

THESIS

A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF NON-NATIVE PRACTICE OF NATIVE
AMERICAN RELIGION

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

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This qualitative study examines the experiences and perceptions of non-Native American people who practice Native American religion. Semi-structured interviews with ten participants, all of whom identify as Caucasian or White, reveal a series of strategies to avoid or dismiss critiques of cultural appropriation. These strategies include, but are not limited to: neoliberal values, the practice of spiritual materialism, denial of spiritual agency, and racial stereotyping.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

I grew up in close proximity to the S'klallam and Suquamish reservations in the Pacific Northwest, on colonized land that had been “checker-boarded,” or opened up to white ownership and development, the most valuable waterfront plots bought by rich whites. I grew up steeped in colonial, white-normative discourse, where anyone who was not white, middle- to upper class, Christian, and straight was considered an outsider. My community had an epidemic level of youth suicide, substance abuse, and mental illness, with the adult response consisting of looking the other way. I was taught that my life mattered less than others, that my queer, punk, mentally ill self did not fit the narrative.

As a way to survive, I turned to alternative forms of spirituality. Neo-paganism taught me that being a woman was sacred, that queerness was to be honored, and that I had the power to shape my own reality. My neo-pagan community as a teenager often included White people who, with varying degrees of permission, were engaged in indigenous cultural and religious practices. During my adolescence, I participated in shamanic and Native American ceremonies, all of which were led by white-identified people.

During my undergraduate education, I found the languages of feminism and cultural studies as a way to understand and resist the discourses I was raised with. The process was both extremely liberating and extremely painful for me. My education and the people it put me in contact with forced me to confront the ways I had been complicit in neocolonial discourse and practices. The intersection of my graduate ethnic studies education and adolescent experiences places me in an occasionally uncomfortable in-between space in which I hold insider status in communities I have come to critique.

The topic of cultural appropriation, or the use of cultural products by those outside of the originating culture, is a very sensitive one amongst white identified members of my spiritual and geographic communities. I've encountered a lot of resistance to anti-cultural appropriation arguments, often extremely hostile and verbally violent. One such instance was a Facebook conversation in response to an article I posted. The pop star Selena Gomez had recently performed wearing a bindi, and the author of the article wrote a detailed response to why Gomez's accessory choice was problematic. I posted the article with a quote from the article that read:

The political context in which cultural symbols exist is important. Cultural appropriation happens — and the unquestioned sense of entitlement that white Americans display towards the artifacts and rituals of people of color exists too. All “appropriation” is not merely an example of cultural sharing, an exchange between friends that takes place on a level playing field.¹

Comments quickly flooded in, the substance of which indicated to me that none of the commenters had read the article, and were reacting to the quote and the concept of cultural appropriation. One of my friends, whose parents had been traveling missionaries, spent a part of her childhood in India and enjoys wearing saris and bindis, despite not being Hindu or of Indian descent. Another commenter worried about “those who only see the color of your skin, and accuse you of cultural appropriation.” Others shifted blame and accused marginalized cultures of being stagnant or xenophobic. I responded with quotes from the article that addressed all of their concerns clearly, but the conversation continued with no apparent reading of the article. Another friend jumped into the conversation with:

The idea of ‘Cultural Appropriation’ Is [sic] one of the most racist things I have ever heard

¹ Jaya Sundaresh, "Beyond Bindis: Why Cultural Appropriation Matters." The Aerogram. May 10, 2013. Accessed May 24, 2013. <http://theaerogram.com/beyond-bindis-why-cultural-appropriation-matters/>.

of. It says that in this country, filled with people from all cultures, and all manners of ancestors, that people with White Skin cant [sic] celebrate any other culture than 'White Culture' which I have no IDEA how to identify. 'It's not okay for you to do that, because you're white' is no different from 'It's not okay for you to do that because you're black'...I just don't understand the racist lines I have to follow. Which drinking fountain do I use? Which seat on the bus do I sit on, and for God's sake, which bathroom do I use?

Instead of recognizing the voiced material and psychological effects of one's religious symbols being appropriated as fashion statements, my friends instead decided they were the ones being persecuted because of their desire to consume cultural products of the Other while possessing white skin. None of them could distinguish the difference between cultural appropriation and cultural exchange, and all of the commenters refused to read the article. All of the commenters identify as independent or liberal politically, and consider themselves members of neo-pagan religions. The quoted commenter says he was raised in Native American spirituality.

This conversation left me shaking and flabbergasted, heart pounding in my chest. What on earth was going on here? What is the logic that turns appropriator into the oppressed? Why were these people so unwilling to accept the lived testimony of an East Indian woman discussing her own experiences and culture, despite identifying as multicultural, aware, progressive individuals?

At the same time, these people were members and leaders of my spiritual community. Could I continue to be friends with them? Be in sacred space with them? I already felt distanced from them because of my education. None of the mentioned commenters have attended college, and I am often described using words like 'elitest' and 'in a bubble'. This conversation and others like it deepened that divide. My spiritual roots and ethnic studies values, values of respecting cultural sovereignty, justice, and seeking to end oppression, appeared to be diametrically opposed. I found myself keeping my spirituality secret in ethnic studies communities, and my ethnic studies education secret in neo-pagan spaces. I tried to deal with this

divide by avoiding it and compartmentalizing my life, but the more I tried to run from this issue, the more I was presented with it. More of these conversations kept happening over the course of my undergraduate career. Before I left Washington to attend graduate school in Colorado, I went to a party with some of the people in the comment thread, and another man who had read it all but not commented encouraged me to make an academic study of it. He expressed similar frustrations to mine, and lamented that our community seemed stuck in white-normative discourses and values. “You need to write about this,” he said, “And write it well.”

This work is an attempt to engage that challenge. I owe my survival in this world as a neuro-diverse, disabled, queer outsider to both my spirituality and my education. I want to live in a world where those of us with European ancestry can honor our ancestors and their indigenous spiritual traditions without appropriating the cultures and practices of indigenous peoples of this continent. I want my brothers and sisters in the craft to be anti-racist activists, true allies to other marginalized people. History shows us that when marginalized people come together, great change can be achieved, but as Carl Jung wrote, “there is no birth of consciousness without pain.”² In order to engage with people unlike ourselves, Whites who practice neo-pagan religion need to confront oppressive practices and discourses within their own community, and not allow these to go unchallenged. We need to confront colonial, neoliberal discourses embedded in our communities if we are truly to identify as independent thinkers and spiritual practitioners.

I realize that this work may be controversial, and it is not my wish to alienate anyone, but rather to invite them to a different way of thinking. Many of us pursue alternative spiritual paths because of deep personal pain, looking for tools to heal ourselves. However, this does not mean

² Carl G. Jung and Joseph Campbell, *The Portable Jung*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1976.), 167.

that our use of those tools is by nature non-oppressive and liberatory for all. The consequences of our actions on others need to be considered if we are to truly consider ourselves free and liberated.

For this project, I sought to discover the answers to the questions that ran through my head every time I got into another fight over cultural appropriation: Why does this happen? What is this person thinking? What led them to think this way? This research is guided by the research questions: 1): What are the experiences of non-Native people who practice Native American influenced spirituality? 2): What are non-Native perceptions of Native people and culture? I asked these questions out of a genuine desire to understand the logics and experiences of those who feel called to practice Native American spirituality, because I truly believe they do not mean to cause harm. As the comment above explained, many people feel disconnected or alienated from their cultures of birth, and this is a valid feeling. However, feelings and intentions, however genuine and heart-felt they may be, still cause unintended material effects that need to be confronted if we want to live in a more equal, decolonial world.

I see this research as important because of the lack of prior qualitative research on cultural appropriation that examines the experiences people engaging in cultural appropriation. There is compelling work by Native American scholars and activists on cultural and spiritual appropriation, frequent critiques of New Age literature and authors, and a few recent works on the ethics surrounding cultural appropriation. I am influenced heavily by these works, but believe that if conversation is going to take place, there needs to be a deeper understanding of the other side.

Chapter Two is my literature review, and will explore themes related to this thesis, including exploring the history of indigenous religious rights and restrictions in the United

States, previous scholarship on this topic, and notions of cultural appropriation, neoliberalism, and spiritual materialism.

Chapter Three will explain the methods and methodology of this project, including why I chose a qualitative structure and the paradigm and theories that inform this study, namely a transformative paradigm and grounded theory.

Chapter Four will report on my findings, examining themes of neoliberalism, spiritual materialism, racial stereotyping, and denial of spiritual agency. These themes will be supported by quotes from the interviews in order to show patterns in participant language use and reasoning. In Chapter Five, the final chapter, I will analyze the data, including making recommendations on future scholarship and anti-cultural appropriation work based on my findings.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter defines and examines concepts related to the background, theory and analysis of this thesis. These terms and concepts include cultural appropriation, current analysis of cultural appropriation as a phenomenon by indigenous and non-indigenous scholars, the history of Native American religious rights in the United States, neoliberalism, and spiritual materialism.

Cultural Appropriation

In order to address questions of cultural appropriation, a working definition of what “culture” and “appropriation” consist of is necessary. The concept of cultural appropriation acknowledges that culture produces products, such as beliefs, food, clothing, and religion.³ When discussing Native American spiritual beliefs, rituals, and artifacts, this research project frames them as “cultural products,” which acknowledges that, though intangible, beliefs are created by people within certain historical and cultural contexts. Therefore we arrive at a definition of the spiritual as material, and acknowledge that spirituality and its practice have tangible effects on people and society.⁴ This is not to say that spirituality is necessarily an object, but to acknowledge that spirituality and its practice and performance have material effects on cultures and bodies. Authors such as Andrea Smith and Vine Deloria Jr. discuss how the practice of spirituality can affect community and individual health. Deloria writes, “Religion cannot be kept within the bounds of sermon and scriptures. It is a force in and of itself and it calls for the integration of lands and peoples in harmonious unity.”⁵ The misuse of cultural products related to

³ Susan Scafidi, *Who Owns Culture?: Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 9.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Vine Deloria, *God is Red: A Native View of Religion*, 3rd ed. (Golden: Fulcrum Publishing), 296.

spirituality can therefore have material effects on identity, mental health, and community integrity.

Cultural appropriation is the unauthorized use of cultural products by those outside of the culture and includes speaking for or representing a culture that is not one's own. This "speaking for" can be done through "legal, social, artistic, and political work" and becomes particularly problematic when done by "individuals or groups with more social, economic, and political power"⁶ than those being spoken for.

While it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when cultural appropriation became a topic of public debate, organizations such as the American Indian Movement have fought for decades for the return of religious artifacts and human remains taken by anthropologists and archeologists. Initially, this focus on repatriation was isolated to the return of physical objects and remains, but since the 1980s acknowledges that there are intellectual and spiritual forms of cultural property being stolen too. Terms for this theft have ranged from "cultural appropriation" to "biopiracy" and "cultural genocide."⁷ Since the advent of the internet, critique of cultural appropriation has become more widespread and accessible with articles and tips on topics such as "how to recognize an exploiter."⁸

Radical environmental authors, New Age authors, and members of the "men's movement" have been writing books appropriating Native spirituality since the late 1960s, though examples of "playing Indian" and appropriating Native spirituality existed

⁶ Jonathan Hart, "Translating and Resisting Empire: Cultural Appropriation and Postcolonial Studies," In *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation*, ed. Bruce Ziff. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 137.

⁷ Michael F. Brown, *Who Owns Native Culture?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 3.

⁸ Philip Jenkins, *Dream Catchers: How Mainstream America Discovered Native Spirituality*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 237.

prior.⁹ Non-Native authors have created lucrative media empires marketing Native stories and spirituality, including books, speaking tours, and online education. These books are often a pastiche of Native American symbolism, Eastern religious thought, and self-help language and logics.¹⁰

While some authors have focused on money as a primary motivator for cultural appropriation, Philip J. Deloria argues that appropriating Native American identity is a way for Euro-Americans to reconcile cultural anxieties and turmoil. He writes, “In each of these historical moments, Americans have returned to the Indian, reinterpreting the intuitive dilemmas surrounding Indianness to meet the circumstances of their times.”¹¹

Both Vine and Philip Deloria argue that “playing Indian” since the 1960s has been a reaction to tumultuous world events and the spiritual vacuum of postmodernism. In the wake of war and social turmoil, “Americans turned their anxious eyes toward individuals and their quests for meaningful lives. These quests for meaning took a variety of forms, but they often involved personal searches for authentic experience.”¹² New Age authors such as Hyemeyohsts Storm published books that are a pastiche of Native American symbolism and mythology with other New Age ideas. Vine Deloria describes Storm’s book *Seven Arrows* as

Unique because it tried to make a contemporary religious statement ... people expected to find a record of ancient Cheyenne rituals and ceremonies were stunned to see garish quasi-psychedelic shields ... and the advocacy of the so-called ‘medicine wheel’ the was supposed to enable a person to adjust their lives in order to solve pressing personal problems ... *Seven Arrows* had an incredible impact on young non-Indians. Accustomed to simplistic teachings from their own churches they found the key to an exotic religion that they had been led to believe was very complicated.¹³

⁹ Shari Huhndorf, *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

¹⁰ Ward Churchill, “Indians Are Us?: Reflections on the ‘Men’s Movement,’” in *Indians Are Us?: Culture and Genocide in Native North America*. (Monroe: Common Courage Press, 1994).

¹¹ Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 7.

¹² *Ibid.*, 31

¹³ Deloria, *God is Red*, 35.

