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The Commodification of the Native in the 21st Century

By: Sarah Fowler

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the emerging popularity of Native American inspired goods within the context of URBN retail stores. Using American Indian stereotypes and symbols these products speak to the western desire to mimic the perceived ideals of Indians, including spirituality and environmentalism thus allowing Americans to assuage technological anxieties with the consumption of a contrived naturalistic lifestyle. It is argued that the production of such “native” goods has further restricted the self-determination of American Indians and perpetuated intolerance by limiting the scope of modern Native American life to once again fit within the definition of a western world. This cycle is additionally harmful in the recreation of the good and bad Indian narrative, popular in the seventeenth century. The good Indian has become a passive naturalist, whose culture is available for consumption while the bad Indian remains the enemy, he continues to lie and cheat and is exemplified by portrayals of modern American Indian entrepreneurs. As an international retailer, URBN is indicative of a global trend in the western perception and treatment of modern native peoples. It is suggested that the global marketing of a trend detrimental to the agency of Native Americans has become an international issue for all indigenous people and stands to perpetuate prejudices around the world simultaneously hindering progress on issues surrounding indigenous rights.

Keywords: Cultural appropriation, ethnocentrism, playing Indian, stereotype, self-determination

Native Americans have been preserved in American culture as noble savages, beloved for their stereotyped bravery and strength and emblazoned on sports logos, foods, and clothing. The twenty-first century technology age has experienced a resurgence in this cultural appropriation and commodification with the consumption of Native American inspired clothing and accessories. This phenomenon is reflective of a nostalgia for a time before great technology; a time of primitive technology and purity characterized by American stereotypes of Indians. Due to global media and marketing, this trend has spread throughout the western world as promoted by such international

companies such as URBN, supporting stores throughout Europe. Not only does this “tribal” trend reconstitute American ethnocentricity in this period of globalization, it works to internationalize the cultural appropriation and intolerance of all modern native peoples. By looking at the ramifications of this trend as it redefines the concepts of the good and bad Indian in the United States, the potential for other western nations to suffer similar regressions in cultural tolerance is revealed.

The trend of consuming Native American inspired clothing and accessories has experienced a newfound popularity, allowing Americans to once again, “play Indian.” Retail stores throughout the world are supplying the tools for this lifestyle, making it possible to wear “tribal” printed tops and pants, imitation turquoise rings, and Jeffrey Campbell moccasins.¹ This trend can be seen company wide within the URBN brand, which includes Urban Outfitters, Anthropologie, and Free People retail stores. Surveying their current merchandise, each retailer is offering its own response to this American Indian trend. Anthropologie merchandise used subtle markers of the trend including geometric shapes and arrows, perhaps catering to the older and more conservative clientele.² The lifestyle brands of Urban Outfitters and Free People however, were more blatant in their marketing of Native American stereotypes. Urban Outfitters is carrying everything from cardigans with wolves howling at the moon, to skin-tight leggings imprinted with artificial Native American symbols.³ These symbols, including the arrow, cross, diamond, and other geometric shapes are reminiscent of Indigenous cave paintings, and the Navajo patterned rugs. Lastly, Free People has perhaps the most explicit marketing in this trend with their miniature size tepee for cats.⁴ These three retailers selling merchandise created from Native American stereotypes across hundreds of stores throughout the United States and Europe is indicative of the pervasiveness of this trend.

This recent movement is not without its context. It takes place during a time of unsurpassed technology, constant stimulation, and instant worldwide communication, forcing some to seek an alternative in stereotypes of the Native American lifestyle. Miranda Brady discusses a similar phenomenon in American history saying:

the construct of the noble savage was persistent in news features of the early

¹ “Pop Color Pattern Tank,” Free People, accessed February 14, 2013, <http://www.freepeople.com/clothes-tops/pop-color-pattern-tank>; “Double Indian Stone Ring,” Free People, accessed February 14, 2013, <http://www.freepeople.com/accessories-the-jewelry-box-rings/double-indian-stone-ring>; “Sedona Sneaker Mocc Boot,” Free People, accessed February 14, 2013, <http://www.freepeople.com/shoes-moccasins/sedona-sneaker-mocc-boot>.

