12-31-2014

#NotYourCostume, #NotYourMascot and #NotHappy: New Generation of Native American Activists Use Social Media to Protest Cultural Misappropriation

Jaclyn Anglis

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gj_etds

Part of the Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons

Recommended Citation

Anglis, Jaclyn, "#NotYourCostume, #NotYourMascot and #NotHappy: New Generation of Native American Activists Use Social Media to Protest Cultural Misappropriation" (2014). CUNY Academic Works.
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gj_etds/18

This Capstone Project is brought to you for free and open access by the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Capstones by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.
Simon Moya-Smith, 31, a Native American activist, talks cultural misappropriation at a coffee shop in his neighborhood, Park Slope.

Simon Moya-Smith was waiting for the train, just like everyone else. Then, Moya-Smith, 31, an Oglala La Kota tribal citizen and advocacy journalist for Native American rights, saw a black man wearing a Redskins hat in the New York City subway station.

As a Native American, Moya-Smith found the team name and the Native American mascot offensive. He wanted to give the man the benefit of the doubt that he didn’t know it could be hurtful. So he decided to approach him.

“You must really enjoy your privilege,” he said to the man.

“I’m an oppressed people,” the man replied angrily.
“Okay man, I understand,” Moya-Smith said. “That’s not what I’m saying here. What I’m saying here is I walk into the subway and I get to see you wearing a caricature of my people with a slur. I did not walk into here in a hat with a caricature of your people and a slur. You have privilege that I don’t.”

But the man still wasn’t having it. Instead, he made the argument that he couldn’t possibly be racist since he was a subjugated black man.

“The discriminated can discriminate just as easily,” Moya-Smith said.

Sometimes when Moya-Smith tells people that they are misusing his culture, they say they’re sorry. Sometimes they even thank him for informing them. But in the case of this man, he was fixated on his affection for the sports team—name and mascot included.

It is moments like these keep propelling Moya-Smith to continue speaking out against the misuse of his culture by non-Natives.

Moya-Smith is part of a new generation of Native American activists fighting cultural misappropriation, or the misuse of their culture by people who are not Native American, such as wearing headdresses, “playing” Native American for Halloween, and using Native American-based mascots. This generation does use traditional forms of fighting misappropriation, such as street protests, petitions to the government, and letters to the editors. But they are also armed with a new, powerful weapon in their fight—social media.

Native American people make up only about 2 percent of the United States population, according to the 2012 U.S. Census Bureau. Of that small number, Moya-Smith says there are about 12 prominent activists, including himself, the band members of A Tribe Called Red, the comedy group 1491s and Adrienne Keane, who runs the blog Native Appropriations. Though this group may not have strength in numbers, social media allows them a broader platform and a louder voice against misappropriation that they did not have before.
While they are not able to convince everyone, they, alongside others, have helped change the minds of prominent individuals and companies about misappropriation. Pharrell Williams has apologized after social media backlash for wearing a headdress. No Doubt apologized for the use of Native attire in their music video “Looking Hot.” Victoria’s Secret has apologized for using a headdress in its annual fashion show and pulled that segment from the broadcast. GAP has apologized for a “Manifest Destiny” shirt. Some major newspapers now refuse to refer to the Redskins team by name. Moya-Smith says the misappropriation links to a larger issue—dehumanization of Native Americans through canceling out their voice. And through social media, they are in the process of reclaiming that voice.

But they still have a lot of work to do, since misappropriation keeps happening.

Moya-Smith raises awareness of these issues through social media campaigns. He lectures at universities, like his alma mater, Columbia. He protests against race-based mascots. And he is being heard. He’s done op-eds for CNN and appearances on NBC News 7, Fox News and NPR, where a broad audience can hear and see him, even if they aren’t on social media. He is part of a group that is here to educate, inform and even change minds sometimes.

Moya-Smith, now based in Park Slope, Brooklyn, where he’s lived for the past two years on and off, pulls out his smartphone.

“Look at this,” he says, scrolling through his Twitter app. He pulls up a tweet from Columbus Day, which he is against celebrating.

“Everybody hashtags Columbus Day, right?” he says. “So you don’t just try to make up new ones. You capitalize on the ones that are happening.”

Hashtags come in handy for fighting misappropriation in the forms of attire and mascots, too, misappropriation he’s experienced for a long time.

Moya-Smith was born and raised in Denver and relocated to Los Angeles when he was in second grade. He moved back and forth between those cities for about seven
years. As a child, he experienced racism and discrimination firsthand in both Denver and Los Angeles. These moments led to his activism.

