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Renaming the Peak

*Investigating the Effects of Changing the Name of Squ*w Peak on Native Women and Public Perceptions of Native American Culture*

Author's Note

As someone who does not identify as Native American, I recognize that there are elements of this issue to which I cannot speak. Accordingly, throughout this research, I have sought to draw out and highlight Native voices.

Throughout this paper, the name of the peak is censored out of respect for the preference of the many Native advocates who censor it in their work.

Abstract

IN LIGHT OF THE RISE IN PUBLIC SOCIAL ACTIVISM AND LANGUAGE justice in recent years, concerns about the name of Squ*w Peak, a mountain point near Provo, Utah, have surfaced due to “squaw” being an offensive term for Native American women. Looking at the effects of the peak’s current name on Native women, as well as its effects on non-Native perceptions of Native women and cultures, shows the potential implications of a name change for the peak. This paper draws on a review of the term’s linguistic associations, studies on potential psychological effects of microaggressions, and research on other effects of the way Native American culture is represented to make a case that ending the use of the term “squaw” in place names could mean positive changes for both Native women’s mental health and non-Native perceptions of Native culture.

Introduction

Soaring above Utah County, Squ*w Peak serves the community as a picturesque lookout point, popular hiking destination, and easily recognizable sil-

houette in the mountain backdrop. Students at the county's two universities warn each other of the peak's notorious reputation based on particular reasons one might seek out a lookout spot late at night. But what many college students don't know about is the peak's even more insidious stereotype: the one that its official name perpetuates. Especially with the rise in public activism for social justice for minorities in recent years, concerns about the peak's name have surfaced because "squaw" is an offensive term for Native American women. Many are concerned by the cavalier way in which a potentially harmful term has been applied to such a prevalent landmark, and local activists have taken actions against its further use. An independent Provo-based committee titled the Repeak Committee, of which several members are Native American, has been working toward renaming the peak since 2017. A *Daily Herald* article reported that the group's goals were "to get the peak's name changed to something that will honor Native American in the correct way" and "to serve as an educational voice to the Provo community, rather than be seen as a political movement" (England).

The committee faces a daunting process to get a name change to go through. Until recently, Utah laws have not defined the process of changing an offensive landmark name very well. The *Salt Lake Tribune* reported in October 2020 on a draft bill supported by the Repeak Committee which would simplify the process for gaining approval for place name changes in Utah (Stevens, 2020). The bill, titled "Place Name Amendments," was approved and signed into force in March of 2021. It directs those who want to change a landmark name to present an application to the newly-created Utah Committee on Geographic Names, who work as a liaison with the United States Board on Geographic Names. The bill also directs applicants to consult with local nations and tribal governments for input and responses before moving forward with a name change (S.B. 10, 2021). This bill makes the process for changing landmark names more clear, but it does not automatically change the place names including the word "squaw" across the state—activists will still need to follow a lengthy process for individual landmarks. In November of 2021, the Secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior established a process to replace the names of geographic features that use it, formally declaring "squaw" a derogatory term and ordering the federal Board on Geographic Names to work toward removing the term nationwide (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2021). Despite this encouragement, name changes continue to face backlash from the public (Brown, 2021). The process is still complicated; more importantly, the controversial place names still remain.

Though the process sounds daunting, other government officials across the country have previously enacted this kind of change. An identically named peak in Phoenix, Arizona, was renamed in 2002 (Gardiner). Even after changes to landmark names like this have been made, however, a lack of public awareness about the implications of the word “squaw” can lead to delays in adjustments to the names of surrounding features such as street names. Some would say that all the coincidentally necessary name changes along with a landmark name change make it too much of a hassle to be worth the effort, or that long-standing landmark names don’t cause enough harm to justify being changed or that political correctness isn’t a good enough reason to do so. So why the push? What are the reasons behind changing a long-standing landmark name that includes the word “squaw”? Looking at the effects of the peak’s current name on Native women’s well-being as well as on non-Native perceptions of Native culture shows the potential effects of a landmark name change for the peak. Understanding these effects can help the Utah County community evaluate the necessity of changing the name of the peak.

Terms Related to Native Culture

Before diving into the effects of the peak’s name on Native American women and others, it is important to understand the name itself. The definition of the word “squaw” is a major element of arguments both for and against taking it out of landmark names. Some historians and advocates have found the word “squaw” to have several different original meanings, not all of which are negative (Gardiner), so it’s possible to interpret the term as respectful instead of offensive. Anthropologist C. Richard King’s linguistic analysis of the word includes research showing that its origin is “an abbreviation of the Narraganset word, *eswa*, meaning woman” (3). The term has origins in words in Native American languages with varying definitions, but its modern-day connotations and use as a slur overshadow that etymology. King additionally describes the term’s most common definitions in popular usage. He writes that “‘squaw’ in popular usage has come to mean ‘a woman or wife’ [. . . but] playful invocation of a racial category to mark gender difference has a more serious parallel in a second definition of ‘squaw’ as ‘an effeminate or weak person.’ More troubling, the third definition of ‘squaw’ as ‘a sexually promiscuous woman’ has not only sexualized Native American women as prostitutes, but also derogated female sexuality more generally. . .” (King 3–4). In other words, “squaw” is a gendered and sexualized term that reflects the history of colonialism and Native American oppression. Terrence Wride, who researched the issues sur-

rounding Utah's Squ**w* Peak at Brigham Young University, explained that "the term throughout the 1850s, in particular, the Gold Rush, became associated with sexual violence against women . . . it's not this abstract idea of the term being offensive to certain people. It's actually been used in official documents as an offensive term" (England). Though scholarship acknowledges the word's innocent roots in various Native American languages, recent linguistic associations with negative stereotypes make the term problematic.

Despite the associations between slurs for Native people and violence and racism, some argue that time has healed those wounds enough that the terms have become innocuous. In her study of public opinions surrounding the Phoenix peak's name change, Michelle Metro-Roland, a professor at Western Michigan University, wrote that before Phoenix's Squ**w* Peak was renamed, "among those opposed when asked about their opposition the largest percentage, almost a quarter, said they liked the name Squ[*]w Peak. Some of the opposition was caught up with the political nature of how the new name had been put into place" (83). Politics and the standing name's appeal held more draw for these people than any issue of language justice, honor for Native American culture, respect for Native women, or even historical preservation.

Attempts to remove offensive terms toward Native Americans used in the sports realm have been met with similar apathy, including from some people who are themselves Native American. A *Sports Illustrated* poll of Native opinions on the team name "R*dskins" found that "75% of Native American respondents in SI's poll said they were not [offended], and even on reservations, where Native American culture and influence are perhaps felt most intensely, 62% said they weren't offended" (Price). These results hold implications for other uses of "r*dskins" and other terms, such as "squaw," in other contexts. Popular discussions of this issue, however, often fail to recognize the legitimate concerns of a large portion of their respondents who are offended by these terms.

Even when the views of a majority do not include finding offense in these terms, that doesn't eliminate the large percentage of people who do associate them with their negative connotations. For example, Kevin Gover, a citizen of the Pawnee Nation and the former Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Indian Affairs, has advocated against the term "r*dskin" being used in sports team names for decades. Before the name of the former Washington R*dskins football team was changed, he described his experience encountering the name for the first time: "The nastiest thing people ever said to us had become the name of an NFL team? I didn't comprehend it then, and I don't now" (Hiatt). Similarly, Chauma Jansen, a member of the Repeak Committee who is

Assiniboine-Sioux/Navajo, expressed the views of many Native women when she said, “For me, the term [“squaw”] is racist and derogatory . . . It is meant to belittle somebody or belittle their worth” (England). If the views of the majority harm the minority, is it not the duty of the majority to protect those whose voices aren’t quite as loud? If derogatory terms such as “r*dskin” and “squaw” result in real damage, not just subjective offense, perhaps we need to consider their use in a different way.

Evaluating Potential Harm

One claim often made by those who want to retain offensive names is that these terms don’t cause any harm, but is this really the case? In a study involving college students, Olivia Holter found that experiencing microaggressions, defined as “the routine exchanges that degrade minorities because of their group membership” (Holter, “School-based” 14), correlates with depression levels for Native American young adults. Her study found significant, positive correlations between recalled experiences of microaggressions and participants’ level of depression (49). This correlation points to a connection between microaggressions and mental harm. It follows that if using the word “squaw” either constitutes a microaggression or encourages one, a community seeking to protect the mental health of Native women should be concerned about the term’s use.

Because Native culture–inspired names have frequently been used for both landmarks and sports teams, other studies on the impact of sports team names and mascots provide important insights into the issue of Squ*w Peak’s name. We see the dangers of using derogatory terms for Native Americans in studies on Native American–inspired mascots. These studies show the potential of a term to encourage microaggressions because the ways in which we reference Native American culture affect how non-Native Americans view it. In doing so, they show that regardless of public perception or general acceptance of offensive terms, they may still be causing damage that people don’t directly perceive. A study published in *The Journal of Social Psychology* looked at how students at a large Southwest university rated Native American individuals after being exposed to Native American mascots compared to white mascots or neutral images. This study found that “when people with a prejudiced attitude are exposed to Native mascots, they evaluate a Native individual as more stereotypically aggressive than people with a non-prejudiced attitude. Importantly, the same pattern does not seem to emerge when people are exposed to White mascots or neutral images” (Burkley et al. 231). These results suggest

that for some people, “Native mascots facilitate stereotype application toward Native people” (231). This significant study finding not only raises concerns about the continued use of Native American mascots; it also has implications for other representations of Native American culture, including place names, and the possibility that they, too, increase the likelihood that someone will respond to a Native individual with prejudice. The particular tie between the term “squaw” and Native women raises extra concerns for the term’s use in the name of a landmark. Its casual use normalizes the term in a concerning way.

