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

Charlene Teters, an artist, educator and long-term activist, calls for more Americans to continue to caricature Native Americans.

Undeclared War

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" in front of us, but for future generations.

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
clinging 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 Center for Corporate Responsibility, a national organisation of investors with combined portfolios worth an estimated $90 billion, 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 Samba (the Cleveland Indian logo) and Little Black Samba. 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 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 fetish es to be worn by the dominant society.

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

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To the Editor of RHODES JOURNALISM REVIEW: