

Football Uniform Controversies: A Critical Sociology of Fashion and Semiotics

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Abstract

This paper is a study of visual controversies found in select football uniforms worn by teams in the United States. Using visual semiotics and the theoretical guides found in the sociology of fashion, I critically scrutinize representations of memorialization, militarization, sexism, and racism embedded in: (1) the 2010 “mining tragedy” jerseys and supporting images of the University of West Virginia football team, (2) the 2013 “wounded warrior” jersey worn by members of the Northwestern University football team, (3) the “lingerie-style” uniforms worn by the women in the Legends Football League, and (4) the “Redskins” name and logo worn by members of that men’s National Football League team. While I find ideological meanings within these fashions, it must be acknowledged that many in fact do not. Thus my goal is to create a “double vision” for the reader (an awareness that images have layered and often divergent meanings) for the purposes of opening dialogue, critique, and critical debate.

Introduction

Sport sociologist D. Stanley Eitzen (2009:42) reminds us that, “symbols of sport are both fair and foul [for they can] bind together the individual members of a group, [but] they [may also] separate one group from another.” Indeed, all sport franchises use symbols to craft a sense of community and create solidarity among its fan base. But there is also a potential dark side to their use. As Eitzen continues, sports symbols “may dismiss, differentiate, demean, and trivialize marginalized groups” in their attempts to create a highly visible and unique visual iconography (2009:42).

So stated, this paper is a critical examination of the potentially opposing and antagonizing reality of sporting symbols in: (1) the 2010 “mining tragedy” jerseys and supporting images of the University of West Virginia football team, (2) the 2013 “wounded warrior” jersey worn by members of the Northwestern University football team, (3) the “lingerie-style” uniforms worn by the women in the Legends Football League, and (4) the “Redskins” name and logo worn by members of that men’s National Football League team. Each of these images/uniforms has provoked controversy in one form or another. For instance, the mountaineer jersey has been critiqued as supporting mountain top removal and strip mining, and has thus been challenged for supporting environmental damage and job loss (huffingtonpost.com 2010). Similarly the wounded warrior jersey with its red splotches has been termed “bloody war porn” and propaganda war programming (Memmott 2013). Finally, the women’s LFL uniforms have been derided as sexist and exploitive (Knapp 2013), and the Redskins’ logo has long been contested as being racist and perpetuating “wantonly undereducated and uninformed” views about American Indians (Staurowsky 2004:12).

But this said, it is often the case that many more find nothing embedded in, nor anything disturbing about, these images. Herrera (2001:107) writes:

Although defenders [of disputed images] allege that critics are being hyper-sensitize, or worse, “politically correct,” it is unlikely that we can dismiss these complaints as the result of people being thin-skinned. Rather these disputes over symbols get at longstanding philosophical controversies about the nature of symbolism and the tension between citizen and group interests. Complaints about sport symbols thus deserve a hearing.

Here my goal is to offer a hearing and create a “double vision” for the reader (see: Denning 2004). By this I mean to challenge the reader, urging them to see that these fashions offer multiple meanings and may in fact work to harm others by demeaning and trivializing the persons who wear them (and whom they’re meant to honor).

I also wish to make clear however that I do not want to censor or regulate these images—rather I wish to enter into disputation with them (and their supporters) for the purposes of critique, debate, and critical awareness-making. In the end, I follow King (2004:30) who suggests, “the significance of [such dialogue] on sport[ing images] is that it fosters critical [scholarship] attentive to race, culture and power, encouraging collaborative reframings of the taken for granted beliefs...”

Semiology and Fashion

This article draws its theoretical perspectives from studies of semiology and fashion, and I offer a brief conceptual description of each to help the reader understand my analytical approach. In general terms, semiology is the science of signs and symbols and how we use them in our lives to infer and communicate meaning. As Edelman (1964) writes:

Every symbol stands for something other than itself, and it evokes an attitude, a set of impressions, or a pattern of events associated through time, through space, through logic, or through imagination with symbol (p.6)...But the meanings, however are not just in the symbols, they are in society and therefore in [people] (p.11)...One understands symbols by looking for people’s differing reactions [and in] their meanings and emotions... there is nothing about any symbol that requires that it stand for only one thing, [thus] to define a symbol system [multiple] perspectives must be taken into account (p.21).

To this end, numerous researchers have approached fashion as a semiotic, cultural, and emotive phenomenon involving communication and meaning (Simmel 1957, Finkelstein 1991). Indeed, clothes and adornments are a significant cultural form through which our bodies relate to the world and to other bodies (Roach and Eicher 1965, Storm 1987, Craik 2005). Further, in every society and culture, dress is a form of projection through which signs and meanings are expressed and contested (Robson 2013). Here then, dress is a sort of sociocultural syntax that may be “read” for connotative meanings and alternative systems of interpretation. For example, as Corrigan (2008) writes:

The social order is a dressed order: occupation, class, age, group, sexuality, gender, region, religious affiliation, activity, subgroup membership, and so forth, are all announceable and readable through appearance (p.5)...The visual aspect of clothing then is fundamental to knowing where we are in the world, who we are in the world, and what the world seems to be (p.7).

The Critical Study of Sporting Fashions

In terms of research relevant to this paper, I identify literature related to sporting fashions in the areas of memorialization, militarization, sexism, and racism. Beginning first with clothing and memory, I note two works that peripherally examine sporting attire in terms of promoting memory making and memorialization (Huberman 2012, Butterworth 2013). Collectively, these pieces suggest that sports logos can become mourning rituals and mnemonic aides meant to materialize the identity of the deceased. Further, Maddrell (2013:509) suggests that such sporting symbols can become “a means of embodying and enacting ongoing hope, care and communication on the part of the bereaved.” Here, I use these works to enhance my evaluative abilities to “read” and critique efforts to materialize the dead via sporting attire. Moving next to the scholastic literature on sport and military, I offer that the majority of academic literature in this area primarily explores rhetoric and patriotic fervour intertwined in sport symbolism (King 2008, Jenkins 2013). For purposes of this analysis, I use this literature as a guide to help me “see” how uniforms and the uniformed body signify visions of physical sacrifice and meanings of service.