Moya-Smith’s middle school, Griffiths Middle School in Los Angeles, had an Indian as a mascot. The mascot was a nameless head and bust of a Native American wearing long hair, a headdress and a stoic expression.

The vice principal would greet students on the loudspeaker every morning: “Good morning, injuns and injunettes.”

“Even as a kid, I knew what that was,” Moya-Smith says. “I knew it was a dehumanization of me. I felt like I wasn’t a person. I felt like I was a thing.”

Bernadette Casados, Moya-Smith’s mother, says she asked about the announcement at the office, but she remembers the ladies there brushed it off.

“I should’ve stood up as hard and as firm as my son did,” Casados says. “I was a young mother taking care of my kids and I think I had a different focus at the time.”

She didn’t feel she could talk to other parents, since it was an all-white neighborhood.

Moya-Smith remembers it being tough to be Native American at a public school. In his Denver school, there were only one or two other Native Americans. Though his sister went to the same school, there weren’t any other Native Americans in the Los Angeles school.

And his school was far from being the only one with a Native American mascot.

MascotDB, a mascot and team name database, has kept record of the nation’s mascots since 2006, gathering data from state high school athletic associations, websites and newspapers. Of 42,624 teams in America, 2,129 of those sports teams are Native American based.

The names range from things like Indians to Warriors to Redskins.

The term “Redskin” originated in the late eighteenth century. According to Smithsonian historian Ives Goddard, the term was first used as a self-identifier by Native Americans to differentiate themselves from whites. But in the late nineteenth century, it took on a negative connotation. L. Frank Baum, author of The Wizard of Oz, called for the extermination of Natives in an editorial, referring to them as redskins. Despite the emerging violent associations with the term, sports teams began to use Native-themed names shortly after.

Moya-Smith says the mascots are a symptom of a larger condition—the dehumanization of Native American people.
The American Psychological Association called for the abolishment of all Native American mascots in 2005, arguing that they create hostile environments for Native children. They feel excluded and report a low sense of self worth.

Stephanie Fryberg, an associate psychology professor at the University of Arizona, found that these mascots present and affirm negative stereotypical images about Native Americans promoted by mainstream society, which can lead to negative relations with other groups.

This is an example of how the cavalier treatment of Native culture can link to a much more serious issue in the Native community.

People are enacting change with the mascot issue, though. The State of Colorado House Representative Joe Salazar will introduce a bill in January to ban Native American-based mascots in the State of Colorado.

Moya-Smith spoke at a meeting in Colorado recently about detriments of misappropriation through these mascots, and how the caricatures harm mental health and stability of Native children. But as illustrated by the database, there are so many other organizations that still insist on using the Indian mascots.

Ned Blackhawk, a Native American history and law professor at Yale University, says a big reason for misappropriation is deeply seeded American cultural identification with Native Americans that goes back to days of early settlement.
He says this identification comes from repeated representational forms of Native Americans, as people to either be feared or admired. These representations appear in popular culture, such as in movies and advertisements. Sometimes, they are the only representation of Native people that non-Natives see.

Blackhawk says this attachment with the representation of Native Americans starts early on in children’s literature and films, *Peter Pan* being a famous example, with the Indian character Tiger Lily and the song, “What Made the Red Man Red?”

“Childhood association with Indians is one of the deepest forms of a kind of cultural mythology that various communities have told themselves across the history of North America,” Blackhawk says.

So, Blackhawk says, the use of mascots or dressing up like a Native American can be seen as an embodiment of that identification. The misuse of a headdress, much like a Native-based mascot, has become a widely talked about issue.

“Are ancient cultures fair game when it comes to fashion or not?” asks a BBC reporter on a live news report.

He’s announcing that a Canadian music festival has recently banned people from wearing Native American headdresses out of respect for indigenous people in mid-2014. Large, enhanced images of feather headdresses emerge on a circular screen around the reporter. One headdress has orange and yellow feathers with a floral headband. Another has white feathers and multicolored shapes on the headband.

“This kicks off a debate between people who agree that sacred objects are off limits and those who think some take offense a bit too easily,” he says. “Well, let’s speak to Simon Moya-Smith.”

Transposed over the images of the headdresses, Moya-Smith appears. He gazes at the reporter head on.

“How do you answer that, that you’re taking this just a bit too seriously, being a bit thin-skinned about it?” the BBC reporter asks him.