While not the focus of this study, cultural appropriation also has a material dimension in the non-Native ownership and use of spiritual items. “Playing Indian” often becomes a performance, embodied and perpetuated through the wearing of Native American jewelry, and ownership of items like drums and feathers. As is noted by Michael Brown, this appropriation often includes the non-traditional use of entheogens such as ayahuasca, and the patenting of traditional plants and shamanic knowledge to make prescription drugs.¹⁴

As will be shown in my data analysis, this idea of something “new” and “exotic” is a common experience among my interview subjects. The appeal of indigenous spirituality seems to be the ways in which it can contribute to personal growth and spiritual development, a view that is compatible with neoliberal and Romantic notions of individual freedom.

Responses to Cultural Appropriation

The Native response to these authors has ranged from the Lakota Declaration of War, which calls on indigenous people to “declare war against all persons who persist in exploiting, abusing and misrepresenting the sacred traditions and spiritual practices of our Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota people”¹⁵ to some Native Americans supporting non-Natives, claiming that Native religious beliefs are beneficial and can help reconcile past violence.¹⁶

Additionally, some Native Americans have marketed their traditions to non-Natives, such as in the case of Sun Bear and the Bear Tribe Medicine Society.¹⁷ Philip J. Deloria also reminds us that cultural appropriation does not happen in a vacuum, and that “increasing numbers of Indians [have] participated in white people’s Indian play, assisting, confirming, co-opting,

¹⁴ Brown, *Who Owns Native Culture?*, 138-139.

¹⁵ “Declaration of War Against Exploiters of Lakota Spirituality,” accessed January 29, 2015, www.aics.org/war.html

¹⁶ James O. Young and Conrad G. Brunk, eds., *The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation* (Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

¹⁷ Lisa Aldred, “Plastic Shamans and Astroturf Sun Dances: New Age Commercialization of Native American Spirituality.” *The American Indian Quarterly* 24, no 3 (2000): 329-52.

challenging, and legitimating the performative tradition of aboriginal American identity.”¹⁸ While this Native participation may be given as a reason why cultural appropriation is acceptable, it is important to consider the economic and social marginalization of indigenous peoples, and to consider that participating in “playing Indian” may be a way out of poverty. Most prior academic critique of cultural appropriation by non-Native scholars has come from philosophers who make attempts to reconcile Western cultural beliefs about ownership with indigenous rights. James O. Young and Conrad G. Brunk, professors of philosophy at the University of Victoria, write that “Our conclusion is that while liberty of conscience and freedom of religious practice are a fundamental right of persons in free society, nevertheless there are important moral obligations owed by those who appropriate the religious ideas and practices of others that may place limits on the exercise of these rights.”¹⁹

They believe that cultural appropriation is harmful because it is a violation of property rights, as it can consist of the theft of objects, and that it is also an “attack on the viability or identity of cultures or their members.”²⁰ As philosophers they loathe to impose a universal standard of morality and respect, acknowledging that these concepts are culturally relative, but claim that any attempt at respectful borrowing of culture should be done by the cultural standards of the culture being borrowed from.

Young and Brunk ultimately assert that the argument over cultural appropriation comes down to a debate between the right to freedom of religion versus the right to cultural identity. They argue that religious rights do not out-weigh rights of others, such as in the case of

¹⁸ Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 8.

¹⁹ Young and Brunk, *The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation*, 94.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

polygamy or denying blood transfusions to children.²¹ Freedom of religion does not automatically grant the right to infringe upon the rights of others.

Non-Native responses to the idea of cultural appropriation are often hostile. An on-going 1993 discussion in the Canadian publication *Globe and Mail* over cultural appropriation met with comparisons to censorship and book burning in Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. While the discussion was on non-Native authors publishing novels with Native characters and storylines, much of the debate can be applied to questions of spiritual appropriation as well. My interviews with White participants in Native American spirituality will also show a reluctance to talk about cultural appropriation, as well as a variety of strategies for dodging responsibility. As the incident in my introduction shows, many non-Natives simply refuse to have dialogue on the issue. However, as Jonathan Hart writes, “The debate on cultural appropriation needs to be encouraged as a sign of freedom rather than as a screaming across the abyss. It would be hypocritical of the dominant culture to cry Stalin while shutting down debate over the issue.”²²

A possible explanation for this behavior is explored by sociologist Avril Bell. Recounting research done by teachers in New Zealand with Maori and White students, Bell suggests that the colonizers only want to encounter the “Other” on colonial terms. In other words, using colonial languages and experiences, “bringing in” the Other rather than centering it, and a “powerful colonizing romance of unity with the colonized other... ‘Unity’, it turns out, means consumption.”²³ Deborah Root, who identifies as being part of the 1960s hippie culture, similarly explained the demand to constantly center whiteness through material performance. “Part of the problem lies in how the display of affiliation [through dressing up in Native

²¹ Ibid.

²² Hart, “Translating and Resisting Empire,” 140.

²³ Avril Bell, *Relating Indigenous and Settler Identities Beyond Domination* (London: Palgrave- MacMillan, 2014), 184.

clothing] enables white people to insist on being the center of attention. The proclaiming of our alliance in a visible, emphatic manner has a performative quality that demands instant recognition and approval.”²⁴ Hence, cultural appropriation becomes more about seeking recognition and validation, rather than a genuine act of solidarity or need for understanding. Cultural appropriation continuously centers the individual and individual rights, an idea rooted in colonial, Western thought.

Rosemary Coombe defined arguments supporting culturally appropriative behavior as being rooted in the ideal of the romantic (or liberal) individual. The romantic individual is viewed as possessing the right to be free to create and imagine whatever they wish, an idea that Coombe defines as “possessive individualism.” Coombe draws on John Stuart Mill’s definitions of liberty, which includes “liberty of tastes and pursuits; of framing the plan of our life to suit our own character; of doing as we like ... [and] from this liberty of each individual follows the liberty...of...individuals.”²⁵ As the data analysis will show, ideas of the rights of the individual are often reflected in discussions of cultural appropriation. Millian liberal individualism also intersects with the moral relativity of postmodernism. The anxieties and relative thinking of both schools of thought often feature in justifications for cultural appropriation. As Philip J. Deloria explains, “Americans found themselves asking a new question: What is the meaning of meaning? Suppose truth had simply dried up and blown away in the blasting wind of nuclear anxiety, cultural relativism, and psychological self-reflexiveness?”²⁶ In the absence of absolute truth and fragile identity, cultural appropriation becomes a way to assuage cultural anxieties.

As will be shown in data analysis, many justifications for cultural appropriation are connected with an ignorance of history, as well as white normativity. In discussing the

²⁴ Deborah Root, “‘White Indians’: Appropriation and the Politics of Display.” In *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation*, ed. Bruce Ziff. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 231.

²⁵ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (New York: Norton, 1975), 265.

²⁶ Philip Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 156.

implications of cultural appropriation, this work relies on past scholarship by Black scholars such as bell hooks and Audre Lorde, as their work in examining how racism is perpetuated also reveals truths about possible motivations for cultural appropriation.

Neoliberalism and Spiritual Materialism

The New Age movement is also an extension of this liberal individualism, and its cousin neoliberalism, with the goals of the New Age movement largely focusing on self-actualization and individual spiritual fulfillment. Occurring within a space of postmodern moral relativity, “New Age thinking tends to focus on individual liberation and engagement with a higher power, having little interest in the social world that lies between self and spirit.”²⁷ While neoliberalism is primarily an economic theory, it also includes certain cultural assumptions, such as the idea that “human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.”²⁸ Under a framework of neoliberalism, spirituality is something that should be shared freely, and is subject to individual choice without consideration for the impacts of such actions on others, nor a consideration of asymmetrical power and privilege between the appropriator and the owning culture. This framework is also a-historical and frames spirituality as a-political, neither of which is accurate when viewed in a historical context.

Another term applicable to culturally appropriative logics is the idea of spiritual materialism. Coined by Buddhist philosopher and scholar Chogyam Trungpa, spiritual materialism is the “strengthening [of] our egocentricity through spiritual techniques.”²⁹ This ego-centered spirituality includes reproducing the performative spectacle of what it means to be a “spiritual” person, without the appropriate commitment. Trungpa uses the example of a person

²⁷ Ibid, 179

²⁸ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2.

²⁹ Chogyam Trungpa, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc, 1973), 3.

who discovers meditation and regards it as an “object of fascination” rather than an authentic spiritual practice.³⁰ Spiritual materialism can also refer to those who “collect” different spiritual practices without committing to any of them, or something who gathers material accessories of spiritual practice (statues, prayer beads, jewelry) without any serious commitment.

Neoliberalism, individualism, and spiritual materialism place emphasis on the needs of the individual over the needs of the community. These frameworks are ignorant of history and ignore wider material impacts of smaller, personal spiritual choices. As the next section will show, Native American spirituality is not a-political, and should be viewed through its impact on Native American communities.

History of Native American Religious Rights

Spiritual appropriation occurs within a space of ignorance regarding the history and federal policies of Native American spirituality. From the time of contact, practicing traditional spirituality has been challenging and at times impossible since it was viewed as pagan and idolatrous. In the late seventeenth century, Pueblo spiritual leaders were publically whipped and hanged, leading to the Pueblo Revolt, in which the Pueblo united with Navajo and Apache allies and expelled the Spanish from their lands.³¹ As Philip Jenkins notes, these prohibitions ironically happened in conjunction with the beginning of non-Native interest in Native religion.³² The 1883 Indian Religious Crimes Code, written by Secretary of the Interior Henry Teller, encouraged BIA agents to discourage dancing and feasts and to “compel...[medicine men] to

³⁰ Ibid., 7.

³¹ Matthew Liebmann, T.J. Ferguson, and Robert W. Preucel, “Pueblo Settlement, Architecture, and Social Change in the Pueblo Revolt Era, A.D. 1680 to 1686,” *Journal of Field Archaeology* 30, no. 1(2005): 45-60.

³² Jenkins, *Dream Catchers*.

abandon...and discontinue their practices.”³³ Such compulsion often consisted of denial of rations and imprisonment.

Native spiritual resistance was also tied to rejection of Euro American norms and called for control of land and reclamation of traditional values. Spiritual leaders such as Chitto Harjo (Crazy Snake) called for a return to traditional indigenous values and spirituality, and tied this pursuit to resisting land allotment. Singing and dance are integral aspects of Native spiritual practices and they too came under attack. The 1890 Ghost Dance movement prophesied the eradication of whites, the return of Native American dead, and a new era of peace and prosperity. First prophesied by Wovoka, the message of the Ghost Dance was spread to the Cheyenne, Arapahoe, and Sioux.³⁴ In response, BIA agents tried to repress Wovoka’s message and the practice of the Ghost Dance. One agent in Dakota territory attempted to use military intervention, but the enthusiasm for Wovoka’s message could not be contained. After intercepting a message from Wovoka that instructed “If the soldiers surround you four deep, three of you, on whom I have put holy shirts, will sing a song, which I have taught you...some of [the soldiers] will drop dead. Then the rest will start to run, but their horses will sink into the earth,” General N.A. Miles lead three thousand troops into South Dakota.³⁵ A confrontation between the soldiers and fleeing Native Americans resulted in the Wounded Knee Massacre. In 1971, Sun Dancers were arrested on the Pine Ridge Reservation after a tribal judge issued an injunction against practicing the Sun Dance.

³³ Lee Irwin, “Freedom, Law, and Prophecy: A Brief History of Native American Religious Resistance,” *American Indian Quarterly* 21, no 1 (1997): 35-55.

³⁴ Ronald Niezen, *Spirit Wars: Native North American Religions in the Age of Nation Building*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

³⁵ *Ibid.*

Religious resistance continued through the era of AIM. Vine Deloria writes that AIM protests were a vehicle to reclaiming ancient tradition, writing “there was the important issue of restoring the old ways and raising the question of people and their right to a homeland; for Indians this meant a return to the ceremonial use of lands.”³⁶ The struggle continues today, over the use and destruction of Native sacred sites.

The fight for religious rights has a long history with some successful outcomes in the 20th century. The 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act addressed the problematic history of grave looting, requiring the repatriation of sacred artifacts and human remains. NAGPRA, in the words of Winona LaDuke, “return[s] not only the bodies of our relatives to our communities, but allow[s] us to bring our sacred items back into ceremonial use, which is essential to the health and well-being of our people.”³⁷ Religious freedom for Native Americans was not guaranteed until 1993 with the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which reads that the government cannot “substantially burden religious exercise without compelling justification” and must “provide a claim or defense to persons whose religious exercise is substantially burdened by government.”³⁸ The 1994 Native American Free Exercise of Religion Act provides protection for peyote use and protects the rights of Native American prisoners to practice their religion. Given the long and continuing struggle for Native Americans to practice their traditional religion and protect their sacred sites, cultural appropriation becomes particularly troublesome.

Cultural appropriation and denial of history also opens itself to outsiders becoming the authority on Native American identity and culture. As Michael Brown writes, “More often,

³⁶ Deloria, *God is Red*, 7.

³⁷ Winona LaDuke, “Native Auctions and Buyer Ethics” in *The Winona LaDuke Reader: A Collection of Essential Writings* (Stillwater: Voyageur Press, 2002), 149.