In terms of fashion, sport, and gender, a more significant collection of work exists that focuses on the feminization (and sexualization) of sporting uniforms and their effects on female athletes (MacDonald 2003, McCullough 2007, Slater and Tiggerman 2010, Steinfeldt, Zakrajesk, Bodey, Middendorf, and Martin 2013). These studies suggest that revealing uniforms contribute to decreased body satisfaction, and that sexualized uniforms distract players and impact their on-court performances. Furthermore, in terms of gender, considerable research has also explored the tendency of the media to highlight voyeuristic and sexualized presentations of female athletes in “aesthetically pleasing motions and poses, emphasizing the erotic physicality rather than the strength of the female body” (Daddario 1992:51. See also Eastman and Billings 2000, Krane et al., 2004, Bissell and Duke 2007, Kane and Maxwell 2011, and Fink 2012). Here too I take this collective body of scholarship to confront the framing of women’s bodies and attire in sport.

Finally, a wealth of research has also explored sporting imagery in terms of racist and ethnically uninformed or insensitive sporting symbols (Claussen 1996, Connolly 2000, Black 2004, Strong 2004, King 2004 2006, Newman 2007, Eitzen 2012). This is most notable with regard to the many sports teams who use names and imagery associated with indigenous peoples in the US. Indeed, in spite of the fact that there are over five hundred federally recognized Native American tribes in the United States, many sport images depict Native American cultures as a monolithic entity frozen in stereotypical and racist representations (Jensen 1994, Paul and Sheets 2012). Again, similar to the aforementioned sections, I use these semiotic guides to construct a readable critique of the prejudiced visual meanings embedded in these uniforms.

Methodology

In theory all images bear an almost infinite chain of meanings. So how then do I propose a critical methodology to “read” these uniforms? My analytic approach is organized around three interconnected dimensions. First, I present the symbols’ meanings as their creators originally intended them to be read. Second, I identify prominent perturbations and alternative understandings to the images. Here, I consider how the meanings and readings of the images change when they are juxtaposed with these alternative meanings—I do this, for as Barthes (1977) notes, the seeming truth of an image hides behind its contextualization and contestation. Finally, I also add a personal reading to these images as grounded in a sociology of art (Paul 2005). In this manner, I examine these images/fashions as cultural representatives that speak to (and allow for substantial commentary to be made on) their historic and social orders of creation. In this way these images are like recorded voices (or at least ghostly images that can speak. See: Roberts 2013). Thus these fashions may reveal much about the social climate and social concerns of their day. Additionally, a sociology of art allows me to interpret these fashions as symbolic displays of power, respect, and/or contempt that “impose upon others a vision... of social division... [and] social authority” (Bourdieu 1989:19, 23).

In terms of sampling, I note that image collection was purposive (Teddlie and Yu 2007). I originally encountered football uniform controversies in 2010 when I was doing preparatory work for the construction of a sociology of sport course. After engaging multiple sport-news-entertainment sites (i.e., deadspin.com, npr sports, new york times sports, the bleacher report) for help in generating ideas for lectures, I encountered the West Virginia University Mountaineer Uniform Controversy (see case studies below). I found the article and the controversy behind it interesting enough to warrant the creation of a file, and from 2010 to 2013 I collected and organized similar stories of provocative and debatable sporting symbols. Using Keith, Schwalbe and Silcock (2010) as a guide, I completed “screen grabs” of various images from the aforementioned websites for data preservation¹. What follows is a themed organization and analysis of four case studies drawn from my personalized set of clippings and document holdings. The cases are presented in chronological order.

Case 1: West Virginia University and the Upper Big Branch Tragedy

History and Intended Meaning: On April 5 2010, an explosion in the Upper Big Branch coalmine in West Virginia left 29 miners dead. The death toll caused by the explosion was the highest in an American mine since the 1970s. As Urbina (2010: Paragraph 16) writes:

Rescue workers described the blast as overwhelming — like nothing they had ever witnessed. Rail lines were twisted like pretzels, they said. Mining machines were blown to pieces. The conditions underground were such a mess after the explosion that it was only late Friday that rescuers realized that they had walked past the bodies of...missing miners on the first day without seeing them.

Subsequent investigations found that the mining company, Massey Energy, had a “perfect storm” brewing inside the mine with poor ventilation, equipment whose safety mechanisms were not functioning and combustible coal dust “behaving like a line of gunpowder carrying the blast forward in multiple directions” (Tavernise 2011: Paragraph 11). In November of that year, the university of West Virginia football team displayed a uniform designed by Nike, Inc. to pay tribute to the deceased miners.

