**Teaching Notes**

**What should be displayed? Native arts in museums and on the runways**

By

Melanie King

**Learning outcomes:**

* Explore the history and practices of collecting Native arts.
* Understand issues surrounding exhibiting art in public and private institutions.
* Examine how various institutions have worked to create a space for Native voices to be heard in museums and popular culture.
* Think critically about representations of Native peoples in popular culture.
* Work in small groups to address these issues and problem solve ways to change the manner in which Natives are represented in museums and in popular culture.

**Audience and disciplines:**

This case is suitable for upper level high school classes and college classes at all levels. The case is particularly relevant to study in the arts, Native American studies, museum studies, history, activism, cultural preservation, communications, sociology, media, and popular culture.

**Related Cases:**

Aguilar-Wells, M. and B. L. Smith. (2011). “Confronting Racism: Treaty Beer Comes to Washington State.” *Enduring Legacies: Native Case Studies*. Retrieved from http://nativecases.evergreen.edu/collection/cases/confronting-racism.html

Arthur, G. (2014). “Is diversity a mask or a bridge? The Indian mascot debate.”

*Enduring Legacies: Native Case Studies.* Retrieved from http://nativecases.evergreen.edu/collection/cases/is-diversity-a-mask-or-a-bridge.html

Arthur, G. (2010). “Should Indian Sports Mascots Be Repealed?” *Enduring Legacies:Native Case Studies.* Retrieved from http://nativecases.evergreen.edu/collection/cases/should-indian-sports-mascots-be-repealed.html

Kuckkahn, T. (2007). “Indian Identity in the Arts.” *Enduring Legacies: Native Case*

*Studies.* Retrieved from http://nativecases.evergreen.edu/collection/cases/indian-identity-in-arts.html

Smith, B. L. (2013). “The Twilight Saga and the Quileute Indian Tribe:

Opportunity or Cultural Exploitation?” *Enduring Legacies: Native Case Studies.*  Retrieved from http://nativecases.evergreen.edu/collection/cases/twilight.html

Smith, B. L. (2014). “Whose Story Should Be Told.” *Enduring Legacies:*

*Native Case Studies.* Retrieved from http://nativecases.evergreen.edu/collection/cases/whose-story-should-be-told.html

Tremblay, G. (2009). “Issues in Contemporary American Indian Art: An Iroquois

Example.” *Enduring Legacies: Native Case Studies*. Retrieved from http://nativecases.evergreen.edu/collection/cases/issues-contemporary-american-indian-art.html

Wheeler, A. and B. L. Smith. (2009). “Tse-Whit-Zen: An Ancient Klallam

Village Reclaimed…Territory Taken but not Forgotten.” *Enduring Legacies: Native Case Studies*. Retrieved from http://nativecases.evergreen.edu/collection/cases/tse-whit-zen.html

**Implementation suggestions**:

Depending on the goals of the instructor, this case can be taught a number of different ways Two suggestions are provided below: the first option involves having students work in small groups to address the questions posed throughout the case which are included below. Regardless of the approach, all students are instructed to do a close reading of the case in advance of arriving to class.

**Option one:**

When students arrive to class, divide them randomly into small groups. Depending on time and number of students:

* each small group can address one question, or
* half the groups can address the questions on cultural appropriation and the other half can address questions specific to museums and galleries. Or,
* each group can discuss all of the questions.

After each group has discussed the questions, have them report out to the class on their responses either by writing their comments on poster paper or on the board.

**Questions raised in the case study by topic:**

**Cultural appropriation**

1. Why do we continue to see acts of cultural insensitivity and disrespect as illustrated in the case study?
2. Cite two reasons why you think in the apologies issued in response to acts of cultural misappropriation that the offenders see cultural appropriation as a way of honoring Native culture?

**Tribal museums**

1. What responsibility do the tribal museums have in addressing the history and

 impacts of colonialism?

2. What role do tribal museums play in the 21st century?

**Non-native museums and galleries**

1. What other steps should be taken to return objects to their original owners?
2. What role should museums and galleries play in working to reunite objects in their collections with their original owners?
3. With regard to displaying Native objects, what story should be told?

