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Choreographing Colonialism in the American West

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[A] long habit of not thinking a thing wrong gives it a superficial appearance of being right, and raises at first a formidable outcry in defense of custom.

—Thomas Paine 1776.

Introduction

Historian Fred Hoxie has suggested that the United States of America was founded on two “original sins”—the enslavement of Africans and the displacement of indigenous peoples from their lands and resources.¹ Both practices were predicated upon a normalized, imperialist discourse of entitlement and the assumed natural superiority of Europeans. Ironically, the American colonies, having fought for independence from British imperialism via an emancipatory narrative of liberty, equality, and justice, in fact, merely imposed their own version of imperialism on the continent's indigenous peoples. This distinctly American colonial project was supported by Christian beliefs and enabled by tropes of inevitability such as ‘manifest destiny,’ ‘the march of civilization,’ and ‘progress.’ Such attitudes were only further empowered by the scientific racism of social evolutionism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which categorized all peoples of the world hierarchically as savage, barbarian, or civilized—a self-serving taxonomy based on the cultural norms and ideologies of those doing the classifying, of course. This general process, well documented by a number of critical historians, provides the sociopolitical and historical context for my paper.²

King and Springwood (2001b) suggest that North America's narrative about itself centers upon a hidden text regarding its relationship with American Indians: a central text that must be hidden, sublimated and, ironically, at the same time, acted out. For the last one hundred years, this hidden text has been acted out with especial clarity on sports fields all over the United States through the appropriation of American Indian imagery and cultural practices (such as dancing) in the form of sports mascots. These range from professional teams such as the Washington Redskins and the Cleveland Indians to college teams like the Florida State University Seminoles and the University of Illinois Fighting Illini and ‘Chief Illiniwek,’ which will provide my focus here. The omnipresence of such symbolism has created commonsense, pop-cultural knowledge out of the notion that ‘Indians’ are a category of athletic mascot. Such “a long habit of not thinking a thing wrong” survived the civil-rights era of the 1960s and 1970s largely unchallenged, despite the removal of similar derogatory public representations of other American minority populations (for example, blackface minstrelsy, Little Black Sambo, the Frito Bandito). This indicates that, from the mainstream perspective, American Indians occupy a different semiotic space than other American minorities, one that remains resistant to reconfiguration along nonracializing lines.

I seek to shed light on the reasons for this resistance by asking how and why these half-time performances and associated narrative practices endow Indian mascots with such significance for nonindigenous Americans. Following Hill (2001) and Urciuoli (1996), I take the position that such institutionalized practices are racializing because they involve what Taussig (1993) has called processes of mimesis and alterity—that is, imitating in order to objectify and distance as Other—and because they continue despite vigorous objections from those so objectified.

In an earlier paper (Farnell 2004), I paid detailed attention to the spoken discourses of Euro-Americans in Illinois who support this practice. I asked the following questions:

How do such racializing practices manage to prevail in educational institutions that simultaneously espouse a commitment to ‘diversity’?

Why do the non-Native people of Illinois feel so strongly and emotionally attached to this symbol? What does it mean for them and why?

What kind of discursive formations in mainstream American society generate talk of reverence, dignity, pride and honor toward American Indians while supporting a refusal to listen to the voices of contemporary Native individuals and institutions that are vigorously opposed to these practices?³

My analysis suggests that, as members of the dominant “race-making” population (Williams 1989), supporters of the ‘Chief Illiniwek’ mascot at the University of Illinois create and passionately defend a “white public space” in which any *contemporary* Native American presence is positioned as disorderly. White public space refers to “a morally significant set of contexts that are the most important sites for the practices of a racializing hegemony, in which Whites [Euro-Americans or people of European descent] are invisibly normal and in which racialized populations are visibly marginal and the objects of monitoring” (Hill 2001: 453, after Page and Thomas 1994). My analysis revealed how, through a rhetoric of honoring, the University of Illinois’ athletic symbol plays a fundamental role in accomplishing the “elevation of Whiteness” (Hill 2001: 456) that concurs with a regional (state) identity. In this paper, I want to add a dynamically embodied theoretical perspective to the issue, by turning to the kinetic and visual semiotics of the mascot's dancing performance itself.

The Dancing ‘Indian’ Body

American Indian sports mascots stage racial difference according to a contemporary Euro-American neocolonial imagination that is directly predicated upon the nineteenth-century colonial project.⁴ King and Springwood (2001a) accurately locate this institutional practice as neocolonialist when they say that analytically it can best be read as a highly produced form of social ritual that enacts a manifest-destiny narrative of Indian conquest, sacrifice, and domination, all in the sustained interests of empire. At the University of Illinois, the performance of Chief Illiniwek⁵ literally, as well as ritually, inscribes the relations of imperial power directly onto the Native American body, represented by a white male student painted and dressed as ‘Indian’ who dances at halftime for a largely white audience.

