



DISCUSSION GUIDE

Native Appropriations: Why Representations Matter

The purpose of this discussion guide is to facilitate thoughtful discussion around the topics introduced in this Indigenous Forum presentation [video](#). The discussion guide can be adapted for use in the classroom as well as salon-style gatherings.

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This [video](#) is a presentation of the 2015 Indigenous Forum, organized by the Bioneers Indigeneity Program and featured annually at the Bioneers Conference. Indigeneity is a Native-led Program within Bioneers/Collective Heritage Institute that promotes indigenous knowledge and approaches to solve the earth's most pressing environmental and social issues through respectful dialogue. Since 1990, Bioneers has acted as a fertile hub of social and scientific innovators with practical and visionary solutions for the world's most pressing environmental and social challenges.



INFORMATION PAGE

Native Appropriations: Why Representations Matter

DESCRIPTION OF VIDEO

JESSICA METCALFE, PHD., (Turtle Mountain Anishinaabe) presents an overview of her blog and Native American fashion boutique, Beyond Buckskin. This video presents an overview of Native American appropriation, why it is harmful, and how to responsibly support Native American traditions through purchasing and wearing Native American-made fashion.

Native American designers featured in Dr. Metcalfe's presentation include:

- Alano Ederza** (Tajltan First Nation)
- Jared Yazzie** (Navajo)
- Jamie Okuma** (Luieño/Shoshone Bannock)
- Christi Belcourt** (Metís)



Watch video:
[bioneers.org/native-appropriations-why-representations-matter](https://www.bioneers.org/native-appropriations-why-representations-matter)

KEYWORDS

CULTURAL APPRECIATION – Learning about another culture with respect and courtesy by taking the time to learn about it, interact with people among the culture, and actually understand it.

CULTURAL APPROPRIATION – The unauthorized taking of another culture's dance, dress, music, language, folklore, cuisine, traditional medicine, religious symbols, etc. especially by those who represent a group in a more powerful political position.

CULTURAL HERITAGE – Elements of a collective past that remain relevant to a cultural group today. A ceremonial song, a type of weaving or carving that has been practiced for generations are all examples of heritage.

TRADEMARK – A letter, words, slogans, symbols, designs, colors, packaging, sounds or scents that help customers to identify specific goods and services.

THE 3 S'S – Together, the 3 S's, source, sacredness, and similarity, make up a heuristic device to help potential buyers to responsibly select and purchase authentic art.

LINKS

[Bioneers.org](https://www.bioneers.org) | [Beyondbucks.com](https://www.beyondbucks.com) | [Nativeappropriations.com](https://www.nativeappropriations.com)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KXejDhRGou>



INTRODUCTION AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Cultural appropriation of Native American heritage, intellectual property, and contemporary images is commonplace across North America. Cultural appropriation is damaging to Native Americans because it perpetuates negative stereotypes, robs artists of credit and compensation for their creative work, and belittles Native Americans by turning their heritage and sacred beliefs into commodities and trends. Recently, more people are learning what cultural appropriation is, and how to honor and respect Native American cultures through the responsible purchase and display of Native arts and fashion.

WHAT IS CULTURAL APPROPRIATION?

Cultural appropriation can be defined as the unauthorized taking of another culture's dance, dress, music, language, folklore, cuisine, traditional medicine, religious symbols, etc. especially by those who represent a group in a more powerful political position. Examples of inappropriate cultural appropriation include using Native Americans as mascots, as in the Washington Redskins football team, dressing up as a Native American for Halloween, and wearing a Native American headdress at a festival.

HOW TO AVOID CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

Ask yourself "The 3 S's"

SOURCE: Who are you buying from? The closer to the original source, the less likely you are appropriating.

SIGNIFICANCE: Is the thing for sale of greater significance in its source community, such as a Native American Headdress, or is it something meant to be used on a daily basis?

SIMILARITY: Is the thing for sale a direct copy of an object of cultural heritage, or is it inspired by it, only including a slight resemblance?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

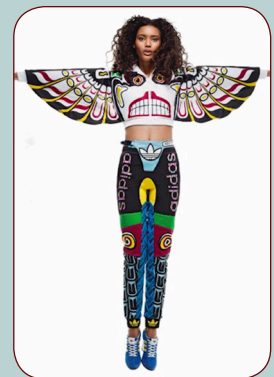
1. What are your reactions to what you saw?
2. What was the most interesting thing you learned by watching this video?
3. What are some examples of cultural appropriation? How do these examples make you feel?
4. Why is cultural appropriation harmful? To Native American tribes? To all peoples?
5. What is the difference between cultural appreciation, cultural sharing, and cultural appropriation?
6. How might a non-Native company go about incorporating Indigenous designs without appropriating culture?



