

Letter: Impolite Illini

We were not part of the mass of people who spilled onto Green Street and the Quad after the men's basketball national championship on Monday. We were, however, among the throngs gathered outside of the Assembly Hall prior to tip-off. There, happy fans warmly greeted us with shouts of "F--- you!" and "If you don't like it here, why don't you leave!" Others acknowledged us by chanting cheerfully "We love the Chief, we love the Chief.." One young woman asked us if we were part of a group and when we were going to leave.

During unpleasant moments such as these and others that include brute intimidation along with vulgarities and disrespect, we realize anew what is at stake in the now decades-long struggle for social justice on this campus.

We acknowledge the dozens - and perhaps hundreds - of people waiting outside of the Assembly Hall who wore shirts that communicated simply "Illinois" and made no reference to the Chief, logo and team name. Perhaps, these people made a deliberate choice. Maybe they identify themselves as silent allies of efforts to retire dehumanizing stereotypes. Possibly they are unspeaking opponents of the boorish behavior that far too often accompanies the caricaturing of American Indian people.

"We" are two professors and an undergraduate. We are tribally enrolled American Indians who know our people, our history and our traditions. There is a difference between American Indians and the romantic noble savage stereotype that manifests in the gymnastics and acrobatic antics of the high-kicking, dancing Chief Illiniwek and in the Fighting Illini logo and name. Our position is more than simply anti-Chief; it is pro-American Indian people. We understand that some people neither desire nor are obligated to understand our position, and so our voices often are rejected or unheard as supporters of the Chief and the media tend to distort our message, twist our logic or dismiss us all together.

As responsible citizens of this campus community, we insert ourselves on this matter to rupture the silence around racial injustice. We speak out for the purpose of demanding accountability, as well as to rewrite narratives of belonging on this campus.

If for no other reason than the acrimony and the antagonism that bubbles to the surface in ways that make it much more difficult to be an American Indian person than it ever should be, the symbol (or mascot or cheerleader), the logo, the team name and all other uninvited efforts to honor American-Indian people in University athletics must end immediately.

D. Anthony Tyeeme Clark postdoctoral fellow and assistant professor
Debbie A. Reese, assistant professor Genevieve Tenoso University employee