In response to criticism from American Indians and their allies, supporters of Illiniwek frequently engage in a rhetoric of authenticity about the choreography performed on the football field. For decades, the university promoted—and the students believed—that the 'chief's dance' was an authentic form of some Indian tribal celebration. Performers continue to claim that the person portraying the chief is knowledgeable about Native American cultures, dances, and music and that the dance is, or is based on, 'fancy dancing.'⁶ Proponents fail to distinguish, however, between a form of exhibition dancing invented for the Wild West shows of the 1920s and 1930s, and widely disseminated by the Boy Scout movement, and a contemporary genre of competitive pow-wow dancing called 'Men's Fancy Dance.' Although both may have emerged from the same roots in Oklahoma at the end of the nineteenth century, as we shall see, Illiniwek's dance does not in any way resemble dance forms known to American Indian peoples.

As Browner (2002: 30) has documented, historical records suggest that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Euro-American producers of Wild West shows in Oklahoma urged their Indian dancers to invent 'fancy' additions to the older dances of Plains warrior societies to please non-Indian audiences. Such audience demands led to the invention of 'fancy war dances' that had never existed in Native cultures but that were subsequently taken up and circulated by Indian hobbyists associated with the Boy Scouts. This is undoubtedly the source of inspiration for Illiniwek's dance. Ten of the first eleven Illiniweks were Boy Scouts interested in 'Indian lore' who learned their dancing in this context. Incorporated in 1910, the Boy Scouts of America modeled many outdoor activities on real or putative American Indian themes.⁷ King and Springwood chart the direction of this movement:

[T]he Indian was appropriated to serve as the central object of fascination and longing in the development of a white masculine character building movement whose emergence bridged the *fin-de siècle*... [T]his movement—whose agenda was articulated in a popular series of youth novels, health manuals, speeches and the literature of the Boy Scouts of America—encouraged young boys to embrace certain elements of Indian life as a way of instilling in them discipline, courage, intimate knowledge of nature, health and moral character. Essentially the aim was to teach white children Indian ways but what constituted 'Indian ways' were a set of highly idealized stereotypes of Indians as scouts, hunters and craftspeople. (King and Springwood 2001b: 206)

Choreographic Contrasts

In marked contrast to the choreographic structure, spatial orientation, movement content, and performance space of *actual* American Indian men's Fancy Dancing, Illiniwek's performance combines stereotypical gestures from the hackneyed 'noble-warrior' motif (i.e., stoic, painted face, 'dignified' postures, and arms folded or held aloft) with exaggerated long stepping, supplemented by acrobatic display (splits, leaps, and turns) and much traveling in straight paths across the performance space with various large and lifted movements of the arms, in order to be seen from a distance. The small, quick, earthly grounded 'touch and step,' closely attuned to the beat of the drum in genuine indigenous Fancy Dancing, has become a stretched out hop-step or skipping action that skims across the surface of the football field in order to reach the goal end where a high jump with splits creates a climax to the display.

In addition, Illiniwek's regalia are inappropriate on two counts. First, he wears Lakota ceremonial regalia typical of the Plains region but unrelated to anything worn by the Illinois nations, who were Woodlands people. Second, American Indian Fancy Dancers do not, and never did, wear buckskin suits or long ceremonial feather headdresses or dance barefoot. This choice on the part of Illinois students in 1926 was far from accidental or arbitrary, however. It followed already well-worn grooves that distilled hundreds of diverse Native cultures into the defining characteristics of the Plains Indian male as representing all Indians (Gone 2002).



Fig. 1. Left: 'Chief Illiniwek' performs at a basketball game at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Photo by Ted Warren, reproduced with permission of Associated Press. Right: Sports logo of the University of Illinois, © Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois.