**Option two:**

This option can be utilized as an extension or assessment of the first option or it can be done independently as long as students have had an opportunity to discuss the basic premise of the case, as this option will be most successful after all students have done a close reading of the case. This might require extra research and time for planning, so it might require two classes, depending on time available.

When students arrive to class, they will be randomly divided into six groups and each will be assigned to a group listed below. They will discuss the case from their particular perspective and will address how to respond to the scenario outlined below. Each group has additional information about their particular perspective that should be kept in mind as each group presents their response.

The final presentation can be done in a number of ways. Students can write a response statement that they will present to the class. This can also take the form of a role-play by setting up a community forum with all members of the group taking their particular perspective in the forum.

**Scenario:**

A designer recently debuted a new line of clothing in conjunction with an exhibit opening on Native contemporary art at the Museum of Art. The line for this exhibit featured stereotypical images of Natives on t-shirts, totes, bookmarks, and magnets. People working the exhibition who were wearing the t-shirts also wore feathered headbands, as did some of the people attending the opening event.

In advance of the opening of the exhibition, and release of the souvenirs, anticipating that there might be problems, the fashion designer and museum issued a joint statement saying they created this line to honor Natives. They believed Natives might find these stereotypical depictions of Natives to be “cheeky”[[1]](#footnote-1) and instead of the long headdress, they thought the feathered headbands would be met without controversy as they complimented the art highlighted in the exhibition.

**Group one: Collectors who have loaned objects to the museum for this exhibition**

You will take the perspective of the collectors of the objects, who have donated the objects or loaned the objects to the museum for this particular exhibition. Many of the objects have been in your family for multiple generations, and as collectors, you feel you have the right to determine how these objects should be viewed and/or used in promoting the exhibition.

**Group two: Native peoples working to have objects repatriated**

You have been in dialogue with the museum to have some of the works in their collection repatriated. As the museum was working to assemble this exhibition, they asked collectors to loan historical objects to provide context for the contemporary art. Some of the objects that have been held in private collections are objects you have known about but did not know what had happened to them until the final checklist (list of objects to be included in the exhibition) were confirmed.

**Group three: Museum staff**

It takes at least two years to properly assemble an exhibition of this caliber. You are keenly aware of the legislation that has been passed in the last two decades working towards repatriating grave goods (NAGPRA) and have been diligent in working towards reuniting objects that fall within the scope of NAGPRA with their rightful owners. However, this does not mean that you are not willing to part with all objects in your collection; otherwise, you will no longer have any objects to exhibit in the Native exhibition hall.

In publicizing this event, your public relations team worked hard to appeal to a new demographic and were not aware of any issues with using images that had been approved to be on display. Besides, is there any bad publicity?

**Group four:** **Contemporary Native artists**

This is a great opportunity to show what Native artists are doing and to remind people that “we are still here.” Many of the works we are creating are inspired by historical objects and are created for a younger audience, oftentimes, using modes that are familiar – such as traditional designs that are replicated on shoes, skateboards, hats, t-shirts, sweatshirts, and phone covers. Creating art allows us to reclaim our heritage, while at the same time we realize that it is not possible to control how our art is consumed or who purchases it.

**Group five:** **Contemporary non-Native artists/fashion designers**

We were asked to create souvenirs for people to purchase when they attended the exhibition. Our team met and decided, what better way to honor the art exhibited than to replicate the people who created it? The images we selected are part of the history of Natives, and if people don’t understand what the image means if they see someone wearing the t-shirt, then we believe it will start a dialogue. As designers we are inspired by the images we see around us and can’t control the way people respond to what we create.

**Group six:** **Visitors to the museums**

We’re very interested in contemporary art but don’t understand why everyone is so upset by this exhibition. Art is created so all people can appreciate it so it seems like we should celebrate the diversity of our culture instead of trying to control what people can or cannot see. However, other members of our group really appreciate the art that was shown in the exhibition but were greatly offended that people were walking through the exhibition wearing feathered headbands and by what was for sale in the gift shop.

**Conclusion**

Conclude the discussion or role-play with a teacher led discussion. Debrief the different perspectives of each group and lessons learned from the discussion. Have students either write down a couple of key ideas they can take with them to turn in at the conclusion of class or assign a short written assignment for students to use as a tool to respond to the case study and what they have learned.