“I think they’ve been saying that ever since they landed in the 1400s,” Moya-Smith replies.
“When you really think about it whenever we Native Americans say something is offensive, people are all, ‘Oh no, that’s our tradition,’” he continues. “So as far back as 1492, you have this culture in the United States and in Canada of saying, you’re just being PC. We can take your culture, we can take your spirituality, we can take your garb and we can do what we want with it.”

As the reporter questions him about film representation of Native Americans, Moya-Smith redirects the conversation back to festivals, and how people are partying while wearing something that is sacred to the Native American people.

“As Native Americans, this is us speaking up today saying ‘stop,’ and we have been saying ‘stop’ for a very long time, ‘please stop appropriating our culture,’ but people haven’t been paying attention,” he says. “But with the proliferation of the web, people can hear the Native American response.”

Moya-Smith says when he was younger, Native Americans could only rebel locally. Now, the response reaches worldwide.

“If I’m a teenager today and I’m at my school and the mascot’s a Savage or the mascot’s a Redskin, I can take a photo of that and I can upload the picture to my Twitter account and send it out there, and then boom, people can respond immediately and its not just local,” he says.

“It’s important we have one foot on the web and one foot on the street,” he says. “We cannot ignore the significant impact of being there in the flesh. It can’t be just about retweeting.”
But retweeting is an important part of the equation, too, so that others can not only see them, but also hear them and their stories.

Moya-Smith doesn’t walk around wearing a feather. He doesn’t have braids. He doesn’t wear moccasins. He doesn’t look like the Hollywood version of a Native American. So it’s hard for people to pinpoint the modern Native American today.

“If you see Native Americans only wearing feathers, you don’t see people like me. I think that the misappropriation of Native American culture creates a divide between us and you,” he says.

But add a clever hash tag, and people can hear his voice from wherever they are at anytime.

When autumn comes around, he says he feels that Native Americans’ voices are particularly ignored and marginalized. But who they are as a culture becomes a thing of pop culture: headdresses, “sexy” Native American Halloween costumes and Native American based mascots during football season.

He says he can’t go a week without seeing Native culture misused: Redskins gear from sports fans. Headdresses used as a fashion statement. T-shirts with the image of a skull wearing a headdress.

“You can’t be Native American and not be political,” he says. “One way it’s going to come at you.”

He learned this right away from his parents. His dad, a Native American, was not an activist, but his mom, Casados, was an activist, but she is Chicana Mexican American, so she is indigenous to Mexico instead of the United States. But both parents would support his efforts early on.

Casados remembers him getting sent home in first grade for talking about Columbus Day.

He would raise his hand and say, “I have another story, too, about Columbus.”

“Oh really, Simon? Please tell us,” the teacher would say.

Casados says it was nothing they wanted to hear. The teacher would tell the office that he was being disruptive and they would call Casados to pick him up.

She remembers it being upsetting to him that no one wanted to hear him.

But she would take him out to celebrate at his favorite restaurant, Pepe’s, where he would eat bean burritos with melted cheese on top.
“I’m proud of you,” she would say. “I know it hurts your feelings that nobody wanted to listen to you, but not everybody’s going to want to listen to your story.”

And sometimes, people in the school would try to tell the story for him.

Casados remembers him being asked to play a Native American in a school Thanksgiving play at least twice.

Casados says he wasn’t happy, since they only wanted him to be the character so he could wear a costume.

“They had a headdress made out of cardboard and not real feathers, just something they put together from construction paper. It wasn’t like, ‘Simon, you’re our Native. We want you to show us what it means,’” she says. “It was more like, ‘Let’s dress you up like a cartoon.’”

He decided to stay home from school that day.

These issues weren’t something that they’d discuss every day. But it would happen throughout the year, since there was always misinformation being spread. And right now, Moya-Smith is doing all he can to change that.

“What I want and what a lot of Native Americans want is for this generation to forget everything they thought they knew about Native Americans and start over,” Moya-Smith says.

This past summer, Pharrell Williams appeared on the cover of Elle UK in a headdress. Shortly after the cover photo was released these activists spoke out against it via social media.

Moya-Smith, like many, used the hashtag #nothappy on Twitter, to express his displeasure with the misuse. Others followed his example, and within 24 hours following the online backlash, Pharrell issued an apology.

“I respect and honor every kind of race, background and culture. I am genuinely sorry,” he said through a representative to the New York Daily News.
Moya-Smith says Pharrell was subject to the norms of American society, which do include dressing like a Native American. And he isn’t the only one.

Just this year alone, other non-Native celebrities misused the headdress, including Alessandra Ambrosio, Khloe Kardashian and Harry Styles.