³⁸ Irwin, “Freedom, Law and Prophecy,” 51.

however, anger is fueled by fear that elemental understandings are coming under the control of others, so that native people are no longer masters of their own traditions, their own identities.”³⁹

Constant reproduction of false representations of Native culture can cause dominant society, or Natives themselves, to believe the false representation is authentic.⁴⁰

The contemporary analysis of cultural appropriation seems centered on an attempt to reconcile Western law and sensibilities with indigenous rights. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is an example of an anti-assimilationist document that centers indigenous sensibilities and priorities, yet the result of twenty years of negotiation has been a declaration with no legal power. Larger legal framework “has often been criticized for being based on the Western ideal of individual rights, and from this perspective the affirmation of collective rights for indigenous peoples clearly indicates that such a vision is imperfect.”⁴¹ While it has been proven that indigenous values are not incompatible with Western legal structure, having United Nations member countries adhere to the declaration remains a struggle.

In Brown’s opinion, “a tidy separation of property and privacy is impossible within a marketmarket system that turns identity into a commodity ... Identity (in the sense of moral integrity and worth) and personality (in the sense of a social marker with commercial potential) exist in a highly unstable relationship.”⁴² Brown seems to be missing the point that identity when commercialized in the market system puts indigenous property and culture at great risk, but his argument about reconciling two cultural voices remains popular among non-Native researchers.

³⁹ Brown, *Who Owns Native Culture?*, 5.

⁴⁰ Young and Brunk, *The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation*.

⁴¹ Jeremie Gilbert, “Indigenous Rights in the Making: The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples,” *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 14 (2007): 229-230.

⁴² Brown, *Who Owns Native Culture?*, 38.

Indigenous researchers, however, are quick to connect debates over cultural appropriation to past genocide and other violence. Rather than attempting to find an in-between space, researchers such as Aldred and Smith⁴³ take a more radical stance. Smith also frames cultural appropriation as part of the larger issues over self-determination and land ownership, writing “When Native peoples fight for cultural/spiritual preservation, they are ultimately fighting for the land base which grounds their spirituality and culture.”⁴⁴

Lisa Aldred’s *Plastic Shamans and Astrotruf Sun Dances: New Age Commericalization of Native American Spirituality* also examines New Age motivations for cultural appropriation, and concludes that such appropriation has a primarily economic motive. She points out the amount of money charged for New Age material accessories and spiritual experiences, and writes “as products of the very consumer culture they seek to escape, these New Agers pursue spiritual meaning and cultural identification through acts of purchase.”⁴⁵ Both Smith and Aldred point out that New Age interest in Native American culture only goes so far as spirituality, with a refusal to see Native Americans as modern people, with modern issues. Aldred claims that “New Age interest in Native American cultures appears more concerned with exoticized images and romanticized rituals revolving around a distorted view of Native American spirituality than with the indigenous peoples themselves and the very real (and often ugly) socio-economic and political problems they face as colonized peoples.”⁴⁶

Spiritual tradition is also often viewed as the last thing Native people have left after colonization. The significance of spirituality and its practice as connected to the land and health of a people is not often addressed in non-Native critique of cultural appropriation. Despite good

⁴³ Questions over Andrea Smith’s Cherokee identity came to light as this document was almost completed. While Smith’s assertion of a Native identity is problematic, her work remains impactful and this research is influenced by it.

⁴⁴ Andrea Smith, “Spiritual Appropriation and Sexual Violence,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 20, no. 1, (2005): 99.

⁴⁵ Aldred, *Plastic Shamans and Astrotruf Sun Dances*, 329.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 333.

intention, prior non-Native critique has also reflected a Eurocentric view that prioritizes concepts like copyright and intellectual property over spirituality and health.

Implications

Neither Aldred nor Smith addresses what they think non-Natives practicing Native influenced spirituality should do, but nor are they obligated to. Non-Native scholars are hesitant to encourage those engaged in cultural appropriation to stop their behavior, and instead propose that they work to minimize their impact and perhaps become better allies by being involved in contemporary Native American struggles.⁴⁷ Young and Brunk write that “It is not often appropriation to blame people for adopting views they feel compelled to espouse, even less demand that they should abandon those views. But, we can ask them to take care in the public expression and representation of those views and the practices that may follow from them. Insensitivity in this regard *is* blameworthy.”⁴⁸ Here, Young and Brunk appear not to believe that cultural appropriation is harmful by itself, but merely in its public expression.

Interviewing non-Natives engaged in spiritual appropriation of Native religion is an area largely missing in the literature. Aldred interviews many prominent non-Native practitioners of Native influenced spirituality, including published authors, and that has influenced her conclusion that they have engaged in cultural appropriation for primarily monetary gain. Taylor, Young & Brunk, and Coombe draw their conclusions from attending events and analyzing writings by non-Natives. Thus far, with the exception of the film *White Shamans and Plastic Medicine Men*, the personal narratives of these individuals have remained largely unexamined.

⁴⁷ Bron Taylor, “Earthen Spirituality or Cultural Genocide?: Radical Environmentalism’s Appropriation of Native American Spirituality” *Religion* 27, no 1 (1997): 183-215.

⁴⁸ Young and Brunk, *The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation*, 102-103

This study will explore how non-Native practitioners of Native American influenced spirituality view cultural appropriation as a concept, as well as examine their experiences and perceptions of Native American people.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Theoretical Framework

I entered this research with a desire to understand the experiences and views of people engaged in cultural appropriation; to let these experiences be heard with the intention of dialogue and understanding. This research is guided by a transformative paradigm that “provides...a framework for examining assumptions that explicitly address power issues, social justice, and cultural complexity throughout the research process.”⁴⁹ This critical framework critiques colonial judgments about indigenous culture and makes assumed Western values, such as the rights of the liberal individual and individualistic thinking, highly visible. A transformative paradigm acknowledges that multiple realities exist, but that those realities need to be considered in conjunction with values of social justice and with an acknowledgement of historical and contemporary power differentials and injustices. Transformative axiology also emphasizes respect, beneficence, and justice, and is guided by culturally appropriate definitions of those concepts.⁵⁰ Working within a transformative paradigm leads to questions such as “Whose reality is privileged in this context? [and] What is the mechanism for challenging perceived realities that sustain an oppressive system?”⁵¹

While interviewing individuals who may be ignorant about or hostile towards ideas of cultural appropriation, a transformative paradigm creates space for multiple individual realities to exist while still maintaining justice as its highest ideal. Such a framework is essential when dealing with emotionally charged topics such as spirituality and Western notions of freedom, but

⁴⁹ Donna M. Mertens, "Transformative Paradigm: Mixed Methods and Social Justice" *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 1, no. 3 (2007): 212-213.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Donna M. Mertens, "Transformative Mixed Methods Research" *Qualitative Inquiry* 16 (2010): (469-474), 470.

also does not allow for simultaneous realities to become an excuse for problematic behavior. I utilize a transformative paradigm in order to distance this research from other research that attempts to continuously center Western values under the logic of “that’s the way things are.” This research acknowledges that those values and realities exist, but does not allow them to become the unspoken norm.

A transformative paradigm also provides a location for me to reconcile and deconstruct my own involvement in spiritual appropriation. Utilizing Marcelo Diversi and Claudio Moreira’s term “betweenner,” a transformative paradigm allows space for contradiction and occasionally conflicting identities to exist within the same space. As they write:

Who gives the authority to ask questions? Who gives the authority to invade people’s lives to do research? We offer an alternative model. It’s all over our work. Like Anzaldua, we ask to be met halfway. Then, we can talk. There, in the halfway place, we can have a dialogue.⁵²

While their intention was not the discussion of cultural appropriation, their philosophy on how to engage in productive conversations involving co-occurring realities is useful for this research, as those engaged in cultural appropriation often exist in constructed realities outside those of indigenous peoples.

Methodology

This qualitative analysis largely utilizes Critical Race Theory and grounded theory to analyze the participants’ responses. Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged as a way to examine

⁵² Marcelo Diversi and Claudio Moreira. *Betweenner Talk: Decolonizing Knowledge Production, Pedagogy, and Praxis*. (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press), 2009, 27.

how the law and legal institutions uphold white supremacy.⁵³ I use its language and thought in order to critique how discourse around cultural appropriation centers colonial, white normative values of the individual. CRT also acknowledges that scholarship on race “can never be written from a distance of detachment or with an attitude of objectivity...[there is] no scholarly perch outside the social dynamics of racial power from which merely to observe and analyze. Scholarship...is inevitably political.”⁵⁴

I chose to conduct a qualitative study because of the potential qualitative interviews have to get at the meaning we ascribe to actions. My research seeks to understand the “why” and “how” of cultural appropriation, and qualitative research “refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things.”⁵⁵ As I discussed in my literature review, much of the research related to cultural appropriation relies on second-hand reading of texts. While these studies are absolutely necessary and my own work is constructed from them, qualitative interviewing of my participants allows this research to “step beyond the known and enter into the world of participants, to see the world from their perspective.”⁵⁶

I also chose to use grounded theory out of a desire to let the interviews speak for themselves. As Kathy Charmaz writes,

Grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves ... data

⁵³ Kimberle Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas, eds., *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement*. (New York: New Press), 1995, xi

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, xiii.

⁵⁵ Bruce L. Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*. 5th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon), 1997, 3.

⁵⁶ Anselm L. Strauss and Juliet M. Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications), 2008, 16.

for the foundation of our theory and our analysis of these data generates the concepts we construct.⁵⁷

Given that I have not come across another project that allows those engaged in cultural appropriation to speak directly on their own behalf, I wanted to take the opportunity to do so.

However, this research also centers indigenous rights and ways of knowing. Using grounded theory allows for themes and codes to emerge from the data, but remains critical of cultural appropriation and its justifications. Additionally, Critical Race Theory has largely centered “democracy” without considering the problematic history of “indigenous peoples’ historical battles to resist absorption into the ‘democratic imaginary’ and their contemporary struggles to retain tribal sovereignty.”⁵⁸ Instead, this research uses the language of CRT to engage an indigenous critique of neoliberalism and views about the liberal individual. Liberal perceptions include the belief in the right to create and possess freely, and holds that all individuals are viewed as free and equal agents in society. This research argues that the interviews analyzed invoke language praising the values of neoliberalism and the liberal individual, and additionally argues that this language is a continuing extension to further colonialism and promotes the erasure of Native peoples. Cultural appropriation should be considered within an appropriate cultural context, and within a discussion of United States law and policy to consider history, culture, and power structures. This research challenges individual, neoliberal values as universal and considers cultural norms outside Western hegemony.

⁵⁷ Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis* (London: Sage Publications), 2006., 2.

⁵⁸ Sandy Marie Anglas Grande, "American Indian Geographics of Identity and Power: At the Crossroads of Indigena and Mestizaje," *Harvard Educational Review* 70, no. 4 (2000), 468.

This research also draws on Buddhist philosophy, specifically the work of Chogyam Trungpa, a Buddhist teacher of the Tibetan tradition. I specifically engage with Trungpa's work on spiritual materialism, a concept that is fully explored in data analysis. In order to discuss spirituality on its own terms, spiritual language and philosophy should be engaged in order to promote respect for non-physical realities and experiences, as these have profound, material effects on both the spiritual practitioner and the communities they move in. While I am occasionally critical of my interview participants' views and ideas, I respect that their spirituality has had a profound effect on their lives and that spiritual experiences exist.

Sampling

During the months of July and August, 2014, I conducted ten semi-structured interviews with non-Native individuals who identified as practicing some aspect of Native American spirituality. All of these individuals resided in Western Washington state, mostly from the Greater Seattle area, with some from surrounding islands and rural counties. I chose this geographic location because of the experiences I had growing up there, and because I had entry points into spiritual communities that I have not established elsewhere. All of the participants identified with the terms "Caucasian" or "White" to describe their racial background.

I limited my recruitment to adults. While many youth identify with alternative forms of spirituality, I wanted this research to understand how Native American spirituality affects individuals over time, and felt that youth who were either raised in Native American spirituality or began practicing it early might have different viewpoints and experiences than those who began practicing as adults. The interview questions were also written in a way that assumed an amount of self-reflexivity that may not be fully developed in youth.

Recruitment

I began my recruitment by reaching out to an online community I knew was frequented by practitioners of alternative spirituality. I was contacted by three interested parties and began my interviews with them, and in turn they forwarded my recruitment email on to other people they knew who fit the recruitment criteria. I chose initial purposive sampling and subsequent snowball sampling in order to gain a gateway into the community, out of a desire to get as diverse an interview pool as possible. Purposive sampling allows for participants to be selected based on their ability to provide the most information. As Chein writes, “The situation is analogous to one in which a number of expert consultants are called in on a difficult medical case. These consultants ... are not called in to get an average opinion ... They are called in precisely because of their special experience and competence.”⁵⁹ Snowball sampling, or having initial participants refer other potential participants, allowed me to recruit people I did not know, which allowed for a more diverse sample.

The process of conducting three initial interviews and then having those interviewees “vouch” for me and share a little of their experience with their friends resulted in an enthusiastic response, including emails from people who were from out of state who I had to turn down due to my inability to travel. I interviewed seven women and three men, all middle-aged or approaching retirement age. Interviews were conducted at my parents’ home, the interviewees’ home, public library meeting rooms, and one in a café, depending on what was convenient for the interview participant.

⁵⁹ I. Chein, *Research Methods in Social Relations* (Austin: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981), quoted in Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 77.

Data Collection

Interview questions were open-ended and semi-structured, with unscripted follow-up questions asked to clarify certain points. I chose an open-ended structure in order to gather the greatest amount of feedback and allow for individual views and experiences to be expressed. The interview questions are listed as Appendix A. Interviews were recorded on a digital recorder and transcribed, and I took notes via laptop computer during the interview. Each interview lasted approximately one hour.

