

Native Appropriations

Examining Representations of Indigenous Peoples



But Why Can't I Wear a Hipster Headdress?

<http://nativeappropriations.com/2010/04/but-why-cant-i-wear-a-hipster-headdress.html>

April 27, 2010 by Dr. Adrienne K.

(image from <http://www.facebook.com/iamhowlingwolf>, which is an entire post in itself. geez.)

I've posted a lot about the phenomenon that is the hipster headdress (see [here](#)¹, [here](#)², and [here](#)³), but I've never really broken it down as to why this trend is so annoying and effed up. A lot of this will be review and is repeated elsewhere on the site, but I thought it was high time I pulled things together into a one-stop-anti-headdress shop. Much of this can also apply to any of the "tribal trends" I feature here, and you can also consider this a follow up to my "[Cultural Appropriation Bingo](#)" post⁴. The many sources I drew from are included at the end of this post.

¹ <http://nativeappropriations.blogspot.com/2010/04/hipster-headdress-abounds-at-coachella.html>

² <http://nativeappropriations.blogspot.com/2010/02/strange-case-of-hipster-headdress.html>

³ <http://nativeappropriations.blogspot.com/2010/03/keha-headdress-and-trend-that-wont-go.html>

⁴ <http://nativeappropriations.blogspot.com/2010/04/cultural-appropriation-bingo-proving.html>

So why can't I wear it?

- **Headdresses promote stereotyping of Native cultures.**

The image of a warbonnet and warpaint wearing Indian is one that has been created and perpetuated by Hollywood and only bears minimal resemblance to traditional regalia of Plains tribes. It furthers the stereotype that Native peoples are one monolithic culture, when in fact there are 500+ distinct tribes with their own cultures. It also places Native people in the historic past, as something that cannot exist in modern society. We don't walk around in ceremonial attire everyday, but we still exist and are still Native.

- **Headdresses, feathers, and warbonnets have deep spiritual significance.**

The wearing of feathers and warbonnets in Native communities is not a fashion choice. Eagle feathers are presented as symbols of honor and respect and have to be earned. Some communities give them to children when they become adults through special ceremonies, others present the feathers as a way of commemorating an act or event of deep significance. Warbonnets especially are reserved for respected figures of power. The other issue is that warbonnets are reserved for *men* in Native communities, and nearly all of these pictures show women sporting the headdresses. I can't read it as an act of feminism or subverting the patriarchal society, it's an act of utter disrespect for the origins of the practice. (see my [post on sweatlodges](#)⁵ for more on the misinterpretation of the role of women). This is just as bad as running around in a pope hat and a bikini, or a Sikh turban cause it's "cute".

- **It's just like wearing blackface.**

"Playing Indian" has a long history in the United States, all the way back to those original tea partiers in Boston, and in no way is it better than minstrel shows or dressing up in blackface. You are pretending to be a race that you are not, and are drawing upon stereotypes to do so. Like my first point said, you're collapsing distinct cultures, and in doing so, you're asserting your power over them. Which leads me to the next issue.

- **There is a history of genocide and colonialism involved that continues today.**

By the sheer fact that you live in the United States you are benefiting from the history of genocide and continued colonialism of Native peoples. That land you're standing on? Indian land. Taken illegally so your ancestor who came to the US could buy it and live off it, gaining valuable capital (both monetary and cultural) that passed down through the generations to you. Have I benefited as well, given I was raised in a white, suburban community? yes. absolutely. but by dismissing and minimizing the continued subordination and oppression of Natives in the US by donning your headdress, you are contributing to the culture of power that continues the cycle today.

But I don't mean it in that way, I just think it's cute!

- Well hopefully I've illuminated that there's more at play here than just a "cute" fashion choice. Sorry for taking away your ignorance defense.

⁵ <http://nativeappropriations.blogspot.com/2010/04/sweat-lodges-part-ii-no-you-cant-heres.html>

But I consider it honoring to Native Americans!

- I think that [this cartoon](#)⁶ is a proper answer, but I'll add that having a drunken girl wearing a headdress and a bikini dancing at an outdoor concert does not honor me. I remember reading somewhere that it was also "honoring the fine craftsmanship of Native Americans". Those costume shop chicken feather headdresses aren't honoring Native craftsmanship. And you will be very hard pressed to find a Native artist who is closely tied to their community making headdresses for sale. See the point about their sacredness and significance.

I'm just wearing it because it's "ironic"!

- I'm all for irony. Finger mustaches, PBR, Kanye glasses, old timey facial hair, 80's spandex—fine, funny, a bit over-played, but ironic, I guess. Appropriating someone's culture and cavorting around town in your skinny jeans with a feathered headdress, moccasins, and turquoise jewelry in an attempt to be 'counterculture'? Not ironic. If you're okay with being a walking representative of 500+ years of colonialism and racism, or don't mind perpetuating the stereotypes that we as Native people have been fighting against for just as long, by all means, go for it. But by embracing the current tribal trends you aren't asserting yourself as an individual, you are situating yourself in a culture of power that continues to oppress Native peoples in the US. And really, if everyone is doing it, doesn't that take away from the irony? Am I missing the point on the irony? Maybe. How is this even ironic? I'm starting to confuse myself. But it's still not a defense.

