

A NATIVE VOICE

Appropriate or Appropriation?

How to Appreciate and Not Imitate

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Cultural appropriation can be damaging, and people are fighting against it.

Male Grass Dancers - Indian Community School Pow-Wow 1995. Photo provided by Sandra Smith.

As a child I basked in the glory of Walt Disney's creations. When "Pocahontas" was released in 1995, I remember being excited about the thought that Native Americans finally had representation on the big screen.

Knowing who Pocahontas was from a historical standpoint and how old she actually was (the real Pocahontas was only 10 years old, according to ancient-origins.net), took something away when I watched the movie.

It took away from the mystique of talking raccoons and songs referencing being one with nature, as she "changes with all the colors of the wind."

The only thing that brought value to the film for me was the implementation of the "Powhatan" language of the Powhatan tribe of Native Americans. The revival of this extinct language was probably one of the few things that I enjoyed.

It still bothers me that Pocahontas was portrayed to be a fully

developed adult woman who fell in love with John Smith. In this image, the true history of Pocahontas was distorted. The Disney version of her hypersexualizes the Native American woman – from her high-cut, one-shoulder dress to her plunging neckline – all which reinforce the "sexy" Native stereotype.

This is cultural appropriation at its finest.

What Is Cultural Appropriation?

Susan Scafidi, author of "Who Owns Culture? Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law," writes that cultural appropriation happens when members of the public take, from a culture that is not their own, "intellectual property, cultural expressions or artifacts, history, and ways of knowledge."

According to Scafidi, this is done with the intent to transform cultural products to suit their tastes, express their creativity or simply make a profit.

Cultural appropriation can be damaging, and people are fighting against it. For example, in 2011, members of Ohio University's student group, Students Teaching About Racism in Society, launched its "We are a culture, not a costume" campaign. Their mission was to raise awareness about the dangers of using racial stereotypes such as Halloween costumes, such as donning a kimono to dress as a geisha or wearing a sombrero to dress as a Mexican.

The campaign shed light on how turning culture into a costume can offend others and be perceived as cultural appropriation.

Cultural Appropriation vs. Appreciation

There are two major factors that I consider when thinking about cultural appropriation versus cultural appreciation: intent and use. There is a difference between honoring a cultural symbol or artifact and using it for personal or institutional gain.

Even though the days of cartoons portraying black face characters and yelling warrior Indians clothed in buckskin are over, there needs to be more sensitivity when using cultural symbols, especially when profitable organizations use them as logos.

For example, there has been a long-simmering debate about whether professional sports teams should use Native American imagery in their names (think of the Cleveland Indians, Washington Redskins, Atlanta Braves and Chicago Blackhawks).

Even when culturally sensitive alternatives are presented, the public is resistant to change. For example, in 2008, graphic Designer Mike Ival, an Ojibwe artist, offered his version of a culturally sensitive Chicago Blackhawks logo.

The design includes the same colors as the original logo, but depicts a hawk instead of an Indian man. His version, a literal symbol that utilizes a hawk's head, went viral and was offered as a suggested replacement of the Chief's head symbol for the Chicago Blackhawks. However, it was never picked up. Instead, the logo was sold to the Maplesoft Hawks, a Canadian youth hockey league.

I still am offended when I hear people referring to meetings as "pow-wows" or sitting cross-legged as "Indian style." Given that

most of these terms were used by culturally insensitive adults, it reiterates to me the relaxed approach people take while talking about Native Americans.

Part of me understands that there are things that are borrowed, used and given cross-culturally in constructive and positive ways, like gift giving.

Gift giving is big within Native American traditions. Gifts that are usually handmade or of your own possession are given to others as a sign of thanks and to honor the receiver.

Adorning the gift that was received would not be a form of cultural appropriation, but appreciation. For example, I hand-crafted and gifted a pair of earrings to a non-Native friend and when she wears them, it is to appreciate the gift, not to impersonate or mock Native Americans or the Native American culture.

The other part of me knows the pain experienced when someone is being insensitive and using things that I, as a Native American, would consider sacred, for purposes other than what is intended.

In 2015, there was a very short-lived Instagram page, "Whitegirlsrockheaddresses." Indian Country Media Network called it the "Most Hated Instagram Page." While the page was up and running, I was able to see the retweets and images of women who claimed the right of wearing headdress in the name of fashion.

It made me livid.

Traditionally, in Native American culture, headdresses are predominantly worn by men. To be given a headdress is the highest honor. They are made with feathers that are considered sacred and are given, not bought, sold or worn for purposes of fashion.

How to Avoid Cultural Appropriation

Fair and accurate representation of Native American culture can be accomplished, but it needs to start with input from those who are being represented.

It is very possible that some of the inaccuracies that created backlash and misrepresentation could have been avoided with the consultation of historians and the Tribal people. Disney's version of Pocahontas' life was so far removed from the truth that it is offensive to some.

Collaboration is essential. With little to no input from those being represented, the likelihood of offending people or possibly misrepresenting them is high.

When in doubt, ask. It is better to ask than assume and be wrong. Remember, imitation and appreciation are not the same things. When your intent is to appreciate, there is no room to imitate.