The interview questions focused on four key subject areas: the participant's background (religious background, racial identity, early life), how the interview participants came to practice Native American spirituality, the effects Native American practices have had on their lives and perceptions, and their thoughts and views on cultural appropriation, Native American people, and culture.

Each participant was given a detailed consent form, including my contact information, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) contact information and approval number for the study, and the primary investigator's contact information. All of the participants were emailed the consent form before hand and signed them before the interview began. Each participant was given a copy of the form to keep. None of the participants were compensated. Before transcription, each interviewee was assigned a pseudonym, and each transcript is linked only with that pseudonym to protect confidentiality. Given that many of the participants know each other and may be easily identifiable, all references to a participant's specific geographic location, work place, business name, or spouse's names were redacted.

I also wrote frequent memos about my reactions to the interviews afterwards, including connections to theory or other interviews. These memos would become important in subsequent data analysis and coding, as it allowed me to see patterns in participant language use and reaction to the interview process. As Corbin and Strauss note, “Without memos...there is no accurate way or keeping track of the cumulative and complex ideas that evolve as the research progresses.”⁶⁰ Memoing after interviews allowed me to process the complex information I was gathering and allowed me to generate initial themes and compare data.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and then coded using open and line-by-line coding to identify themes and consistencies across interviews. To construct initial categories, I utilized open coding strategies, as many of the interviews were quite complex and difficult to code line-by-line. This was done by noting anything I felt was significant to the research questions. I then grouped several initial codes together using axial coding, or relating initial categories and codes to each other to create a larger, more theoretically sound codes. I then returned to passages from the interviews I noted as significant, and coded those line-by-line. Interviews were constantly compared to one another for similarities and differences, and I used memo writing extensively to process the complex data that emerged. Given the deeply personal nature of the interviews, I often found myself engaging with what the participants were not saying, or hesitating to say, as much as what they were saying. I often struggled with coding as I hold very different beliefs from my participants, but wanted the data to speak for itself. As Charmaz writes,

If your codes define another view of a process, action or belief than your respondent(s) hold, note that...Your ideas may rest on covert meanings and actions that have not

⁶⁰ Corbin & Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, 140.

entirely surfaced yet...Our task is to make analytic sense of the material, which may challenge taken-for-granted understandings.⁶¹

Emerging themes were compared to other interviews and theoretical readings to ensure consistency and identify discrepancies. I began with twelve initial themes that were then condensed into the five that will be discussed in the findings and data analysis chapters.

Limitations

Given my limited geographic scope, the themes that emerged from these interviews may not be consistent across geography. Different cultural assumptions and language use exists on the West Coast in ways that I am acquainted with but may not fully understand given that it was where I grew up. My participants were also clustered in their mid-to-late fifties and early sixties, and they may have different cultural backgrounds or ways of communicating that I may not fully understand as a person in her twenties. Additionally, while I specified in my recruitment that all people who did not identify as Native American could participate, all of my participants identified as White. It is possible that non-Native people of color who are practitioners of Native American spirituality might have different experiences and perceptions than Whites.

At only ten participants, this data may not be generalizable to a larger population. I also interviewed only three men, and believe that there may be some unexamined differences between men's and women's experiences that I am unable to see with such a small sample. Additionally, as was noted above, my interviews were extremely rich in data and I often had to narrow down topics that may deserve more intense analysis in the interest of time. I have chosen to analyze the themes that were the most pervasive, but they are by no means the only themes worth examining.

⁶¹ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 54.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

In my search to understand the experiences and views of people engaged in cultural appropriation I found four major themes: neoliberal values, the practice of spiritual materialism, denial of spiritual agency, and racial stereotyping. While these themes are by no means exhaustive, they represent the most dominant voices among the nine interviews.

Views of Spirituality are Grounded in Neoliberal Values

A dominant theme present in the interviews is a neoliberal view of spirituality. These include the idea that spiritual practices are free and open to be practiced by all, that spiritual authority can be purchased or “earned” through short periods of study, that spirituality is inherently an individual rather than a community pursuit. Many of the participants continuously asserted that race does not matter in spirituality, and it is only a person’s intentions and soul that does matter. Many emphasized a common human experience, and discounted the effects that one’s race has on one’s human experience.

Free and Open Spirituality

Mariah⁶² explained what she sees as the universality of Native American spiritual practices.

There are some ... human experiences that have evolved over the millennia of being human beings, who live in relationship to their world. Who live on the ground, sleep on the ground, hunt and gather ... and over those millennia those particular, uh, uh, rites and ceremonies that have developed, and they’re pan-cultural ... The Sami people sweat in a structure, it’s a beehive structure. Obviously the Finnish people sweat, so sweating or some kind of purification is a pan-cultural experience, it doesn’t just belong to the Lakota Sioux. You know, it doesn’t. It didn’t originate with them. It originated with the people.

⁶² All names provided are pseudonyms.

Mariah and her husband (who was also interviewed for this study) travel internationally teaching Native American spiritual practices they learned over the past twenty-six years. At the beginning of the interview, Mariah was eager to discuss her initiations into Native American spirituality, her distant Cherokee ancestry, and how she had been called to practice and teach Native American spirituality. When asked directly, however, about the idea of cultural theft and appropriation, she, as did other participants, begin to reframe their participation as a simple reflection of universal human experiences. As another participant, Emma, said,

I'm aware of being...a trespasser [laughter] ... I wanna be respectful of that. And also recognize that there can be a lot of anger and resentment, um, when people appear to appropriate something that isn't theirs. The perplexity I come up with is it *is* mine ... in the sense of the essence of it, which is more of a human experience than the specifics of that culture. And it's so interwoven with who I am, what I've done ... it's completely interwoven in everything.

Diane specifically addressed ideas of ancestry and "blood" as a right to practice spirituality.

There was a point in time when Native people didn't have anyone to step into the traditions and the ceremonies. And they asked us: 'if you are interested, yes, you are welcome. It doesn't matter that you're Rainbow, it doesn't matter that you're ... that you can't prove blood quantum. What is accurate and true is you have the vision, you have blood calling you here. You're re-remembering things ... you are a part of a greater movement towards helping the world understand that we have to take care of what we have. That we have to listen to the earth and behave better as human beings, not just with each other, it starts from the self and works outward, but it comes up through your feet. It comes up through the earth. We get our nurturing from the earth. And if we destroy her, we're destroying everything.

Here, the non-Native practice of Native American spirituality is to be praised, since it is preventing needed traditions from dying out. She also described spirituality as originating within the self, or one's personal relationship with the earth, rather than community.

Samantha also discussed her Native American influenced shamanic practices as being a reflection of universal human experience, rather than being the product of a specific culture,

A lot of people do associate shamanic practices and shamanism with, um, with Native Americans or, um, indigenous people in the Amazon and people who are not otherwise, um, integrated into our Third World sort of concepts of things. And, and the word shaman actually means 'one who sees in the dark.' And it is not at all something that is ... strictly for Native or tribal people of one sort or another. It is simply practices that are based in a spirituality that sees the world in terms of an upper and a lower world and a middle world, and none, I mean, where the differences come in are in the ... the traditional practices, but those core practices, you know, are found all over the world by varying groups ... Native Americans don't have a monopoly on it, it's just that we have come to the place of associating anything shamanic with Native Americans. And, and that's a societal thing, but it's not, it's not indicative of what the actual history of shamanism is throughout the whole world.

When Samantha was asked if she thought there was a reason why people tend to associate Shamanism with North American indigenous peoples, she explained what she saw as an overlap between shamanic traditions.

Because of what we've seen in movies and media, they just don't have any other exposure as to, to, to what it would be. There are plenty of modern day shamans who don't look any differently than you and I do, but the ones that we only ever see are the Native American people and, and, and the Mongolians tend to show up as well and Tibetans who have the, the eye curtain and the special clothing and stuff. I just think that it's, they're more interesting and media likes to do things that are interesting because it gets them more, uh, ratings ... Um, because I have Native American ancestry in my heritage, it's something that I've always been very interested in. The cultures and the practices. And when I started learning Wicca, I realized that the practices although they have different names, are almost utterly the same in the way that they are done. With regard specifically to when a Wiccan connects with, um, deity or spirit, we call that 'invoking', in shamanism they call it 'merging', but the process of bringing that, that spirit, that deity into your body are exactly the same, and I found that throughout, um, my learnings [sic] about shamanism that much of the, of the healing work, the extraction, what they call extraction healing is very similar to what I've found in Reiki practices, and, um, and it's just fascinating ... the shamanic practices go, the healing practices that I've learned, are very advanced and I have not yet learned anything that is Wiccan oriented with regard to that kind of healing, although I'm sure that there are some, but the, so much of their practices are just like what we do. They simply have different names, and I find that there is, within all of the Earth based practices, that there is a lot of that kind of overlap, and just calling something different.

Purchasing or Earning Experiences

Many of the participants described reading books and learning with teachers in pursuit of Native American spirituality. Many of these experiences reflect the notion of having the right to practice Native American traditions, or that it was the participant's destiny. Diane describes the first time she participated in a pipe ceremony, in a New Age store in Washington State.

Um, when I sat down for ceremony the first time, um, the pipe carrier asked if there were any newbies and, of course, I raised my hand and she said, 'well,' and I said 'this is my first time actually sitting here in this ceremony, but I have done this a hundred thousand times, lifetime after lifetime. And it has been calling me and calling me.

Emma also describes a feeling of destiny, that discovering Native American traditions was a feeling of validation.

I always as a child had a lot of imagination, uh, I would imagine myself riding a horse across the plains, uh, with black hair flowing out behind me, which I don't have. And I never thought of it as Native American, um, I used to imagine that the sky and the stars and the trees, um, were alive and could speak to me. Um, and, um, and I, I thought of that of my own way of pretending. Um, when I was, a young woman, I believe, I was about twenty ... um, might have been twenty-one. Um ... I, um, on a, a, trip, I was born on the East coast, raised in the mid-West, and then I traveled to the West Coast. And I remember visiting Seattle at a friend's house, and on their coffee table they had a copy of *Seven Arrows*. And I thought, 'what's this?' and I picked it up, and I started to cry because I realized that what I had been experiencing had precedence that there were people who lived ... talking to the stars and the trees and thought of nature as alive and had a whole living tradition behind something I thought was my own imagination. And, I was, um, it was, it was a huge moment, um, for me. It was a validation of my own experience, and it opened up my curiosity about Native things. I was part of the counter culture, a lot of the counter culture kids had a fascination with Native America and other indigenous traditions. So, I kind of picked up information here and there. I never made a concerted study, and I never sought out Native teachers. But it was more just an awareness that this existed and that I had an affinity for it.

Here, Emma omits that she travels twice a year to go on retreats with her shamanic spiritual teacher, and has spent eighteen years actively studying shamanic traditions from around the world with him and other groups.

Both Emma and Diane claim these Native American traditions as their own experiences. Other participants describe participating in Native American ceremonies and tradition with a sense of competition, or an idea that it has something they have earned through demonstrations of endurance or knowledge. Mariah describes an experience in which she sat in a sweat lodge for an extended period of time.

[The facilitator] just went on and on and on and the sweat just drug out and finally people started going 'oh, we're just so tired' and people kept leaving and people kept, and finally there were three of us that were left and [the facilitator] said 'Finally.' He didn't speak English, he said to his interpreter, 'Finally.' He said, 'now the people who are supposed to be here are here, and this is why you've come.' And we're all sitting there and going 'no, I just know it's rude to walk out in the middle of a ... and I don't care how tired I am.' You don't just get up and walk out and that's what he was waiting for. So that's an example of not asking for it, I just kept sitting because if it took all night, I would sit all night, that's the way I was taught.

Her husband Peter also recounts a story in which he defended his right to lead Native American religious ceremonies at a state prison.

Because they [Native American prisoners] were very, some of them were very hesitant when I was asked by some of them to pour lodges over there, some of them were saying, 'well, who's this white guy?'. And, uh, and uh, you know, 'why is he pouring lodges over here'. And they'd say, 'well, he's a Sun Dancer and he's been given the rights to do this and blah blah blah.' And they said, 'well, why don't you sit in a lodge with Peter, give him a chance, see what happens.' And after one of those lodges, and that was, that's a pretty common thing when I pour lodges up on the reservation, that's a pretty common thing. And, uh, the guy after the ceremony came, this big Indian guy, was a Yakama guy, and he came to me and gave me, presented me this big eagle feather and said 'I want to apologize to you.' And I said 'Why?' and he said 'well, because I, I felt like you had no right to do this and who are you?' and he says, 'but after sitting with you I'm giving you the eagle feather, it's my only eagle feather I have that my dad gave me just out of respect for how you're walking your way.' Which was a pretty amazing thing for him to do that. Because there is, there is resentment. I have colleagues here, this person happens to be a Lakota, but is not very happy at all that, that I'm a Sun Dancer, she's not happy about that at all. And we don't have a good relationship because of that.

Peter also acknowledged that appropriation exists, but denies that what he does is cultural appropriation because of his years of dedication to the Sun Dance.

But we're very, very careful yet we're very open, we're not advertising lodges, we, we have kind of a tight email list, so we try to be really, and [teacher] has been a big proponent of that. Early on he said, he said 'you haven't Sun Danced, even if you've Sun Danced one year, you are not a Sun Dancer, I don't want you, I don't wanna hear through the Indian internet that you've been talking about this or saying things that you haven't done because I'm going to find out.' And so we were kind of put on alert that we'd better keep our mouths shut. And when we finished our first four years, you know, which is, three, you know, two, four day food and water fasts, one in the fall, one in the spring and then the dance which is a four day food and water fast. So thirteen times in those four years, we did that and then ... [laughter] we went to [teachers], you know, at the end of that and said 'well what's next?' and they said 'well, the first four years was just to get your attention.' [laughter] which, you know, is crazy. And then they got more serious and said, 'well now you're here to help others go through their initiation and to stand with us, to learn what it means to be leaders, or what we call leaders or senior dancers.' And so for the last thirteen years that's what I've been doing, just helping out in the arbor and running lodges, running fasts or whatever to help other dancers out.

