

“Indians” in the American Imagination: Exploring Cultural Appropriation through Structured Academic Controversy

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What is cultural appropriation, how does it affect Native American communities, and should it be regulated by law?

OVERVIEW

In early 2014, Pharrell Williams was winning. His latest single, “Happy,” was in the midst of a 47 week run on the *Billboard Hot 100*, 10 of which were at the top. Williams’ personality, every bit as outwardly positive as the song “Happy” suggested it might be, was made for TV, and he quickly became the darling of talk shows on the late night, morning, and daytime circuits. Famously, in April 2014 Williams broke down in tears of inspirational joy while discussing the wave of fan interpretations of the song with Oprah Winfrey. Also moved, Oprah suggested the song was so successful, “Because it came from such a clear space that the energy was absolutely uninterrupted by anything other than allowing it to flow from heart to heart.”



And then Williams posed on the cover of *Elle UK* magazine wearing a feathered war bonnet.

As happens in the social media age, many fans, and others, were “#nothappy.” To them Williams had become yet another artist guilty of “cultural appropriation.” The bonnet, which has origins primarily in Plains Indian tribes, was ceremonial, something earned by a select few, even within those tribes in which it did exist. Some argued that it was a leftover stereotype from the eras of “Buffalo Bill” and Cowboys and Indians, something worn by few that had come to represent all. However, many others disagreed, suggesting that Williams had every right to don the headgear and had been wrongly accused. In response to the uproar, Williams accepted the criticism and issued what, at least to this author, seemed a heartfelt apology.

Once an academic term uttered mostly on university campuses, events like Pharrell’s magazine cover on *Elle* have brought the contentious issue of “cultural



OVERVIEW (CONTINUED)

appropriation" into public consciousness. The practice, defined by Fordham Law Professor Susan Scafidi as, "Taking intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artifacts from someone else's culture without permission...[especially] when the source community is a minority group that has been oppressed or exploited in other ways," is viewed by some as a serious issue that deserves legal action. Others, however, believe that "cultural appropriation" is a natural outgrowth of the "melting pot" culture of a place like the United States and that there is nothing negative about it whatsoever. Perhaps no bellwether of the contentiousness behind the term is as telling as the Wikipedia entry for the term, where the open source nature of the site allows anyone to make edits, and they do. "Cultural appropriation" is updated, and also reverted to its previous state almost daily as individuals seek to control the meaning of the concept itself.

In this lesson, students will engage in a structured academic controversy to address the question, "should appropriation of Native American cultural practices be regulated by law?" Working in small groups, students will consider cultural appropriation in varying degrees by watching *RUMBLE* clips of African American "Mardi Gras Indian Tribes" from New Orleans, viewing images of sports logos, controversial fashion items, and consulting divergent viewpoints in regards to each. Groups will pair off into a "yes" and "no" answer, and support their position with evidence. Then, the groups will switch, and each defend the opposite position. Finally, the class will end with each student drafting a personal response to the activity.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The definition of "culture"
- Various definitions of "cultural appropriation"
- About the debate regarding the validity of the concept of "cultural appropriation"
- About specific instances in popular culture labeled as "cultural appropriation"
- About the Mardi Gras "Indians" of New Orleans

2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Through textual analysis of divergent viewpoints on cultural appropriation, students will be able to evaluate both sides of the debate and then employ research-based evidence in the statement of their own beliefs about the issue.

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Ask students:

- Have you ever heard the term “cultural appropriation”? What do you think it means? Can you give any examples of what might be “cultural appropriation”?

2. Show students Slide 1, “Pharrell Williams, Elle Uk Cover,” inform your students that the cover was deeply offensive to some, and that Williams later issued a heartfelt apology about it, and ask:

- What about this photo do you think was so offensive to many? Why? How do you feel about it?
- Is there any tradition in your life that you feel might be out of place on the cover of a fashion magazine?

