

Gendered Discourse: Higher Education, Mascots and Race

Gail Bederman in her influential 1995 work *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* explains the growth of college athletics as a development related to late Victorian era claims to authority based on the physical body and racial superiority. Specifically, “as white middle class men actively worked to reinforce male power, their race became a factor that was crucial to their gender.”<sup>1</sup> Sport allowed men to embrace their masculinity on the field and enact displays of physical violence. This violence was juxtaposed with male behavior off the sporting field, which was caught up in the things they had learned on the field, namely respect for rules, order, and control. The masculine ideal was coupled with whiteness as a racial category. Thus as a long list of historians have proven the apex of masculinity was white male displays of physical prowess.

How then did sports mascots tie to the white masculine ideal? It would seem logical that the adoption of Indian performance would be antithetical to white masculinity. Yet, as Philip Deloria and others have shown, participants in playing Indian relied upon these rigidified momentary “lapses” in civilized behavior to confirm both psychic and physical superiority in the alienating world of the post World War I era.

I begin with Bederman and Deloria in order to ground the oft-ignored theorization of the historical links of gender and race between sports, educational institutions, mascots when considering the contemporary moment. Often scholars (and public discussants) considering the mascot issue fail to connect all education, sports, and mascots fully with race and gender and instead concentrate either on the connection between the affirmation

of white racial superiority and educational commercialism or on the claims of racism and traditionalism. Instead, I suggest that even when deploying claims of race and racism they are couched within a gendered language that affirms white male dominance.

One of the most striking features of the November 2003 University of Illinois Board of Trustees meeting was the spatial positioning of the audience. I attended the November meeting out of a deep curiosity caused by the substantial public rumor that newly appointed trustee Francis Carroll would propose the “retirement” of the much revered and much despised Chief Illiniwek. Although I, like many of my colleagues in the history department, was skeptical that Carroll’s resolution would come to fruition, I felt that even the possibility of movement regarding the issue could prove pivotal to my critical inquiry into the links between educational institutions and their sports mascots. The local newspaper and television stations staked out campus for the days prior to the meeting after it was confirmed that the Carroll resolution would be on the agenda and their presence along the back wall of the meeting room offered the sense of heightened suspense that maybe today there would be some kind of action by the Board of Trustees. Yet, what became most enthralling to me was not Carroll’s withdrawal of the resolution and the reaffirmation that progress would not be made, it was the audience demographic and seating arrangement. The room was divided into four quarters with isles dividing each quadrant. Directly inside the door in the upper right quadrant sat anti-mascot proponents including a large number of faculty and Native activists. In the bottommost two quarters sat a mix of anti-mascot groups including the Progressive Resource Action Coalition as well as interested community members and administrative officials. Yet it was the fourth quarter, that directly in front of me, that presented the realization that the

contemporary discourse of the mascot debate was not just an affirmation of whiteness but of a male-gendered whiteness. Of the hundred or so orange-clad students in front of me an overwhelming number were white men. Belonging to the organizations “Honor the Chief” and “Students for Chief Illiniwek” these orange clad bodies demonstrated their allegiance to the cause by jumping rhythmically up and down while chanting and deploying the tomahawk chop. Setting aside the disturbing movements mimicking a violent death, I kept focusing on the physical space and the sea of white men. Was the seeming dominance of white men in the pro-Chief alliance significant? Was there a parallel between the pro-mascot movement as a male discursive space and arguments long fronted by colonial historians about the reification of male identity through racialization, conquest, and appropriation?

I left the meeting with a sense that I had just witnessed a physical rendering of the very phenomena Bederman and Deloria had noted in their linkages between sport, masculinity, race, and higher education. I had seen white men shed their own identity by donning garb and performing specialized behavior that would only be legitimate within specific context. And importantly, they did so in a direct appeal to the very bastion of middle class male identity: the Board of Trustees at an institution of higher education. The niggling sense that I needed to investigate the historical coupling of higher education, the mascot, gender, and race became even more invasive combined with other public statements offered surrounding the Carroll resolution. The November 18<sup>th</sup> issue of the Daily Illini illustrated the stereotypical ways in which gender was asserted. In response to the statement “nancy cantor, the chancellor of the diversity, has lost control of the issue” University alumnus Matthew Keelan offered the opinion: “Why does she

deserve any control over this issue? She obviously has no respect for the great traditions of the University of Illinois, nor any plans to uphold them. She has her own plans, and I think she should take them somewhere else. Or was that sentence referring to how she lost control, and left crying like a selfish child, when she didn't get her way? Her actions reflect poorly on the University. The tradition of the Chief has always reflected a dignified presence on the University. The University does need to take a stand. A stand to uphold the tradition of Chief Illiniwek. A stand against the political agenda of the misinformed. Take a stand for what is right. Take a stand to protect something which so many people profoundly respect. Hail the Chief.”

