Cultural Appropriation of the Plains Native American Headdress in the 21st Century by Middle-to-Upper Class American Non-Indians

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Abstract

My research addresses the cultural appropriation of the Plains’ Native American headdress by middle to upper class American non-Indians belonging to the hipster subculture. The hipster subculture appropriates minority cultures while also receiving the benefits of the majority culture to which they belong. The hipster subculture is influenced by a generally limited knowledge of Native American culture and the trends pressed by corporations. Native Americans also contribute to stereotype continuation in order to make money.

I reviewed six journal articles addressing culture appropriation in fashion, spirituality and stereotypes as well as six journal articles addressing the relationship between identity and appropriation; three journal articles addressing the hipster subculture and their reputation for appropriation, and three addressing the Native American’s place in the market. Because hipsters typically lack pride in their own culture, the subculture selectively appropriates pieces of Native American culture. With these conclusions, the hipster subculture will gain consciousness of their actions and take more caution in their appropriation habits.

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 Native Americans 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 headdress, 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 of 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’ Native American headdress in a highly sexualized manner, which perpetuates stereotypes of Native women and strips the headdress of its spiritual significance.

Harm of Cultural Appropriation

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.

Maureen Schwarz, author of Fighting Colonialism with Hegemonic Culture: Native American Appropriation of Indian Stereotypes, claims that stereotypes include the Savage Barbarians, 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. In support of this argument, author of “Of Kichis and Kachinias: A Critical Analysis of the ‘Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990’ (2010), Hapiuk claims that “as much as $160,000,000,000 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). Hipsters assert 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.

Discussion

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 they’re not a part of the 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 Jessyca Murphy’s source, filmmaker Jim Jarmusch, “Native Americans are now (considered mythological); they don’t even really exist—they’re like dinosaurs” (9). Abaki Beck, author of “Miss Appropriation: Why Do We Keep Talking About Her?” 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).

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 because they are entrenched in the minds of Americans, therefore there is a great fear of 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.

References


