

Multimedia Review: Multicultural Film

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Rosenstein, Jay (Producer) (1997). *In whose honor? American Indian mascots in sports* [Film]. (Available from New Day Films, 22 D Hollywood Ave., Ho-ho-kus, NJ 07423)

It has ever been the way of the white men in relation to the Indian, first, to sentimentalize him as a monster until he has been killed off, and second to sentimentalize him in retrospect as the noble savage.

James Gray, "The Illinois," 1940



high school teams.

In 1988, Ms. Teters, a graduate student recruited by the University of Illinois Art Department, brought her two children to a Fighting Illini basketball game where a student dressed as Chief Illiniwek performed a pre-game purported ceremonial dance to raise the team's spirit and entertain the fans. A combination of knowledgeable and inane fans smeared with fake war paint yelled Hollywood war chants in response. Instead of being entertained by the Chief's parody, the Teter children were traumatized by the event and Charlene's sadness turned to anger. The Teter family respected and loved their Native American traditions and was shocked by the mockery of their cultural identity. What was sacred to them became a



profane mimicry of a Native American religious ceremony in this Midwestern university community.

Chief Illiniwek, a stereotype of Native Americans, was created in 1926 to allegedly bond University of Illinois students, sports fans, and alumni with their home team. Professor Rosenstein's film negates that mythology by exposing America's long history of perpetuating racist stereotypes of Native Americans. These acts of cultural colonialism, much like the Jim Crow Minstrel shows, began with the Dime Western novels in the 1860's and were popularized by Buffalo Bill's Wild West Shows in 1883. This stereotyping continues in entertainment and shows all over the United States. Few of these team mascots have received approval from the Nations or Tribes they claim to respect and honor. The University of Illinois avoided the issue by claiming the Chief was not a mascot but a sports symbol and his ceremonial dance and music were historically and culturally authentic. The University has never presented original source documentation to support its claims.

Since 1926, two years after passage of the Indian Citizenship Act, 36 students have portrayed the Chief, including one female during WWII, who was known as Princess Illiniwek. None of the imitators of the bogus Chief was of Native American heritage. From his inception the Chief's costume did not represent any Native Americans from Illinois. The most recent costume, sewn in 1982, was purchased from a member of the Oglala Sioux Nation, not the Illiniwek Confederation who lived in the area that constitutes the state of Illinois. The Chief's eagle feathers, from an endangered species considered sacred by the Sioux, were returned to the Nation in 1992 and replaced with dyed turkey feathers.

The film with its haunting background music takes the viewers through the painful experiences of Ms. Teters as she stood alone and questioned the authenticity of the bogus Chief's ceremonial dress and trivializing religious dance. Her solitary act of conscience grew into campuswide protests against racist imagery. She saw the Chief as an embodiment of cultural colonialism and his ceremonial dance as a tool to objectify Native Americans. Charlene faced hostility when she carried a hand-printed sign saying that Native Americans are human beings, not mascots. Sports fans spit on Charlene during the daytime and at night made harassing phone calls to deter her struggle for respect, decency, equity, civil rights, and academic honesty. The film does a thorough job of exposing university spokespersons including Board of Trustee members, alumni spokespersons, and State Representatives who defended this racist stereotype. They explained that the Chief was not a mascot but a symbol of school pride, solemnity, honor, dignity, grace, beauty, strength, and bravery and that his ceremonial dance respected Native American culture. The Board of Trustees in 1990 voted 6-1 to make Chief Illiniwek the official symbol of the University. The Board passed the following motion:

The tradition of Chief Illiniwek is a rich one and has meaning for the students, alumni, and friends of the University of Illinois. For more than sixty years, the Chief has been the symbol of the spirit of a great university and of our intercollegiate athletic teams, and as such is loved by the people of Illinois. The University considers the symbol to be dignified and has treated it with respect. His ceremonial dance is done with grace and beauty. The Chief keeps the memory of the people of a great Native American tribe alive for thousands of Illinoisans who otherwise would know little or nothing of them.

It is important to note that many UIUC faculty members voiced their opposition to keeping the Chief as a university symbol. In 1998, the UIUC Faculty-Student Senate approved a resolution, by a vote of 97 to 29, calling for the end of Chief Illiniwek. After that vote, 13 campus colleges, schools, centers and departments approved similar resolutions asking the administration to stop using the Chief as a mascot and symbol. These events occurred against a slow but steady 30-year campaign of banning Native American symbols and stereotypes used by 70 high school and college teams across the United States. Recalcitrant colleges and professional teams such as the Cleveland Indians (Chief Wahoo), Atlanta Braves, Kansas City Chiefs, Chicago Blackhawks, and, the most inflammatory of all, the Washington Redskins continue their racially insensitive stereotyping.

The University of Illinois continued its demeaning tradition until the administration was pressured by the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) Executive Committee to remove Chief Illiniwek's name, logo and performance from all sporting events. The University was informed it could not host NCAA championships events on its Urbana campus unless the Chief was retired. Bowing to pressure, UIUC retired the Chief in 2006 only to see him resurrected during the Fall 2007 Homecoming where a new generation of imitators appeared on floats. The Chancellor, Richard Herman, said banning images of the Chief from Homecoming ceremonies and activities violated the U.S. Constitution: "The University values free speech and free expression and considers Homecoming floats, decorations, and costumes and related signage all representations of such personal expression."

The film concludes with a synopsis of events from 2001-2006 affecting the status of the Chief and other sports mascots. Dennis Hastert (R- IL), former Speaker of The United States House of Representatives, and three Illinois Congressmen were unsuccessful in their attempt to pass a bill that would block the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) from punishing schools that continue to use derogatory names and images of Native Americans.

Jay Rosenstein's documentary earns a 9.5 on a scale of 10 for meeting or exceeding multicultural educational standards in the areas of historical setting,

accuracy, social milieu, cinematography, pace, sound, music, editing, narrative, point of view, credibility of principal players, and diversity themes. Charlene Teters is a professor of art at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico and the founding board member of the National Coalition on Racism in Sports and the Media.

Supplemental websites to help educators use *In Whose Honor? American Indian Mascots in Sports* in a multicultural learning environment include:

- In Whose Honor website
<http://www.inwhosehonor.com/>
- Pro and con positions about retiring Chief Illiniwek
<http://www.retirethechief.org/resources.html>
- Cincinnati Zapatista Coalition American Indian Mascot page
<http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/1364/nmascots.htm>
- Charlene Teter's homepage
<http://www.charleneteters.com>
- Charlene Teter's 2006 presentation at the Martin Luther King Symposium
<http://www.researchchannel.org/prog/displayevent.aspx?rID=4926&fID=1902>
- American Indian Sports Team Mascots
<http://www.aistm.org/1indexpage.htm>
- The National Coalition on Racism in Sports and Media
<http://www.aimovement.org/ncrsm/index.html>
- Mascots, racism in schools by state
<http://www.aics.org/mascot/mascot.html>
- Articles on sports team names and logos
<http://www.racismagainstindians.org/UnderstandingMascots.htm>

Photo Credits

Photo of Chief Illiniwek mascot at University of Illinois football game. Taken by flickr user soundfromwayout on November 11, 2006. Retrieved February 20, 2007, from <http://www.flickr.com/photos/soundfromwayout/294802004/>

Photo of Charlene Teters, Retrieved November 18, 2007, from <http://www.charleneteters.com/graphix/teters.jpg>