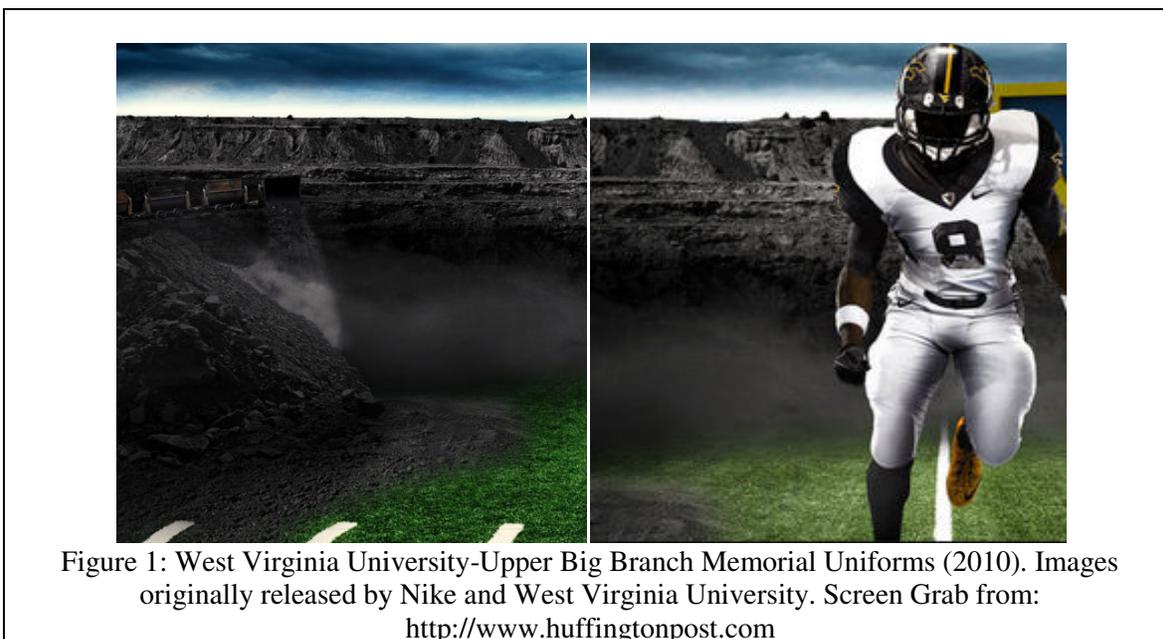


Figure 1: West Virginia University-Upper Big Branch Memorial Uniforms (2010). Images originally released by Nike and West Virginia University. Screen Grab from: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com>

The university issued the following

This year, the passion is the same but the uniforms are strikingly different. On Nov. 26, 2010 the Mountaineers will suit up in Nike... Dress. The special...uniform pays respect to the 29 lives lost in the devastating explosion at West Virginia's Upper Big Branch mine last April. In West Virginia, coal mining is a way of life. So is football. With this in mind, Nike designers brought inspiration from the mines above ground to the gridiron. Tribute to the hard-knocks industry is evident throughout the uniform...the Mountaineers will be clad in a shade of White that looks as if it has a fine layer of coal dust on the surface...Accents come in University Gold, a hue that references the canaries used long ago to test toxicity in mines. The Mountaineers' helmet also is cast in smudged Black, with a thin yellow line running from front to back...representing the beam of light emitted by a miner's headlamp, and a graphic with the number 29 honors the perished miners at Upper Big Branch (WVU sports 2010: Paragraphs 1-5).

Alternative Meanings and Controversies: While many West Virginians were happy that the victims of the mining tragedy were being honored and remembered, several were displeased with the symbolism behind it. Of particular consternation was the referencing of canaries in the uniform symbol system. As West Virginia University and Nike explained above, "miners once carried canaries into tunnels to detect dangerous gasses." Often the gasses would kill the bird before affecting the miners, and the bird would be read for signs of distress (MSHA.gov 2013). In semiotics, there is always "the signifier" which is the observable physical form of sounds, words or pictures and the "signified" which is the unobservable mental concept the signifier engenders (Alozie 2010). Thus, while all heard the word "canary" and saw the color "yellow," several critics constructed (signified) an emblematic and representational link, imagining the recently deceased miners as birds: as cheap, disposable tools and as victims of "outdated technology" (Miller 2010, Ward Jr. 2010). Accordingly, instead of being fashioned as heroes, for these critics, the miners were transformed into exploited creatures sacrificed to the mineⁱⁱ

Beyond this, the most vocalized controversy existed in the way by which Nike introduced the new uniform. In a graphic ad, Nike placed a WVU football player in the midst of an open pit mine with the sound of a detonating explosion that left the landscape flat and treeless. Apart from the distressing explosion, the ad disturbed many in that it seemed to be a tacit endorsement of the controversial form of strip mining and mountain top removal. As Danny Chiotos, a youth organizer for the Student Environmental Action Coalition, said:

I'm largely amused by it and kind of bewildered by it. They should come up with a better ad that actually promotes WVU football and the memory of the miners and mine safety. By depicting a surface mine that also resembles the open pit mines of western states like Wyoming, the ad also misses a key point about Upper Big Branch: The Massey Energy Co. mine that exploded April 5 was an underground operation (Cited in Huffington Post 2010: Paragraph 5).

After clear-cutting forests, mountain top removal is accomplished by using explosives to blast open mountaintops, revealing exposed coal seams. The debris left behind is then dumped into valleys, covering streams with what are called valley fills. The ad plunged both the school and Nike into one of West Virginia's most emotionally charged and political divisive issues: Coal operators say it's the most efficient way to reach some reserves, but people who live near the mines say it's too destructive, results in job loss, and ruins their home values, their environment, and their health. Biggers (2010: Paragraph 13) writes:

Nike's blatant advertisement for devastating strip-mining and mountaintop removal operations, which have destroyed more than 500 mountains -- what are the WVU 'Mountaineers' going to be called if they lose their mountains? -- poisoned 2,000 miles of streams, left communities in ruin and poverty, and led to the largest forced removal of American citizens in a century, is one of the most offensive images in years.

Lastly, Joe Gorman, a WVU student at the time, said:

Nike and the school should honor underground miners without glorifying the mountaintop removal that's destroying West Virginia's heritage and the mountains that make us the Mountaineers... The ad says with a voice over, 'It's just the way things are done in West Virginia' but miners and residents...have been fighting strip mining and mountaintop removal since before I was born, and that's something to be proud of, too (Cited in the Huffington Post 2010: Paragraphs 18-19).

Ultimately, Nike revised the ad, having the uniformed player appear in front of a stadium rather than a strip mine (Associated Press 2010).