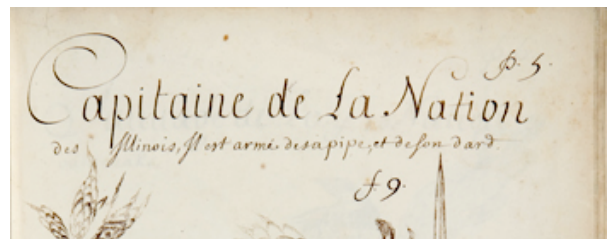




Fig. 2. Eighteenth-century representations of Illinois Indians. Left: Illinois Indians visiting New Orleans, 1735 (detail from *Desseins de Sauvages de Plusieurs Nations, Nue Orleans, 1735*). Colored pen and ink by Alexandre de Batz, 1735. Courtesy of Peabody Museum, 41-72-10/20, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Photograph by Hillel Burger. © Presidents and Fellows of Harvard University. Right: Chief of the Illinois by Charles Becard de Granville ca 1700, with permission of Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

In contrast, the regalia of male Fancy Dancers consist of two large, gaily colored turkey-feather bustles attached to shoulders and hips, a small 'roach' headpiece, and moccasins or beaded sneakers. [8](#)



Fig. 3. Fancy Dancer showing typical regalia. Still photograph taken from video footage by author, 1998.

Dance movements specific to the Fancy-Dance genre make the brightly colored feather bustles blur the outline of the body through fast turns on the spot and changes of direction within a small area of ground space inside the sacred-dance circle. The low arms (held out slightly to the side) and upright torso combine with fast footwork that must not lose the beat of the drum (in competition, musicians try to trick dancers into missing the final beat and thus lose vital points off their score). The precise combination of moves in Fancy Dancing are improvised in performance but must conform to the choreographic constraints of the genre—that is, only certain kinds of steps, jumps, and turns are acceptable.



Fig. 4. Fancy Dance regalia blur the outline of the body during dancing. Still photo from video by author, 1998.

Clearly, the late nineteenth-century Oklahoma exhibition dancing that became today's pow-wow Fancy Dancing evolved in regalia and choreography in ways quite distinct from Illiniwek's dance. Ironically perhaps, it is the invented romantic, white image and its choreography that have been largely frozen in time under the trope of 'tradition.'

Likewise, the musical accompaniment to Illiniwek's dance is a Euro-American band march with a rhythm that crowds identify with an Indian 'tom-tom' beat, a stereotypic misrepresentation derived from early Hollywood movies completely foreign to any indigenous musical expression. However, precisely *because* of this, it holds tremendous emotional appeal for sports fans and especially the members of the Marching Illini, the university's marching band. Any genuine indigenous forms of musical expression would fail in this context, as would anyone dressed as an Illinois tribal leader because the visual imagery and sounds would not be recognizably 'Indian' to the crowd. That is, the dance, regalia, and music would not function as indexes connecting the colonizing gaze of the audience to their stereotypical image of the 'noble savage' and its associated moral qualities (pride, spirit, courage, bravery). These moral qualities, which for fans are enveloped within the performance, rapidly become indistinguishable from strong feelings of loyalty to the educational institution.

It is relevant to note that Illiniwek's appearances began in 1926, under the auspices of the University of Illinois' marching band. The band originated in 1870 in the military department, which designed and taught military science and tactics, a required subject at the time for all (male) students. In articulation with an emergent patriotism on the Urbana-Champaign campus in the wake of the Civil War, the band enacted both a real and symbolic extension of military formations as celebrations of conquest and expansion.

During his half-time performance, Illiniwek emerges, creeping stealthily from the heart of this military formation into the open space of the football stadium. Here, we find Foucault's (after Jeremy Bentham) panopticon turned inside out. "Instead of the one in the center monitoring the bodies and the behavior of hundreds around the perimeter, the thousands around the perimeter monitor the behavior of the one in the center" (Fiske 1993, cited in King and Springwood 2001a). As the single Indian body that can be monitored and disciplined, Illiniwek becomes the symbolic social body of all American Indians, onto which is ritually mapped all of the Euro-American (white) readings of the significance of the Indian to the history of America. Discipline or control relies upon the technology of enclosure, and Illiniwek is physically enclosed not only by the stadium with its thousands of fans, but by the Marching Illini that molds itself around the performing body (King and Springwood 2001a).

Table 1. A comparative summary of contrasting features

Native American men's Fancy Dance	Chief Illiniwek's dance
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<p>1. Performance Space</p> <p>The Pow-wow arena</p> <p>Sacred dance-circle oriented to the four cardinal directions—ESWN. Can vary in size and be outdoor or indoor.</p>	<p>1. Performance Space</p> <p>Football Stadium</p> <p>Rectangular field of regulation size with goal posts at north and south ends, marked by halfway and other lines.</p>
<p>2. Musicians</p> <p>Drum groups of six to ten or more sit in circles around a large drum, either in center of arena (if only one) or around the edge of the arena if several drums are present.</p>	<p>2. Musicians</p> <p>A military-inspired marching band provides stereotypical “tom-tom” music, with players marching in straight lines following militaristic formations.</p>
<p>3. Audience/Participants</p> <p>Participants (some dance and sing, some do not) gather in family groups on bleachers or with own chairs. Can range from small community pow-wow with one to two hundred people to large events with tens of thousands of participants. Anyone can enter the dance arena during “intertribal” dances.</p>	<p>3. Audience</p> <p>Tens of thousands of spectators sit in raked seats/bleachers in an oval shape surrounding the field. Only players, cheerleaders, band members, and officials are allowed onto the performance space of the football field.</p>