The Purpose of Landmark Names

The concerning normalization of anti-Native American slurs serves as another reason those against a landmark name change tend to oppose it. Even if we do consider the term “squaw” objectively offensive, the deep-seated nature of place names complicates the process. Landmark names entrench themselves in local vernacular in ways that reach beyond the actual landmark. In her study of public reactions to language justice-related landmark name changes, Metro-Roland wrote, “Unlike monuments, [landmark names] have a functional role in our lives. They become normalized in their usage. Eventually the original signification is overlain and the names take on new significations. They also, though, become stuck. They become a habit.” (88). Her description of the assimilation of these names into local vernacular highlights one of the challenges of changing them; normalized new significations can make community support for a name change hard to find. Those new names require community backing if they are to meaningfully take hold beyond paper maps.

After the Phoenix peak’s name change, Robert Nelson wrote, critiquing the new name’s relative length, that “the people of Phoenix already have a pretty good idea what somebody means when somebody else says they ‘hiked up Squ[*]w Peak during lunch’ or ‘there’s an accident backing up traffic on the Squ[*]w Peak Parkway’ . . . That’s the most important role of a landmark. It is supposed to mark the land so people have a clue where . . . they’re going.” The name serves a purpose; its usage constitutes community habits that would be impossible for a council’s ruling to immediately overthrow. The name fulfilling that purpose within the community, however, appears arbitrary, especially after long-term use. As such, a sufficiently compelling reason to make a change might necessitate replacing a progressively arbitrary name with a new one. This has happened with other place names, including in Utah, which have been successfully transitioned into names that avoid promoting prejudice. One example is the former Negro Bill Canyon in Southern Utah. Despite

lasting local controversy about changing this landmark name for practical reasons, it was relabeled Grandstaff Canyon by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names in 2017 because of concerns about the historic connections between the word “negro” and racism (Herndon, 2017). Similar linguistic awareness in the realm of sports of the potential for harm from a name led to the former Washington R*dskins football team changing their name to the Washington Commanders in February of 2022 (Franklin). The negative effects of the use of “squaw” in a landmark name on Native women constitute a similarly compelling reason to make a comparable landmark name change.

Considering Honor and Heritage

Additionally, approaching place names with deliberation allows for an equal amount of intentionality regarding whom and what we honor with names. Some, however, argue that changing the name of Squ*w Peak would constitute not a success but a failure in respecting Native American culture. Many people interpret the use of Native American references in the names of landmarks, mascots, and other titles as a way to honor them. For example, Karl Swanson, former Washington R*dskins vice president, said that the team’s name “symbolizes courage, dignity and leadership and has always been employed in that manner” (Price). Others have said the same about Utah’s Squ*w Peak—that the peak’s current name aims to honor a Native American woman and respectfully remember her story.

As told by Jay Buckley, a history professor at BYU, the peak’s name’s origin comes from an anecdotal story about a Native woman who fell off the cliff to her death after a confrontation between the white settlers and the native Timpanogos Utes (England). This historical inaccuracy hasn’t stopped people from passing down the legend. The violence inherent in the story has not stopped its transmission, either. One Repeak Committee member, who is a Native American woman, described her reaction to the story: “It just brings up a lot of . . . those traumas that history kind of has forgotten about or it’s not really taught” (Udall). The story that local parents pass down to their children about the peak’s history is one of pain, expansionism, Native eradication rhetoric, and death. Although this battle and other conflicts between Native peoples and white settlers in Utah are important, they are better fit to be confined to a history book than commemorated in the name of a natural landmark.

Both the implications of the word “squaw” and its folkloric origin story complicate the idea that Squ*w Peak was named to honor a Native woman. If the current name isn’t doing anyone honor, perhaps the Utah community

needs to ask itself whom we want to honor and then do so deliberately. As an example, officials in Arizona renamed their Squ*w Peak to Piestewa Peak after Lori Piestewa, the first Native American woman to die in combat while serving in the U.S. military (Kelleher 101). The Repeak Committee has proposed renaming the peak after a local Ute woman but is first seeking name recommendations and approval from the Ute Indian Tribe (“Utah Group”). Knowing that landmark names become deeply integrated into the vocabulary of local communities, perhaps we can use their influence to our advantage in promoting general education about influential Native women in Utah.

