

# Cultural Appropriation and the Plains' Indian Headdress

By Marisa Wood

## *Introduction*

“Cultural appropriation” can be defined as the borrowing from someone else’s culture without their permission and without acknowledgement to the victim culture’s past. Recently there has been a conversation taking place between Native American communities and non-Indian communities over cases of cultural appropriation, specifically the misuse of the Plains’ Indian headdress, which Natives compare to the Medal of Honor. The “*hipster subculture*”, which can be defined as a generally pro-consumerist, anti-capitalist group of middle-to-upper class non-Indian Americans, has selectively appropriated aspects of many minority cultures; this action has heavily trended toward aspects of Native American culture. As a result, Native Americans have reacted with outrage as they perceive the offenses to be products of insensitivity, ignorance and prejudice.

Although there are many justifications behind the actions of the hipster subculture, ultimately, studies suggest that the reasons for appropriation have been subconscious and unknown even to the subculture itself. Because they do not have a consistent body of rites and cultural traditions, middle-to-upper class non-Indian Americans who belong to the *hipster subculture* selectively appropriate aspects of minority culture such as the Plains’ Indian headdresses, not to offend its significance, but in order to subconsciously make it, and all they believe it stands for, a part of their own culture.

## *Cultural Appropriation and the Plains' Indian Headdress*

According to many accounts, non-Indian Americans belonging to the *hipster subculture* generally appropriate in an effort to appear worldly. Due to a sincere lack of education, these efforts appear offensive and insensitive. Many *hipster subculture* members wear the Plains’ Indian Native American headdress in a highly sexualized manner, which perpetuates stereotypes of Native women and strips the headdress of its spiritual significance.

Professors and authors of *Introduction to Cultural Appropriation: A Framework for Analysis*, Bruce H. Ziff and Pratima V. Rao define cultural appropriation as a “taking from a culture that is not one’s own, intellectual property, cultural expressions and artifacts, history and ways of knowledge” (14). In most cases, cultural appropriation borrows from a minority culture without acknowledgement of a sensitive past of oppression or other. In addition, Rebecca Tsosie, author of “Reclaiming Native Stories: An Essay on Cultural Appropriation and Cultural Rights” (2002), claims that cultural appropriation can include tangible as well as intangible aspects and items such as symbols, songs, and stories. All of these components are pertinent to the survival of Native Americans as “distinctive cultural and political groups” (Tsosie 301). Although cultural appropriation can include a variety of aspects and items, the headdress has become a particular target for controversy. Susan Scafidi, author of the article “When Native American Appropriation Is Appropriate,” suggests a plausible explanation for this controversy claiming; “There is a difference between fashion inspiration and cultural appropriation; only many people do not understand how to distinguish their actions as one or the other.” Americans have a notable inability to distinguish cultural inspiration from cultural appropriation,

resulting in many public apologies by corporations, celebrities and other institutions.

As previously mentioned, the most prominent object of appropriation is the Plains' Indian headdress made of eagle feathers. According to Phillip Jenkins, author of *Dream Catchers: How Mainstream America Discovered Native Spirituality*, this is the most powerful image and the most popular image when non-Indians "play Indian" (4). Native Americans like to compare this headdress with the United States Medal of Honor in hopes that the comparison will provide perspective that non-Indian Americans can understand. For the most part, the deep spiritual significance of this item is not common knowledge for a non-Indian in the 21st century. Although this fact may lighten the criticisms many non-Indians receive for wearing the Plains' headdress, it does not change the effect this appropriation has on Native Americans of today.

Many Natives have reacted to headdress sightings with outrage against the *hipster subculture* and non-Indians alike. Author of article "Appreciation or Appropriation," Tara MacInnis, includes a direct quote from an email written by Kim Wheeler, an Ojibwa-Mohawk from Winnipeg, to H&M after they introduced headdresses in their Canadian stores. Wheeler claims that the headdresses are extremely significant, worn by chiefs as a symbol of respect and honor, and "they shouldn't be for sale as a cute accessory" (Wheeler). Native American Adrienne K, the founder of the blog forum, *Native Appropriations*, claims that "donning a faux feather headdress offends and stereotypes Native peoples, denies the 'deep spiritual significance' of indigenous garments and makes light of a 'history of genocide and colonialism'" (Adrienne K).

