

Native americans
cultural appreciation
media essay



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Culture is a system of beliefs, values, traditions, and behaviors that are passed through generation to generation from a particular group of individuals. The culture of a group of people is strongly treasured, whereas ignorance is not. Christopher Columbus first discovered America in 1492 and called upon the first people he laid eyes on as “Indians”, thinking he was in India. These so called “Indians” make up the history of America today, however as much as they have been through with the coming of Europeans and colonization, one would think their culture would be valued and appreciated. This is not the case. Two elements of Native American culture in today’s society that have been abused and misinterpreted are appreciation and appropriation. Cultural appreciation deals with the understanding and acceptance of an ethnic group’s differences and history, whereas cultural appropriation is the adoption of a culture’s traditions, symbols, or other artifact by another culture. Media and pop culture today consists of a mixture of diversity, because America is known as the melting pot, but the problem with today’s society is that they do not understand the history and culture of Native Americans. It is not wrong to incorporate Native American culture in movies or fashion, however when the traditions, beliefs, and history are portrayed incorrectly with many misconceptions, then issues will arise. There should be a large line between cultural appreciation and appropriation in mainstream media and pop culture.

Ever since the beginning of Hollywood cinema, the culture of Native Americans has been portrayed stereotypically as two types of people: independent and honorable or as savages. The lack of understanding of Indian identity and the perspective of their history has been overlooked by

Hollywood for many decades. Of course, many Native Americans feel underrepresented as they see themselves depicted as inferior to others in western films. Media has either created unflattering images of the Native American culture and history or has given up their hopes of making a living in the area of acting (Webb, 2009).

The Native News Network is a website created by a group of Native Americans whose mission it is to provide factual news regarding their culture. The focus group discuss the effect that media has on Native American culture and the label that has been created from the aftermath of western films. They say that mainstream media does not “ capture the true essence of who American Indians are in contemporary times” (Rickert, 2011). Tribal Chairman Matt Wesaw, one of the participants in the focus group says, “ For too many years, we have let other people talk about who we are, what we need and what we want. That’s why we are still a mystery. Now is the time for us to tell our story...without us telling, it will never be told properly” (Rickert, 2011).

Native Americans are a group of people just like everybody else, therefore they should be treated fairly and should be portrayed the way they really are. The problem with Hollywood and Native Americans is not that they are not being put into films without their history being incorporated, it is the fact that Native Americans feel their culture is being incorrectly interpreted and displayed along with the fact that many Native American films contain non-Natives playing the role of Natives as opposed to Natives playing the role of Natives. For example, in *Stolen Women Captured Hearts* (1997), there is a lack of Natives on screen. During the time of the making, many pro-Native
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American groups protested against the use of non-Natives, particularly Caucasians, playing Native Americans, such as a Cheyenne being portrayed by actor Trevor Howard (Webb, 2009). This makes it seem that Hollywood has no faith in the talent of Native Americans. Native Americans are usually seen as savages, wearing barely any clothes and getting shot by Caucasian heroes during warfare. Native Americans are seen as sensitive people in *Heart of an Indian* (1912), but as blood thirsty savages in *The Battle of Elderbrush Gulch* (1914). Native American women are princesses or squaws, which is an offensive term towards Native American women. The males are usually Caucasian, dressed as Native Americans with makeup and braided hair wigs, whereas the women, being Caucasian as well, are usually Indian princesses (Padgett). Some Native Americans have worked on set as extras or consultants, but have been paid less than the Caucasian males doing the same job, such as the Navajos on the set of *The Searchers* (1956). Along with less pay, the Navajo people were not allowed to leave the reservation unless granted permission from the government (Padgett).

Native Americans have not always been treated and depicted inferiorly. In the movie *Little Big Man* (1970) with Dustin Hoffman, Native Americans are portrayed more authentically in the story line. In this movie, emotions fill the screen with laughter and tears as opposed to the stereotypical savages and unemotional beings. It shows Native Americans as real humans. There is a balance in this movie with some Natives being good and others being bad (Padgett). *The Lone Ranger* (1949-1957), a television series starring Native American Jay Silverheels as Tonto, has had an incredible impact on Native American characterizations. " Tonto is the one who started it all. He was the

first really mainstream pop culture Indian figure, the monosyllabic stoic Indian stereotype”, says Native writer Sherman Alexie. Films, comic books and even toys have been created as a result of Tonto, having fused the West with American culture (Hoffman, 5).