That’s why Native Americans use these platforms to respond in real time. Something posted online is not as easily ignored as a voicemail or letter to an editor. In fact, newspapers are coming to them in the age of social media.

*New York Daily News*, for example, covered a Pharrell controversy with a specific focus on the social media backlash. The newspaper even made a reference to the #NotHappy hashtag. *Washington Post* has also done a brief write-up of activist hashtags used by the Native American community, in anticipation for the Peter Pan Live show and what would later become the hashtag #NotYourTigerLily, in response to the way the Indian character was portrayed in the show.

Blackhawk says activists were previously not able to reach as many people with their campaigns.

But now, as seen in the examples from the *New York Daily News* and the *Washington Post*, stories can be built from those social media responses.

“‘I think it kind of has a non-corporate, a non-hierarchal form of communication for people to share ideas really quickly and easily,’” Blackhawk says.

And Moya-Smith thinks social media has created two communities—a community that will stop misappropriating and a community that won’t. All non-Native people need to hear the Native American’s voice is an Internet connection.

Some people don’t apologize. Other celebrities defend themselves by saying they have Native blood.
“When celebrities wear them and they say they’re Native, what do they do for their community, or do they even know their community?” Dennis Zotigh, a cultural specialist at the National Museum of the American Indian, says. “Or are they just saying they’re Native to have some sort of response?”

A headdress on display at the National Museum of the American Indian in New York.

Zotigh says the headdress is an honorific symbol of a warrior.

In history, eagle feathers have been earned by Native Americans that have gone into battle. In modern times, when warriors return as veterans, they are also rewarded with eagle feathers.

“So if someone who was not Native wore these war bonnets, it would be analogous to somebody wearing a Purple Heart or a medal of honor that didn’t earn it,” says Zotigh.

Along with war honors, there is also a spiritual component that comes with a headdress. Zotigh says the eagle is believed to be a messenger between the creator and humans. Their feathers have a special significance as a symbol of prayers.
“You’re not going to find an Indian walking into McDonald’s with a war bonnet,” Zotigh says.

Headdresses are still used today, mainly in ceremonies for those prayerful purposes.

This does not always mean the elder will be wearing a headdress, but it’s a time when it would be appropriate to do so.

Moya-Smith went to one this past March in Denver in an arena. Surrounding the arena were drum groups from different nations and tribes.

The elders stand in the grand entry of the powwow, sometimes in headdresses and sometimes not. They say an opening prayer before the celebration begins.

“A powwow was historically when maybe a war party or a hunting party came back and they would regale with stories,” Moya-Smith says. “Today, it’s a celebration of who we are and our resiliency.”

Inside the arena were dances. Tribes singing songs from their respective nations. And different forms of Native American artwork are sold, such as beadwork.

Moya-Smith says at a powwow, you hear so many different languages. But that’s to be expected, since Native American tribes all have different customs, cultures, histories and politics.

Zotigh says not all tribes represented in these powwows and cultural events even use headdresses in their culture.

Blackhawk says there are 566 federally recognized Native American tribes. He says the Great Plains states are ethnographic regions where Native Americans typically wear headdresses. But he says those tribal citizens may live elsewhere.

Zotigh says that social media is a way Native Americans can speak out about their culture and why it has always been inappropriate to misuse a headdress, no matter where they live. It’s not a new fight. It’s just a new way of fighting the issue.

“If you look at the black and white country westerns, you look at Cher in the 70s, they wore these war bonnets and they were offensive back then,” Dennis says. “But when we spoke about it and had objections to it, who did we tell? We talked among ourselves. Now our voices can be broadcast to the world through social media, and now we can say we don’t like it. It’s offensive. It’s wrong.”

And these citizens are speaking out about what the headdress means to them.

“When we see someone who is non-Native and they misuse the headdress or wear it in an incorrect way, this is actively working toward the destruction of our
traditional practices,” Jessica Metcalfe, 33, owner of Beyond Buckskin blog and boutique, said.

Metcalfe, who has a doctorate in American Indian studies, says in her tribal background, Turtle Mountain Chippewa, the eagle is seen as an intermediary between the human beings and the creator, or God. When they do good deeds for the community, they are rewarded with eagle feathers.

She lives on a reservation in North Dakota. But she says many Native Americans live in cities and might see people in popular culture wearing the headdress and misunderstand it.

“We need to protect our use and our traditional practices and our values,” she said. “Whenever we see the headdress, it’s a major form of community.”

Metcalfe launched the blog Beyond Buckskin in 2009 to trace examples of cultural misappropriation. She launched a boutique in 2012 to call out companies, like Urban Outfitters, that were mislabeling their items as Navajo.