According to Wheeler, the Native American community has been fighting "the whole 'hipster head-dressing' for a while now" (Wheeler). Although the idea of cultural appropriation is not new and Native Americans have been fighting their stereotypes for decades, it has become a trend across the nation and grown in popularity in recent years. Because many minorities have made so many strides in the past fifty years, the evidence against Native Americans challenges those very successes. Abaki Beck, author of "Miss Appropriation: Why Do We Keep Talking About Her?" asserts that Americans still find it funny to dress up like an Indian woman for Halloween and that this undermines the equality and modern society that America promotes (2). Beck concludes that although the United States believes they have "reached an exceptional state of being" in a "post 'racial society,'" cultural appropriation does perpetuate harmful and racist stereotypes (2). The mockery of Native American traditions and rites continues to be condoned nationwide and the effects are real.

### *The Effects of Cultural Appropriation*

The cultural appropriation of the Plains' Indian headdress is a pertinent issue in Native American communities because if this issue can be resolved, it will be the beginning of the end of the stereotypes that confuse Native American identity in the eyes of both the Indian and the non-Indian—in this case, the *hipster subculture*.



*Figure 1. presents a young woman donning a Plain's Indian headdress and represents the misuse of the headdress as a cute accessory (Imgarcade).*

There are four clear arguments for the damage caused by cultural appropriation, outlined by Ziff and Rao. The first argument is that cultural appropriation harms the appropriated community because it interferes with the community's ability to define itself and establish its own identity (Ziff and Rao 8). Native American identity is already a very strained concept and it is difficult to see where best to begin rewriting all the convolution of history. Native Americans have been forcibly assimilated to forget their culture, languages, and self, but as contemporary society today and Native American communities continue to rebuild after all this time, appropriation and stereotypes only further propel this culture into an invisible Otherness. For example, Beck and MacInnis report that Native American outfits and Halloween costumes "draw attention to the hyper-sexualization of First Nations women" (MacInnis). This sexualization is perhaps one of the most popular aspects in the 21st century, as pictures of women lightly clothed in headdresses circulate the Internet constantly. Beck also supports this claim by addressing the Native-inspired bikini and floor length headdress worn by Karlie Kloss on the Victoria Secret catwalk in 2012, as well as the Navajo inspired panties and drinking flasks sold at Urban Outfitters in 2011.



*Figure 2. This picture of Karlie Kloss at the Victoria Secret fashion show serves as an example of the hyper-sexualization of Native American women and the misuse of the headdress (Getty).*

Tsotie also sees the continuation of both the Princess stereotype—Pocahontas—and the Squaw stereotype—one "corrupted by the material artifacts of white culture" and "was willing to prostitute herself to white men" through appropriation (311). Maureen Schwarz, author of *Fighting Colonialism with Hegemonic Culture: Native American Appropriation of Indian Stereotypes*, claims that other stereotypes include the Savage Reactionary, the Drunken Indian, Mother Earth, the One-with-Nature or Ecological Indian, the Spiritual Guide and the Rich Indian (9). These images have convoluted the Native American's own idea of himself or herself for years and further confused the non-Indian's understanding of Native Americans.

The second argument is that cultural appropriation can damage or transform culture practices and harm cultural integrity (Ziff and Rao 8). Author of "Of Kitsch and Kachinas: A Critical Analysis of the 'Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990'" (2010), Hapiuk claims that "the fear is that native arts and crafts traditions will die out" (1021). If this were to continue as extremely as it might, it could result in the disappearance of "a valuable national resource" (1021). Native American arts and crafts are currently a facet of American culture and must be kept up in their authenticity and practice in order to remain a relevant part of American culture.

A third argument is that cultural appropriation wrongly allows cultural outsiders to materially benefit themselves from, and at the expense of, the injured group (Ziff and Rao 8). In support of this argument, Hapiuk claims that "as much as \$160,000,000 has been unfairly stolen from the pockets of Indians" due to the sale of "fake goods passed off as genuine" Native American arts and crafts (1017). Headdresses have been featured in H&M and Navajo print clothing in Urban Outfitters, evidence that Native American cultural items are not being sold by Native Americans themselves. This is also evidence that these items have become devalued commodities in the 21st century United States.

