# Colonialism Didn't Disappear, it Rebranded

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Our world is abundant with gift shops selling dream catchers and smudge kits, orange shirts marked by "Every Child Matters", and beaded boots and dresses on runways. At a glance, this widespread connection to Indigenous culture seems like a step towards reconciliation — but below the surface, many of these displays cause more harm than good.

An investigation by data journalist Francesca Fionda of 40 shops in Gastown, BC, revealed that 75% were selling "Indigenous" souvenirs made by non-Indigenous companies and people (Yesno). Countless clothing brands, including Valentino, worth nearly 8 billion dollars, plagiarise and profit off of Indigenous designs, often slipping by with no consequences (Factora; Metcalfe). The well-known "Every Child Matters" logo, created by Comox and Kwakwaka'wakw artist Andy Everson, has been stolen countless times and placed on merchandise, often by overseas companies (Beaulne-Stuebing). These detached companies take the profits for themselves.

Profiting from stolen heritage is far more than just unethical, it's modern colonialism. Indigenous people in Canada throughout history have had their culture, traditions, and arts stripped from them to a point of near erasure. Residential Schools and the forced removal of children from their homes damaged generations of Indigenous identity. Children were raised without their culture, language, family, ways of life, and put through horrors beyond comprehension. For 67 years the Canadian government criminalized spiritual ceremonies and other cultural practices, destroying the arts associated (Parrott). Colonial power held to a belief that Indigenous people would ultimately cease to exist either due to Western disease or

forced cultural conformity (University of Saskatchewan). The remnants of this mindset didn't disappear with policy changes and reconciliation efforts though. Instead it evolved, shifting to forms more socially acceptable by today's standard, forms such as cultural appropriation.

We too often see costumes of the "Indian chief" or the "Native American Princess", or "cultural" merchandise made by non-Indigenous companies, perpetuating stereotypes surrounding Indigenous people. These dehumanizing displays tend to push the perception of Indigenous peoples into a one-dimensional category, frozen in time, neglecting the ever-evolving and diverse realities of Indigenous identities today (The Canadian Encyclopedia). Authentic Indigenous culture is not only an existence of the past, as these companies sometimes may lead us to believe.

Kerry Potts, chair of the non-profit organization Native Women in the Arts, beautifully worded an aspect of this issue. "For so long, Indigenous people have been a part of a popular culture — but their image hasn't been created or controlled by Indigenous people" (Cruickshank). In the same interview, she touches on the problem with mass-marketing aspects of Indigenous culture that aren't meant to be bought or sold. "Once these aspects of Indigenous culture are mass marketed, they lose their historical meaning", she states. While some mass-produced Indigenous "inspired" products seem to be created with respect, or don't blatantly perpetuate a stereotype, their very creation is frequently problematic. This practice creates competition —that should not exist— with Indigenous artists (The Canadian Encyclopedia), who rely on their culture's arts as a livelihood and an expression of identity.

This cultural exploitation is not as widely recognised as it could be— by our country's people, and by those who lead us. According to a survey done by the Angus Reid Institute in 2023, out of all other racial groups in Canada, Indigenous people believe that the least amount of progress in reducing racism has occurred over the past few generations, with 15% of people saying that racism is worse now than it has been in the past (Angus Reid Institute). That 15% is close to 300,000 Indigenous people in Canada alone (Statistics Canada).

Currently, one of the only protections of Indigenous arts are intellectual property laws, and Indigenous people face unfair challenges when trying to use this safeguard. In order to copyright a design, our current system requires it to be original, and with it a supplied hard copy of what is to be protected. The issue here is that Indigenous art forms are often passed down orally, through generations. Designs may have been created hundreds, if not thousands of times, and stories, songs and traditions are often not documented formally (Bird). At the height of Canada 150, the government made an official reconciliation promise to Indigenous people. In light of this, public awareness and discussion surrounding the impact of cultural appropriation increased, leading to brand and institutional support for the cause. However, many of those promises were short lived, and when celebrations wrapped up, active support dwindled (Nixon).

I came across a Reddit thread arguing that "cultural appropriation is actually a good thing" (u/rfieyer). Among others, a comment stood out to me; not because of its validity, but because it reflects a common misunderstanding surrounding cultural appropriation. "A non-Indigenous person wearing an Indigenous headdress should not be criticized, as they are not pretending to be Indigenous, and "simply like the look", therefore causing no legitimate harm."

This brings forth a common disconnect between intention and effect, and a lack of awareness of historical context. Normalizing the “trivial” or “insignificant” leads to larger cultural patterns— patterns of oppression and cultural devaluation. Symbols that are so sacred, and so historically vilified should never be worn carelessly by

the unaware.

Cultural appropriation is theft, belittlement, and apathy. The corporate reconciliation we so often see, legal changes, and distant declarations can only do so much. One of the biggest problems with how our society discusses Indigenous issues is the lack of connection. We need truly conscious effort and perspective compassion; we need to listen to Indigenous voices; we need to profoundly feel.

Though reconciliation remains ongoing and complex, we can try to the best of our abilities to inform, connect, and educate ourselves and others.

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