² “Straight Shot Necklace,” Anthropologie, accessed March 18, 2013, <http://www.anthropologie.com/anthro/product/jewelry-necklaces/25728213.jsp>; “Capitana Cardigan,” Anthropologie, accessed February 14, 2013, <http://www.anthropologie.com/anthro/product/clothes-sweaters/26610204.jsp>.

³ “Obey Los Lobos Cardigan,” Urban Outfitters, accessed February 15, 2013, <http://www.urbanoutfitters.com/urban/catalog/productdetail.jsp>; “Leggings,” Urban Outfitters, accessed February 14, 2013,

http://www.urbanoutfitters.com/urban/catalog/category.jsp?id=W_APP_LEGGINGS.

⁴ “Printed Cat Tipi,” Free People, accessed February 14, 2013, <http://www.freepeople.com/printed-cat-tipi>.

twentieth century as a result of a culmination of socio-historical circumstances. It was a popular, normalizing discourse and was part of a rising nostalgia expressed by a generation living through post-industrialization in the first decades after the end of westward expansion.⁵

The early twentieth century, like the twenty-first century, had to reconcile the sociological changes occurring in light of industrialization and the creation of cosmopolitan cities supported by technological advancement. The twenty-first century has become hailed as the age of technology with the widespread use of computers, smart phones, and social media networks governing everyday life. Never before have individuals around the world been able to communicate as quickly and frequently as they can today.

Many Americans are beginning to feel irrevocably connected to technology. This has created a rift within the American psyche wherein one part cannot imagine a world without such stimulation, immediate gratification, and communication, while the other part longs for tranquility, silence, and solitude. “For many non-Indian peoples, who are increasingly disillusioned with capitalist ethics, materialism, lack of family networks and support, and the general degradation of the environment, Native Americans represent both a romanticized golden past and a hope for a return to a simpler life in the future.”⁶ It is within this paradigm that Americans are turning to stereotyped utopias of the Native American lifestyles and peoples, where Indians represent a complete rejection of technological advancement in favor of primitivism. It is the belief that the American Indian “ ‘was a savage, at just about the stage in civilization the white man was just a few centuries back.’ ”⁷ Within this view there is the assumption of a linear moral development model that connects savagery to the beginning of man’s time on earth, with modernization and morality as the end result. Therefore, if Americans are unsatisfied with the status of modernity, they can look back and mimic stereotypes of indigenous life as a way to escape technological anxieties, and engage with the traditions of the past.

The notion of “playing Indian” dates back to media representations of westward expansion. However, a new utopian fascination with Native American life began in the 1970s and 1980s. These pivotal decades marked a surge of social awareness and advocacy with the subsequent Chicano, Free Speech, and Feminist movements. It was during this time of self-determination that Native American identity was reformed. A “newfound, but largely romanticized, respect for native peoples’ connection with the land and environment emerged in the 1970s in conjunction with the civil rights movement and

⁵ Miranda Brady, “ ‘Stories of Great Indians’ by Elmo Scott Watson: Syndication, Standardization, and the Noble Savage in Feature Writing,” in *American Indians and the Mass Media*, ed. Meta Carstarphen and John Sanchez (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 27.

⁶ Eve Darian-Smith, *New Capitalists: Law, Politics, and Identity Surrounding Casino Gaming on Native Land*, ed. John Young (Belmont: Wadsworth/ Thomson Learning, 2004), 33.

⁷ Miranda Brady, “ ‘Stories of Great Indians’ by Elmo Scott Watson: Syndication, Standardization, and the Noble Savage in Feature Writing,” in *American Indians and the Mass Media*, eds. Meta Carstarphen and John Sanchez (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 23.

an increasing awareness of ethnic diversity and alternative lifestyles.”⁸ This trend was pervasive and focused on Native American “spiritual purity” and relation to the land.⁹ During the 1970s and 1980s, “playing Indian” typically involved the practice of perceived Native American cultural beliefs systems and traditions, including Shamanism, reincarnation, and the use of natural materials for health such as crystals.¹⁰ These reflected a form of lifestyle emulation that is not as eminent in current trends. While expanding cultural awareness prompted the 1970s emulation of Native American beliefs, the twenty-first century consumption of stereotyped Native American apparel and accessories is fitting to a period of instant satisfaction, where culture can be bought and sold.