Fig. 5. Chief Illiniwek stands in front of the marching band, Memorial Stadium, Oct. 26, 1940. University of Illinois Archives, “Illiniwek V. John Grable at Notre Dame Game” RS: 39/2/20, Box ATH 1-2 Folder ATH 1-2 Grable, John 1939–40. Courtesy University of Illinois Archives.

The performance is thus a celebration of imperial power that stages a mythical version of the history of Indian/white relations. The drama played out on the football field during the game against Penn State in 1926, when Illiniwek first appeared, shook hands, and smoked a ‘peace pipe’ with a student dressed as the Quaker William Penn confirms this interpretation. It is a mythology that reconstructs Indian/white relations as friendly, equal, resolved. It is in firm denial of the historical fact that all Native peoples had been forcibly removed from the state in the 1830s in a process that today we might call ‘ethnic cleansing.’ This mythical history literally *incorporates* the tragic figure of the Indian into the imagined community of the United States of

America, allowing white America to reimagine itself as a partial embodiment of Indianness—"We are now the Illini tribe" say supporters—as it attempts to merge with the Indian in the formation of a 'shared' (and blameless) American consciousness.



Fig. 6. Chief Illiniwek's first appearance at the football game against Penn State, Oct. 30, 1926. He is standing next to the Penn State mascot, 'William Penn.' Photo published with permission of University of Illinois Division of Intercollegiate Athletics.

That a *dancing* Indian should be the major trope for this racializing practice is neither without import nor further irony. I will summarize and simplify a complex history here, by noting the fertile tension between disgust and desire over alien American Indian bodily practices that was created for many European immigrants as a result of Puritan theology and other Christian (largely Protestant) forms of bias against the body in America during the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries (see Deloria 1998, King and Springwood 2001a, Pagden 1982, Segal and Steinbeck 1977). This tension was supported by longstanding Platonic-Cartesian philosophical dualisms that separated and valorized 'mind' over 'body' (Farnell 1999, Foucault 1978, Pandian 1985, Tripp 1997, Wagner 1997). Pandian writes, "From the late Renaissance ... human others became symbols for comprehending what was denied as a valid part of the [Christian] self" (1985: 42). King and Springwood (2001a) suggest that the Protestant belief system provided a religio-historical momentum in expansionist Western Europe for viewing non-Christian bodies with pious disdain, regarding them as carnal flesh because (assumedly) spontaneous, open, and sensual.

Dancing, especially, was singled out for Calvinist attention as a preamble to fornication (e.g., Marks 1975, Stubbs 1585). Denying such corporeal experiences for themselves, Protestants were thus poised to inscribe and read the non-Western body as representing all these things. The dancing Indian body that signified wild, savage, spontaneous, hypersexual, war-like, heathen passions—the dark and dangerous antithesis of all things civilized and Christian—was nevertheless simultaneously pregnant with fascination and desire for the projected wildness and sexuality of the New World 'Other.'

These alien bodily practices included not only so-called wild dancing and exotic rituals but also unfamiliar domestic activities and excesses of gesticulation. On the whole, the greater the observable variation from acceptable European norms of physical behavior, the more primitive a society was judged to be. This rationale and distancing as Other provided justification for widespread colonial efforts to 'civilize the savages' through disciplinary regimes that exerted radical control over bodily practices: not only over dancing but also over clothing, hairstyles, eating habits, sexual liaisons, social manners, work ethics, and ritual activities (Farnell 1995: 32; see also Child 1998, Lomawaima 1994, Osburn 1998). Reports of such disciplinary regimes abound within the archives of Government Boarding School records, for example.



Fig. 7. American Indian children, hair cropped and clothed in European-style school uniforms learning finger songs at Carlisle Indian School, ca. 1900. Frances Benjamin Johnston photo. Courtesy of Cumberland County Historical Society, with permission.

