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Miss Appropriation: Why Do We Keep Talking About Her?

by Abaki Beck

“My culture is not a costume” was the slogan of a campaign started by students at Ohio State University. They sought to address the issue of the use of ethnic and racial stereotypes as Halloween costumes. The campaign featured people holding pictures of “themselves”--sexified/stupified/laughing-stock versions of themselves. One picture, for example, featured a Native American man holding a picture of two non-Natives wearing colorful feathers and skimpy brown attire with a sign that says “Me wantem peace, no war.”

The need for this campaign is a powerful statement of our time. Post civil rights movement, post “racism,” post “racial society,” however one wants to phrase it, America believes we have reached an exceptional state of being, where all can succeed and social stratification is based not on skin color but on ability. But have we? While some academics and pessimists alike recognize this “post racial” idea to be false, something must be said so that the broader public recognizes that we are not so post racial that this campaign is needed. We still think it is funny to dress up as stereotypical characters, such as a slutty Indian woman for Halloween (or, “Pocahontas”). We still think it’s beautiful when we see a Victoria’s Secret model traipsing the cat walk in a “Native inspired” bikini and a floor length headdress. This past year Americans have seen the Native trend everywhere. For example, last year, Urban Outfitters came out with a new line of clothing featuring “Navajo hipster panties” and “Navajo drinking flasks.” The Navajo Nation complained and eventually won a lawsuit against the clothing company for falsely using the Navajo name without their permission. This year, Paul Frank Inc.’s fall fashion line was themed “neon Native,” complete with a monkey (the company’s logo) in a headdress. Again, Natives and allies raised a ruckus. Paul Frank apologized, and vowed to hire a Native artist to collaborate with in the future. The most recent and visible transgression, the Victoria’s Secret incident, involved an offensive model’s display meant to represent the month of November. November was the only month in the fashion show represented by a race. Victoria’s Secret also apologized after complaints about their lack of sensitivity to Native sacred icons (the headdress).

These recent examples from within American society show that Americans see nothing wrong with phrases like “trend watch: Native American.” Native American culture, or any culture, marginalized or not, should not be viewed as a “passing trend” or merely a “style of clothing.” This not only dismisses and “other-izes” the existence of real, living Native Americans, but it also ignores the histories of Native discrimination and cultural extermination efforts by the larger non-Native society.

With these recent apologies by various national brands, “Native” issues made their way to the mainstream media. But the ques-

tion remains: how and why is this such a big issue? Why is this the main “Native” issue that non-Natives are willing to talk about? I have a few hypothesis. First, lets face it: the vast majority of Americans know next to nothing about Native history, culture, and contemporary issues. And some of those Americans also believe that Natives no longer exist. This should not come as a surprise: Natives are usually only thought about in the past tense, and in school we only learn about them in relation to war or that illusionary phrase “the West.” This is a danger for many reasons, but chiefly among them (Get it, chiefly? Please excuse my humor) is that when the majority of Americans see images of the Victoria’s Secret model, that may be the closest to Native culture they ever get. A second reason is that, despite this disconnect with Native narratives and histories, most people feel like misappropriation, or, fashion, at the very least, is something they can comment on. You don’t need to know about who Tecumseh was to know what a headdress is. Everyone has the right to defend what they wear and what they consider beautiful. Thirdly, for those who do view non-Native girls on blogs like “this-is-not-racist.tumblr.com” wearing headdresses as misappropriation, there is a definite villain. The evil CEO. The racist designer. Bigoted corporate America.

But when it comes to real Native issues, who is the villain? Who is to blame for the fact that Native American youth commit suicide at a significantly higher rate than non-Natives? Who is to blame for substance abuse, absentee parents, and lack of upward mobility? Who is to blame for language loss, loss of religious knowledge, loss of ethnobotanical knowledge? These are hard issues to talk about, and harder still to avoid victim blaming. Part of the reason these issues are so difficult to discuss is that few people outside of Native American communities are even aware that they are issues. To the extent that most Americans are aware that Native Americans are still part of our culture and society, their perceptions of Natives are colored by stereotypes. I know that Natives are not racially inferior, lazier, or stupider than the average American. But for many, these stereotypes still exist. What, then, is the cause of these problems? “Governmental policies”? “History”? Generalized terms like this allow people to distance themselves from these issues, and to disconnect these issues from the material conditions of living Americans. Perhaps this is why these issues are not so prevalent in the media (unless under the pretext of the “white savior”), but less significant issues such as cultural misappropriation are seen as true “Native issues.” Another question is, why is it acceptable to appropriate Native American culture year round, whereas the practice of appropriation of other cultures only really occurs at Halloween? Examples of such costumes were seen in the Ohio State University campaign. Why is it not unusual for Native Americans to be represented throughout the year, in both costumes and fashion? But

perhaps, we should not be disgusted by the ignorance and racism behind the misappropriation of Native culture. Instead, we should be disgusted that, according to popular media, this is the primary Native issue. We should instead be disgusted that “Miss Appropriation” is the Native issue important and interesting enough to discuss in mainstream media. □

For more information, read:

“Victoria’s Secret Apologizes for Use of Headdress”

The New York Times, by the Associated Press

Nov. 12, 2012

<http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2012/11/12/us/ap-us-victorias-secret-headdress.html?ref=aponline>