The fourth and final argument asserts that there are two separate harms caused by an

inability to discern “alternative conceptions of what should be treated as property or ownership in cultural goods” (Ziff and Rao 8, 9). First of all Native Americans’ conceptions of sovereignty and rights are subsumed within the American legal structure, and second of all, the American institutions transform Native cultures into property, promoting the right of private entrepreneurs to control and sell Native culture (Ziff and Rao 8, 9). Hapiuk asserts that “Native Americans should be able to curtail appropriation of their culture and to maintain their own culture’s survival” (1021). Although they’ve been trained in the past to assimilate, contemporary America no longer holds them to that American standard.

Most importantly, cultural appropriation ignores the histories of Native discrimination and cultural examination efforts by the larger non-Native society (Beck 2). According to the author of *American Indians: Stereotypes & Realities*, Devon Mihesuah, these histories include events such as the Indian Crania Study in the early-to-mid 1800s—a study that required the U.S. Army to send hundreds of Cheyenne Indians’ heads they had decapitated to the Smithsonian Institution (43)—and the forced assimilation of Native Americans into the Carlisle Indian Industrial School—a school established to serve as an example of how military discipline, harsh punishment, and rigorous studies could ‘kill the Indian and save the man’ (45). These sensitive histories are also not common knowledge of the average non-Indian American in the United States. It makes it easier for the *hipster subculture* to participate in cultural appropriation. However, what this subculture doesn’t understand about the future is that this continuation dismisses the existence of Native Americans, categorizing them further into some Otherness (Beck 2). It not only dismisses Native communities culturally, but politically as well.



**Figure 3.** Pharrell Williams on the cover of *Elle Magazine* emphasizes Scafidi’s evidence of cultural appropriation in the fashion industry (*Elle UK*).

According to Scafidi, artist Pharrell Williams’ error on the 2014 cover of *Elle Magazine* received criticism because he wore a Plains’ Indian headdress without either regard for its cultural significance or an attempt to turn some of its elements into something new. Williams made an honest mistake and did apologize to the Native American community for his ignorance. Although cultural appropriation has negative effects, it does not mean that all Native American culture is off-limits. By definition, cultural appropriation occurs when there is no acknowledgement toward the culture and no regard for taboo items. Author of “Henna and Hip Hop: The Politics of Cultural Production and the Work of Cultural Studies,” Sunaina Maira, adds that in order to reproduce trends from another culture, one must work with that culture (354). If not, one runs the risk of denying the harsh history that many minorities have endured, a history of which one may not even be aware.

### *Hipster Identity*

The *hipster subculture* appropriates cultures while simultaneously taking advantage of the many benefits of membership in the middle-to-upper class society. This demographic uses and consumes Native American imagery because they wish to distance themselves from their non-Indian American culture and heritage due to negative actions by their ancestors, including colonialism and white imperialism.

For the sake of argument, “*hipster subculture*” will be defined by several sources. In her “Postmodern Authenticity and the Hipster Identity” (2013), Kelsey Henke defines the term

“hipster” as a contemporary subculture of a fashion-forward, creative group of individuals belonging to the middle or upper class who share a “personal aesthetic of minority culture symbols and appropriated countercultural fashions. Although this group presents themselves excluded, uninterested and self-exiled, the hipsters never cut themselves off from their culturally and economically dominant status in society”. According to Jenkins, as American values change, the country’s citizens “look to Indians to represent ideals that the mainstream Euro-American society is losing” (2). In this paper, “the country’s citizens” will only include those belonging to the *hipster subculture*.