VIDEO GUIDE

This guide provides a roadmap to various ideas, keywords and concepts presented by Dr. Metcalfe to support video navigation.

Idea, Keyword or Concept	Time Stamp
On why and how the blog, www.beyondbuckskin.com , got started	00:50
Alano Ederza Streetwear	1:50
Jared Yazzie T-Shirt, "Native Americans Discovered Columbus"	1:55
Jamie Okuma beadwork-inspired contemporary fashion designs	2:10
Native American headdress	3:00
Jeremy Scott's misappropriation of a totem pole for Adidas	3:45
Urban Outfitters misappropriation of the Navajo trademark	4:05
Do corporations have ethical obligations?	4:35
About the Beyond Buckskin Boutique	5:10
Media coverage of Beyond Buckskin	5:50
Martin Sensmeier in porcupine quillwork	6:15
Significance of quillwork as an ancient traditional practice	6:30
Educating people about Native cultures, histories, and perspectives	7:00
The difference between cultural appreciation and sharing and appropriation	8:00
Definition of cultural appropriation	8:15
Why Urban Outfitters Navajo appropriation was harmful	9:10
Paul Frank Industries' "racist powwow"	11:00
Design house, Valentino, collaborated with Christie Belcourt	12:30
Missing and murdered Indigenous women	12:55
Who owns culture? and "The 3 S's"	15:20





TRANSCRIPT

Native Appropriations: Why Representations Matter

Featuring: Jessica Metcalfe, PhD., (Turtle Mountain Anishinaabe),
Tailinh Agoyo (Narragansett/Blackfeet/Chinese)

JESSICA – I started Beyond Buckskin back in 2009 as a blog. Okay? This is a space where I could share artist's profiles, showcase different designers, just to really get information out there, because people I think don't know that Native American fashion exists, and I was researching this topic for my doctoral dissertation when I was a student at the University of Arizona in Tucson, and I was interviewing these fashion designers, and they were sharing these really cool stories with me of their struggles, their successes, and I wanted to share that with more people. And the fastest, quickest, cheapest way to get your words out to a broader audience is by launching a blog. So that's what I did. And I showcase various designers, very high-end couture dresses, but also street wear such as this by Alano Edzerza, with the bold graphic leggings.

And then this is a photoshoot that we did in Los Angeles featuring a T-shirt by Jared Yazzie of his brand ODX. And the T-shirt says, Native Americans discover Columbus.

But also I love this. This is by Jamie Okuma, and she's doing really cool stuff. Jamie is a beadwork artist, inspired by traditional beadwork of her people. And now what she's doing is she's taking that traditional beadwork, creating her own contemporary spin on it, but then transferring that pattern to fabric, and then turning it into awesome dresses. So she's making this direct line between the traditions of her people, and then putting that into contemporary wearable clothing, because in the society that we live in, we can't really wear our buckskin dresses without standing out quite significantly, so she's finding a way of taking those traditional decorative elements and making it into something we can wear right now.

I also highlight the traditional stuff because the traditional stuff is amazing, and it really highlights how we continue these artistic practices.

Raise your hand if you have ever seen or know of a Native American headdress. Raise your hand if you vaguely know something. Okay. So, like the majority of you guys are vaguely familiar with the Native headdress. It's one of our most iconic symbols, but it's also culturally relevant, and there's a value system behind it. And I hope to share some of that with you guys today.

And I would love to talk about just the really cool contemporary designers and the really cool traditional stuff, but I can't because stuff like this keeps popping up. And this is misappropriations of Native American iconography and symbols and names in the fashion industry.

And one example would be on the left. This is Jeremy Scott's collection for Adidas in which he essentially ripped off a well-known totem pole by a well-respected totem pole carver and gave him no credit at all.

So this stuff keeps happening, and this is kind of our big—This was a big turning point in 2011 when Urban Outfitters got caught. They had labeled over two dozen of their products as Navajo, and there's a lot of problems with this, but the big one is from a legal perspective, and that is that the Navajo nation has actually trademarked their name. And any unauthorized use—[APPLAUSE] And any unauthorized use of the word Navajo is just violation of trademark law. That's it.

