

Even in this day and age of 'political correctness', school, university and professional sports teams across the country still athletic names and mascots. This commodification of Indian people is reflected more broadly across



Charlene Teters, an artist, educator and long-term activist, calls for more Americans

How media continue to caricature Native Americans

Undeclared War

AT THE START of the new millennium, we are still involved in what Seminole activist Michael Haney has called "the longest undeclared war against the American Indian, here in our own homeland". This war, no longer on literal battlefields, is now being fought in courtrooms, corporate boardrooms and classrooms over the appropriation of Native American names and spiritual and cultural symbols by the professional sports world, Hollywood, schools and universities. The issue for us is the right to self-identification and self-determination.

For 50 years the American Indian community has worked to banish images and names like Cleveland's Chief Wahoo, Washington Redskins, Kansas City Chiefs, Atlanta Braves. We remind people of consciousness how they echo other historic racist images of the past. Chief Wahoo offends Indian people the same way that Little Black Sambo offended African Americans and the Frito Bandito offended the Hispanic community – and should have offended all of us.

My own involvement in this now national struggle began with my children's humiliation and pain. Most Native People have tolerated distorted images of Indians on Saturday morning cartoons and Westerns. Like most people of colour who have been de-humanised by stereotypes, we were told to tolerate these distortions, that we "can't do anything about it". I sought to make my children strong through a positive identity, so they wouldn't be hurt by an American mass media permeated by racial distortions. I worked hard to instill my children's pride in their

Spokane and Colville heritage by teaching them their birthright, culture, songs, history, stories and images of themselves and their people. As soon as they could walk, they took part in winter ceremonies and social dances, like pow-wows. But with all that, their self-esteem was still seriously undermined when we moved to the University of Illinois, whose mascot was a dancing Indian called Chief Illiniwek.

As a graduate student in that environment I witnessed sororities and fraternities sponsor "buck and squaw" dances using caricatures of Indian people on their posters and T shirts. A local bar, a favourite student hangout, featured a flashing neon sign with a drunken cartoon Indian falling down over and over again. One sorority held an annual beauty contest called the Miss Illini Squaw contest. Racist caricatures of Indian people permeated this campus community, and challenged my children's identity every time they left the safety of their own home, undoing the positive work of my family. I soon realised that I could not live in this community with my children and not address the issue.

I took a stand for my children, by standing outside the local basketball stadium, holding a sign that said, "Indian People are Human Beings, not Mascots" to let my children know that our cultural identity was important to protect – not just for us, but for future generations. Thus began my involvement in the long and ongoing struggles of Indian People, here in our own homeland.

A few years ago during the media frenzy that surrounded the baseball playoff games

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between New York and Cleveland, the *New York Post*, caught up in the hype, covered its front page with the headline, "Take the Tribe and ... SCALP 'EM!" Little concern was shown for the Indian children or community living in New York City or around the country. The American public has been conditioned by the sports industry, educational institutions and the media to trivialise indigenous culture as common and harmless entertainment.

For more than 150 years popular culture has successfully candy-coated colonial America's racial attitudes towards American Indian people into palatable contemporary stereotypes. From sports team mascots to tourism, we are things – things to be entertained by, things to strike fear with, things to be colourful backdrops, things to be mined for profit, and never, ever fully-fledged human beings. When you translate the tribal names we have given ourselves, they translate to our humanness in some way – as "the human beings", "the first people" or "the original people". That is why it is so hard for us to understand, at the turn of the new millennium, why we are still involved in the debate around the humanness of Indian people.

Native American students do not feel welcome

on high school or college campuses if the school uses

'Little Red Sambo'

'Squaws'

cling to racist representations of Native Americans in their different media.

to rally to the cause of dismantling these stereotypes...

as its mascot (not a clown, a mythical creature or an animal) a chief, the highest political position you can attain in our society. Using our names, likenesses and religious symbols to excite the crowd does not feel like honour or respect. It is hurtful and confusing to our young people. To reduce the victims of genocide to a mascot is at best unthinking, and immoral at worst. An educational institution's mission is to educate, not mis-educate, and to alleviate the ignorance behind racist stereotypes, not perpetuate them.