A Personalized Semiotic Reading: Memorials and tributes become a way of visibly invoking the presences of those who died. What is striking about the West Virginia/Nike uniform spectacle is the absence of the miners themselves. Beyond the wearing of the number "29," the immortality of those represented is made invisible or at least secondary to the Nike/WVU brand. Thus in a very critical voice, this allows memorialization to masquerade as product placement and logoism –the images of football fashion transmutes tragedy into an unsophisticated aesthetics of marketing. Here, there is no air of reverence for the deceased in these uniforms. Rather, they merely foreground memorialization as the miners become performance commodities and souvenir trinkets selling corporate brands (Marx 1967). As Biggers (2010: Paragraph 17) writes "if they really wanted to memorialize the miners, why not donate to the Upper Big Branch family fund, or to the United Mine Workers..."

Additionally, the uniforms and the accompanying visual rhetoric of the ad do seem to suggest a tacit endorsement of mountain top removal and some of the environmental and human damage to which Massey is linked. Consider for example the following passages from the comprehensive state report on the mine disaster:

Massey is...well known for causing incalculable damage to mountains, streams and air in the coalfields; creating health risks for coalfield residents by polluting streams, injecting slurry into the ground and failing to control coal waste dams and dust emissions from processing plants; using vast amounts of money to influence the political system; and battling government regulation regarding safety in the coal mines and environmental safeguards for communities. (p.92)...[Further], no United States coal company had a worse fatality record than Massey Energy....(p.97)... The story of Upper Big Branch is a cautionary tale of hubris. A company that was a towering presence in the Appalachian coalfields operated its mines in a profoundly reckless manner, and 29 coal miners paid with their lives for the corporate risk-taking. The April 5, 2010, explosion was not something that happened out of the blue, an event that could not have been anticipated or prevented. It was, to the contrary, a completely predictable result for a company that ignored basic safety standards and put too much faith in its own mythology (p.101) (McAteer, et al. 2011).

In the end, the symbols of the blasted, barren landscape and the coal-dusted uniforms are not symbols that honor the environment or the deceased miners.

Here, I am choosing to see them as a visual history of corporate greed, death, and product sponsorship—and I hope that such a rhetorical statement will promote greater conversations about environmental abuse, deviant corporate actions, and a true desire to commemorate those who died.

Case 2: The Wounded Warrior

History and Intended Meaning: On November 16 2013, five days after Veterans Day, Northwestern University partnered with sport apparel manufacturer Under Armour and the Wounded Warrior Project to design a special flag-themed set of uniforms for the game. The game uniforms were then auctioned off with the proceeds going to the Wounded Warrior Project, a public-service organization founded by veterans to support veterans who have been wounded on duty. The design was to resemble a “distressed pattern which depicts a flag that has flown proudly over a long period of time” (Mirabella 2013: Paragraph 7).



Figure 2: Northwestern University Football Uniforms (2013).
Images originally released by Under Armour. Screen Grab from: <http://www.npr.org>

Alternative Meanings and Controversies: The design of the special uniforms however, disturbed many, with several visualizing a blood soaked uniform. For example, a blogger on the Deadspin website wrote, “But isn't ‘flag covered in blood’ a little on-the-nose for something honoring a group that operates programs for injured veterans?” (Petchesky 2013: Paragraph 1). Matt Mirchin, Under Armour’s executive vice president of global marketing said the blue and red patterns on Northwestern’s uniforms were inspired by:

[I]mages of actual American flags that have been flown around the world in harsh conditions over extended periods of time, as a further tribute to the indomitable spirit of our nation and its protectors. The suggestion that these uniforms are depicting streaks of blood is completely false and uninformed (Cited in Mirabella 2013: Paragraph 10).

But as noted, persons will often attribute meaning and signify connotations beyond intended meanings. In fact, several commentators on Under Armour’s Facebook page issued disgust:

As a father of a U.S. Marine who has shed blood in combat in Afghanistan, I find this absolutely disgusting, insensitive, and disrespectful (Cited in Memmott 2010: Paragraph 4).

As a military spouse ... I find your uniforms insensitive, offensive and shameful. There is nothing glamorous about wearing the blood splattered by your injured or fallen comrades (Cited in Memmott 2010: Paragraph 5).

Further, Matt Ufford (2013), a Northwestern graduate and a Marine veteran who served in Iraq, stated:

I went to Northwestern, I went to war, and I hate these uniforms... The uniforms look blood-spattered at first glance. At second glance, even. At all glances and most longer looks. Surely Under Armour and Northwestern aren't honoring wounded veterans with a football uniform adorned with a blood-splattered flag, right? Not after those veterans bled for their country and some of their friends came home in caskets covered in the flag?

... Sporting events, particularly around Veterans Day, have a habit of condensing military service into an easily digestible slice of patriotism...that squeezes an emotional trigger for the audience while whitewashing the devastating effects of war -- its 500-pound bombs and rubble buildings, its stolen sons and daughters, its impossible and unfair cruelty.... Northwestern's flag uniforms perpetuate this dishonest interpretation...(Paragraph 1, 3, 7).

A Personalized Semiotic Reading: War and military imagery has long been part of sporting discourse (Butterworth and Moskal 2009, Jenkins 2013). In fact, games and athletic contests are often described as wars and battles and the proclivity of such linguistic use is obvious as:

the use of war metaphors in sports media coverage, [is] exciting and dramatic... [Further], such language become forums for a type of large-scale, patriotic theatre meant to promote a sense of [team and fan] unity... (Jenkins 2013:247)

As Astore (2011: Paragraph 4) writes, there are surely “well-meaning people who see such pageantry as an uncontroversial celebration of love of country, as well as a gesture of generosity and thanks to our military.” Nonetheless, the overlap of sports-symbolism with war-symbolism is problematic because this trivializes the seriousness of war and makes the whole process appear like a leisure-time contest. In other words, when war is framed as entertainment, conversations about the legitimacy of war and its generated horrors are underestimated and made light of in the name of patriotism. This spectacle encourages fans to identify with a whitewashed image of war from the comfort of their bleachers or their couch. Additionally, these images of war as entertainment help to negate sustained conversations about the long-term financial and emotional effects that these injuries have on service members, their families, and their communities.

