

Halloween in the united states and racist and culturally oppressive customs

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Halloween has become one of the favorite holidays of the United States. A chance to dress up, gather enormous amounts of candy and celebrate with your friends, sociologists have taken interest in the holiday and the motivations and purposes of costuming and celebration on this particular day. While the holiday itself originally popularizes costumes of witches, ghosts and black cats, capturing the popularized characteristics of spookiness of the day provided by Hallmark, often many individuals chose to employ costumes to emulate trends or figures in popular culture. Picca, Dirks and Mueller explore the holiday and the mass tendency of Americans to dress up in racially and ethnically offensive costumes in “ Unmasking Racism: Halloween Costuming and Engagement of the Racial Other.” Their findings show that, unlike many tradition “ ritual of rebellion” holidays such as Mardi Gras or New Year’s Eve, where a oppressed groups temporarily assumes a position of power, Halloween is a “ ritual of rebellion” holiday where white people may engage in racially offensive or questionable costumes and behaviors without the judgement of the “ restrictive social context of the post-Civil Rights era” that further reinforces white supremacy (Mueller, Dirks and Picca 315). This has been assumed into structural and institutional levels of racism in the marketing, packaging and design of costumes sold.

When considering the racial other and which groups are exploited in the costume market and during the day itself, Native Americans bear the brunt extreme racial stereotypes. Already a fringe group with little societal concern for cultural respect, during Halloween, these offenses are escalate in quality and quantity. Americans casually don what they crudely consider authentic

Native American garb and act out what they perceive to be rituals of tribes. To make it worse, it is unlikely that an individual will dress up as a member of a specific tribe, instead opting to homogenize the entire race and negate their many differences in terms of dress, ritual, religion etc. Before discussing the specifics of the costumes themselves, it is important to recognize the impact that this casual, but flagrant, disrespect for Native American culture has on Native American people. In the documentary, *In Whose Honor*, a prominent Native American activist, Charlene Teters, accounts the self-loathing, sadness and embarrassment that her children experienced when they saw the University of Illinois Chief Illini mascot. Tearfully, she attests to how her children felt ashamed of their culture and the excitement that the rest of the non-Native American audience was able to express towards this falsified display of ritual (Rosenstein 1997).

Costumes that are supposedly Native American are very commonly produced and worn on Halloween. Indian Princesses, Pocahontas and tribe leaders are often crudely culturally appropriated and sexualized by industries and individuals alike. Stereotypical headdresses, feathers, braids, face and body painting, and (faux) animal skins are utilized by costumers. Some prefer to exploit solely the cultural aspects of Native American tribes, while others also divulge into unsavory representations of sexuality by portraying themselves as scantily clad “Pocahontas” or other representations of Native American women. These costumes permeate, even gaining status of popularity, the marketplace and costume parties without question.

Distasteful stereotypes are able to be played out “because both masquerader and his or her audience identify the humor as the principal

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feature of the costume, they are able to circumvent any judicious assessment of the negative images of the racial other being shared” (Mueller, Dirks and Picca 318). By blaming any criticism of a costume on an individual being too sensitive, the perpetrator of such offense is able to rest in their privilege and deem others as too serious or incapable of understanding the joke. This only further marginalizes and disrespects Native Americans

Cultural appropriation and problematic dress extends beyond that of costuming and permeates into marketing tactics, still relying on ill-informed, unflattering stereotypes. Items from tobacco to cars to butter will utilize the image of Native Americans as noble savages to sell their product (Merkin 2001). Utilizing the imagery of a tamed nature expert as a means to sell a product further homogenizes the many distinct cultures across Native American tribes, but also leaves no area of society untouched from this ugly stereotyping and exploitation. All throughout society, we depend on uninformed images to sell products with a complete disregard for the emotions of the people we so inaccurately represent.

The emotional trauma and abuse that one incurs from these images is detrimental to one’s psychological health. The impact of utilizing these images extends far past Halloween and the ritual of rebellion posed by Mueller, Dirks and Picca and further cripples the Native Americans ability to fight for less culturally abusive representation of themselves. It is not uncommon for people to decide to dress up as stereotyped caricature of Native Americans, and unlike the backlash that may come if one did the

same representing black or Latina culture, it will likely go uncriticized and uncorrected. The amount of costumes that one can find that claim to be representative of Native Americans clearly attests to this. It has yet to enter the sphere of being so inappropriate or culturally offensive that people try to employ some type of political correctness around its images.