This subculture is notable for their consumption of minority cultures, best explained in Henke’s term: “an anti-capitalist pro-consumerist group” that consumes tangible and intangible cultural products in order to self-express. But while they appropriate minority cultures, they simultaneously take advantage of the many benefits of the middle-to-upper class society to which they naturally belong. They simultaneously reject and find comfort in their majority status. Murphy claims that the popularity of Pocahontas chic-fashion inspired by traditional Native American dress-and the appropriation of indigenous and other non-white cultures can be pinpointed to individuals associated with the contemporary *hipster subculture*. In accordance Scafidi argues, “Those of us blessed with choice naturally go in search of cultural capital and varied experience,” characterizing the vain attempt of hipsters to appear cultured. The *hipster subculture* by definition has the financial advantages to consume, and because they are fortunate to have a choice in matters of consumption, they express themselves in a cultured and worldly manner. Native American culture is a victim of this consumption among many other minority cultures and the Plains’ Indian headdress just one object of curiosity for the *hipster subculture*.

Henke and Murphy both claim that lately the *hipster subculture* has “heavily trended towards appropriations of Native American culture” (Murphy 2). However, contrary to initial reactions from Native Americans, Henke suggests that hipsters do have a genuine appreciation for the cultural capital it produces. They consume tangible and intangible cultural products such as media, art, and nostalgia. Consumerism is their primary means of self-expression, not solely a tool for a rebellious end, and their purchases consist of retooled, old countercultural symbols. Most hipsters are more concerned with consuming cool rather than creating it. Henke and other cultural commentators see a possible correlation between the adoption of minority symbols and the rebellion against one’s own class. They want to create as much distance as they can between themselves and an ordinary “Christian-inspired existence,” “mediocre,” “a slow suicide” (11). In conclusion, the efforts of hipsters to appropriate do show to be genuine signs of appreciation and respect, although these efforts do not appear that way to Native Americans, evident by reactions such as those by Kim Wheeler and Adrienne K. Murphy suggests a different perspective, that perhaps this demographic appropriates Native American imagery “in an attempt to manifest revolutionary identities and assuage white imperialist guilt” (2). This idea suggests that cultural appropriation is affected more by the identity crisis hipsters are facing and less by the identity crisis that Native Americans are facing.

While Kulis, Brown, Wagaman, and Tso demonstrate no outside strain on the identity of Native American youth (292), Murphy claims that the *hipster subculture* that is appropriating Native American culture does not identify with their heritage. The hipster wishes to “distance herself from the whiteness of the Bush era, globalization and corporate personhood and return to a pre-colonized America that she perceives as genuine, peaceful and pure” (Murphy 3). In the recent 2008 recession the American dream was shattered, “leaving once potentially prosperous youth with conflicted feelings of defiance and remorse” (Murphy 4).

According to Mark Greif, turning to minority suffering as a source of identification

can free white Americans from their whiteness, with its stain of Eisenhower, the bomb, and the corporation (9). Murphy suggests that Native American culture represents a pre-colonized America—genuine, peaceful, and pure—and therefore, the *hipster subculture* wishes to embody these characteristics, while still maintaining the economic and social mobility granted by their privileged majority backgrounds (5). Murphy claims that, not only do these hipsters make attempts to identify themselves, but also that they wish to breathe in new life and new modes of self-expression because ethnicity becomes a spice or seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture (6). Murphy observes one universal defense for this trend in question given by the demographic in question: “but I just think it’s cool” (9). Murphy claims that nothing is ever just cool; there is always an unconscious structure to it all, like the unspoken connotation of the feather headdress, the chieftain, and the dream catcher, that represent exotic freedom and purity.



**Figure 5.** Two young men stand in notable spiritual poses in face paint and headdresses to represent the general association between spirituality and Native American culture (*Apihtawikosisa*).

Author of “How to Live Without Irony,” Christy Wampole suggests that hipster’s adopt irony because (1) our society has exhausted its ability to produce new culture and (2) the influences of the Internet, which allow greater media consumption and a reprioritization of the importance of virtual life over reality. American society lacks a strong traditional cultural community, compared to societies worldwide. Because the nation is a mixed salad bowl of different cultures, over the years, citizens have been exposed to very different cultural norms. It has created a raised awareness, and perhaps, due to this, Henke suggests the *hipster subculture* is “[celebrating] low culture they’ve been instructed to avoid” (13). The historical stain of whiteness has pushed American citizens to find comfort in other cultures for their rigid morality or at least rigid list of practices.