In this section, Peter omits that he and Mariah travel internationally leading sweat lodges and sharing Native American traditional knowledge, which is in direct conflict with his teacher's comment that he is not a Sun Dancer and does not have the right to pass on the knowledge he has been taught.

Spirituality and the Individual

All of the participants emphasized the importance of individuals finding their own spiritual truths, or creating an individualized spiritual path that works for them. Any exercise in community, or the idea of placing community at the center of one's spirituality was met with dissatisfaction, as Sean recalls,

I admire ... the Native peoples and there's so many of them that I look up and am inspired, and, um...at the same time there's a part of me that ... sees a lot of the Native religion as just as dogmatic as Catholicism. In fact I had to leave the other teacher ... I actually had to leave her class because it was too dogmatic ... she basically preached during the class, it wasn't like, she said she was trying to help us find our path, and, you know, get us in touch with our hearts, but she was actually giving us ... um ... it wasn't open ended, it was like 'this is how we do things' and she would emphasize the 'we.'

A few of the interviews included deep conversations on the topic of cultural appropriation, as

some of the participants came to the interviews already familiar with the topic. In all of these interviews, the participant's right to practice always came back to individual agency and choice, or the idea that spirituality is an individual pursuit. Peter stated that regardless of how uncomfortable he made his Native American coworkers, he would continue to practice.

Well I would say, you know, I understand as best I can understand and ... spirit has taken me this way and spirit and creation is my highest authority. You know? And if there's something I need to learn and continue to learn in our interaction, then I am absolutely willing to do that. This is what my Sun Dance chief has told me, this is where spirit's taken me.

Peter also criticized what he perceived as a lack of individualism and deference to authority amongst Native American prisoners. The prison brought in Native American tribal members to run ceremonies and replace Peter.

But they brought in Native people to be leadership and we saw it because we were over there just a couple of weeks ago, how the prisoners kind of shrunk because they've got new Indian authority now, and so instead of being kind of a strong "this is our circle, this is what we do." Because they have new reverent authority, they backed away from the leadership that we've been encouraging them to do for the last ten or fifteen years, so it was very interesting to watch that. I haven't said anything to any of them yet.

Throughout the interviews, collective behavior or centering community concerns are placed second to the individual.

Spiritual Materialism Practiced

In the early 1970s, Chogyam Trungpa, a Tibetan Buddhist meditation master and scholar, began teaching Buddhism and meditation in the United States. He quickly observed what he described as "a great deal of confusion, misunderstanding, and expectation" amongst his "spiritual materialism" or the phenomenon of "thinking we are developing spiritually when students."⁶³ Trungpa conducted a series of talks meant as an intervention for what he termed

⁶³ Trungpa, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, 3.

instead we are strengthening our egocentricity through spiritual techniques.”⁶⁴ Examples of this are the collection of religious artifacts, jewelry, and clothing to signal to others that one is a spiritual person, as well as building up lists of qualifications or collecting teachers and experiences in order to present a spiritual image of oneself. Mariah, for example, recounted initiations she received from South American indigenous teachers, her participation in the Sun Dance in Canada, and her participation in the maintenance of sacred clay beds in the Southwestern United States. Other participants also describe exploring Eastern philosophies and occult traditions, often working these in alongside their Native American practices.

Spiritual Collecting

Trungpa describes these acts of spiritual collecting, or taking different, unrelated traditions from different spiritualities and combining them to suit the individual. An example of this is reflected by Susan.

So, what's ... what's worked for me over the years ... I have created sort of, like, this amalgam of different things. I started out with, uh, probably the Harner shamanic tradition. Learning, learning a lot about that. And then I moved into a Dianic tradition, a Moon Ceremony tradition, which combines a really, really ancient goddess worship with Native American spirituality that came from the Apache or Shishinde tradition. And so, and then moved into, a, uh, learning about Sun Bear's, the Sun Bear, Bear Tribe traditions through there I learned my pipe, I got my pipe tradition and I've got me, uh, and I learned a lot about sweat ... And then I have also something that has been really important to me is working with para landra work which is not Native American but very earth based, so everything that I do now is sort of like a combination of all that.

These acts of spiritual materialism, however, did not go unnoticed even by a participant. As Linda recounts,

People get into fads, whatever those fads happen to be ... I think one of the things that has happened is a kind of fad around spirituality. And I think that people who perhaps at thirty or forty years old or whatever read a book and get totally and completely wrapped up in something and the trappings of whatever that religion is ... so that they must have a pipe, and they must have a drum, and they must have a Navajo blanket hanging on their

⁶⁴ Ibid.

wall ... It's one of the concerns that I've always had with the New Age movement, in a great way that it seems as though it comes from 'you went to this three hundred dollar seminar and several things were suggested in it, and you must go out and purchase and buy those several things'. And that sadly, the people that are actually creating those things may not even be paid or respected appropriately for having that.

Emma also recalls seeing similar practices amongst her acquaintances.

I think especially in the counter culture days, people got really excited about this [Native American spirituality], they were looking for something that went beyond white suburbs and that had more meaning and connection to the earth and so forth. And people...they went at it, like you would if you had, if you had a million dollars and you walked into a store, you know? I'll take that, and I'll take that, and I'll take that. And I know many people have been around and myself included, did not initially understand the sense of ownership that exists around particular traditions.

Spiritual Performativity

The performance of being a spiritual person assumes that spirituality is a commodity that can be performed by acting in certain ways, without a genuine commitment to spiritual practice or discipline. These performances are often done for the benefit of others, so that the spiritual materialist is seen as a spiritual person by observers. As Sean said,

I know, I've know a lot of people that were, you know, white, Caucasian, that were indistinguishable from Natives ... I know one guy in particular that ... I don't know what his exact heritage is, but he's short, white, bald man [laughter] but he ... is so, um ... ensconced in those ways and he talks, he has that same cadence and the way he talks is that slow kind of cadence that a lot of, like the elders speak with. And, just his aura and... just the way he walks on the earth is very, very Native American ... It's like with a sense of wonder, a sense of honor, like ... recognizing and seeing the oneness of everything, the spirit within all things.

Many participants related elaborate stories about spiritual experiences. These stories were used as a way to relate the authenticity of their spiritual choices, or to impress upon a certain point.

When Sean responded to a question on what made him decide Native American traditions were right for him, rather than the many other traditions he has explored, he described his vision quest.

I'd been doing a lot of reading about the ceremonies and stuff and I, like a week before I went on the actual vision quest I did a shamanic journey to talk to White Buffalo Calf

Woman, and to thank her for allowing me to take part in the ceremonies even though I wasn't Native. And I had this vision of her ... and she came to me and said that I was one of her people as much as if she had given birth to me herself ... And then on the vision quest itself, Sitting Bull came and appeared to me and he thanked me for taking part in their ceremonies and celebrating their ways and yet adapting them to modern times...so I was able to take the traditional and, and tweak them [sic] to my own benefit and Sitting Bull actually thanked me for doing that, for adapting their ways.

Denial of Agency

Most of the participants exhibited a denial of spiritual agency, or the ability for individuals to make their own spiritual choices. A pervasive theme in the interviews was the "voice of spirit," or a sense of being called to pursue Native American spirituality, rather than spirituality being a conscious choice. Participants expressed hesitancy, a deliberate avoidance, or a reluctance to get involved in Native practices, and argued that they had received a spiritual calling that validated their participation in Native spiritual practices. As Robert recalls

I was twenty-five and in synagogue for Rosh Hashanah ... and a voice spoke to me ... and the voice said 'why are you here?' And my first response was 'what the hell was that?' I mean, now I have a relationship with that voice, but that was the first time I ever heard the voice and after being a little freaked out by the voice, I thought it was a really good question ... and I just sat for, I dunno ... ten, fifteen minutes, and the only answer I could come up with that felt true was 'I'm here because when I was a child my mom told me I was supposed to be.' And so, I packed up my stuff and walked out.

Robert then became involved in a spiritual center and with sweat lodges. He remembers attending a sweat lodge in Long Island, saying,

Before the sweat lodge [I had] a really unique experience that I didn't understand. I remember, this was before the lodge, you know, I get there and, you know, the rocks are heating up and outside the lodge, I couldn't stop pulling at my skin. And going, 'I'm dirty, I shouldn't be here like this.' ... And I've since come to understand that I was Native in my last life. So, you know I couldn't believe I was going into Native ceremony with a, with a white skin. With a white man's skin, with a white man's body ... And it actually took maybe four years before ... I think I found resolution within myself that I'm a white man involved in Native ceremony and that's okay.

When I asked how he came to this resolution, Robert described Native spiritual practices as hard,

but you don't give up on something simply because it's hard. He views his practices as a spiritual calling, entered into with reluctance, and from the voice of the divine or a past life experience.

Samantha, who practices shamanic journeying and healing techniques, shared a similar story that spoke to the denial of spiritual agency,

I trust that if the spirits are willing to share with me and teach me, that other people should be willing to accept me as well. That it's the spirits who determine whether or not I am a shaman. I don't call myself that. And, and that as long as the healing work I'm doing is having good results, then I believe that the spirits are in line with me and okay.

Denial of Appropriation

Diane spoke honestly about how she had encounters with "Native people [who] do not want me doing what I'm doing." Diane and other participants did not identify their practices as cultural theft or appropriation. Diane recounted how she and other non-Native people in her community regularly had conversations about what their responsibilities as non-Natives practicing Native spirituality were.

Um ... is, is this something that we're doing that we need to really stop? You know? It's not our culture. How can you be called to do something with one breath and then have to put it down with another? Um ... everybody I know has their own reasons and their own answers for this, um, my own is I don't follow a traditional Native tribal path with the pipe that I carry. And that 'I carry' is even an incorrect grammatical phrase because when you speak about this it is 'to walk behind the pipe'. You don't carry it, it walks you and you walk behind it. I learned a rainbow⁶⁵ way of doing this. It is Native but it is not Lakota, it is not Cherokee, it's not Cheyenne, it's Rainbow, and that is what I practice.

Later, when asked why Native Americans might view non-Native practice of Native religions as theft or appropriation, Diane said,

⁶⁵ Here, "rainbow" refers to a term coined by Sun Bear to describe his pan-Native American spiritual teachings marketed to people of all racial backgrounds.

I can really identify with why they believe that. Every single thing points to that. You have, you have a people who were not allowed to pray until 1978. They were not allowed to do ceremonies. Legally, they could have been imprisoned until 1978. So you've got hundreds of years here where people were persecuted for their beliefs. Hello, this is America! I mean, God! What a dichotomy! ... How dare I? How dare I presume? I get it, I totally get it, but you know what? I got called. [Laughter] there was a voice out there that said, 'c'mon'. So. Everybody's got to follow their path.

Another participant, Sean, denies that he is engaging in cultural appropriation because of the similarities he sees between Native American religion and Celtic practices,

Years ago I was, I kind of was doing the whole white guilt thing, and it was like 'oh, I can't do anything Native American cause I'm not Native American' and then, um, I saw a TV show about the Celts and one of the characters was a shaman and here he is waving a feather and working with stones and it just struck me that my heritage is Celtic, but if my ancestors had been born in this country, they would have been indistinguishable from Native Americans because they still would have honored the spirits of the land, the spirits of the animals of the land, and so I ... it was kind of at that point that I started to allow myself to take part in Native things.

Having encountered people in the Seattle area who practice Celtic Reconstructionism, or the reclaiming of pagan Celtic religion, I asked him why he did not get in contact with those people and pursue Celtic spirituality. He responded,

I'm actually ... interested in exploring more of the Celtic roots. Um, and I really would like to get more into that. Um ... and it's funny cause I've kind of in some ways have resisted the Native American way because of that, I've been wanted to have more Celtic, but it's like, it's just following my path, spirit just keeps putting it right in front of me, and it's just, it's that surrendering to, to ... um ... what spirit wants me to do.

Racial Stereotyping and Lack of Understanding Native Life

In an effort to understand how participating in Native American cultural practices impacted the participants, each participant was asked about their perceptions of or experiences with Native American people. The responses to this question were often the most revealing, especially since the question was deliberately placed after questions about how Native American

spirituality had benefitted the participant's life. When I asked Peter how Native American spiritual practices had influenced his life, he talked extensively about his participation in the Sun Dance, and how Native American spiritual practices had positively influenced him.

They've touched me in my heart in the deepest part of my being, so, um, because of the commitment that's necessary, because of my devotion to, uh, my Creator. Uh, so everything about my life has changed, you know, emotional, spiritual, mental, physical. Uh, and they were changing before but the Sun Dance in particular, I guess, has, you know, if I would say it I would say it's lined me up with my own soul. It's, uh, it's, it's put me on my path.

Peter is obviously profoundly affected by his participation in the Sun Dance, and he discussed positive relationships he has with Black Foot elders in Canada that mentored him through that process. However, when I asked him about his perceptions of or experiences with Native American people, generally, his tone changed drastically.

