racial minority marginalized as mascots like animals or make believe creatures, rather than as people. The Defendants oppose this policy change based on their privileged belief that they control the meaning of the word and that the

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minority group should change their understanding of the word to comply with the intended usage.

In conclusion we can see throughout the many rhetorical choices made by the Defendants of the team's name, that they are either *unable* to recognize how the name is offensive and harmful based on their perception of the world because of the cultural hegemony of white Americans. Or worse, they *refuse* to recognize that the word is offensive based on their privileged viewpoint that they can demand dominance over the meanings of words, based on the cultural hegemony of white Americans. The latter being reprehensible. Based on this information alone, the question remains. The owner and commissioner are both white billionaires and many of the fans of the team cross the full spectrum of races and socioeconomic status. However, the rhetorical choices in this paper are only made by the owner of the team, Dan Snyder and the Commissioner of the NFL, Roger Goodell. Both refuse to recognize the offensiveness of the name in spite of the ever growing opposition to it. However, without further understandings of economic privilege and cultural worldviews and understandings held by billionaires, which would also be a key factor in understanding the rhetorical choices made by them, understanding of their choices remains unclear. It is clear however, that White Privilege is a defining factor of the rhetorical choices made.

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