American Indian dance forms, intertwined as they were with indigenous spiritual practices, received special attention, however, and became subject to a series of prohibitions by the U.S. federal government in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (see Prucha 1975). Prohibitions against dancing continued to preoccupy U.S. government administrators and policy makers for almost half a century. In 1883, for example, the “Rules for Courts of Indian Offenses” established guidelines for the discontinuance of “old heathenish dances” as hindering the assimilation of American Indians. By 1892, a modification of these rules identified dancing (along with polygamy, the practices of medicine men, intoxication, and immorality) as punishable offenses. This U.S. governmental attitude continued into the 1920s through circulars issued regularly by the Commissioners of Indian Affairs (Prucha 1975: 187; 1984: 801–3) and lasted until 1934.

What cruel irony, then, that during this period when the U.S. government attempted to control and suppress these dynamically embodied forms of expressive culture within indigenous reservation communities, colonial constructions of ‘dancing Indians’ began to proliferate off-reservations—in Wild West shows and expositions and especially on American university campuses (Deloria 1998, Moses 1996). The colonialist message was clear: dancing for the entertainment of a white audience was acceptable, while dancing for spiritual and cultural purposes on the reservation was not (Browner 2002: 30).

In a crystal-clear example of “imperial nostalgia” (Rosaldo 1989), by the end of the nineteenth century, we find the emergence of a colonialist “longing for that which has been destroyed” enacted out in new spaces of racial representation—the Wild West show and the sports arena. Imperialist nostalgia occurs when “people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed” (Rosaldo 1989: 69). By the turn of the twentieth century, when the potential for American Indian military resistance had disappeared, the actual existence of American Indians was effectively superseded and displaced by the ‘Indian’ as a polysemous sign vehicle for the construction of Euro-American identity. The efforts to erase American Indian dancing only to reincorporate it as colonial mimicry on the sports field serve to reconcile a dominant pattern of violence—ethnocide and genocide—for the purposes of constructing a morally viable white identity. At the University of Illinois, supporters of the mascot insist they seek only to honor the former American Indian peoples of Illinois, at the same time refusing to honor even the request of the descendants of the Illinois tribes, the Peoria Indian tribe of Oklahoma, to stop this demeaning practice.

Conclusion

In sum, I have argued that the ‘rhetoric of honoring’ by University of Illinois’ mascot supporters is contradicted in two ways: first, through the origins of this practice and its colonial juxtaposition with the legal prohibition of genuine Native dancing on reservations; and second, by the neocolonial semiotics of the performance itself, in the audience’s power to use mimesis to create a white public space—a dynamically embodied discursive regime that dictates and controls what the performance will mean for them. In both cases, the genuine expressive ‘Indian body’ or, preferably, the dynamically embodied indigenous person has been effectively silenced.

Notes:

Acknowledgments: I dedicate this paper to all those Native American students, faculty, and staff at the University of Illinois, past and present, who have vigorously protested this practice and endured.

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¹ Presentation at the Newberry Library, Chicago, on the exhibition Lewis and Clark in Indian Country, September 2005.

² For example, Horsman (1981), Berkhoffer (1978), and Pearce (1967).

³ The article also provides an opportunity to connect my research interests in discourse-centered linguistic anthropology, Native American ethnography, and the anthropology of human movement and performance to my role as an activist against this form of institutionalized racism in the academic institution in which I work and its environs.

⁴ I use 'colonial' here to refer to domination by an imperial power that appropriates land and economic resources and destroys or severely disrupts social organization and political autonomy. 'Neocolonial' refers to symbolic domination via processes such as the cultural appropriation of imagery, symbolism, religious practices, and arts.

⁵ Hereafter, I will use simple 'Illiniwek' because the invented character is unqualified to hold the honorary title 'chief' and many indigenous people and their allies find this deeply insulting.

⁶ See statement by John Madigan, a former Illiniwek in the Garippo report, 2000 (see Farnell 2001) and recent statement on the Web site www.honorthechief.com (accessed May 13, 2009).

⁷ In 1915, the Order of the Arrow, a national Scout camping fraternity, was founded in which ceremonies of initiation were based on 'Indian themes' and local lodges and chapters were given 'Indian names.' The first three individuals who portrayed Illiniwek (Lester Leutwiler, Webber Borchers, and William Newton) became interested in 'Indian lore' through their involvement with the Boy Scouts. They spent time "Playing Indian" (Deloria 1998) at summer camp, learning so-called Indian dances as well as arts and crafts from Ralph Hubbard, a renowned enthusiast who traveled widely in the United States and Europe producing 'Indian pageants' (Powers 1998: 558).

⁸ In contrast to an eagle-feather war bonnet or full-length headdress, a roach is much smaller and made of porcupine hair attached to a crown-hugging leather base that also supports two vertically placed eagle feathers. These are attached so as to move freely along with the head movements. They add to the visual energy but blurred outline of the body.

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