Although there have been films in past decades to have acknowledged Indian identity, this is not the case for movies in the 21st century. X-men Origins: Wolverine (2009) contains the popular character Silver Fox. Silver Fox is supposed to be a Native Canadian Black Foot, according to the original comics, however in the movie, the character is played by Lynn Collins, a Caucasian actress. Along with the choice for a non-Native as Silver Fox, the actual name of the character is changed to Kayla Silverfox to make it sound more American. (Webb, 2009). The fact that Hollywood changed the name of the original character to make it mainstream is ignorant. It is no wonder why Native Americans feel they are being oppressed still today.

The month of November is a time to celebrate Native American history and culture, however other headlines involving inappropriate appropriation overpowers the point of Native American Heritage month. Earlier in November of 2012, singer Gwen Stefani came under the spotlight after her music group, No Doubt, came out with a Wild West-theme music video called “ Looking Hot”. It featured Gwen Stefani on horseback, a feather surrounding her head and blond braids, fire dances and teepees. According to Gwen Stefani, this music video was “ never to offend, hurt or trivialize Native American people, their culture or their history.” Native Americans felt that this video was created only for the band to make a profit, and that there is no

understanding of the Native American culture in this video (Rogers, 2012).
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Native American women have been highly sexualized throughout pop culture and history. This is not a good thing giving that 1 in 3 Native women will be raped in their lifetime and that 70% of sexual violence against Native women is committed by non-Natives (K., 2012). Take the annual Victoria's Secret Fashion Show for instance. Supermodel Karli Kloss walks down the runway in a feather headdress that is floor-length long with a tiny leopard print bikini and turquoise jewelry. When the show aired in December, the model had to be edited out of the hour long show. The outfit worn by the model is misleading and inappropriate, because Native American women did not wear bikinis as traditional garments. It gives off the impression that is this is what their culture is like, that all women barely wear clothing (K., 2012).

Halloween is also a time of year where people enjoy dressing up as Native Americans. There is no problem with dressing up as an Indian, but the fact that some outfits are skimpy and inappropriate is disrespectful. Also, most of the women and men who dress up as Indians have no knowledge about the outfits they are wearing, the headdresses they have on their heads or the symbolism of the paint on their faces. According to certain Indians, as long as one is aware of the culture and history of the ethnic group they are pretending to be, then it is alright (K., 2012).

Retail stores, such as Urban Outfitters, are under fire with the manufacturing of hipster clothing, using the Navajo name and their motifs in the apparel without permission. Yes, permission is required according to the Indian Arts and Crafts Act. This acts states it is illegal to misrepresent Native American tribal names on any products that have not been manufactured by the

Native Americans themselves, because this falsely suggests that these items
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are authentic (United States Cong. Bill). According to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Native Americans lose up to half a billion dollars due to these incidents of fabrication and counterfeiting. Not only do the Navajo lose money from these products, they also lose a sense of their culture, because the American culture is creating this stereotypical representation of the Navajo (Siek, 2012). Sasha Houston Brown, a member of the Santee Sioux Nation of Nebraska says, " Despite what dominant society and mainstream media say, Native culture is a vibrant and living culture. We are not a relic of the past, a theme or a trend, we are not a style or costume, we are not mascots or noble savages." Brown also explains that collaboration is essential in keeping the values and dignity of Native Americans through pop culture. " Collaborations can work as long as the dynamics at hand are empowering Native artists and designers so they are actually able to participate in an equitable manner," says Brown (Grinberg, 2012).

Collaborations allows Native Americans to work with non-Natives in order to achieve a sense of understanding of their culture while at the same time incorporating their culture in products as a way to get rid of the modern stereotypical perceptions created from media and pop culture.

A line should be drawn between cultural appreciation and appropriation in mainstream media and pop culture to the point where there is a true understanding of Native American culture: the history, beliefs, values, traditions and behaviors. Ever since colonization of Europeans, Native Americans have been oppressed and treated inferiorly. Since the beginning of Hollywood cinema, many stereotypes have been exposed to the public, making it difficult for Native Americans to be appreciated by the people who

take advantage of their symbols and traditions without respect for their history. By incorporating Native Americans in movies based on their culture would be appropriate and would allow them to show how they really are, as opposed to non-Natives pretending to be them. When it comes to fashion, many productions have come under fire, such as Victoria's Secret and Urban Outfitters for either promoting Native American women as highly sexualized or gaining profit by fabricating the authenticity of apparel and such products. In order to be justified, collaboration is vital between Native Americans and non-Natives. As long as there is a learning aspect while making products as well as an understanding and respect towards Native American culture from the public, then there should be no controversy or lines drawn. Native Americans have a long history of oppression, betrayal, and suffering, yet they still believe in their culture after hundreds of years of pain, therefore they should be appreciated and respected, especially since we are technically on their territory.