Further, as Bacevich, (2011: Paragraph 17) notes, such pageantry is also a “cheap grace” because it requires very little of fans and organizers and no blood sacrifice from either. In this way, the uniforms seem to make light of injury, violence, death, and war –and worse still are used to “license” and give credence to war itself. As such, this “accreditation of war” proscribes such an aggressive definition of patriotism that fans and athletes’ alternative visions (such as pacifist and antiwar ideals) are often ignored or silenced (King 2008, Schimmel 2012, Jenkins 2013). To this end, I would argue that the blood soaked uniforms should be just as enthusiastically be read and discussed as a radical anti-war exhibition. The blood uniforms should serve as an oppositional statement to war, reminding us of the true reality of veteran’s sacrifices. For example, the Wounded Warrior Project (2013: Paragraphs 4-5) writes:

In Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, for every US soldier killed, seven are wounded. Combined, over 48,000 servicemen and women have been physically injured in the recent military conflicts. In addition to the physical wounds, it is estimated as many as 400,000 service members live with the invisible wounds of war including combat-related stress, major depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Another 320,000 are believed to have experienced a traumatic brain injury while on deployment.

As Scarry (1985:63) succinctly summarizes: “The main purpose and outcome of war is injuring.” Thus, in this light, sport is a poor substitute to mirror the reality of war—and collectively we should stop embracing the symbolism of war in sport if we do not also truthfully recount its consequences.

Lastly, I also wish to note that the “blood uniforms” can also be read as a marketing ploy and a signifier of Under Armour’s attempt to out market their largest competitor, Nike. As Bob Leffler, owner and president of Baltimore’s Leffler Agency writes, “Under Armour is in a battle with Nike...and the uniform design was a provocative attempt to garner attention for its brand” (Cited in Memmott 2010: Paragraphs 16-18). Here then, I argue that the bloody uniform was not a naïve fashion invention, but a uniform designed for controversy and marketing. Tragically, in this light, while these forces claim to support the troops, they are ultimately reducing them to fetish commodities and mascots of corporate imagery. Thus, at a time in which U.S. citizens should be engaged in conversations about the realities of war, Americans are instead further enmeshed in the culture of sport entertainment that disguises as patriotism.

Case 3: Lingerie Football and The LFL

History and Intended Meaning: The Legends Football league (formerly the lingerie football league) made its first televised pay-per-view appearance during the halftime of the National Football League’s (NFL) 2004 Super Bowl. The show incorporated a lingerie fashion show followed by a seven-on-seven “football game” between female models and actresses in uniforms consisting of lacy boy-cut underwear, bras, garter belts, and chokers (Knapp, 2013). From this initial one time venture, the sport of LFL was born and has since morphed into a professional league with greater popularity than other women’s football leagues. These other women’s leagues (see: IWFL, WFA, NWFA, and WPFL) have been largely ignored by the media and sponsoring agencies. As Knapp (2013:3) writes, “While these women playing football in football uniforms under standardized football rules struggle to receive mainstream attention, the women of the LFL, in their lingerie uniforms and playing a non-standard version of the game, thrive in comparison.”

A major reason for the league’s popularity is the marketing of players in revealing uniforms which have been described as, “tiny, curve-hugging, bun-exposing panties and provocative bras, accented by what amounts to downsized shoulder pads and hockey helmet” (Whitt, 2009: Paragraph 11). While the uniforms of the LFL suggest a hyper-sexualization of female athletes for the purpose of sensual arousal, LFL ownership sees it differently. Mitchell Mortaza, the founder and chairman of the league stated:

A lot of fans are coming to our stadiums and arenas expecting a big bachelor party... You know, just a bunch of T and A. And they're finding it couldn't be further from the truth. Yes, it's a sexy game, but these women are intense, their football IQs are high (cited in Worner 2010: Paragraph 3)... the goal is to empower the women and *show off their athletic prowess* (cited in Duraku 2013: Paragraph 5. Emphasis added).

Alternative Meanings and Controversies: Because sport is a human activity in which the body is the object of intense scrutiny, the sporting body, “is the focus of not only the person who inhabits it but also spectators, trainers, and owners” (Besnier and Brownell 2012:444). In this way, the athletic body is always on display with increased opportunities for being “surveilled and gazed upon” (that is, to be critiqued and judged by others, often using sexist cultural evaluations of beauty). And research indicates that female athletes are most often looked at as sex objects whether they want to be seen that way or not. Additionally female athletes are typically judged and positively evaluated more by their appearance than by their athletic performance (Eitzen 2012, Weber and Carini 2012, Crouse 2013).

Thus, while the members of the LFL do have the ability to “show off” significant moments of athletic prowess and display their powerful sporting bodies, they are nonetheless also objectified by the audience’s gaze—and most observers do seem to read the uniforms as sexually suggestive “costumes” (Galloway 2012). Further, despite what league management reported above, they seem more heavily invested in promoting sexuality than athleticism.

Consider the fact that members of the LFL must submit to the possibility of accidental nudity on the field. Such moments of nudity are covered in the players' contracts:

Player has been advised and hereby acknowledges that Player's participation in the event and the related practice sessions and Player's services and performances hereunder may involve accidental nudity. In light of the foregoing, Player knowingly and voluntarily agrees to provide Player's services hereunder and has no objection to providing services involving Player's accidental nudity (Craggs 2009: Paragraphs 5-6).

Athletes are also informed that they could not wear additional clothing that may inhibit opportunities for accidental nudity—and may be fined for doing so (The Smoking Gun, 2009). As Knapp (2012:10) notes, “in the season opener of the league's first year, at least one player was stripped of her bottoms during a tackle leaving her laying on the field pantiless.” Further, Corr (2009) noted that the crowds' reaction to such “wardrobe malfunctions” was noticeably louder than any touchdown celebration at the games.