Keelen strategically opposed the dignity of the “stoic” Chief Illiniwek with Cantor’s emotional response. While Keelan explicitly calls Cantor’s behavior childish and misinformed he is also implicitly hyper-feminizing her. Cantor is not just a woman but she is a woman who can’t control her emotions. Further since the university must be a strong traditional (read: masculine) place, Cantor’s admission of emotion is a direct affront to men. In many ways, Keelan’s feminizing of Cantor parallels what colonial scholars have charted with other gendered colonialism. Keelan’s editorial in November became part of an increasingly open charge that University chancellor Nancy Cantor couldn’t handle herself, was a neo-liberal (which was in the eyes of the writer apparently a pejorative term), and was overly emotional in anti-chief stance. As months passed and my puzzling about gender and the mascot grew greater, the gendered nature of the discussion took root in a lecture I offered to students of the US History survey on the Gendered and Racialized World of the 1920s. In my lecture I talked about the ways in which consumption and race were tied together in post war America through gendered

appeals. Soap ads, sporting goods, cars, and household items all were scrutinized as elements of the increasingly open ties between racialization and commodification. The lecture extended weeks later into my section after my students attended a campus lecture by Julian Bond of the NAACP in commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Brown v Board entitled “The Broken Promise of Brown v. Board.” Of the 25 students an overwhelming number argued that the promise of Brown had not been broken and that public education has fulfilled its mandate to provide equal access. One of the few lone dissenters offered this statement: “how can we argue that the spirit of brown and equal rights hasn’t been broken when we attend a university that allows a white man to dress up as an Indian and dance around the football field?” A second student responded to the initial question: “it’s just like the stuff we talked about in the 20s when people got up on stage in blackface and made fun of African-Americans. They’re both about racism” What was so interesting about these statements was not just my happiness that someone in the room had connected Indians as a part of the racialized population but that a student critiqued the mascot as both a racialized and gendered display. It wasn’t just whites who dressed up as Indians but it was white men. Even more provocative was the assertion by a male student that “it’s just a bunch of guys playing football. Why do people care so much?” and his later belief that if the government and university didn’t think it was wrong why should the students? In this instance again the links between sport, higher education, race, and gender were offered up but resolutely unconnected as the discussion quickly deteriorated into students claiming things like “I’m not a racist,” “My great-grandmother was Indian and I don’t mind the mascot.” The more nuanced investigation of the uses of gendered and raced rhetoric then fell to the concerns of authenticity and race.

In many ways, my inquiry into higher education, sport, gender, and race have been sidetracked by the very things my students fell prey to. In a presentation to high school students at a local high school that opened with a student asking “Are you an Indian?” I spent the majority of the time presenting the events of American settlement and colonization just so that I could get them to consider Indians as a racialized group. Much of this is a result, I believe, of the poor understanding of Native American history. Many pro-chief supporters articulate a very flat definition of race and racism that is informed by a very minimalist conception of race as either black or white. Indians are neither black nor white and thus cannot be an object of racism.

I want to tie my grounding of sport and higher education as a white male space to mascot discourse as gendered through a final discursive moment couched in the language of education and race. Our esteemed university president, James Stukel concluded in public statement that there is “an ominous element of the discourse should alarm anyone who loves and cares about the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. I am referring to the rhetoric of race and the increasing innuendo and bald-faced assertions that those who are not opposed to the Chief are motivated by racism. It is a false and unfair insinuation that inflames an already emotional debate and exacerbates an already intractable situation. In fact, the multitudes of opinions on all sides of the Chief issue are based on principal positions by virtually everyone with a point of view. Certainly there is not one member of the Board of Trustees who is driven by racism in his or her deliberations on this matter. Nevertheless, the rhetoric of race is intensifying. And whether it is intentional

or not, it is deceptive and makes it all the harder for opposing sides to come together to resolve the issue.”

I end with Stukel’s comment not just because of his position as a white male and the head of the university at that but also because it illustrates the need to consider what it means that there are a sea of white men articulating the pro-mascot position and our university president and board of trustees are such men. At the end of the class discussion I related to you, the initial student who posed the question of the white men as mascots stayed after to offer her final thoughts to me about the mascot issue. She said “it’s hard to be minority on this campus. It is hard to be black and it’s even harder to be Indian. It’s hard to be a woman in a classroom often dominated by men. By what’s worse than anything is being all three, black, Indian, and female on a campus where white men get to walk around with an Indian head on their clothes and no one even notices.”

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<sup>i</sup> Bederman, 5.