Henke also claims that through a collective reworking of symbols subcultures engage in a conscious act against social injustices. The forced assimilation and removal of Native Americans is a viable social injustice against which these hipsters are fighting. With this new perspective behind the motives and minds of the *hipster subculture*, the original criticism they received can be reconsidered and directed elsewhere.

### *Contributing Factors*

The most influential factors contributing to the *hipster subculture*’s appropriation of the Native American headdress would be their (1) lack of awareness of the significance of the Plains’ Indian headdress, (2) corporations’ marketing of culturally appropriated merchandise, (3) Native Americans’ own stereotypical self-representation, and (4) the false notion that the Native Americans are no longer a relevant community.

Universally the preponderance of evidence indicates that education would be the most successful solution for cultural appropriation of Native American culture. Annette Jaimes claims that a lot of racism that Native Americans face in American today remains unexposed to the public—there is a gap in non-Indians’ knowledge of Native Americans (40). Similarly, Beck asserts that these offensive actions occur because the vast majority of Americans do not know much about Native American culture and are not educated enough to understand the significance of the traditions that they appropriate (2). Sanitized versions of Native American

history make it impossible for upper to middle class non-Indians to access a full understanding of accurate U.S. history. It disables them from making their own intelligent decisions, especially when it comes to expressing themselves. Murphy points out those wearers of the Plains' Indian headdress often believe that they are honoring Native culture as opposed to perpetuating racism. This supports the notion of an education gap— an immense lack of knowledge on the subject of Native American culture in non-Indians in the United States (7). According to Jenkins, most of the people wearing headdresses “think of it as a homage to native peoples and some misguided attempt at respect” (1). They're not doing it maliciously but they are coming at it in the wrong way (Jenkins 1). If the *hipster subculture* can make it a priority to educate themselves on the actions in which they are participating, it could be enough to stop them from participating at all. For now, it is their responsibility to educate themselves.

It does not help the diluted understanding of Native Americans that corporations and institutions are also partaking in the appropriation of Native American culture. According to Beck, those who do view non-Native girls on blogs wearing headdresses on blogs like “this-is-not-racist-tumblr.com” need to know that the true villain is the evil CEO, the racist designer, and bigoted corporate America. The fashion industry is continuously on watch especially after Victoria's Secret, H&M, Urban Outfitters, and Elle Magazine, among others, faced the fire that they did due to their thin distinctions between inspiration and appropriation. It is not only the corporations at fault.

Author of “Becoming the White Man's Indian: An Examination of Native American Tribal Web Sites,” Rhonda S. Fair argues that some Native Americans capitalize on the commodification of their culture as well (1). Member-focused Internet sites run by Native Americans use historical photographs but also provide context and emphasize contemporary Native American tribal events. Native-run sites catered to non-Indians generally play upon “the phantom image of *The Indian*” (Fair 5). In order to draw in consumers, these Native Americans will represent themselves on their websites in the very way that non-Indians expect—the false expectations made up of the longstanding stereotypes. According to Fair, when a website is directed toward tribal members, a chief or council member is likely to appear in a suit and tie or dress, while a web site directed toward outsiders shows the chief wearing traditional or “authentic” clothing (206). These sites will be prepared with black-and-white photographs, people donning headdresses and traditional dress, and people participating in actions such as carving. Fair asserts that Native Americans merely appropriate the White Man's Indian for economic gain and appropriation seems too superficial—tribes are doing more than just appropriating; they seem to be identifying with these images in daily life (208). It is as much the responsibility of the Native Americans as it is the responsibility of the non-Indians to rework these stereotypes. The many Native Americans that have capitalized on the commodification of their own culture discredit other Native's arguments against misappropriation and continuation of stereotypes. In order to create a widespread universal understanding and clear confusion for non-Indians, all Native Americans have to agree that they will not contribute to the problem.