Oh my gosh. [Laughter] Well, they're, they're hugely varied, uh ... I grew up in California, so always heard disparaging as we went to fish on the Klamath river I heard disparaging remarks from my dad mostly about the drunk Indians who were Klamath Indians. And, so took that in, said 'okay', you know, but uh ... when I was a kid, a young kid, loved the Saturday because it's my generational time, the black and white Saturday movies of Geronimo and Cochise. You know, always identified with the Indians, but never felt like, I've never felt like a wannabe, you know, those guys are pretty cool, that was more it ... it wasn't really until these dreams started happening and I went to Taos and I started coming into these ceremonies that my whole view started to shift and my view became a ceremonial view, you know, that's where I began to know them. Because of the reverence with which they held their path, and obviously since that time, so that's twenty-six, twenty-seven years, I've been in lodges with Native Americans, mostly Lakota who, um, didn't comport themselves, at least in my way of thinking, in a sacred way, who were pretty profane about what they did, and I've left lodges because of that from time to time ... I think, um, know a lot of very arrogant Native Americans, I know a number who are in poverty, living on the edge ... So I would say, I know a lot of ceremonial leaders, I know, just, a lot of what I would call ... well, Natives call 'em, uh, uh, you know, 'apples', red on the outside, white on the inside.

Instead of mentioning positive interactions, or immediately recounting his experiences with his teachers, Peter reaches for stereotypes derived from movies and his father's racist remarks. The one positive interaction he discussed is a Native American woman who performed a healing

ceremony for him, and that story served to compare her, as a humble, giving healer, to the arrogant Lakota discussed previously. Peter also drew a comparison between the “ceremonial” Native Americans he met in Taos to the drunk Klamaths or arrogant Lakotas. This is also an extension of the romanticism seen reflected elsewhere, where the only good Indian is a traditional Indian.

Peter and others reference drug use, alcoholism, and domestic violence, but rest the blame on a drift from traditional ways, without an acknowledgment of the continuing effects of colonialism and genocide, or indeed, the history of Native American religious persecution. As someone who works with Native American youth in an educational setting, Peter referenced his observations of “the really dirty underbelly of this reservation in terms of the heroin, uh, and heroin influence from gangs and, uh, the murders that go on, targeting that goes on, and then the, casino scamming, Indians getting rich off of that.”

Along with the romanticizing of traditional Native American life, there is often a dichotomy expressed between the busy, modern, material Euro-America and more contemplative, intuitive, traditional Native American culture. Mariah remembers spiritual experiences she had while working with the Indian Health Service and meeting Native American women,

It’s not in the realm of rational mind, it’s in the realm of, of soul, it’s in the soul realm ... it [spiritual experiences] sought me more than I think I sought it, really. Said with humility, it’s not a bragging statement, it’s just a statement ... Native women are, I believe still much more in tune with their understanding of how spirituality is the center of their life.

Mariah often referred to women she lived and worked with as quiet, modest, and spiritual. While

these attributes may be praise worthy, stereotyping is still harmful as it creates a limited image of who Native women are.

Mariah then went on to discuss the history of colonization, and how boarding schools disrupted spiritual traditions and lifeway's, but then began to discuss colonization through a 'Manifest Destiny' lens that views Western culture as naturally superior, and colonization as inevitable.

So I think the state of them [Native Americans] as a people, like any other conquered people, and, by the way ... I, thank heavens, grew up in the realization that the history of this planet is one people conquering other people. We're not dastardly Northern Europeans that came over here and, you know, and did something awful for the first time in the world, it's, the world is, has a long history of people moving from one area to another for whatever reason, and then usurping or assimilating the cultures. Some come more easily and some go kicking and screaming. So, um, I think Native American culture was in a process of assimilation and the best parts of dominant, white Western culture, really believe that was the best for them.

Along with these other stereotypes, Mariah related stories that stereotype Natives she interacted with as ignorant, suspicious of outsiders, and living in the past.

I'm a little embarrassed to say it in this way and this is the truth about my feeling ... so there was a, a reservation that I worked for and it was down a long dirt road, and they had been given two hundred thousand dollars to get the road paved, and so they don't trust the government, of course. Uh, because of the things like the blankets with small pox, and you know, and the way they were cheated and on and on and on. You know, it's you know, that story is a shameful story, but it's a story and it's in the past. But they don't trust and so they hired an American, a white engineering firm to come say 'did they give us enough money?' because they were certain that two hundred thousand dollars wasn't enough money to put this road in. They company charged them a hundred and eighty thousand dollars, so here they are in the council meeting saying 'see they didn't give us enough money.' And that's a quintessential story of ... living in the past because that's where we think we're gonna go back and capture what was quintessentially unique and authentic about us, yet not separating, um, the victim story or that that was then and this is now, and, my mother may have been sent to a boarding school, but I wasn't [laughter] you know, that kind of things and yes those are, those kind of forgivenesses [sic] that psychologically we know are important ... And I think this need to be right that they were wronged, or in other words, victimization, is what is holding, uh, them back. That's my opinion, and, as I say, I'm a little embarrassed ... but I think that's what's, where a great deal of the issue is.

Other participants stereotyped Native Americans as distant and inherently distrustful, and remarked that negative interactions colored their participation in spiritual communities with them. Dichotomies were often drawn between Native Americans who were willing to share their cultural practices, and those who were more guarded. As Emma recalls,

[My experiences have been] mixed in the sense of, um, I've had the good fortune to be around some people who are very generous and understanding in terms of how they interface with others, some of them because they are mixed-blood themselves, so they straddle worlds ... I once was talking with a Native woman ... she was talking about how she was distraught, that, um ... the Suquamish people weren't keeping up the grave of Chief Seattle. And she was very offended about this and annoyed and complaining ... And I said to her, 'Well, you have this awareness. Have you thought of kind of spearheading, um, efforts to do something about this?' ... And somebody who was nearby totally blew up, they felt that I had been so disrespectful to her, and it's the way I would have talked to any friend ... But apparently, how I approached it or what I did or said, it wasn't meant disrespectfully, but it created this enormous blow up ... and one of the things I felt is, you know, I don't know that I wanna strive for connection with a culture where I can set off a powder keg like that. Because my own sense of belonging is so tenuous that I wanna be in places where there is a welcome, and I feel that people are sensitive about these things, and, um, prone to take offense.

As is reflected in Peter's quote, many participants received early negative messages from their parents. As Susan remembers,

When I was growing up and my Dad grew up ... where the Native population was pretty trodden upon, and he didn't have anything good to say about Native Americans because they, you know, what they presented was a lot of alcohol, they presented like, um ... not caring and not getting out. They didn't have a great work ethic, he learned, or, according to his perceptions they did not and so I didn't hear anything good from him about them ... I also, you know there was a lot of reading when I was growing up that presented Native Americans in a good light and, and 'the noble redskin' which is probably just as full as whatever as [laughter] you know some other things you've got.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Neoliberalism

As was presented in the findings, the participants consistently stressed the importance of the individual: finding one's own spiritual path, de-emphasis on community, history, and culture in favor of individualism, and individual ownership over spiritual practices and experiences. The participants view their personal experiences and spirituality as more important than community concerns or indigenous critique, an extension of neoliberal views on individuality and private property.

Along with this tendency to stress the individual, specific cultural experiences are universalized under "human" experience. As was shown in one of Mariah's quotes, she denies the ownership that indigenous people have over their own traditions with the statement "it originated with the people." The effects of race, ethnicity, and colonialism are left out of the conversation in favor of discourses on universality, erasing cultural difference, diversity, and life experience. This stress on the individual over the community is reflective of a larger neoliberal discourse present within Western society, a discourse that continues to center whiteness, capitalism, individuality, and private property. In other words, a Eurocentric discourse.⁶⁶

As David Harvey writes, "Neoliberalization has meant, in short, the financialization of everything."⁶⁷ While Harvey focuses on how neoliberalism has affected international markets and discourses on citizenship, this idea is reflected in how the participants view spirituality: everything is available to everyone for a price. As was shown in the findings, many participants feel entitled to participate in Native American spirituality, or view practices and experiences as

⁶⁶ Immanuel Wallerstein, "Eurocentrism and Its Avatars: The Dilemmas of Social Science," *Sociological Bulletin* 46, no. 1 (1997): 21-39.

⁶⁷ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 33.

possessions that they have earned through study or demonstrations of dedication. Under this framework, spirituality isn't owned until it can be capitalized on.

These findings are also reflected in Michael York's work. He writes, "The New Age [spiritual movement] is modeled upon, and is an outgrowth of, liberal Western capitalism. It is part of the same 'cultural logic of late capitalism' that asserts the right to free and unrestricted global trade."⁶⁸ York also makes the connection that such appropriation is white supremacist and Eurocentric, writing, "Not only does it [appropriation] encourage a paradoxical homogenizing to the cultural standards of North Atlantic civilization, exemplified in its affirmation that 'we are all one,' but it also carries an implicit judgment of inferior status for non-hegemonic cultures, inasmuch as they are not considered to be the ones who decide what is to be shared and what is not."⁶⁹ According to York, those engaged in cultural appropriation are striving to assimilate the cultures they are appropriating into their own Western framework, and that they alone have the right to determine what is correct, valuable, and available.

These notions of individuality and freedom appeared to be the most ingrained in the participants. In response to prompting, they continued to come back to themes of individual experience, rights, and universality. These discourses are perhaps the most difficult to challenge and discuss, given how embedded they are in Western consciousness. As Harvey writes, "Neoliberal rhetoric, with its foundational emphasis upon individual freedoms, has the power to split ... It has long proved extremely difficult within the US left, for example, to forge the collective discipline required for political action to achieve social justice without offending the desire of political actors for individual freedom and for full recognition and expression of

⁶⁸ Michael York, "New Age Commodification and Appropriation of Spirituality," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 16, no. 3 (2001), 367.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 368.

particular identities.”⁷⁰ As Harvey is saying, even within groups where people identify as liberal, radical, or progressive, these notions of individuality remain engrained and extremely appealing.

Many of the participants reported leaving strict religions, such as Orthodox Judaism or Catholicism, in favor of Native American spirituality. They reported feelings of freedom and control in their practice of Native American spirituality that they had not experienced in other traditions. As Philip Jenkins writes, “Nobody enforces orthodoxy in neo-Indian spirituality, and certainly not accuracy ... Many who reject the traditional structures of organized religion do so because of a dislike of hierarchy, dogma, and traditional authority, and prefer to base themselves on principles of individualism, spontaneity, and self-reliance.”⁷¹ Participants felt free to adopt many practices from different traditions. Tradition is often ignored under logics of individuality, freedom, and control, and these practices are justified with notions of freedom, with the view that orthodoxy or tradition of any kind of oppressive. As was shown in Sean’s quote, he was unhappy with how his Lakota teacher would “emphasize the ‘we’” and tradition. He described adapting ceremonies she taught him, despite her vocal discomfort. As Sean remembers, “I actually kind of tweaked out my teacher a little bit because I kept shifting things, adapting the traditional ways to fit who I was, and she, made her really nervous, like ‘oh my god if my teachers saw what we were doing, they would freak out.’” In his view, spirituality is an individual pursuit, rather than something stemming from community tradition.

This idea of adapting spirituality to fit the individual is also a reflection of Philip Deloria’s idea that Euro-Americans adopt indigeneity to reconcile cultural anxieties.⁷² According to Deloria, Euro-Americans adopt Native American dress, and adopt their own interpretations of

⁷⁰ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 41-42.

⁷¹ Jenkins, *Dreamcatchers*, 197-198.

⁷² Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 7.

Native American traditional life and spirituality, a phenomenon he terms “playing Indian”. This is clear in many participants, as they described adopting Native American spirituality in response to feelings of dissatisfaction with dominant culture or religion.

Given the ubiquity of these ideas, it isn’t necessarily surprising that the participants would reflect them. What is present amongst the participants is a claim to indigenous spirituality without a full acceptance of those values and acknowledgement of both historical and contemporary inequities. As we have seen in prior research, there is an attempt to reconcile the practice of indigenous spirituality with Western values of individuality and private property. The participants in this study viewed their personal experiences and call to Native spirituality to be a sort of property, asserting ownership and authority over their version of Native spirituality, and the freedom to appropriate and change tradition in accordance with their own needs. What is lacking is an understanding of how Native American people view this as offensive and harmful, and further, an acknowledgement and respect of those views. Some of the participants acknowledge the harm caused by cultural appropriation, but fail to recognize their actions as culturally appropriative, instead viewing their actions as the exception to the rule. As will be shown in the discussion of lack of spiritual agency, all other concerns give way to Western rhetoric of individuality and ownership.

This neoliberal view of spirituality is also contrary to many understandings of the history and purpose of Native American religion. Amanda Porterfield writes of the radical potential of Native American spirituality. She traces the history of prophets such as Handsome Lake, who rejected colonial values and encouraged his people to return to traditional ways of life. She describes Native American spirituality as inherently community minded, critical of colonialism

and capitalist consumption, and respectful of nature.⁷³ Many of the participants bemoaned contemporary American culture, particularly its destructive influence on the environment. What is missing from their analysis is a genuine critique of the underlying values that support that destruction: individualism, private property, and commercialization.

Christopher Rowanien:te Jocks writes about the contradictions of taking Native American spiritual practices out of a Native American context. He writes that this issue is

perhaps less often articulated, and concerns not what *should* be taught, but what *can* be taught; or, what can be translated accurately out of a Native context into a non-Native one. The issues here are not only linguistic, but epistemological and ontological as well...they concern the very nature of knowledge, and of the reality enacted and enhanced by American Indian ceremonies. These are matters about which Native traditionalists cultivate and maintain vastly different perceptions from those familiar to Euroamerican intellectual and religious history.