She also speaks out against wearing headdresses to summer music festivals.

Some festivals don’t allow people to wear headdresses anymore in the wake of widespread online backlash. A good example is Lightning in a Bottle, a festival held in Bradley, California.

On the website, the festival has a section condemning the misuse of headdresses by non-Natives. The section raises the question, “Would you rock a blackface or a swastika at a party? How is this different?”

“I think that’s a really great step forward in that music festival becoming an ally to us Native people,” Metcalfe said.

While spring and summer is the time when people play Indian at music festivals, Metcalfe says she braces herself for Halloween as well.

Many major Halloween costume online stores include “Sexy Native American” sections.

Blackhawk says some college students try to create non-ethnic costume Halloween parties at college campuses. But he says Halloween is a difficult industry to target, since it operates out of seasonal costume stores as opposed to commercial stores.

“So that association is very hard to break,” he says.
Other cultural misappropriation issues have become national stories.

There has been an ongoing public debate about changing the Redskins name. Some newspapers, like the New York Daily News and Washington Post, are refusing to use the word “Redskins.” Moya-Smith says that victories like that might seem small, but he considers those to be huge victories.

“For Native Americans, for people that have been largely ignored or canceled out of American conversation, it’s a huge victory for us to get any form of recognition as a community, as a people,” Moya-Smith says.

Blackhawk says anti-mascot activists are gaining momentum.

When Moya-Smith was first getting into online activism, he named his blog after the phrase, “I am not a mascot.” Once social media took off, he translated that into a hashtag. It has since been picked up by several Twitter users.

He and other activists also schedule Twitterstorms when there is a Redskins game on, so that they will all be using similar hashtags at the same time and get attention.

These Twitterstorms happen by word of mouth. Sometimes one person will have a creative tweet that others retweet. Other times they organize through Facebook.
“I think the Washington Redskins football team will be under tremendous continued pressure to drop either the name or the logo,” Blackhawk says.

Blackhawk says there are some schools that once had Indian names but don’t anymore, Stanford being one of them.

In the case of Stanford, Denni Woodward, the associate director of the Native American Cultural Center, wrote a piece, published on the school’s official website, explaining why the school eliminated the Indian mascot.

According to Woodward, Stanford’s mascot became the “Indian,” a caricature of a small Indian with a big nose, in 1930. The mascot remained for over four decades, until 55 Native American students and staff presented a petition to discontinue the Indian symbol to the university ombudsperson, who presented it to the president.

“The petition further stated that the Stanford community was not sensitive to the humanity of Native Americans, that the lack of understanding displayed by the name of a race being placed on its entertainment, and that a race of humans cannot be entertainment,” wrote Woodward.

After reading the petition, the president permanently removed the mascot. There have been campaigns to bring it back, but they have been unsuccessful.

Stanford is not alone in the mascot change. Dartmouth, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Syracuse and St. John in New York have also removed and replaced former Native American themed mascots.

“The ranges of schools across North America that once had Indian mascots but no longer do, that’s due to the activism of Native American community members,” Blackhawk says.

Blackhawk says what is needed for further change is cultural sensitivity training for non-Natives.

He says the misrepresentation of other peoples’ ethnic practices is something that suggests cultural illiteracy, since it’s not one’s right to inhabit the identities of another community, especially one that’s endured discrimination and violence.

“Things like blackface or wearing yarmulkes, or people who dress as Jewish or Catholic priests on Halloween, it’s not an appropriate form of cultural practice,” he says. “Native American communities are still not seen as a comparable form.”

So for someone who does misrepresent that community, Blackhawk thinks the sensitivity training would be an opportunity for personal review.
Moya-Smith says one of the counter-arguments for misappropriation is a question. “Aren’t there larger issues in the Native American community?” These issues include rape culture on reservations, poverty, fracking, drug use, and suicide rates.

But just because Native Americans are focused on cultural misappropriation doesn’t mean that they aren’t addressing other issues simultaneously. Moya-Smith says they want to address the canceling out of Native American voices.

Casados thinks the current group of activists, informed people trying to inform everyone else, has gone further than any group before.
“Thank God for social media because these guys are being heard in areas in spaces that they’ve never been heard before,” she says. “And it’s a loud, booming voice.”

Moya-Smith says as Native Americans, that’s what they do. They speak up, so they understand that this is a time to include Native Americans in all form of discussion so we can end this discrimination.

“It’s a time for us as Native Americans to reaffirm our presence and that we didn’t die off,” he says. “It’s a time for us to reclaim our voice.”