This view of Native Americans as spiritually pure naturalists has created a new consumer market that allows Americans to buy into and connect with these themes. Americans struggling with the speed of modern technology cope with these insecurities by consuming Native American themed products. “Business is booming with respect to products connected with Indians who supposedly represent the opposite of urban white populations obsessed with making money and with material possessions.”¹¹ In this way, Native American values are placed in direct opposition to American ideals, including capitalism. The consumption of Indian inspired goods serves as a way to assuage feelings of guilt or disapproval with American society by attempting to buy into another conceived reality. “Native Americans are seen as white society’s saviors, the last remaining key to redemption and a future free of anxiety, pollution, and complexity.”¹² In seeing the Native as pure, and the American as corrupted by capitalism and technology, the availability of Indian inspired goods has created an alternative lifestyle, possible for non-Natives through the purchasing of such apparel and accessories.

The implications of this consumptive trend, however, are detrimental to the way Americans conceive themselves in relation to Native Americans, reinforcing negative stereotypes and promoting racial prejudice. By consuming stereotypical representations of Native American cultures, Americans are reinforcing the prejudices of the past. Often Americans only experience conscious depictions of native people through stereotyped images in media and clothing, a problem discussed by Lucy Ganje. She states, “When our only cultural encounter comes from wearing a piece of clothing with an ‘Indian-head’ logo on it ... we have become prisoners of our own stereotypes and contribute to the cultural violation of American Indian people.”¹³ Therefore, when Americans attempt to

⁸ Eve Darian-Smith, *New Capitalists: Law, Politics, and Identity Surrounding Casino Gaming on Native Land*, ed. John Young (Belmont: Wadsworth/ Thomson Learning, 2004), 31.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 32.

¹² Ibid., 33.

¹³ Lucy Ganje, “Marketing the Sacred: Commodifying Native-American Cultural Images,” in *Images That Injure: Pictorial Stereotypes in the Media*. 3rd ed, eds. Susan Dente Ross and Paul Martin Lester, (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011), 104.

capture and consume the idealized concept of Native Americans, they are in fact perpetuating their own stereotypes, and denying the true existence and varied lifestyles of native peoples. “These pervasive, negative ethnocentric American Indian stereotypes contribute to an institutionalized ethnic prejudice against American Indian cultures and are commonly interwoven into the fabric of American consciousness, so ubiquitous that mainstream America has simply come to find them acceptable and not insensitive.”¹⁴ This prejudice goes beyond the individual and contributes to a collective rejection of Native American identities and cultures that then becomes institutionalized and justified by appropriated products. These beliefs are so deeply imbedded within American culture that they are not challenged or considered hurtful to Native Americans. There is often little hesitation for Americans consuming “tribal” goods, who are perhaps unaware of their cultural implications.

An example of the insensitive appropriation of American Indian culture is typified by a recent lawsuit, filed on behalf of the Navajo Nation against Urban Outfitters for trademark infringement. Urban Outfitters released a series of products with the Navajo name in 2011, including women’s panties and a flask which the Nation argued implied their endorsement.¹⁵ The tribe issued a cease and desist letter to Urban Outfitters followed by a lawsuit in 2012.¹⁶ Navajos argue that Urban Outfitters used false advertising that implied trademark infringement as well as an encroachment on the federal Indian Arts and Craft Act.¹⁷ Urban Outfitters then issued a statement through spokesman Ed Loram saying, “ ‘Like many other fashion brands, we interpret trends...The Native American-inspired trend and specifically the term ‘Navajo’ have been cycling thru fashion, fine art and design for the last few years.’ ”¹⁸ This speaks to the acceptance of American culture of appropriated images of American Indians who view the recent trend as disconnected from living people, and instead as a disassociated trend to be marketed to consumers. This case also highlights how Americans are becoming victim to their own stereotypes of native peoples, unwilling to recognize native exploitation and appropriation.