**Additional Resources:**

While this case focused on issues surrounding contemporary popular icons appropriating aspects of Native culture, it is important for students to know that there are many Native artists whose work is making a significant impact and inroads into a world long dominated by other groups. Below are a select few Native artist counterparts to the fashion and musical groups highlighted in this case study for appropriating culture.

**FASHION**

**Eighth Generation:** “Louie Gong (Nooksack) is a Native artist, activist and educator who is widely known for merging traditional Coast Salish art with influences from urban environment to make strong statements about identity.” (Eighth Generation)

“Welcome to Eighth Generation.” (2014). Retrieved from http://eighthgeneration.com/

**Native Threads:** Mission Statement – “Native Threads exists to promote and preserve Native American culture and tradition through hip clothing that connects our people and makes the statement ‘This is Who I Am.’” (Native Threads)

“Native Threads.” (2014). Retrieved from http://www.nativethreads.com/about/

**Seven Generations** – “Seven Generations Clothing is a Native American clothing company owned, operated by natives. Each t-shirt is a ‘one of a kind design.’ Designed by a different member from our artistic family. Our motto is ‘Honor Our Elders And Teach Our Children.’” (Seven Generations)

“Seven Generations.” (n.d.). Retrieved from https://squareup.com/market/dfxtive-inc

**MUSIC**

**LightningCloud** - “LightningCloud” (n.d.). *Native Threads.* Retrieved from

http://www.nativethreads.com/profiles/lightningcloud/

**Supaman -** MTV featured hip-hop artist Christian Parrish Takes the Gun “Supaman” of the Crow Nation in 2014

Billings Gazette (2014, February 20). “Studio Enjoy: Supaman – ‘Prayer Loop Song’

Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\_0jq7jIa34Y

Exposito, Suzy. (2014, March 13). “SupaMan’s Message Soars Far Beyond the Crow

Nation.” Retrieved from http://www.mtviggy.com/articles/supamans-message

soars-far-beyondthe-crow-nation/

Taki Telonidis. (2011, October 11). “Supaman: Rapping On The Reservation.” *NPR.*

Retrieved from http://www.npr.org/2011/10/11/141238763/supaman-rapping-on

the-reservation

**Tall Paul** – “In ‘Prayers in a Song’ Minneapolis based hip hop artist Tall Paul (Paul Wenell Jr. raps about his struggle to learn his indigenous language, Anishinaabemowin, and his journey toward a deeper understanding of his Native identity.” (The Ways)

The Ways. (n.d.). “Prayer in a Song.” *The Ways: Great Lakes Native Culture &*

*Language.* Retrieved from http://theways.org/story/prayers-in-a-song

**A Tribe Called Red** – Three DJs from Ottawa. “A Tribe Called Red bring politics into the party by reimagining the powwow tradition, flipping the script on cultural appropriation in electronic dance music.” (Boles)

Boles, Benjamin. (2013, February 7-14). “A Tribe Called Red.” *NowToronto*. Retrieved

from http://www.nowtoronto.com/news/story.cfm?content=191133

Irwin, Nigel. (2013, May 2). “New Music: Listen to a Tribe Called Red’s New Record,

‘Nation II Nation.” *Noisey Music by Vice.com*. Retrieved from http://noisey.vice.com/en\_uk/blog/listen-to-a-tribe-called-reds-new-record-nation-ii-nation

Risk, Trevor. (2013, July 12). “A Tribe Called Red Want White Fans To ‘Please Stop

Wearing Redface ‘Indian” Costumes to Shows.” *HuffPost Canada Music.* Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2013/07/12/a-tribe-called-red-redface-indian-costumes\_n\_3576884.html

1. This scenario is inspired by a 2002 incident in which clothing company Abercrombie & Fitch debuted t-shirts with sayings such as “Wong Brothers Laundry Service - Two Wongs Can Make It White.” A spokesman for the company said, “We thought they were cheeky, irreverent and funny and everyone would love them.” BBCNews (2002, April 19). “US company pulls ‘racist’ T-shirts.” *BBCNews.com*. Retrieved from http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/1938914.stm [↑](#footnote-ref-1)