Education about Native American Culture

The existing fable behind the peak’s current name as well as potential name considerations reflect a greater societal problem: miseducation about Native American culture. The common use of belittling terms encourages complacency regarding undereducation about Native American history and populations. Native histories and even the general recognition of current Native American communities are challenged by “eradication rhetoric,” or the idea that conversations about Native peoples in the United States encourage the idea that they are a thing of the past. A few ways this can happen are through the absence of large-scale education on current tribal standings and treaties, references to Native American cultures only in the past tense, and literature that perpetuates Native American stereotypes. One University of Montana study found 161 problematic statements in the five Montana eighth grade history textbooks (Holter, “Cultivating Perspective” 56). These statements included things like obviously omitting Native perspectives and history, applying tokenism, and saying Native peoples were “civilized” by white settlers. This kind of rhetoric discredits the continued existence of thriving Native American communities and individuals nationwide.

On the other hand, stereotype-conscious education can decrease bias. In a study where kindergarteners were introduced to a curriculum designed to help them “differentiate culturally authentic, ambiguous, and inauthentic children’s literature” about Native North Americans, the students “showed less bias toward Native Americans as a cultural group” than students who were not introduced to the new curriculum (Pyterek ii). The absence of bias, as well as a more nuanced understanding of the nation’s history and what they could learn from it, positively influenced these children, probably leading to fewer microaggression perpetrations in their futures as well. Renaming Squ*w Peak has the potential to both raise awareness for the existing educational gap

about Native American history, nations, and cultures. Like a new curriculum for the entire surrounding area, a different name for the peak could encourage more authentic education about its history and significance.

The Path Forward

There are many factors to consider when analyzing the effects of a landmark's name, such as how it affects the vocabulary of the surrounding community. Even more important is how it affects those who are represented by it. Native American women face serious, concerning consequences when general perceptions of them don't line up with the reality of the high value of their culture, roles, and lives. We see this lack of equal value for their lives in the systemic racism within the justice system that has led to the missing and murdered indigenous women crisis in the United States. Native women experience both disproportionately high rates of violence and disproportionately low response rates from the legal system to counter it (Joseph). Historically, they have been disenfranchised and disadvantaged in many ways. The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) Reauthorization Act was signed into law only recently in March of 2022, demonstrating both the beginning of progress and the long road ahead to remedy this injustice through responding to gender-based violence. One important element of the VAWA is its expansion of the criminal jurisdiction of Tribal courts to cover non-Native perpetrators of gendered violence or assault on tribal lands ("Fact Sheet"). Changing public perception to match the law regarding the importance of Native women's lives should be compelling for us all; their rights deserve defending.

Studies have already shown an association between the use of derogatory terms such as "redskin" and "squaw" and negative effects for both Native and non-Native people. Ending the use of the term "squaw" in place names would mean positive changes for both Native women's mental health and non-Native perceptions of Native culture. These changes in perception constitute one small step toward more safety and justice for Native women on a national level. The benefits far outweigh its cost of inconvenience because renaming the peak could decrease microaggressions and increase respect for Native people. Utah's recent bill supported by the Repeak Committee, along with encouragement from the Department of the Interior and the landmark changes that could follow, present the beginning of a solution. They provide a way for citizens of Utah County to deliberately shape whom they honor and how they educate both themselves and others about Native American culture, emphasizing the value of Native women in doing so. Importantly, community

support from all sides will be necessary for a landmark name change to take effect quickly and have a positive impact that matches its full potential. Standing behind the bill and the Repeak Committee's plea for greater respect for Native American women can lead us to a more equitable future.

Afterword

*I couldn't stop smiling when, on September 8, 2022, the U.S. Department of the Interior officially announced the Board on Geographic Names's decision to replace nearly 650 geographic feature names that previously incorporated the word squ*w. Utah County's "Squ*w Peak" is no more! After months of effort and participation from nearly 70 tribal governments, the new list of names for these features, effective immediately, has been compiled and can be found on the U.S. Geological Survey website (Interior Press, 2022). Utah County's summit is now Kyhv Peak (USGS, 2022), a name that comes from the Ute language for mountain. The Provo Repeak Committee posted the news on their Facebook page accompanied by a long list of celebratory emojis (Repeak Committee, 2022), and I have been wholeheartedly celebrating this news with them.*

As promising as this change is, my research shows that there is still much work to do before the peak's name fully makes the switch. A change in paperwork isn't automatically reflected in a change in everyday speech, and an altered landmark name doesn't come close to repairing the damage that has already been done to Native communities. Until Kyhv Peak has completely replaced the former name in our vernacular, the work outlined in this paper remains. Our work may be done when it comes to government officials, but we must continue to lobby for change from our neighbors, families, and friends, both to change their vocabulary and to consider the implications of this summit's name for how we think about and stand with Native people and culture.

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