Do these major companies have any kind of ethical obligations to the original peoples of this continent? Do they have any? Do they have to run their business ethically when it comes to representing other people's cultures?



So, I started asking my readers from my blog, right. It was just a blog at the beginning, and I was saying, Hey, instead of buying the native knock-offs, why not buy the real thing? Native artists exist. Native designers exist. They're out there. They're producing really cool stuff. Let's support them.

And my readers were saying, "Okay, that's a cool idea. But where? How? I want to support these artists but how can I do it?" And at that time in 2011, there wasn't a space for you to easily access Native American made fashion. You kind of had to know somebody or go to an event, or go to Santa Fe. There was only the stuff in certain places.

So I decided to launch the Beyond Buckskin Boutique. And through this space I work with 40 to 50 Native American artists from the US and Canada to get their work out to a broader international audience. So we have customers in the US, Canada, but also abroad – Australia, the UK, Sweden, Switzerland, and so forth. And we've been covered by CNN, ABC, NBC, CTV, most recently Martha Stewart. So people are really interested in what we're doing, and they like that it is something that is solution based. And then just providing an alternative path, a different opportunity.

And I really like this image. This is Martin Sensmeier who's wearing porcupine quillwork. So he's got the porcupine quillwork medallion necklace and hair ties. But we also sell porcupine quillwork earrings and bracelets. So stuff that anybody from any background can wear this stuff and support this movement.

What's cool about quillwork is it is an artistic practice that predates contact. It predates the introduction of glass seed beads, and it continues to this day. That's really powerful. We have a large collective of artists who continue these ancient practices, and when you buy a pair of porcupine quill earrings, you are actively supporting the continuance of ancient traditional practices, which I think is really cool.

And that's what we try to push forward with the Beyond Buckskin boutique and blog. It's about education. Right? Because we have a huge problem with education and lack of education. Native cultures, histories, perspectives aren't represented in mainstream culture, not in the educational setting, not in the legal world, not in the business world. And so we depend greatly on forums such as this to have these opportunities to educate and to learn.

TAILINH - Can we just take a step back and talk about why you think that cultural misappropriation in fashion is harmful and dangerous, even on a smaller scale?

JESSICA – Right. And I think we kind of have to get into a definition of what is appropriation. Right? What is cultural appropriation? I think there's a distinct difference between cultural appreciation and cultural sharing, and then there's cultural appropriation.

The important difference between cultural appreciation and sharing, and then cultural appropriation has to do with: Is it an authorized or unauthorized taking? Right? When we're talking about appropriation, it's in general an unauthorized taking of another culture's practices, symbols, even names, like when it comes to the word Navajo, the unauthorized taking of those things.

And it's typically also having to do with power dynamics, right? The extraction is coming from a more dominant culture from a minority group or a group that has been oppressed in the past. And so we have to talk about those dynamics as well when we're talking about appropriation.

Now, as for what is so harmful about somebody else taking these cultural valuable things, like our names, our symbols, our belief systems, and then taking them and then misusing them and misrepresenting. So those are kind of the key examples of what we're talking about.

When it comes down to, like I showed you guys the Urban Outfitters things, that was the Navajo flask, the Navajo panty, the Navajo sock. The thing about Navajo people is that they were at that time a dry



reservation. They did not sell alcohol. So to have a flask tied to their name is like a huge misrepresentation of their people. They also have beliefs connected to modesty and humility, so to call something the Navajo panty was also in direct contradiction to their cultural value systems.

So there's all these things going on where there's this major company misrepresenting those people. But what they were really doing is turning them into a pattern. Right? They're saying, We're calling it the Navajo sock because it's got a pattern that references Navajo rugs. But there's a lot of mis-education that goes on, and they're perpetuating those misrepresentations.

TAILINH – Jessica, can you give a few examples of where major designers have stolen designs from native designers?

JESSICA – Oh, I've got lots of examples. Of course, the Urban Outfitters was such a key critical turning point. Because it was trademark violation, we actually had some teeth on it, that we could talk about that. But then it was kind of a launch pad to talk about like what are these ethical obligations that companies have. Do they have any?