A Personalized Semiotic Reading: Beyond this promotion of sexuality over athleticism, we must also recognize that the game is still a brutal contact sport where the players are expected to conform to a particular type of physical play referred to as, “smash mouth football.” To this end, the uniforms of the LFL are clearly a detriment and are physically exploitative. For example, on November 11 2013, seven former players appeared on the television show “Inside Edition” told various stories about injuries incurred while playing. A number of women said that protective hard-shelled shoulder pads used in practice were routinely changed to foam pads on game day to show more cleavage (Inside Edition 2013). Additionally, because the women wore “next to nothing,” they often sustained injuries from the hard artificial turf. Deborah Poles a former player for the Chicago Bliss said, “I remember leaving a game one day, just drenched in blood” (2013: Paragraph 12).

As discussions of injury prevention and better protective gear are ratcheting up in other professional sporting leagues (i.e. the NFL, NHL) it is telling that such a concern is absent in the LFL. In these other leagues effective protective equipment has been developed to reduce the prevalence and severity of head and facial injuries and body lacerations (Bachynski 2012). Clearly this lack of protection is meant to put the body on display and link its sexualization with its brutalization.

So why then do women play? Despite these travails, many athletes say they play because they simply love football and feel that the LFL affords them the best opportunity to play. For instance several have issued statements similar to the following:

I just appreciate playing football, I don't care what they put me in (cited in Smith 2011: Paragraph 4).

It is a necessary evil... Maybe one day, girls won't have to wear lingerie to get people interested [in women's football] (Cited in Mosley 2011: Paragraph 9).

And finally, a player with the Tampa Breeze, stated she'd rather wear a conventional uniform:

I mean, I don't like it. You'd rather wear full clothing. I have a bunch of scrapes on me.... But I believe the league will change to conventional uniforms in the future...You look back at basketball, you used to have to wear skirts. Obviously it's changed, they have the WNBA now. So if you look back, women's sports has constantly evolved and I think that this sports league is going to end up changing the uniform (Cited in CBC News 2012: Paragraphs 4-7).

While I doubt seriously that this will ever occur, this does signify that many women look at the Legends Football League as one of the few legitimate means to participate in a football—and it reveals the structural and cultural barriers that female athletes have to hurdle in order to play (and be valued) in the sport. Ultimately, the goal for women's sport would be to build legitimacy around athletic ability separate from sexualityⁱⁱⁱ. But this indeed is going to be a long and difficult journey, for other more “institutionalized” sports are following the model set by the LFL. Consider:

The International Volleyball Federation required that female athletes wear bikini uniforms (i.e., the uniforms could be not exceed 6 centimeters in width at the hip)...and only changed the rule in response to pressures from countries whose religious and cultural customs prohibit such uniforms...

The Badminton World Federation (BWF) instituted a rule that women must wear skirts, and an American Deputy President of the BWF defended the rule by claiming, ‘We just want them to look feminine and have a nice presentation so women will be more popular’...When the Women’s Professional Soccer (WPS) League re-launched in 2009, it appears they valued style over (athletic) substance as they hired Project Runway winner Christian Siriano to team with PUMA to design the uniforms. Further, they hosted a fashion show in New York City in which players walked a runway to showcase the new uniforms, designed specifically for a sense of fashion, flair and femininity...There is no evidence of similar fashion shows for the unveiling of new men’s sport leagues, or even new uniforms for existing men’s leagues! ... Sadly, the cases noted above provide just a glimpse into the constant barrage of (hyper) sexualization of female athletes and women’s sport (Fink 2010:52).

What attracts women to sport is the same thing that attracts men to sport – athletic expression, competition, and camaraderie (Theberge 2000, Migliaccio and Berg 2007) But the hyper-sexualization of female athletes only serves to erode the public’s conception of them as athletes. Hopefully with continued research and critical advocacy in this regard, substantial progress and change will be made and women will be celebrated primarily for their athletic abilities.

Case 4: The Redskins



Figure 4: Washington Redskin Football Uniform (2013).

Images originally released by the Nike and the NFL. Screen Grab from: interactives.wavy.com

History and Stated Meaning: The “Redskins” began in 1932 as the Boston Braves, a team that played in Boston, Massachusetts. In 1933, George Preston Marshall purchased the team and changed their name to the Boston Redskins to eliminate confusion with the Boston’s baseball team of the same name (Smith 1987) and apparently to “honor” the then head coach William Dietz who identified as a member of the Sioux Nation (Hylton 2010)^{iv}.

In 1937 the team was moved to Washington, D.C., and though the team is now in Maryland, it is still considered Washington’s team. From the perspective of the various owners of the team, the symbolism of the name is intended to honor the achievements and virtues of American Indians. For example, former Redskins owner Jack Kent Cooke said, “I admire the Redskins name. I think it stands for bravery, courage, and a stalwart spirit...” (Braiker 2013). And current owner, Daniel Snyder states that the name was chosen in 1933 to honor Native Americans and that it will never be changed (Synder 2013).

Alternative Meanings and Controversies: While owners claim that the name pays tribute to American Indians and reflects bravery, courage, pride and a fighting spirit—the name has nonetheless stirred considerable controversy. For several decades various Native American groups have protested the name insisting that the term is racially insensitive. In 2013, this issue once again came to national attention with several prominent sports journalists making a public commitment to not uttering the team’s name on air nor writing the term *redskin* in press because they considered the name offensive.

They asserted that the Redskins trademark is particularly derogatory because, unlike some of the other names ostensibly based on Native American culture, it is actually a racial epithet (Mithlo 2005).