Beck claims that the non-Indians engaging in and supporting cultural appropriation believe that they can comment on it—that one doesn't have to know who Tecumseh was to



**Figure 5.** *Sioux Indians photograph demonstrates an example of images that promote the phantom image of Native Americans (Brenchley).*

know what a headdress is and that everyone has the right to defend what they wear and what they consider beautiful (2). The United States' main ideals do support a person's right to express oneself as he or she desires. Tsosie defends the hipster subculture in this respect, claiming that non-Indians may find it difficult to understand why Indian people would seek to control intangible aspects of their culture or why Indian people would protest the appropriation (301). Many non-Indian responses demonstrate a disregard for Native reactions to appropriation, believing them to be oversensitive. Author of "American Indian Intellectualism and the New Indian Story," Elizabeth Cook-Lynn asserts that nobody really cares what Indians think about any particular current national or global issue because the place of Indians is in a mythical past, painted in cartoons like Pocahontas, John Wayne westerns, or the plethora of western and romance novels that capitalize on stereotypes about Indians as either noble or bloodthirsty savages (57). According to Murphy's source, filmmaker Jim Jarmusch, "Native Americans 'are now [considered] mythological; they don't even really exist – they're like dinosaurs'" (9). Beck claims that most non-Indians are unaware that Native Americans are still part of white culture and society (2). According to Mihesuah that "there are approximately 2.1 million Indians belonging to 511 culturally distinct federally recognized tribes or an additional 200 or so unrecognized tribes" in America alone today (23). In addition, Beck claims that schools we only teach about Native Americans "in relation to war or that illusionary phrase 'the West'" (2). Generalized terms and stereotypes allow Americans to distance themselves from these issues and detach themselves from the material conditions of living Americans (Beck 2). Beck argues that this knowledge gap contributes to the idea that Natives are usually thought about in the past tense (2). MacInnis claims that the distinction between appreciation and appropriation is, ultimately, the responsibility of the consumer. Cultural appropriation will only stop when the consumers understand what it is they are doing and why it upsets Native Americans the way that it does.



*Figure 6. The image shows members of Native American tribes performing a tribal chant at a Pow Wow in 2009 and demonstrates the relevancy and closeness of their culture (Moeller).*

According to Tsosie, the United States is the ultimate cosmopolitan liberal union so Americans find it difficult to understand why control of Native culture should "belong" to Native people. Under liberal tradition, if non-Indians want to dress up like Indians then they should have the freedom to do so (Tsosie 310). Although the United States generally prides itself on being post-racial and accepting of all people, the United States also prides itself on the freedoms of its citizens. These two ideals do not always work together perfectly, supported by the general fact that racism is not extinguished. Freedom of expression allows cultural appropriation amongst other things, so it is not a matter of the government to deal with this issue. It is between these two communities—the Native Americans and the *hipster subculture*—to work things out together and come to an understanding.

### *Conclusion*

Modern Native American communities have expressed emotionally charged reactions, both passionate and angry, about the cultural appropriation of the Plains' Indian headdress for a variety of valid reasons outlined in this research paper. The passion and anger of the Native American population is unfairly aimed at the *hipster subculture*. It is not necessarily the fault of hipsters that they lack a full and comprehensive understanding of Native American history

and Native American culture. The headdress is a symbolic image for Native culture, but it is more than the headdress for the Native community—this issue represents the disregard of Native American histories and of their relevancy in the 21st century; it represents the faults in the educational systems that are meant to provide young citizens with a well-rounded and unbiased perspective of history. Hipsters appropriate the headdress due to a convoluted understanding of Native American's past, present, and future. These ideals are embedded in the minds of Americans, therefore there is a great feat before the United States—the rewriting of Native American stereotypes and the rewriting of their stories in textbooks. Native Americans were the first to civilize the land of the United States. Today, they are barely recognized as a relevant and modern ethnicity, their traditions misunderstood by the majority of the nation. If this disregard continues, it will create a further divide between non-Indians and Indians further pushing them into some Otherness, disregarding them as a culture/ethnicity. Although Europeans made a systematic attempt to extinguish Native American culture, there is now a chance to rebuild and fill in the holes between what remains of this culture. The findings of this research do not apply solely to the members of the minority culture, but to members of all cultures. It is an imperative United States principle to protect the equality and freedoms of all its citizens, to welcome all cultures with open arms. In order to abide by this principle, the Native American culture will be restored, respected, and honored.

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