According to Jocks, many Native American ceremonies and practices make no sense outside of a Native American context, and that these practices cannot be taught accurately to individuals who maintain a Eurocentric worldview.⁷⁴ He also writes that such practices that are often characterized by “outright falsification...distortion...and violation of context” and that “In either case, such adaptations of interpretations can be severely unethical.”⁷⁵

One phenomenon carefully documented in prior research, but not readily apparent in this study, is the capitalist dimension of cultural appropriation. As Lisa Aldred writes, “As products of the very consumer culture they seek to escape, these New Agers pursue spiritual meaning and cultural identification through acts of purchase.”⁷⁶ While a couple of the participants describe businesses they run, experiences they have paid for, and items they own, their primary

⁷³ Amanda Porterfield, “American Indian Spirituality as a Countercultural Movement,” in *Religion in Native North America*, (Moscow: University of Idaho Press), 1990, 154.

⁷⁴ Christopher Rowanien:te Jocks, “Spirituality for Sale: Sacred Knowledge in the Consumer Age,” *American Indian Quarterly* 20 (1996): 415-431.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 417-418.

⁷⁶ Aldred, “Plastic Shamans and Astrotuf Sundances”, 329.

motivation for pursuing Native American spirituality does not seem to be rooted in capitalism. Rather, the capitalistic tendencies seem to be a reflection of a larger, Eurocentric discourse of which capitalism is but one facet. Aldred categorizes culturally appropriative New Age spirituality as “primarily a consumerist movement.”⁷⁷ However, this study shows that the capitalist component of cultural appropriation is secondary to other concerns about the individual, freedom, and the contradictions of those ideas with Native American spirituality.

Western Neoliberal views of Native American spirituality are fraught with contradiction. The participants described the innate uniqueness of Native American spirituality, and then avoided questions of cultural appropriation through arguments that universalize the practices and deny their origin. They view Native American spirituality as an answer to problems of environmental destruction and personal struggles, but still cling to Eurocentric colonial fantasies that seek to assimilate Native practices into Western epistemology and ontology. In extreme examples, participants who viewed themselves as in tune with Native communities acted as apologists for genocide, and revealed problematic views on colonization and assimilation, even as they claim to have earned a place of authority in Native American spirituality. Neoliberal economic relationships to spirituality also result in material performance of Native identity that creates a spectacle of Indianness, and turns indigenous identity into a performance.

Spiritual Materialism

The theme of spiritual materialism is closely tied with themes of personal property and consumption. An example of spiritual materialism was how the participants dressed for their interview. One participant, Peter, came to the meeting at a public library dressed in a t-shirt with a geometric “tribal” design and extensive Native American turquoise jewelry, including multiple

⁷⁷ Ibid., 330.

dangling earrings. When he approached me to ask if I was the student he was to meet with, he remarked in surprise that I had not recognized him by his outfit. He had deliberately dressed to be recognized as someone who identified with Native culture. Other participants also wore large pieces of jewelry, and tribal influenced fashions. One participant's partner came to meet her after our interview dressed in a tunic, moccasins, and beaded headband and carrying a walking stick. This may be how the participants regularly dress, but at least in Peter's case, his attire that day was a performance.

As is reflected in Linda's quote, there is often a desire to possess the material representations of spirituality. Many of the participants made reference to drums, pipes, and (illegal) eagle feathers in their possession. They took great pride in possessing these things, and two of the participants gave me gifts, one of a heron feather and another of a beaded medallion made by a Native American prisoner in an Eastern Washington jail. Both gifts were explained to me, and the intention behind them was to thank me for my work and because gift giving is "traditional". This gift giving also becomes a performance of how in touch with Native culture the participants felt they are, given the fact that "gift-giving" is the core of many tribal values.

This theme also inspired the greatest amount of self-reflexivity amongst the participants, with Linda and Emma recounting stories about their concern with people becoming more interested in Native spirituality as a fad or trend than a genuine spiritual pursuit. Other participants described other spiritual people they knew performing Native identity, as in the case of Sean's description of his White friend who "talked like an elder."

To some of the participants, Native American identity becomes a material performance, dressed in tribal print clothing and draped with turquoise and silver jewelry. This materialism then creates a performative representation of what it means to be indigenous, and many of the

participants criticized Native Americans they viewed as not living up to that representation, as in Peter's use of the term "apple" to describe Native Americans who did not live by his expectation of traditional life.

The relation of deeply personal spiritual experiences is also a marker of spiritual materialism and performance. Sean's story of his vision quest is an example of how the participants often performed during the interviews, providing rich detail of very personal experiences. As Sean was relating this story, it felt like a performance for my benefit that would pre-empt any argument that he did not have a right to adapt the ceremonies. After all, who can argue with personal visits from White Buffalo Calf Woman and Sitting Bull? By appropriating Native American spiritual figures into his story, Sean is claiming spiritual authority and is performing the identity of a spiritual, chosen person. One who has a divine given right to practice and appropriate these traditions as he sees fit.

This can be viewed as an openness that any researcher would be grateful for, but the relation of the stories included elements that specifically addressed their right to participate in Native American traditions and professed their authenticity. Rather than stating that they had influential experiences, those experiences are vividly reenacted in order to impress their impact and authenticity on me, the audience. This re-telling of the experience may also serve to reinforce the participant's authenticity to others, though because of my research method it is unknown if this performative aspect is something that carries over into the participant's day-to-day interactions or if it was specific to our interaction.

Spiritual materialism has been documented in other examples of Euroamerican people pursuing non-European spiritualities. *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* is an example of a spiritual teacher addressing these performative tendencies he saw present amongst Westerners. In

a lecture given to students wanting to pursue Tibetan Buddhism, Chogyam Trungpa begins, “We have come here to learn about spirituality. I trust the genuine quality of this search but we much question its nature.”⁷⁸ Trungpa describes what he sees as a genuine desire to learn, but also reinforces that desire is not necessarily an indicator that the seeker’s actions are right, or even spiritual. He continues, saying “Ego is constantly attempting to acquire and apply the teachings of spirituality for its own benefit...We got through the motions, make the appropriate gestures, but we really do not want to sacrifice any part of our way of life.”⁷⁹ This tendency is reflected in the participants for this study. They want to be and be seen as people who follow an authentic Native American path, but are not willing to consider critique or other viewpoints, instead clinging to a Western worldview that validates their individuality and denies personal agency in spiritual pursuits.

Denial of Agency and Appropriation

When asked about cultural appropriation, many of the participants pled ignorance, saying that they had not heard critique of cultural appropriation, despite many tribal communities around the world making public statements against cultural appropriation for many years.⁸⁰ Most of the participants denied seeking out Native American spirituality, instead describing a feeling divine. Native spirituality is viewed as coming from “the spirits” or other divine source, rather of being called to practice. This view is interesting given that in a few cases the participants left families and homes, and moved thousands of miles in pursuit of teachers and events. These actions are not viewed by the participants as choices, but rather as following the call of the than being a cultural product, created and sustained by people.

⁷⁸ Trungpa, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, 13.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Brown, *Who Owns Native Culture?*, 22-23

Sara Sutler-Cohen also described this phenomenon in her research, where she posits that having a compelling narrative of one's entry into Native American spirituality provides justification for participation. As she writes, "during my stint as a participant at a basic training shaman workshop, we were told that no one could tell us we were shamans...Only 'Spirit' could give us this information, so the role of the imaginary takes on a whole new realm of understanding with its own sets of knowledge."⁸¹ As is reflected in her research as well as this study, the voice of 'Spirit' is considered the most valid form of knowledge and critique. As was shown in this research, the participants attempt to distance themselves from this internal voice, often describing feelings of not seeking or wanting Native American spirituality, or being continuously called to it.

Many of the participants also simultaneously argue that they practice Native American spirituality but that their spirituality is also non-Native. After recounting a long list of Native American authors, teachers, and traditions who had influenced her, Diane responded to questions about cultural appropriation with an insistence that her practice isn't a "traditional Native path." Co-optation and appropriation are justified with similar themes, an insistence that practices are universal, owned by no one, and that they are not trying to practice a "pure" form of Native American spirituality.

This contradictory and circular thinking is one way in which the participants avoided confronting their own complicity in cultural theft. Diane's phrase "I got called" was presented as the final word. That individual justification is what makes sense to her and to most of the participants, along with the constantly shifting definition of their spirituality as either Native

⁸¹ Sara C. Sutler-Cohen, "(Dis)Locating Spiritual Knowledge: Embodied Ideologies, Social Landscapes, and the Power of the Neoshamanic Other." in *Cultural Representation in Native America*. (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2006), 44.

American or not. It is interesting to note that none of the participants emphasized the universality of spirituality until confronted with the idea of cultural appropriation. Prior to that question, they all emphasized what makes Native American spirituality unique and different from other practices they had encountered. This dissonance serves as a way to avoid having honest conversations about appropriation and accept complicity in cultural theft.

Racial Stereotyping

As was reflected in the conversation that introduced this study, many people view the notion of cultural appropriation as inherently xenophobic or racist, believing that not participating in culturally appropriative behavior means that people can only engage with their own culture. Many people who resist the idea of cultural appropriation use examples of experiences they had that exposed them to other cultures in a positive way, using examples of travel and attending cultural events. One issue with this argument is that it does not make a distinction between mutually beneficial cultural exchange and cultural appropriation, but that argument remains a compelling one. In light of these ideas, one interview question was specifically designed to assess if the participant's participation in Native American cultural practices gave them more realistic, humanizing views on Native American people. What is revealed in the interviews is a perpetuation of many stereotypes and white supremacist settler-colonial logics. These logics reflect bell hook's definition of white supremacy, including the idea of whiteness as default. She describes her white students as "have[ing] a deep emotional investment in 'sameness' even as their actions reflect the primacy of whiteness of whiteness as a sign informing who they are and how they think."⁸² This is demonstrated by the participants

⁸² bell hooks, "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination", in *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995), 339.

through a focus on sameness, a denial of the impact of race and colonialism, and universalizing spiritual practices.

Many of the participants chose to relate the prejudiced views of their parents. While the actions of the parent are not the fault of the child, it is still worthy to note that those memories were often the first the participants reached for. Peter recounted his father's disparaging remarks about Klamath fishermen with no context, not explaining why his father felt the way he did or any effect those remarks had on Peter as a child. Nor did he make any attempt to refute what his father said. Other responses to the question about experiences with Native American people also included media representations, such as Western films, cartoons, and novels. While representations do form impressions of others, the question was deliberately framed to encourage the participants to talk about actual people, not media representations.

Many of the participants made references to alcoholism and drug abuse, again mostly through second hand experiences rather than personal relationships. Peter and Mariah, who do have experience in Native American communities, provide stories of poverty and violence without providing context or acknowledging historical and contemporary inequalities. For the participants, these stories are meant to speak for themselves. In an extreme example, Mariah says that colonization was "the best for them." Within the theme of denial is also the denial of the continued effects of Native American genocide, reservation life, and the denial of religious freedom. Mariah views genocide as a "story" located in the past, and believes that feelings of victimization are what is "holding them back" rather than continued material effects of that genocide. As Winona LaDuke relates, "I have heard that a number of times in my life. 'You guys should get over it, it happened a long time ago.' You cannot get over it if you are still in the same circumstances a consequence of what happened a hundred years ago. You cannot get over

it if you are still in exactly the same relationship as you were a hundred years ago.”⁸³ By perpetuating this idea of “getting over it,” Mariah is ignoring the continuing existence of colonial relations and power structures, and the testimonies of Native American people. These kind of narratives create harmful stereotypes of victimization, and places the burden of making things right on the colonized, rather than the colonizer. These narratives also essentialize Native Americans, and ascribe behaviors to groups, rather than individuals.

In Emma’s story about offending a Native American woman over her suggestions of the treatment of Chief Seattle’s grave, Emma represents the woman, and the group she was with in general, as oversensitive and rude. She recounts her feelings of isolation, believing that her intentions are good and that she “didn’t wanna strive for connection with a culture where I could set off a powder keg like that.” In both Emma and Mariah’s cases, Native Americans are lumped together and seen as a homogenous group who think, act, and behave in the same ways. Individual stories and behavior serve as testimony for how all Native Americans are. This essentializing behavior takes away the right for people to self-define, and erases the effects of both history and contemporary events.

Many of the participants also drew a line between “traditional” and contemporary Native Americans, seeing traditional values as more desirable. This assertion of their right to define who is and who is not authentically Native again erases cultural authority and autonomy. Michael Brown describes a group of Hopis who protested workshops on their religious traditions being presented by a white Lutheran minister, writing, “The situation is richly veined with irony.

Indigenous peoples now perceive themselves as more threatened by outsiders who claim to love

⁸³ Winona LaDuke, *Who Owns America? Minority Land and Community Security* in *The Winona LaDuke Rader: A Collection of Essential Writings*, (Stillwater: Voyageur Press, 2002),145.

their religion than by missionaries dedicated to its overthrow.”⁸⁴ While the participants view their practices as innocuous or perhaps even supportive of Native American people and culture, their assertion of cultural authority is threatening to self-definition, and allows non-Natives to become self-appointed authorities on authentic Native American identity.