Modern Native Americans suffer from the perpetuation of racial prejudices within American consumer culture, creating a crisis of identity for those who see themselves grappling with two incompatible cultures. American consumer culture and media dictate the identity of Native Americans as contrary to American culture, creating an appealing exoticism and purity that intrigues Americans. This also serves to arrange Native

¹⁴ Victoria Sanchez, “Buying into Racism: American Indian Product Icons in the American Marketplace,” in *American Indians and the Mass Media*, eds. Meta Carstarphen and John Sanchez (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 158.

¹⁵ “Navajo Nation sues Urban Outfitters for Trademark Infringement,” *Guardian.co.uk*, last modified March 1, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/mar/01/navajo-nation-sues-urban-outfitters>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Americans and Americans as belonging to two opposite cultures, making it impossible for today's Indians to be both.¹⁹ "This disjuncture between traditional American Indian values and identities and imposed Euro-American values and identities forces American Indian individuals into a position commonly termed as 'walking in two worlds.'"²⁰ American Indians struggle to exist as culturally complex individuals in a world that perceives them as homogenously Indian.

The effort for Native Americans to contend with dueling identities impedes upon the process of self-determination with the imposition of already fixed outcomes. Native Americans react to the impossibility of existing outside of racial stereotypes in various ways. "Some may completely reject modern, non-Indian life...for others, the reaction may be to assimilate into dominant American culture and reject Indian-ness; for others still, the confusion of ethnostress may result in internalizing the stereotype and trying to conform to the prescribed notion of Indian-ness."²¹ Despite whether American Indians attach to American, Indian, or the stereotype of Indian identities, they are being forced into each of these directions by a culture unable to reconcile a multicultural identity for native peoples. This reality is forcing American Indians to exist within culturally contrived territories, prohibiting the self-determination of modern Indians.

The resurgence of commodifying stereotypes of the "Native" also works to revive cultural narratives of the past, including concepts of the good and bad Indian. The good Indians, portrayed in seventeenth century American newspapers were "considered good Indians when they can be referenced as allies, friendly, and 'our' auxiliary Indians."²² Good Indians were compliant with American objectives, and their status as allies determined their morality for Americans.

It can be argued that the concept of the good Indian has been recreated in the twenty-first century. Similar to the seventeenth century, today's Indian is considered good when they can be aligned with American intentions. The good Indian is now a silent one, an Indian with a homogenized identity, which is consumable for the modern American. He is also a relic of the past to be remembered, but never encountered. Americans love the good Indian, and align themselves with this perception of native people through the consumption of goods that represent favored characteristics, including spirituality, environmentalism, and primitivism. In this way, American culture is recreating the ethnocentric concepts of American Indians, which serve to prevent social progress and tolerance of modern native people.

¹⁹ See note 15 above.

²⁰ Victoria Sanchez, "Buying into Racism: American Indian Product Icons in the American Marketplace," in *American Indians and the Mass Media*, eds. Meta Carstarphen and John Sanchez (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 159.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 160.

²² John Sanchez, "American Indian News Frames in America's First Newspaper, *Publick Occurrences both Forreign and Domestick*," in *American Indians and the Mass Media*, eds. Meta Carstarphen and John Sanchez (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 15.

Simultaneously, the narrative of the bad Indian is being perpetuated in the twenty-first century. The bad Indian was described in seventeenth century newspapers as deceitful, sneaky, and savage.²³ This type of Indian was one that scared the American people. He was a villain whose barbaric ways made him capable of inflicting pain without remorse. The bad Indian is immoral, contrasted with the Protestant ethic of seventeenth century America. Conceiving of American Indians as bad not only served as a way to create the popular culture of Western films, but also justified American persecution of native peoples. If Indians were immoral, savage beings, they were also subhuman, and not afforded the same rights as Americans.