Stop getting so defensive, it's seriously just fashion!

- Did you read anything I just wrote? It's not "just" fashion. There is a lot more at play here. This is a matter of power and who has the right to represent my culture. (I also enjoy asking myself questions that elicit snarky answers.)

What about the bigger issues in Indian Country? Poverty, suicide rates, lack of resources, disease, etc? Aren't those more important than hipster headdresses?

- Yes, absolutely. But, I'll paraphrase Jess Yee in [this](#)⁷ post, and say these are very real issues and challenges in our communities, but when the only images of Natives that Americans see are incorrect, and place Natives in the historic past, it erases our current presence, and makes it impossible for the current issues to exist in the collective American consciousness. Our cultures and lives are something that only exist in movies or in the past, not today. So it's a cycle, and in order to break that cycle, we need to question and interrogate the stereotypes and images that erase our current presence—while we simultaneously tackle the pressing issues in Indian Country. They're closely linked, and at least this is a place to start.

⁶ <http://www.aistm.org/cartoons10.htm>

⁷ <http://bitchmagazine.org/post/keha-and-the-ongoing-cultural-appropriation-and-sexualization-of-native-women>

Well then, Miss Cultural Appropriation Police, what CAN I wear?

- If you choose to wear something Native, buy it from a Native. There are federal laws that protect Native artists and craftspeople who make genuine jewelry, art, etc. (see info [here](#)⁸ about The Indian Arts and Crafts Act). Anything you buy should have a label that says “Indian made” or “Native made”. Talk to the artist. find out where they’re from. Be diligent. Don’t go out in a full “costume”. It’s ok to have on some beaded earrings or a turquoise ring, but don’t march down the street wearing a feather, with loaded on jewelry, and a ribbon shirt. Ask yourself: if you ran into a Native person, would you feel embarrassed or feel the need to justify yourself? As commenter Bree pointed out, it’s ok to own a shirt with kimono sleeves, but you wouldn’t go out wearing full kabuki makeup to a bar. Just take a minute to question your sartorial choices before you go out.

...and an editorial comment: I should also note that I have absolutely nothing against hipsters. In fact, some would argue I have hipster-leaning tendencies. In my former San Francisco life, had been known to have a drink or two in the clouds of smoke outside at Zeitgeist, and enjoyed shopping on Haight street. I enjoy drinking PBR out of the can when I go to the dive bars near my apartment where I throw darts and talk about sticking it to ‘The Man’. I own several fringed hipster scarves, more than one pair of ironic fake ray-ban wayfarers, and two plaid button downs. I’m also not trying to stereotype and say that all hipsters do/wear the above, just like not every hipster thinks it’s cool to wear a headdress. So, I don’t hate hipsters, I hate ignorance and cultural appropriation. There *is* a difference. Just thought I should clear that up.

This manifesto draws heavily from these awesome posts:

A l’allure garçonnière: [The Critical Fashion Lovers \(basic\) guide to Cultural Appropriation](http://alagarconniere.blogspot.com/2010/04/critical-fashion-lovers-basic-guide-to.html)
<http://alagarconniere.blogspot.com/2010/04/critical-fashion-lovers-basic-guide-to.html>

Threadbared: [LINKAGE: The Feather In Your “Native” Cap](http://iheartthreadbared.wordpress.com/2010/04/21/linkage-the-feather-in-your-native-cap/)
<http://iheartthreadbared.wordpress.com/2010/04/21/linkage-the-feather-in-your-native-cap/>

Racialicious: [Some Basic Racist Ideas and Some Rebuttals & Why We Exist](http://www.racialicious.com/2010/04/22/some-basic-racist-ideas-and-some-rebuttals-why-we-exist/)
<http://www.racialicious.com/2010/04/22/some-basic-racist-ideas-and-some-rebuttals-why-we-exist/>

GSU Signal: [Mockery of Native heritage only perpetuates Native issues](http://www.gsusignal.com/perspectives/mockery-of-native-heritage-only-perpetuates-native-issues-1.2231674)
<http://www.gsusignal.com/perspectives/mockery-of-native-heritage-only-perpetuates-native-issues-1.2231674>

BitCh Magazine: [Ke\\$ha and the ongoing cultural appropriation and sexualization of Native women](http://bitchmagazine.org/post/keha-and-the-ongoing-cultural-appropriation-and-sexualization-of-native-women)
<http://bitchmagazine.org/post/keha-and-the-ongoing-cultural-appropriation-and-sexualization-of-native-women>

BitCh Magazine/Racialicious: [On Hipster/Hippies and Native Culture](http://www.racialicious.com/2010/04/22/feminist-intersection-on-hipstershippies-and-native-culture/)
<http://www.racialicious.com/2010/04/22/feminist-intersection-on-hipstershippies-and-native-culture/>

⁸ <http://www.artnatam.com/law.html>