# It Happens Here_Ep 18_Symbols

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**SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

Racial inequity, symbols, cultural respect, offensive images, stereotypes, hate crimes, free speech, public harm, colonialism, inclusive spaces, public schools, historical context, societal divisions, Minnesota laws, erasure fear.

**SPEAKERS**

Brandon Schorsch, Speaker 1, John Morrin, Staci Drouillard, Tyler Howell, Prof. Anton Treuer

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S **Staci Drouillard** 00:06

It Happens Here, the roots of racial inequity on the North Shore. Episode 18 - "Symbols,"

J **John Morrin** 00:13

. . . plastic tomahawks or bow and arrow. . . It's not respect for other people's culture. So if a store is selling all this stuff, it's reinforcing an image, a historical image, of the past.

S **Staci Drouillard** 00:19

Aaniin, boozhoo, hello. My name is Staci Drouillard, Grand Portage, direct descendant. And WTIP producer. and

T **Tyler Howell** 00:42

And this is Tyler Howell, WTI P community host.

S **Staci Drouillard** 00:46

We just heard from John Morrin Grand Portage Ojibwe elder and a trainer for the people's Institute for survival and beyond. John shared how his training has helped open his eyes to the complicated nature of symbols and images.

J **John Morrin** 01:03

So I drive through Grand Rapids and I go by this one store, and there would be that cigar store

So, I drive through Grand Rapids and I go by this one store, and there would be that cigar store Indian sitting on, you know. . . those cigar store Indians. And I hated that every time I had to drive through Grand Rapids, but I at that time, I didn't have the knowledge or to be able to go in and talk to a store owner about how that is very offensive to Indian people, because that's a stereotype. So it makes me very angry, but now I can at least engage a store owner if I see something offensive, and ask them about it and maybe educate them about it.

S Staci Drouillard 01:43

John shared another example, which comes from a commercial.

J John Morrin 01:48

We're watching that TV commercial, me and a friend of mine who had also went to the workshop, and a man and a woman riding on a white horse across the desert, like in Arizona and New Mexico. So we sat and watched it, and as they got closer and closer, and pretty soon these men in camouflage came down on ropes, hit the ground. It was a US Army commercial. What are they symbolizing there? So, you got these guys in camouflage--US Army, which, of course, if you understand history that Indian Affairs was in the War Department. And so what that's doing isperpetuating an image that Indian people are "war like." Got to watch out for them . . . and then on top of it, I've learned that a lot of those helicopters, the Apache, the Chickasaw, the Seminole, they're named after Indian tribes. All these weapons that kill people are named after Indian tribes. So what that commercial was doing then, 1989, was reinforcing that negative image about us. That's how racism is perpetuated, and these symbols also help reinforce societal divisions.

T Tyler Howell 02:57

Here's Bemidji State professor Anton Treuer:

P Prof. Anton Treuer 03:01

This is going to come up over and over and over again. We're seeing this with Confederate flags and statues all over the country, and we're going to have to grapple with this stuff, and it's not always going to be a comfortable conversation. You know, I love the view of: something is really causing harm. Then let's exhibit it in a museum or a place where it can be contextualized and we can understand it, rather than in a place that is somehow celebratory, or position where it can do harm to people or keep us more divided.

T Tyler Howell 03:36

These symbols can be subtle, like a toy tomohawk found in a souvenir shop.

S Staci Drouillard 03:41

They can also be overt, like flying a confederate flag or wearing a swastika symbol. And these more extreme examples in particular blur the line between free speech and doing harm. We reached out to Brandon Schorsch of Jewish Community Action in the Twin Cities, who made the connection between racist symbols and what is labeled a hate crime in the United States.

B Brandon Schorsch 04:11

In the United States, anti-Black hate crimes have been the number one amount of hate crimes year after year after year, since hate crimes started being recorded in the 1970s. As folks who want to go and understand these problems more-- across the West, and if we're using "West" to mean like European countries and the United States, Canada and other settler colonies like Australia, New Zealand, each country records hate crime data completely different. If you look at UK hate crime stats says they had 100,000-plus hate crimes, but if you look at Canada, Canada is about a third of the population size of the island of Great Britain. It says that, you know, Canada had about 6,000 something like that. And not all that's due to population size, but a big part is really due to the ways in which things get recorded. The threshold for what we consider a hate crime in the United States is very different than what gets recorded for official data as a hate crime in the UK. You know, if somebody does graffiti in the United States, it is a swastika in a lot of states that might not even go and count as a hate crime, even if it's drawn onto somebody's lawn. If it ends up being on the public side of a sidewalk, it might not be counted as a hate crime for official stats.

