

Mascot Statement By Melody Walker Brook, Elnu Abenaki

As I tried to formulate my response to a school athletic mascot/name that holds on to a stereotype of an indigenous person, I stepped back in order to understand the whole picture.

I looked up statistics surrounding missing and murdered indigenous women. I looked up suicide rates. I looked up statistics of heart disease and diabetes. I looked up incarceration rates.

My Facebook feed in recent months has been full of images of the Dakota Pipeline Water Protectors, and protests in Mi'kmaq territory surrounding natural gas storage sites, both of which were scarce on mainstream media sources. There was even a photo of football players in their Redskins uniforms raising their fists in support of Black Lives Matter and wearing a jersey that proves how others, even other marginalized groups, see indigenous people. Meaning, they don't.

What does this have to do with a mascot symbols? Everything.

These seemingly unrelated issues are connected to a theme of invisibility and a lack of empathy for indigenous people, one of the most marginalized populations on Turtle Island. I have seen my friends on Facebook argue about Halloween costumes, and the right of the Redskins to maintain their traditions. The issues that plague Indian country are symptoms of a much broader problem that perpetuate them.

A mascot that condenses more than 500 Nations into a single – and incorrect – stereotype represents more than 400 years of colonialism, and is the symbol for a world that has never cared about their suffering. There is no honor in this.

They do not see the faces of the indigenous children shipped to boarding schools. They do not see the smallpox scars. They do not see the societies confined to reservations outside of the public eye, struggling with substance abuse and health issues. They do not see the constant attack upon indigenous values, or the bodies of all of those killed creating a country that other people are proud to call home.

They see a caricature of an Indian with a headdress, the stereotypical Plains warrior of legend, doomed to fall: the warriors of the past, long gone. To them, it may be beautiful, or they may even think it is honoring them, but to at least some indigenous people, this is a simply a further affront to countless individuals and groups shredding every last ounce of their souls to reclaim their past and secure a better future - one filled with pride and the possibility that every other American thinks they have – the pursuit of happiness. Most importantly, people are struggling just to be seen as human beings. Not Warriors, not Braves, not Marauders, not Chiefs – just human beings.

Change takes place every time someone makes a conscious choice to be better. Some mascots depict a generic “Indian” with the Plains style headdress - in the Northeast. What

does that message convey? It has nothing to do with the history of the area. As a citizen of a local tribe, this mascot does not represent me. It certainly does not honor me. I am hard-pressed to come up with an example in the Northeast of a headdress style similar to the Plains region. It does not fit.

The generic “Indian” mascot in essence wipes the identity of more than 500 Nations, because placing that image in a locale that has nothing to do with the Plains smacks of the message that it does not matter whether they depict local groups or Plains groups. They are all the same.

The regional piece is lost, and all Indians once again are painted in the typical vein of ambiguity, and the fake image of the noble savage or the mystical warrior. When we as a society marginalize and shape human beings into caricatures, we are complicit in the violence against them, metaphorically and literally.

What happens when people are reduced from personhood and they are no longer seen as human beings? What happens when real human beings are left out of the media or ignored by most people in dominant society? Society can continue to treat them as they always have, while symptoms of what was broken remain in their communities. Mascots could be a visible reminder of people often forgotten – and yet they do not see their real faces. The mask of what they want Indians to be shields them from the realities of indigenous life.

Misrepresentation is a dishonor, but it is also more than that. It is a travesty. And it is no wonder that in this world indigenous women are stolen and attacked at higher rates than other populations. It is no wonder that indigenous people have little to no media coverage about their struggle just to have clean drinking water or to safeguard their sacred sites from those looking to turn a profit.

Apathy begins when people are young, and is perpetuated by those who do not place value on all walks of life. All Indians are just generic warriors, or a dying race of people without identity. They are not real people to mainstream society. With so many real issues that need to be addressed in indigenous society, we can do better. Change the mascot and teach students how to be responsible citizens in a world desperately in need of them. As a person with a vested interest in this mascot debate, this mascot does not represent me. It does not honor me. It is an affront to our people.

This is not just a mascot. It is about what the mascot represents. I read an article in Indian Country Today chronicling the experience of indigenous students attending high schools with an Indian mascot. They become targets, and it becomes their unwanted apologist role to explain what indigenous people really stand for, and what they actually look like. With every fresh iteration, a message is sent to them that their existence is a stereotype; in some cases students have even received negative attention. For a community already struggling with many issues – including, as I can attest personally, self-identity – any school with such a mascot will potentially harm not only the individual student, but our community as a whole.

It is a school's job to prepare students for the world, and by doing so, create citizens that will make it a better place. If a mascot can potentially harm any student's self-identity, why would you continue to keep it? If even one student is sent back with a broken spirit, the community-at-large has failed, because we all seek to challenge injustice.

We need role models in our societies, and we need students that feel empowered to take on a world that often does not support them. Everyone that promotes and that actively perpetuates a broken system, I challenge you to do better.

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