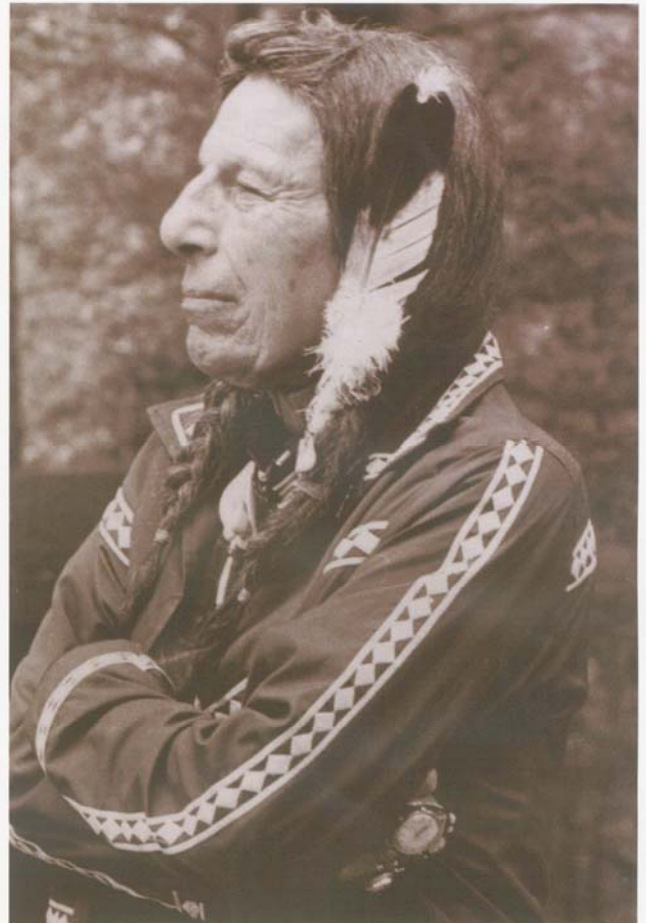
Student leadership has played a significant role in bringing the mascot issue forward. In the 1970s students at Stanford and Dartmouth were successful in changing the athletic team identity from "Indians" to a race-neutral name and symbol. Since 1988 the student-led struggle to retire the dancing Indian mascot/symbol at the University of Illinois has drawn out, with little chance of reform in the face of an arrogant and entrenched, governor-appointed Board of Trustees.

Still, in recent years significant contributions to this movement to eradicate racist mascots have been made. At least six universities have changed their names, and the Los Angeles Board of Education voted to ban school appropriation of Indian names and images. In schools across the country the mascot issue is being challenged, in debates led by young Native people with newfound pride in reclaiming themselves. The Interfaith Centre for Corporate Responsibility, a national organisation of investors with combined portfolios worth an estimated \$90 bil-

lion, have appealed to companies to discontinue using stereotypes that negatively impact upon Native Americans, people of colour and women. Also, tribal leadership, which once thought that "there are more important issues in Indian country", is now making a closer connection between mass media stereotyping and disrespect of tribal sovereignty.

Native artists, reflecting the consciousness of Native nations, are addressing this issue of stereotyping in their paintings, installations and writings. A recent example is Edgar Heap of Birds' public art piece commissioned by the Cleveland Institute of Art in 1996. The controversial billboard juxtaposed a likeness of the Cleveland logo Chief Wahoo with the phrase "Smile for Racism". The work was nearly banned by the commissioning agency because it was perceived as offensive to the "Cleveland community". Meanwhile, the Cleveland American Indian community continues to protest outside the Cleveland baseball stadium during every home game because of the objectionable red-faced, big-nosed, bucktooth Cleveland Indian logo. Three years ago the "Cleveland Five", including this writer, were arrested for burning effigies of Little Red Sambo (the Cleveland Indian logo) and Little Black Sambo. The "Five" were held for 30 hours and then released without being charged, in what was another attempt to hush the voices of real Indian people.

For those who want to trivialise this issue, I say that racism is never trivial. Whose responsibility is this? Everyone who considers themselves anti-racist! Native leadership and



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'Redskins'

'Chief Wahoo'

allies working on the mascot issue call upon people nationwide to work towards the elimination of the misrepresentation and abuses of Indian images, names and spiritual way of life by sports and media. American Indians are a people – not mascots, and not fetishes to be worn by the dominant society.

CHARLENE TETERS is an activist, artist and writer and founding board member of the National Coalition on Racism, Sports and the Media.