T Tyler Howell 05:31

WTIP reached out to Cook County Sheriff Pat Eliasen to ask about the laws related to imposition of controversial symbols or images. He explained that "Minnesota doesn't have a hate crime specific statue, but there are certain crimes, typically assault, that are enhanced if committed with bias against someone because of perceived class, color, race, sexual orientation, etc." He added that "the act of placing an offensive object in someone's yard be investigated, and the matter would be turned over to the county attorney for review and charges, depending on the specific situation, a trespass charge could also be investigated if someone placed an object on private property."

S Staci Drouillard 06:19

So, here in Cook County, displaying a flag or image associated with hateful ideology on your own property and even in public is not against the law. Some might argue that hateful speech is protected by the First Amendment right to free speech, even if it causes harm to others, and that asking for the removal of negative images or symbols is in effect erasing History. Professor Treuer had this to say about the public debate around what's called "cancel culture."

P Prof. Anton Treuer 06:57

There's a broad public debate about cancel culture. We do have competing goods that bump up against one another. So, one is freedom of speech. We should all have freedom of speech. And if we muzzle anyone's freedom of speech, even if their speech is horrible, then it means

anybody's freedom of speech can likewise be similarly muzzled. So protecting freedom of speech is important. It's a public good. And then there's another public good, which is inclusive, respectful, equitable places and practices and images. And so in navigating this, even though there may be some gray areas and it's a delicate walk, we are going to have to walk this, to protect freedom of speech, on the one hand, and provide for that open, inclusive, equitable learning environment, business environmentand social space, especially when we're looking at places, people and actions that are serving the public.

T Tyler Howell 08:14

And what if a symbol that is perceived to be harmful or hateful is, for example, displayed by a teacher at a public school without historical context or discussion.

P Prof. Anton Treuer 08:23

For example, a public school is funded with per pupil funding and taxpayer dollars. So if there is a private school that does not take taxpayer dollars or per pupil funding, then there's a little different standard about what they do. In fact, this is why some religious schools choose to be private schools, because they want to be able to do religious things and not have to be beholden to everyone's religion. But in those public spaces, it's a fair question to ask which images, types of art and so forth deserve primacy of place, and if we pick images or music, whatever that is divisive or is harmful to someone or highly objectionable to people in our public, then that exercise of free speech becomes something that does a public harm to people in our community. I would say, if there are artworks or songs or images or symbols that would do public harm, then people who love those images, artworks and symbols, should exhibit themin their private space, rather than in public space, and doing so is not an infringement of their free speech to speak whatever they want. It is simplya careful and thoughtful orchestration of that public good, for inclusive, respectful and equitable learning space, political space and public space that is our responsibility to maintain, especially in these very divisive and troubling racial times. For

T Tyler Howell 10:16

For this series, we define racism as race prejudice plus power. When considering the line between free speech and public harm, Professor Treuer adds this context:

P Prof. Anton Treuer 10:28

It's also fair to just understand that America is born out of colonialism, and American culture is still steeped in colonialism, and one of the defining functions of colonialism is taking one language and culture and using it to supplant all others. America sought to supplant tribal languages and cultures with white, Anglo Saxon language, English and culture, and with every other group too, as a result, because colonialism is about erasure. One of the great fears of anyone who is steeped in the culture of colonialism is fear of their own erasure. So today, there are a lotof white folk who are afraid of white erasure, and this fear has always, always dominated the thinking of whoever's in power.

11:35

For WTIP. This is Tyler Howell.

S Staci Drouillard 11:38

And I'm Staci Drouillard. Miigwech--thank you for listening.

S Speaker 1 11:43

"It Happens Here" is funded by the Minnesota Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund.

S Staci Drouillard 11:47

You.