But from where does the word “redskin” originate? Early historical records indicate that redskin was used as a self-identifier by Native Americans to differentiate between themselves and Europeans. Throughout the 1800s, the word was frequently used by Native Americans as they negotiated with the Europeans and later the Americans. The phrase was largely benign until the zeal for westward expansion created conflict with Native tribes. At that point, the word redskin began to take on a negative, increasingly violent connotation that viewed Natives as “primitive and warlike savages” (Stapleton 2001, Hylton 2010). Around the same time the word redskin was becoming imbued with negative connotations, other Native American words and images were becoming increasingly popular symbols for sports teams. Team owners frequently began using words with indigenous connections in the 1850s to instill a sense of team spirit, unity and an “us against the world” type mentality for the sense of social solidarity (Hylton 2010). Later, Indian symbology was adopted because of a growing association (and stereotypical imagining) in the public mind with Indianness and athletic prowess. As Hylton (2010:896) continues:

Thanks to the accomplishments of individual athletes like Jim Thorpe, Chief Meyers, and Chief Bender and of teams like the Carlisle and Haskell Indian Schools, the independent Nebraska Indians baseball team, and the Oorang Indians of the NFL, a new association developed between Indians and athletic proficiency. With such a perception embraced, names referred to Native Americans’ acquired skills in American team sports rather than supposedly savage qualities. However, in the 1930s, the meaning of Native American nicknames changed again. Reinforced by powerful images of exotic, warlike Plains Indians in Hollywood films and a new widely adopted practice of associating team names with the ferociousness or guile of the players, Native American team names and logos took on a new meaning and became a source of crowd-pleasing pageantry.

Many journalists note that the original ownership of the Redskins team had a legacy of promoting racist ideology and segregation—thus, they feel that even if the naming was done to honor Indians, the owner’s biased racial beliefs negated any positive symbolism intended and instead turned Indian imagery into symbols of a “minstrel act” (Zirin 2013). In this regard, owner George Preston Marshall ordered team members to smear themselves with face paint before going out onto the field and the coach was made to wear feathers on the sideline (Gandhi 2013). Additionally, Marshall also resisted racial integration and the Redskins were the last team in professional football to sign and play a black player. As (Smith 1987) writes:

Washington Redskins owner George Preston Marshall once quipped, ‘We’ll start signing Negroes when the Harlem Globetrotters start signing whites.’ In 1961 the Redskins were the only team in professional football without a black player. In fact, in the twenty-five year history of the franchise no black had ever played for George Marshall...Their owner was the one operator in the whole structure of major league sports who has openly flouted his distaste for ‘tan athletes’ (p.189)... For the Redskins’ owner, NAACP stood for ‘Never at Anytime Any Colored Players’ (p. 194).

Rhoden (2013: Paragraph 2-3,13) writes that these words suggest “intolerance and a rallying cry for those who opposed civil rights, equal rights and human rights [and] years later, Daniel Snyder, the owner of the N.F.L.’s Washington franchise, is...aligning himself philosophically with George Preston Marshall.” In May 2013, Daniel Snyder, the Redskins’ current owner, echoed his predecessors when he vowed never to change the name, saying: “The name was never a label. It was, and continues to be, a badge of honor” (Belson 2013: Paragraph 8). Rhoden continues:

Snyder might object to being placed alongside... Marshall. By his insistence on using a term that offends even one person, however, he contributes to an atmosphere of intolerance and bigotry. Snyder has an opportunity to get on the right side of history; though I don’t expect [him] to change his team’s nickname voluntarily...Snyder’s fight is an economic issue, revolving around licensing, marketing and branding. His stridency is based in money, not morality (Paragraphs 19-23).

A Personalized Semiotic Reading: When Native American symbolism is chosen and applied to sport, it is generally done because such images are seen to reflect courage, pride, and ferocity.

However, of concern here is the notion that Indian symbolism is generally selected by outsiders (non-Natives) for generic purposes. Further, because outsiders often select images, such images are not generally authentic to the particular cultures from which they are acquired (Black 2002). Thus, the co-optation and use of such images may ultimately reflect disdain for and ignorance of the cultures they are meant to honor. As cultural curator Joanna Bedard (1992:5) comments:

What happens to a culture whose symbols are chosen by outsiders, by those who do not understand its deepest beliefs, structures and ways of life? What kind of interpretation of a society can come from symbols designed not to elevate conscious understanding to the highest of that society's ideas but to reduce that understanding to categories that debase or ridicule. Such symbols are not representations but caricatures.

Further, as Jensen (1994) notes, the rule that sports teams have a right to name themselves needs to take into account power, effects, and authenticity; not everyone has the right to claim any name. He states:

In the case of teams who identify as Savages or Redskins, a non-Indian group (the team) has exercised its power to use a derogatory name that likely has harmful effects in promoting racist stereotypes--a name to which the team has no authentic claim. The team is appropriating a racist term that has been used against an oppressed group (1994:21).

Here, I argue that the symbolism of the Redskin name helps to produce and maintain inequality by offering an institutionalized vision of supremacy. This image, which makes use of stereotypes, acts to remove said persons from the mind-sets of others. Stated differently, when a group is stereotyped, they are removed from acts of cognition, which then make certain actions toward the group justifiable. Fiske (1993:623) argues:

Stereotypes control people, which is one of the reasons they are so aversive...Stereotypes reinforce one group's or individual's power over another by limiting the options of the stereotyped group, so in this stereotypes maintain power. People with power do not have to put up with them, but people without power are victims. Power is control and stereotypes are one way to exert control both social and personal.

In this light then, the Redskin is a racial caricature that is not only stereotypical but also oppressive. In specific, Native American sport images are commonly tied to systems of power in which Non-natives appropriate Native cultural symbols as their own. The problem with this, in my view, is that the general notion of the Indian as a Euro-American creation born of generalized stereotypes. Thus, the existence of the Redskin mascot makes it difficult to "see" actual Indians. Stereotypes negate our awareness of Native history, worldviews, and structural conditions—and this alone may be considered an act of ignorance and oppression.