Unfortunately, this narrative continues today with a redefined notion of the bad Indian as the modern Indian. This modern Native American has the same qualities described in the seventeenth century—deceptive and cunning. He cheats at the expense of the white man, and is once again ignorant of morality. However, this Indian is also a modern one. He does not necessarily portray the spirituality and communication with nature that Americans want to see. This American Indian has a dual identity. He is American as well as Indian. And to the disappointment of those who stereotype him, he participates in the American culture, politics, and economy. It is for this reason that he is a bad Indian; he is not the Indian that Americans want to see, acknowledge, or support. This Indian is a reminder of the existence of native peoples in America and has been reconciled with the use of bad Indian rhetoric.

The collision of the good and bad Indian can be difficult to reconcile in the American consciousness, which is manifested in the controversies surrounding Indian gaming, which has reverted to this good and bad rhetoric. “The cultural myth of Indians as spiritual, pure, and connected to nature, land, and family is no longer sustainable in the face of Native Americans participating in contemporary society and behaving as savvy business people.”²⁴ American perceptions of the good Indian, supported by the consumption of Native American inspired goods, has been short-sighted by the emergence of the modern Indian who can operate an established casino, and be a driving force in the political world.²⁵

The increasing presence of Native peoples in the American economy has become evident as a result of the gaming industry. Within the last twenty years, federally recognized Native American tribes have been allowed to establish and operate casinos on reservation land. These increasingly lucrative establishments have afforded tribes the economic viability to participate in modern politics. However, “Indian gaming, and the newfound economic, political, and cultural independence that it brings to some individuals and tribes, destabilizes and undermines the carefully constructed images

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Eve Darian-Smith, *New Capitalists: Law, Politics, and Identity Surrounding Casino Gaming on Native Land*, ed. John Young (Belmont: Wadsworth/ Thomson Learning, 2004), 34.

²⁵ Ibid.

about Native Americans that we have become used to.”²⁶ This new image of the wealthy Indian represents the conflation of native purity and western capitalism within the American Indian cultural narrative, forcing Americans to once again call upon the bad Indian.

As shown across debates within California, Americans recreate the bad Indian stereotype when they argue that Native American casino owners operate outside of the law, do not pay taxes, and are scheming behind the backs of the American people.²⁷ When the Chumash recently moved to acquire former sacred land near Simi Valley, residents claimed they worried that the Chumash’s intentions were impure. While the Chumash claimed they wanted to preserve the native Burro Flats Painted Cave, residents felt they were purchasing the land as a means to establish a casino.²⁸ “ ‘I very much respect their desire to protect sacred sites but I want to make sure any such action precludes the establishment of a casino,” Ventura County Supervisor Linda Parks said.’ ”²⁹ Inherent in this comment is the assumption that the Chumash have an alternative agenda, lying to Americans to conceal their economic interests. Instead of affording Indians the ability to protect their cultural history, some Americans are skeptical that the deceptive Indian of the seventeenth century will reappear to relish in the defeat of the white man. It is negative stereotyping such as this that prohibits the voices and issues of native people from being deemed legitimate in twenty-first century America.

American Indians have been redefined by the recent trend of “tribal” goods across the fashion industry. Americans have used this aesthetic to lean upon past stereotypes, once again creating a good Indian for the public to consume, and a bad Indian for the public to rally against. Unfortunately, the significance of a mere fashion trend is saturating the agency and prosperity of native peoples. Indian issues such as land rights are being reduced to racist narratives of the seventeenth century and in today’s global world, this threatens the legitimacy of all native peoples. As one of the leaders of the western world, the United States has the capacity to influence the treatment of indigenous groups around the world. As the current market spreads the consumption of indigenous inspired goods worldwide, America must consider the implications of its cultural perceptions upon the world’s indigenous population.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 90.

²⁸ Steve Chawkins, “At Polluted Santa Susana Lab Site, Sacred Cave Attracts Tribe’s Bid,” *LA Times*, last modified Oct. 30, 2012, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/oct/30/local/la-me-chumash-rocketdyne-20121030>.

²⁹ Ibid.

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