

Bryn Mawr College

Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College

Sociology Faculty Research and Scholarship

Sociology

11-2016

Review of Indian Spectacle: College Mascots and the Anxiety of Modern America, by Jennifer Guiliano.

David Karen

Bryn Mawr College, dkaren@brynmawr.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.brynmawr.edu/soc_pubs



Part of the [Sociology Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Citation

Karen, D. Review of Indian Spectacle: College Mascots and the Anxiety of Modern America, y Jennifer Guiliano. New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2015): 742-744

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College.
https://repository.brynmawr.edu/soc_pubs/12

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

Indian Spectacle: College Mascots and the Anxiety of Modern America, by **Jennifer Guiliano**. New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2015. 194 pp. \$27.95 paper. ISBN: 9780813565545.

David Karen
Bryn Mawr College
dkaren@brynmawr.edu
Culture, Education
1054 words

All US sports fans know that the National Collegiate Athletic Association is a massive, money-making machine. Media contracts for its Football Bowl Series and March Madness are in the billions of dollars. We regularly read about the commercialization of college sports, the exploitation of the college athlete, and the hypocrisy of the term “student-athlete.” In this context, Jennifer Guiliano’s *Indian Spectacle* provides some important historical perspective. In fact, after reading Guiliano’s well-researched book, today’s fans might well look at our current controversies and say, in the words of that great sage, Yogi Berra, that “it’s déjà vu all over again.”

Guiliano examines the rise and use in college football of Indian mascots at five universities: Stanford, Miami of Ohio, University of North Dakota, University of Illinois, and Florida State. The goal is to show that, across regions, there is, with some variation, a constancy to the performance of “Indianness” at halftime shows. Implicitly understanding college football as an organizational field, Guiliano discusses how the football halftime spectacle resulted from interactions among the full range of actors involved: fans, players, coaches, university administrators and faculty, halftime band participants, band masters and composers, media (both on-campus and off-), alumni, students, and local community members. Competition for students and prestige was an important part of this organizational field and plays a role in the developing use of Indian nicknames and mascots. Using a wide variety of university and other archival sources, she shows that there was a national network of participants who spread various stereotypes of Indians through the use of music, dance, and mascotry. The interesting surprise in this story was the involvement of the Boy Scouts of America, not only in teaching a set of wilderness skills that connected to colonial Indian tropes but also in being central to the networks that spread stereotypes about Indians (including high school bands). These networks, Guiliano shows, produced a national circuit of performances that tethered the Indian-focused halftime spectacle to the emerging commercialism in the music industry, in higher education and, especially, in its athletic manifestations.

If this were simply a study of how the use of Indian mascotry developed and spread on various college campuses during part of the twentieth century -- certainly an interesting topic -- Guiliano would have made an important contribution to our understanding of the dynamics of how certain stereotypes and colonial tropes about Indians spread and persisted in the US. However, she aspires to a lot more and she doesn’t meet her greater goals. Ultimately, Guiliano argues that college football and the halftime spectacle that developed in its midst were a response to the anxieties produced by the challenges of modernity. These anxieties included “the closing of the American West, competition between institutions of higher education, the meaning of higher

education and the intent of sport, as well as major events like the Great War (1914-1918), the Great Depression (1929-1941), and World War II (1939-1945).” (9) Guiliano suggests that these challenges threatened American masculinity but also that, at various points, whiteness, middle-classness, and heterosexuality were deemed to be at risk. Again and again, she tells us that college football and the halftime spectacle was the answer to white middle-class males’ twentieth century anxieties. But how did they resolve or confront these anxieties? I don’t believe that Guiliano provides a compelling answer.

Guiliano argues that college football and its halftime spectacle suggested a particular kind of “Indianness” that produced “raced, classed, and gendered bodies.” (13) At various points, she claims that college football “defined an entire social and domestic world of American middle-class life.” (4) Further, Guiliano has an unarticulated functionalist analysis in which football and Indian bodies are, broadly conceived, the answers to various “needs” of society or of particular groups in society. For instance, Guiliano wrote of a “need” for “commercialized community identities.” (13) Similarly, although only 3 of 10 students voted on the choice of a mascot at Florida State, Guiliano argues that men went to great lengths (possibly engaging in election fraud!) to have “Seminole” win because they had an “intense need” to have a masculine mascot. (78) Although Guiliano also discusses how certain groups have specific interests that they pursue under given conditions, too frequently this vague sense of need plays a causal role in her analysis.

The other major problem with the book has to do with the scope of its claims. Despite her contention that the halftime spectacle was produced via contested and circuitous routes, there’s an inevitability to Guiliano’s argument that doesn’t sit well. If “Indianness” is the solution to the anxieties of America in the first half of the twentieth century, why do we not get some systematic variation in its expression as the anxieties change? How can the Indian college mascot continue to be the “solution” as the “problem” of modernity and its attendant anxieties change? And if Indian mascots ARE the solution to these anxieties, what do we make of the other college mascots that were developed during the twentieth century? What do we make of all the fierce animals, the Confederate symbols (Rebels, singing Dixie, the Confederate flag), and the ethnic nicknames (Fightin’ Irish, Gaels, Samurai) that colleges and universities have used for their sports teams? Did these other mascots also deal with the anxieties that Guiliano mentions or were there *other* anxieties that were dealt with by those other mascots?

In her Conclusion, Guiliano seems to acknowledge that, with changing societal challenges, we get changes in mascots and nicknames. She reflects on the massive changes that have occurred in college football, with its ubiquitous media coverage, global reach, and mega-profits. Though her book isn’t focused on the struggles that ended – or didn’t end – the use of Indian mascots and nicknames in her five cases, she properly points to Native-American mobilization against their use as a key factor in the elimination of these symbols across the country. Trying to understand the dynamics that produced these different outcomes would have been a fruitful strategy to concretize the links between societal and institutional factors, on the one hand, and changing sports symbols, on the other. Indeed, a more systematic comparative consideration of the pressures that produced different dynamics at different institutions (both with respect to adoption and dropping of Indian-related symbols and nicknames) would have led to a more compelling analysis and narrative.