So after that, there was also the Paul Frank. Is anybody here familiar with Paul Frank Industries? Raise your hand. Julius the monkey? You've seen Julius the monkey. I'd never heard of Paul Frank Industries either until they had their, what I called, their racist powwow.

So they had an event, and it was a neon Native American themed event, and they had prop tomahawks, prop bow and arrows, feathered headdresses, neon war paint, and they encouraged their guests to stand up on this stage, kind of like a runway, and pose with these props. And the poses that people picked were really disturbing. So they were kind of mock scalping one another, mock beheading one another, pointing their bow and arrows at people, and it was shocking because it was like: Is this what people think? Is this what people think about Native people? It was shocking.

So, we actually reached out to Paul Frank Industries and actually built a bridge with them, which was extraordinary. The president of Paul Frank Industries read our critiques, again, on the blog, and we had a great response from that brand, where they reached out and collaborated with four Native American designers, and we launched a capsule collection out of that. So what started off as a really bad event and bad representation and misuse of native cultures and symbols, we morphed it into a really powerful collaboration and a positive route out of that.

So, in August, Valentino, which is a major designer, collaborated with Christi Belcourt, who is a Métis painter and artist from Canada. And Christi Belcourt is also not only a phenomenal artist, beadwork artist, painter, but also she was the one who put together the project for the missing murdered Native women of Canada.

And for those of you who do not know, we kind of refer to it as our stolen sisters. Which there is like 600 that are documented, that we know of, of our Native sisters who have gone missing. No trace. We have no idea what happened to them. And there's no investigation into looking into where these women went. The police say, oh, those kind of women don't want to be found.

So there are these very deep-seated racist perspectives going on. And Christi has been at the forefront of bringing recognition to these women and calling for justice for them, for either finding them or taking an active stance against their perpetrators, and through her various projects.

So she collaborated with Valentino. They used one of her large-scale paintings called Water Song and transferred it to fabric that they put into their recent resort collection. And what's great is that they give her credit. They don't just say, Oh, we collaborated with somebody. They say who she is, and they point it out, and they let everybody know exactly how that collaboration was to be. So that's just extraordinary of where we're seeing this turning point of designers actually looking at Native people as Native individuals.



TAILINH – I’m wondering, you sell a lot of art and fashion on your website, made by Native designers and Jared. Who are your customers mostly? And how do people get educated or recognize when they’re in a store, what are the guidelines? I think when the Urban Outfitters thing came out, a lot of people who are sensitive and caring and really want to pay attention to what’s going on and be respectful didn’t know what to do. And I know I had friends myself who were at the art shows and saying, Well, I’m afraid to buy that bracelet and wear it down the street. I’m afraid somebody’s going to say I’m doing something wrong. So, do you have kind of a set of guidelines as to people who appreciate Native art and fashion, how they can approach purchasing items for them to wear?

JESSICA – Oh yes. Definitely. So, there’s this great scholar. Her name is Susan Scafidi, and she writes about this topic specifically, and also from a legal perspective. Who owns culture? Who has a say in what is something that’s culturally appropriate to share, etc.?

So what she does is she gives this really great guideline called the Three S’s. I hope that this will be a key takeaway for you guys today. And you can apply this to any situation, not just with Native American appropriations. But those Three S’s are first Source; second is Sacredness or significance; and then the last one is Similarity.

So, the Source. Who are you buying this thing from? Are you buying it from Urban Outfitters who has nothing to do with Native people? I really discourage Urban Outfitters. They’re a terrible company. That’s my opinion. Or are you buying it from an actual Native American artist? So, think about source.

And the next one is Sacredness or significance. Is what you’re buying or wearing, is it something that has greater significance within the community, such as the Native American headdress, or is it something that is meant to be worn on a daily basis like moccasins, for example?

That gets you back to Source. Okay, are you buying these moccasins from a big company, again that are extracting native technologies for their own profit, or are you giving money to a Native American moccasin maker? So think about that.

And then the third one is Similarity. So is what you’re buying a direct knock-off? Is it a knock-off of a headdress? Is it a knock-off of a Native American designer stuff? Or is it something that is simply inspired by it?

I love the world that we live in today. We can learn so much about different cultures. We can be inspired by different cultures and different people. I think inspiration is great. But inspiration requires some creativity of your own. So please don’t make a direct copy of somebody else’s cultural property.

So those are the three S’s – Source, Significance, and Similarity. And I think those are keys that we can apply to our everyday lives. I think so.