Peter and Sean often described their dissatisfaction with ceremonies, Peter because the participants were “arrogant” or did not “comport” themselves in ways he felt were correct, and Sean because he did not see the relevancy of traditional practices to his life. Their validation of what they view as authentic and relevant to them is also part of a disturbing trend where outsiders decide what is valuable and true in a culture they do not belong to. As Philip Jenkins writes, “Today, non-Indians not only seek to practice Indian spirituality themselves, but to determine what is or is not appropriate to that tradition...The more pseudo-Indians speak on such issues, the greater danger that the general public will mistake their voices for the authentic views of Native peoples, so that once again, Native voices will be silenced.”⁸⁵ As was shown in Peter and Sean’s quotes, as well as Mariah’s and Emma’s, the participants often had strong opinions about what good Native cultural practice and identity looks like. This is reflective of Shari Huhndorf’s findings in her work, *Going Native*, where she writes, “While those who go Native frequently claim benevolence toward Native peoples, they reaffirm white dominance by making some (usually distorted) vision of Native life subservient to the needs of the colonizing culture.”⁸⁶ Here, the participants feel free to judge what is good, desirable Native identity and life within the context of their own spiritual and emotional needs. These definitions are often based in stereotypes, and ignore historical and contemporary influences on Native life and identity.

⁸⁴ Brown, *Who Owns Native Culture?*, 23.

⁸⁵ Jenkins, *Dream Catchers*, 243.

⁸⁶ Huhndorf, *Going Native*, 5.

Many participants validate people and identities that they view as traditional, and put down any one or anything that does not fit their idea of what authentic Native American cultural identity looks like.

Summary

The participants in this study describe coming to practice Native American spirituality through a series of divine interventions or seeming coincidences. The majority of the participants emphasized that they never actively sought Native American traditions, but that Native American spiritual practices were continuously put in front of them. Many of them had come from strict religious backgrounds, and were attracted to Native American traditions because of their appearing dissimilarity to traditions such as Christianity or Judaism. The participants describe their current, Native American influenced religious practices and the impact of those experiences in great detail; demonstrating how seriously the participants view their practices and the impact those practices have on their lives. Any attempt to introduce the topic of cultural appropriation is met with a series of avoidance strategies, including, but not limited to, a denial of spiritual agency, justifications that use neoliberal language about the universality of religious practices, the performance of spiritual identity as a way to support their practices, and repeated, racist critiques of Native Americans. Many participants also exhibit tendencies towards spiritual materialism, or a pre-occupation with performing a spiritual identity, as well as a tendency to collect from different spiritual traditions.

These findings reflect much of the prior literature, but also break away from prior findings because of the emphasis on the experiences and motivations of the participants, and de-emphasis on capitalistic motivations, although those themes are still present. The findings of

this study unveil a form of cognitive dissonance present among this population, where participants simultaneously asserted their right to practice and alter Native traditions as they please, but may also acknowledge the existence of cultural appropriation. Participants also simultaneously emphasize what makes Native American spirituality unique and different, and then deny that what they practice is Native American at all. They report not seeking out Native American traditions, and then describe the great lengths to which they sought out teachers and other resources to help them along the path.

This cognitive dissonance is supported and formed by Western, Euronormative dialectics that insist on the primacy of the individual, rather than the community. Such a mindset is uncritical of history, white supremacy, and leaves many cultural assumptions unexamined.

Implications

This study may function as a pilot for another study, research that I hope to continue with a larger sample across geographic areas, age, and ethnic groups. Any such study would have implications not only for Ethnic Studies, but also for Sociology and Psychology.

The implications for Ethnic Studies are clear, as cultural appropriation and the contemporary genocide of Native communities remains a salient topic. This study also has implications for the emerging critical study of whiteness, as it unveils how embedded colonial and against dominant ideologies. It is possible that these discourses form, not only the backbone of cultural appropriation, but of uncritical whiteness in general.

From a sociological perspective, this study showed how subcultures who identify as counter-culture tend to still reflect dominant values. Despite constructing their identities around being individuals drawn to non-dominant practices, this sample largely reflected the values of

dominant, neoliberal discourse. How and why this is has implications for studying other subcultures, as well as for organizations and groups who identify with fighting for social justice. Questions of how and why non-Native are drawn to practice Native American spirituality, as well as the effects these practices have on the practitioners, have clear connections to psychology and human development. Many participants came to practice Native American spirituality from some sort of trauma or dissatisfaction with mainstream American life. It is possible that the deeper motivations for their practices may be found through utilizing psychology methodologies and methods in an expanded study.

As was reflected in the conversation recounted in the introduction, many White people in the United States feel no connection to a positive racial or ethnic identity. This sense of disconnection, of not having a culture, history, or identity, undoubtedly is traumatic. Historically, becoming racialized as White has often meant giving up ethnic identity and traditions in favor of buying into white supremacy and capitalism.⁸⁷ Being encouraged to pass for White, adopt whiteness and the myth of neoliberal economics has had negative effects on the psychology and well being of many White identified people, and this loss of culture may have profound generational effects. It is also important to acknowledge how buying into Whiteness has benefitted Whites, and how cultural appropriation is a mere perpetuation of this problematic dynamic, rather than an end to the cycle

Reflections

In concluding this study, there is a clear need for continuing conversations on white supremacy and contemporary colonialism, as well as a need to recognize a spiritual dissatisfaction with contemporary America, a void that Whites are feeling compelled to fill with

⁸⁷ Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

non-dominant spiritualities. The participants reported feelings of disconnection with themselves, the earth, and any sense of positive cultural identity. These problems are real, but the solutions need to be different. The participants feel victimized by dominant American oligarchy, dissatisfied and outraged by the environmental destruction perpetrated by the hands of Western corporations, and disconnected from one another in an age of ever expanding information technology, but the solutions to these cultural ailments cannot be considered just and good if they come at the expense of further marginalizing an already marginalized people. One group's happiness and well-being cannot come at the cost of other people's happiness and well-being.

The participants' experiences are also characterized by unexamined, Euro-normative cultural experiences that need to be made explicit if any productive, decolonial conversation on cultural appropriation is going to take place. Unspoken assumptions, settler-colonial logics, and racial prejudices need to be unveiled. This is perhaps the most difficult problem to address, but it is also the most essential. What this research shows is a group of people who identify with counter-culture, or as liberal or progressive, who still reproduce dominant ideologies, though often without that intention.

Most of the participant's perceptions of Native Americans are coming through stereotyped media representations, or hand-me-down experiences from older relatives. They lack honest, human interactions with Native American people, and this is one way in which white supremacy is perpetuated. As bell hooks writes

I met groups of liberal well-meaning white folks who were in theory anti-racist, but the vast majority of them had little or no actual everyday contact with black people. Many people forget that the apartheid South did not keep white and black folks apart in daily life but rather enforced subordination and domination.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 58.

Though most of the participants report studying with or having personal and professional relationships with Native Americans, and the data shows that these interactions are still marred by stereotypes and a White supremacist dialectic.

Many of the participants expressed a craving for change: cultural change, connection, and an end to the hurts caused by colonialism. But in order for these things to occur, the descendants of colonizers need to recognize the ways in which they perpetuate the values and life ways of their ancestors. Rather than ignoring that connection, there is a need for honesty. If the burden of “getting over” colonialism is continuously placed only on the colonized, we are going nowhere fast. In order to reconcile colonialism, we need to divest ourselves of white supremacy, or viewing white cultural values as the normal, unspoken ‘way things are.’ Simply because some of us may participate in Native cultural practices does not mean we have achieved justice, nor that we do not still have internalized white supremacy. As was shown in the findings, the participants who view themselves as most immersed in Native American culture and life ways were also most likely to say things that reflected stereotyped, prejudiced views on Native American people. We have seen this tendency in other times in our history. As bell hooks writes, “Ironically, de-segregation and racial integration was viewed by liberals and conservative as the action that would bring the races together. In reality even when black and white came together, they were still separated by white-supremacist beliefs.”⁸⁹ Definitions of respectful participation need to come from Native definitions of respect, not settler-colonial definitions. We are living in an increasingly pluralistic society, and that a certain amount of exchange and even appropriation may be inevitable. As Michael Brown writes,

⁸⁹ Ibid, 5

Members of different societies need to talk about one another if they hope to get along. The fluid dance of imitation and contrast, reticence and disclosure is an essential part of social life in pluralistic societies. It is suppressed only with difficulty and at some cost in creative freedom. To make this observation is not to defend commercial exploitation or gross insensitivity. Nor is it to claim that movement of cultural elements between the politically weak and the politically strong is equivalent to exchanges among equals. I wish simply to point out the risk of taking too rigid a view of cultural ownership, especially when technological and social changes are making cultural boundaries ever harder to identify.⁹⁰

Brown's quote gets at the complexity of the issue, and it can be easy to slip into absolutes when discussing such a charged topic that gets at the values we hold most dear: freedom, agency, and choice.

Whites are also encouraged to buy into white supremacy, to never consider whiteness and how it has benefitted some and harmed others. Being honest about where we still hold prejudice, how we know what we think we know about the Other, and genuinely considering history from points of view we do not share are some of the first steps to this decolonization of the mind. As bell hooks writes,

We live in chaos, uncertain about the possibility of building and sustaining community. The public figures who speak the most to us about a return to old-fashioned values embody the evils [Martin Luther] King describes. They are most committed to maintaining systems of domination – racism, sexism, class exploitation, and imperialism. They promote a perverse vision of freedom that makes it synonymous with materialism. They teach us to believe that domination is 'natural,' that it is right for the strong to rule over the weak, the powerful over the powerless. What amazes me is that so many people claim not to embrace these values and yet our collective rejection of them cannot be complete since they prevail in our daily lives.⁹¹

In the interview transcripts, narratives of 'getting over' colonialism, locating genocide and colonialism in the past, and emphasizing how the past cannot be reconstructed reflect the ideas

⁹⁰ Brown, *Who Owns Native Culture?*, 251-252.

⁹¹ bell hooks *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 27-28.

that domination is natural and inevitable. Though the participants emphatically identify as against dominator culture, their language continuously reflects it.

In order for anti-cultural appropriation dialogue to take place, and indeed for us to live in a freer, more equal world, the ways in which dominator culture is perpetuated through these types of language and thought need to be discussed and made explicit. Beyond these conversations, this study has implications for other academic fields, and this research can be taken in many different directions.

This work in an attempt to uncover experiences and perceptions that make up the how and why of appropriation of Native American spirituality, and it creates more questions about internalized white supremacy, colonialism, and the legacy of history.

Recommendations

As was discussed in prior chapters, this research was limited by its sample size, the demographics of the participants, and its limited geographic scope. Because of these limitations, there is a clear need for more research, and more conversations, as this sample may not be representative of all non-Native people who practice Native American spirituality. As I was beginning recruitment for this study, I came into contact with non-Native individuals who had been invited to practice tribal religion by tribal members, and had been initiated into Native American religious societies. This group was invited in because of their presence at local cultural events, and they continue to participate in tribal life and society, rather than practicing Native American spirituality out of context or with other non-Natives. It is clear that their experiences may be different than the participants in this study, and that their experiences may offer examples of mutually beneficial cultural exchange.

This study also raises questions about the experiences of younger people and non-Native people of color who practice Native American spirituality. Perhaps because of the initial recruitment and snowball sampling strategy, the participants were clustered around the same age group and shared common experiences around how they came to practice Native American spirituality that were largely influenced by the cultural climate of the 1960s and 70s. Future research could examine if the same language strategies and experiences are also present amongst younger people, and how the influence of being raised with the internet may influence the way younger people view and talk about spirituality. It is possible that younger people have more awareness of the term “cultural appropriation” because of the influence of the internet, and that they may have more conversations on the topic online than my older sample.

This research also reflects a tendency amongst those engaged in cultural appropriation to avoid complexity, and to suggest that in the absence of absolutes, it is acceptable to people to act as they choose without considering the consequences of their actions. With the complexity of the issue in mind, here are some recommendations for de-colonial work I have compiled from Native American writers and Black anti-racist educators for how we can move forward.

1. Acknowledgement and dialogue around Western, settler-colonial internalized norms and how they affect our actions, thoughts, and perceptions.
2. Native American spiritual practices and their related artifacts should be viewed as intellectual property, with all the rights and protections of intellectual property pertaining.⁹² Native American practices should be viewed in all their diversity and beauty, and any cursory

⁹² Jocks, 426.

similarity to other cultural practices should not be conflated with the practices being identical, and therefore public domain.

3. Non-Native practitioners should not share, sell, or publically practice spiritual techniques they were taught without explicit, detailed permission from someone widely recognized as a Native American spiritual leader.⁹³ Permission to share specific practices, songs, or traditions should not be taken as blanket permission to share or alter other practices.

By working together with Native people, being honest about historical and contemporary colonial power dynamics, and considering non-dominant frameworks, non-Native practitioners of Native American spirituality can develop more authentically healing and de-colonial ways of being. For this to occur, Native viewpoints must be considered fully, and unspoken colonial assumptions must be unveiled. Such actions require vulnerability, and perhaps pain, but they are necessary in order for justice and equality to become a full reality.

⁹³ I include this part on recognition because of past actions by people such as Sun Bear, who did not have permission from his tribe to share or sell the traditions he marketed to whites.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. In order to collect demographic information that best represents you, can you tell me about your ethnic background and racial identity?
2. Can you tell me about your religious upbringing?
3. Could you describe your current religious or spiritual path?
4. What brought you to Native American spiritual practices?
5. How have Native American spiritual practices influenced your life?
6. Were there any specific experiences that made you decide this was right for you?
7. There are some people who would call these types of practices cultural appropriation. What are your experiences with that?
8. Do you know why some people would call it cultural appropriation?
9. What are your perceptions of or experiences with Native American people?
10. Do you have any comments or anything you would like to add?