

Handout 1

Misrepresentation of Native Americans in mainstream culture

Ex. 1. Answer the following questions:

1. What comes to your mind when you think about Native Americans? Consider features of character, behavior, clothing, objects, etc.
2. Native Americans or Indians: does the name matter?
3. Why might Native Americans oppose to the idea of “the discovery of America”?
4. Why is it ironic that the American society sees itself as the nation of liberty?
5. How would you describe the history of US-Native relations?

Ex. 2. Think about the following statements. Do you agree with them or not? Why?

1. It is wrong to speak of Native Americans exclusively in past tense.
2. It is wrong to use children’s alphabet cards which say, “A is for apple, B is for ball, I is for Indian.”
3. It is wrong to criticize children’s behavior by saying e.g. “You’re acting like a bunch of wild Indians.”
4. It is wrong to encourage children to dress up as Indians for Halloween.

Ex. 3. Read the article and answer the following questions:

1. Why was Ralph Lauren’s advertisement criticized?
2. How would you define the term cultural appropriation?
3. Why is the concept of a romanticized Old West harmful?
4. Why were NA people outraged by Karlie Kloss’s costume?
5. What does Patricia Michaels say about fashion? Do you agree?
6. What does Jessica Metcalfe say about the picture that Lauren has? Do you agree?

“Ralph Lauren’s Native American Ads Reveal Sad Truth About The Fashion World”

By Kim Bhasin

The clothing company Ralph Lauren released an online advertisement for its RRL line last month that drew scathing criticism from Native Americans. The ad’s imagery harked back to the Old West, with henley jerseys and rustic jeans displayed in faded sepia tones. And while one page touted bandanas and “Western-style” shirts, the opposite page showed a Native American sporting a feathered headdress, holding a rifle across his lap. Another page depicted a stoic Native American man with dark skin, braided hair and a Western shirt-and-vest combo. Critics charged that the ads reduced people, and indeed entire cultures, to mere marketing props. Many called for a boycott. Dr. Adrienne Keene, a postdoctoral researcher and citizen of the Cherokee Nation, wrote in a post for Indian Country Today Media Network that Ralph Lauren had reached a “new low.”

“Ralph Lauren has been doing this my whole life,” Ruth Hopkins, a writer in her 30s who lives on the Spirit Lake Tribe reservation in North Dakota, told The Huffington Post. “He is a repeat offender. Cultural appropriation is apparently his thing.” Following the outcry, the

company removed the images from its website and apologized. The episode neatly summed up an issue in fashion and pop culture that has drawn heated debate in recent years. Many people seemingly remain tethered to the idea of a romanticized Old West — a time of death and carnage for America’s indigenous population.

The “cowboys and Indians” movies of the 1950s did much to solidify these tropes in modern American culture, building on centuries of stereotypes. These films mashed up the traditions of countless tribes indiscriminately, often depicting Native Americans as primitive, even bloodthirsty brutes. At best, indigenous people were depicted as noble savages, piteous characters not yet corrupted by the “civilized” world. Meanwhile, the real-life meanings attached to certain items, customs and historical figures got distorted or lost, and white Americans, for the most part, neither knew nor cared. Take the war bonnet, a feathered headdress worn by the warriors or leaders of many Native American tribes. Each feather was earned through a sacrifice or an act of valor, making the bonnet a mark of great respect. But at the 2012 Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show, supermodel Karlie Kloss strode down the catwalk in panties, a skimpy bra and a massive war bonnet-like headdress. Chanel put headdresses on the runway in 2013, and Pharrell Williams donned one on the cover of Elle UK in 2014. Each incident was met with swift backlash.

Such clichéd images are what many Native Americans in the fashion industry want to transcend. “Mass society thinks that way,” said Bethany Yellowtail, a 26-year-old fashion designer and member of the Crow and Northern Cheyenne tribes. “They think of teepees and headdresses and feathers.” Raised in Montana on the Crow Indian Reservation, Yellowtail wants to bring authenticity to indigenous fashion with her line B.Yellowtail, which will be released in spring. Her clothes are modern takes on the classic designs of her culture, adapting the work of her ancestors to the 21st century — for example, designs based on the beadwork of her great-grandmother, who lived in the 19th century. “Our original designs were purposeful,” she said. “The colors, the designs — everything has a specific meaning and a spirit connected to it.”

Patricia Michaels, a 48-year-old Native American fashion designer who appeared on Bravo’s “Project Runway” in 2013, told HuffPost that she doesn’t consider it her place to police what people can or can’t use in their designs. It should come down to thoughtfulness and taste, she said, adding that if the non-Native American designers who have gotten in trouble in the past had simply collaborated with Native American designers who know the culture, everyone would have benefited. “I wouldn’t take the Pope’s hat and put it on the runway,” said Michaels, who is based in New Mexico. “I think that’s where taste comes in, as far as a designer. Do you really want to put a war bonnet on a female model? If you’re going to be distasteful and have no regard for somebody’s culture, it’s shameful.”

When Michaels describes her designs, it’s clear that everything has a meaning. Her “Elk Antler Cape” strives to portray the beauty and grace of indigenous hunters and the animals that give their lives. An “Ink Drip Top” on silk charmeuse represents contaminants invading once-pure waters. A flowing, hand-painted organza skirt symbolizes the years that Michaels’ ancestors spent observing and preserving nature. Meanwhile, Ralph Lauren’s “Pawnee jacket” — an item that appeared in the controversial RRL ads last month, and one that shares a name with a Midwestern tribe — was described in the ad copy as “a faithful wool/nylon jacket modeled after a 1930s sporting coat.” It’s unclear if any Pawnee people had a role in designing the jacket. A search for “Pawnee” on the Ralph Lauren website now yields no results.

The famed designer behind his eponymous brand built his fashion empire on images of classic Americana, clothes that evoke the idyllic American dream. Many of his brand’s designs succeed in that — from preppy polos to denim workwear — and his Navajo prints of the 1980s popularized many indigenous patterns. But where’s the line between celebration

and appropriation? Last year, Ralph Lauren released another collection that raised some eyebrows. It had lots of Native American imagery, like headdresses and totem poles. A representative for the Ralph Lauren company declined to comment for this article. Lauren himself, though, addressed his love for Native American aesthetics in an interview with the Associated Press last June. The designer reflected on his years growing up in the Bronx, New York. “I grew up inspired by America, inspired by the West, inspired by the Adirondacks, inspired by African-Americans, soldiers — life that I saw — the Native Americans,” Lauren told the AP. “I saw a world that was different, and I was inspired.”

The Native American aesthetic is clearly a big part of Lauren’s life. His Double RL Ranch in Colorado is chock-full of tents and artifacts, and there’s even a decorative vintage photo of a nameless Native American child. After the ranch was featured on “The Oprah Winfrey Show” in 2011, Dr. Jessica Metcalfe, writing at the blog Beyond Buckskin, dubbed the photo the “ultimate form of appropriation.” “That little girl is someone,” Metcalfe wrote at the time. “She’s someone’s daughter, sister, antie, niece, mother, cousin, granddaughter, grandmother.”

There’s a pervasive idea that Native Americans are a thing of the past, said Kim TallBear, a professor of anthropology and Native American and indigenous studies at the University of Texas at Austin. The idea that Native Americans no longer exist makes it easier for society to ignore their voices. Cultural representations of Native Americans are always focused on the past, she said, as seen in sports franchises like the Cleveland Indians and Washington’s NFL team. “There’s a national delusion that we’re all dead and vanished,” said TallBear, a member of the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate in South Dakota. “We are contemporary, living people.”