But again, as noted in the introduction, I have no desire to force the team to self-censor or abandon its logo and name completely^v. Though I do consider the name offensive and feel it acts as a perpetuator of stereotypes, many Native Americans have gone on record as saying they support the logo because it is one of the few national symbols that "gives our people recognition" (Guggenheim 1999, Stapleton 2001)^{vi}. Given that less than one percent of the US population identifies as American Indian, the logo can act as a strange and contradictory cultural beacon letting people know that Indians still exist (even if stereotypically perceived) – and in many ways the controversy surrounding it is one of the few national platforms that gives voice to Native activists and a "symbolic place" to highlight Native American issues and realities.

Thus, for these reasons, I feel that a "comprising middle path" may be the best solution. I support the ownership's continued use of the logo and associated symbolism if the team creates honest and meaningful programs of outreach wherein they work with Native peoples to educate all about the realities and authentic identities of American Indians – and if they contribute a significant portion of the monies generated from logo sales to programs such as the American Indian college fund (see: <http://www.collegefund.org/>). A similar model of exchange can be found in the relationship between the Seminole Nation of Florida and Florida State University (FSU). In 2005, the Seminole Nation granted FSU "lasting permission" to use Native-Seminole imagery in return for limited academic scholarships for select tribal members and the construction of a Seminole Heritage and Culture museum on campus (FSU 2005: Paragraphs 13-14).

I recognize that such a compromise would continue the “sustainability of acceptable racist imagery that becomes a portal for...White power structures...to maintain or advance their own [financial] interests” (Staurowsky 2007:72). But, if nothing else, such a compromise would also force the Washington Redskin franchise to acknowledge voices of protest, compel monetary concession for the appropriation and construction of Native imagery, and urge broader public recognition of American Indians beyond that of mascot fetishes and cultural imaginations.

Conclusion

This paper examined image based ideological controversies in select American football uniforms. Using the theoretical guides of visual semiotics and the sociology of fashion, I critically scrutinized representations of memorializing, militarization, sexism, and racism embedded in: (1) the 2010 jerseys and supporting images of University of West Virginia football team meant to “honour” the miners lost to the Upper Big Branch tragedy, (2) the 2013 “wounded warrior” jersey worn by members of the Northwestern University football team, (3) the “lingerie-style” uniforms worn by the women in the Legends Football League, and (4) the “Redskins” name and logo worn by members of the National Football League team.

My goal herein was the identification of the multiple ways that these images have been read and I noted their layered and often divergent meanings. Additionally, I added a personal reading to each of these fashions, issuing critique and suggesting that each uniform, in their own way: trivialized sacrifice and replaced memorialization with commercialization, exploited the physical wellbeing of the athlete and promoted sex appeal over athleticism, and perpetuated an institutional history of racism and cultural ignorance. However, I called not for censorship of these fashions, but issued instead these criticisms for the purposes of opening dialogue, critique, and evaluative debate. Lastly, in select situations, I suggested compromise and encouraged parties on both sides of these ideological contestations to meet and collaboratively re-frame images and meanings for mutual benefit.

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End Notes

ⁱWhile all efforts have been utilized to ensure the presentation of copyright free images, I do however claim these of fair doctrine. One of the rights accorded to the owner of copyright is the right to reproduce or to authorize others to reproduce the work. This right is subject to certain limitations found in sections 107 through 118 of the copyright law (title 17, U. S. Code). One of the more important limitations is the doctrine of "fair use." The doctrine of fair use has developed through a substantial number of court decisions over the years and has been codified in section 107 of the copyright law. Section 107 contains a list of the various purposes for which the reproduction of a particular work may be considered fair, such as criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, scholarship, and research. As this work falls within the confines of criticism, scholarship and research, the author cites the doctrine of fair use in the collage and presentation of all images reproduced here. The author also follows the techniques of "critical collage pedagogy" (Garoyan and Gaudelius, 2008), which holds that copyrighted material may be used in a derivative way without permission, if the collected works are combined in such a way as it can be considered a new work in its own right. I hold that the works combined here into a collage combine a new work in its own right and are thus free of copyright restriction.

ⁱⁱOn 1/13/13, a mine superintendent who worked at Upper Big Branch was sentenced to prison time. The supervisor admitted to ordering a company electrician to disable a methane monitor on a mining machine so it could continue to cut coal without automatic shutdowns. The monitor is a safety device that senses explosive amounts of methane gas and automatically shuts down mining machines when dangerous levels of gas are present. (<http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2013/01/17/169623969/massey-mine-boss-sentenced-feds-toughen-mine-safety-rule>). This information also gives credence to the notion of viewing miners as disposable commodities and victims of corporate greed.

ⁱⁱⁱI suspect the league is also turning away talented players that do not meet the league's standard of beauty. For example, a great blocker that is big and powerful but who has significant body mass (one who would be labelled "fat") would not be offered a chance to play. As league owner Mortaza issued: "The women of the LFL need three things...Confidence, athleticism and, finally, they have to be gorgeous. We're not looking for the best athletes. We want our league to have women like Anna Kournikova, Danica Patrick and Gabby Reece. They're not the best at what they do, but they're the most marketable. We know why men turn out." (http://articles.philly.com/2009-05-15/sports/24985091_1_lingerie-football-league-hopefuls-human-sexuality)

^{iv}There is also evidence to suggest that the 1929 silent film "Redskin" was the inspiration behind the team's name (Hylton 2010).

^vThough if it did, the organization has localized precedent to consider. The Wizards, the National Basketball Association (NBA) team that, like the Redskins, plays in the Washington, D.C. area, abandoned its former name, the Bullets, to distance itself from negative and violent imagery.

^{vi}This view has also been communicated to me by various friends and research informants of Native American descent.