PROCEDURE:

1. Tell students that before you can assess the idea of “cultural appropriation,” you must address the words separately. Then ask,

- How might you define “culture”?

2. Show students Slide 2, “Culture - Oxford Dictionary,” and ask:

- What might be some examples of things considered “culture” by this definition?

3. Now show students Slide 3, “Appropriate / Appropriation - Oxford Dictionary,” and ask:

- How might appropriation apply to culture? Can you think of any examples?

4. Show students Slide 4, Fordham law professor Susan Scafidi’s definition of cultural appropriation, “Cultural Appropriation Definition,” and ask:

- Can you think of any examples of cultural appropriation? Do you think that it is an issue that should concern people?

5. Play Clip 1, “‘Indians’ at Woodstock,” and ask:

- Why do you think “Indians were in” at Woodstock? What do you think the elements of Native American fashion you saw in this clip might have meant to the people who wore them? (*Encourage students to think of what Woodstock represented at the time: freedom, escape from the mainstream, etc. Perhaps the Native American clothing suggested freedom, outsider-ness, and a connection to nature and the past, even if those things were more imagined than real.*)

6. Break students into small, even-numbered groups, ideally of four, for the Structured Academic Controversy (SAC) activity. Then divide each group into Side A and Side B. Inform groups that they’ll be addressing the question, “Does cultural appropriation negatively affect Native American communities, and should it be regulated by law?” Over the course of the activity, Sides A and B will switch positions, arguing both in the affirmative and the negative.

7. Tell students that they will gather information for the SAC at four stations. Groups should move through the stations as time and space permits, and may begin their journey at any of the four stations. Groups should follow the instructions on Handout 1 - Cultural Appropriation Structured Academic Controversy.

- Station 1: Thoughts on Cultural Appropriation
- Station 2: Music - Mardi Gras Indians in New Orleans
- Station 3: Sports Logos
- Station 4: Fashion

SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Ask students:

- Having taken both sides of this debate, how do you now feel about cultural appropriation? Is there a “yes” or “no” answer to its existence? Does it concern you? Is it always the same, or do you feel differently about the varying ways you see cultural appropriation occur?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

1. Look up the term “Hollywood Indian.” In a short essay, use two examples of the “Hollywood Indian” to address the idea of cultural appropriation in American cinema and television. How have Native Americans been portrayed? What does the portrayal of Native Americans suggest about the mostly white producers and directors who have written and casted them?

STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading (K-12)

Reading 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

Reading 6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Reading 8: Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

Reading 9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing (K-12)

Writing 1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

Writing 7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

Writing 9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening (K-12)

Speaking and Listening 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Speaking and Listening 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 9: Global Connections Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

Core Music Standard: Responding

Analyze: Analyze how the structure and context of varied musical works inform the response.

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators' and/or performers' expressive intent.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.

Core Music Standard: Connecting

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.

NEW JERSEY STATE LEARNING STANDARDS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

Reading

NJSLSA.R1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences and relevant connections from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

NJSLSA.R6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

NJSLSA.R8: Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

NJSLSA.R9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Writing

NJSLSA.W1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

NJSLSA.W7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects, utilizing an inquiry-based research process, based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

NJSLSA.W9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

RESOURCES

VIDEO RESOURCES

- Rumble – “Indians” at Woodstock
- Rumble – Big Chief Monk Boudreaux
- Rumble – Ancestry

IMAGE RESOURCES

- Pharell Williams, Elle UK Cover
- Culture: Oxford Dictionary
- Appropriate/Appropriation Dictionary
- Cultural Appropriation Definition

HANDOUTS

- Handout 1: Cultural Appropriation structured Academic Controversy
- Handout for Station 1: Cultural Appropriation Arguments
- Handout for Station 2: Music – Mardi Gras “Indians” in New Orleans
- Handout for Station 3: Sports – The Washington Redskins Logo
- Handout for Station 4: Fashion