# "Our Concern is With the Real": Authenticity in Countercultural Appropriations of Native American Heritages during the Long Sixties

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In *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s*, historians Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle note that providing a satisfactory definition of the 1960s counterculture proves a difficult task, primarily because the counterculture defined itself first and foremost by what it was *not* rather than what it was. Borrowing J. Milton Yinger's definition of contraculture, they emphasize that a counterculture is "an oppositional movement with a distinctly separate set of norms and values that are produced dialectically out of a sharply delineated conflict with the dominant society" (7).

This clear polarization invites us to think anew about definitions to suggest that during the 1960s, the meaning of the word "authenticity" itself mattered less than its dialectic relation to its opposite—authenticity could then be defined negatively, by contrast with a state perceived as inauthentic. In the 1960s and early 1970s, in particular, desire and thirst for authenticity grew proportionally with the dissatisfaction felt for inauthentic modern society. Although the long decade was characterized by general affluence and the constitution of a well-to-do middle class, there remained pockets of discontent, from which the so-called "hippie" counterculture emerged. Rejecting the tranquil conformity of the times, the Sixties counterculture expressed dissatisfaction with the consumerism, materialism, imperialism and social and racial injustice it identified as core American values. Braunstein and Doyle indeed suggest that the Sixties counterculture was initially a "ripening of discontent" over American mid-century ethics, which gave birth to an alternative culture in which music, drugs, literature and lifestyle were combined to reject the heritage of the nuclear family, corporate capitalism and military aggression (8). This countercultural project was made visible in physical appearance, the use of psychedelic drugs, the adoption of communal living situations, new cultural forms and alternative institutions, new family patterns, new sexualities, new philosophies, new personal identities, and more. For the most part, counterculturalists—often called "hippies" in the media—were characterized by their youth and their social background as privileged members of the middle-class. Historians have also identified two phases in the 1960s counterculture, contrasting the 1964-1968 utopian period of "flower child" posturing and high optimism with the 1969-1972 downward trajectory of the movement (Braunstein and Doyle 12-13).

In *The Making of a Counter Culture*, Professor Theodore Roszak explains that young counterculturalists felt alienated in modern society, which they experienced as depersonalizing and technocratic to the extreme (4). Under the condition of modernity, then, the rebellious youth felt uprooted from cultural traditions, from community belonging, from the natural world and from spiritual meaning—in a word, they believed the modern condition to be deeply *inauthentic*. Authenticity became one of the core tenets of hippies' new value system, both an escape from and a remedy to mainstream society. Standing Rock Sioux author Philip Deloria demonstrates in *Playing Indian* that authenticity is indeed a culturally constructed category created in opposition to inauthenticity, and adds that the two opposite poles have often been perceived racially, or ethnically. He writes: "[…] because those seeking authenticity have already defined their own state as inauthentic, they easily locate authenticity in the figure of an Other" (101). Previous subcultures and countercultures, including the beat generation, had equated that Other with the African American community, but as Charles Perry underlines in his memoirs-history of the counterculture, "a growing sense of black nationhood had rendered blacks unwilling to serve as identity crutches for white kids" (152). Instead, Perry identifies Native Americans as the counterculture's "holy primitives" (152).[1] Consequently, when the counterculture turned to Indigenous peoples, it actually continued an old leftist tradition that assigned people of color sought-after authenticity. The aim of this paper is therefore to demonstrate that counterculturalists' thirst for the authentic and the real shaped their perception of Indigenous peoples and cultures, sparking a wave of interest for and appropriation of Indigenous heritages. This paper considers issues of power and neocolonialism to suggest that in its quest for authenticity, the counterculture not only debuted a westernized, generic, and *inauthentic* version of "Indian culture," it also enforced imperatives of authenticity upon Indigenous people.

## Indianness and Authenticity

In *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present*, Robert F. Berkhofer articulates the idea that there have been two manifestations of "the Indian" in American history: material, *real* Indians (a set of tribes and individuals), and *ideal* Indians, a collection of mental images, stereotypes, and preconceptions based loosely on real Indigenous people. This latter collection of meanings assembled in the American psyche constitutes "Indianness," a term that describes the body of representations white Americans

[1] Although none are entirely satisfactory, the words "Native Americans" and "Indigenous people" are used interchangeably in this paper to refer to the aboriginal population of the United States. The word "Indian" is used to refer to non-Native constructions and stereotypes about Indigenous people. When possible, names of tribes and nations are preferentially used.

have constructed about and projected upon American Indians. “Indianness” encompasses a shifting and evolving range of notions that define “the Indian of imagination and ideology” (Berkhofer 71). Indianness has indeed evolved through time and has been redefined repeatedly, because its construction serves a purpose for non-Indigenous populations—it is not simply a factual description, but a category responding to the preoccupations of non-Natives, so that the changes in its content reveal more about non-Native desires than Native Americans’ lives or cultures (Aldred 341).

In *Playing Indian*, (Philip) Deloria analyses this historical evolution and demonstrates that the meanings encoded in Indianness before the beginning of the period known as modernity were those of aboriginality to the continent, radical freedom, naturalness and individualism, which fulfilled American needs in times of Revolution and conquest of the continent. With the arrival of alienating modernity, however, the historic tradition of Indianness was entirely reworked—from then on, Indianness allowed for the encounter of *authenticity*, the real. As Deloria writes, “in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American’s fascination with playing Indian would shift from the tradition founded during the revolution–in which Indians represented quintessential American identities–to a new, modernist tradition characterized by an obsessive desire for authentic Indians far outside the temporal bounds of modern society” (94).

What Deloria then calls “Indian Play” is the material enactment of Indianness, the physical translation of its conceptual contents. He writes that “images of Indianness have often been translated into material forms,” so that, for the longest time in American history, Indianness has always been articulated ideologically as well as *performed* and *experienced* by non-Natives (6). Deloria’s definition of the concept also suggests that performances of Indianness (through clothing, reenactment of rituals, fabrication of tipis, and more) have been used to construct and define national and personal identities. Although there is importance in the choice of the appropriated practices, Indian play is always first and foremost a means of enacting the contents associated with the current version of Indianness. In this study of the counterculture, we may understand its Indian play to be, among other explanations, a way to experience the authenticity encoded in Indianness. As the “freak extraordinaire”—that is to say, the? local celebrity of the Berkeley countercultural milieu—known as Charlie Brown stated in an interview granted to the underground newspaper *The Detroit Sun*, “[…] the Indian way will survive all others, and hippies are turning on to the Indian way because it is real and natural” (5).

**The Sixties Counterculture: Tribe Wannabee?**

Once a participant in the countercultural movement, historian Deborah Root recalls:

> I think most of us of a certain age can remember when a fantasy of Native people functioned as a metaphor for the rejection of mainstream, bourgeois, white society. Native culture, or, more properly, the bogus version of Native culture that existed in the white imagination, came to stand for authenticity and redemption. Many of us appropriated the most superficial and hackneyed marks of this romance–beads, feathers, fringe–as a means of displaying our opposition to our own cultural background and the flatness and hideous pastels of suburbia.(Root 226)

Sartorial choices indeed reflected the importance of Indian iconography and Indian play for the self-image of the self-styled "longhairs." In the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood of San Francisco, in particular, "on almost any given day [...] one could find the beautiful and colorful trappings of an Indian girl or brave; the other costumes... were much more difficult to identify" (Watson 219). Beads, fringe and feathers became highly fraught visual symbols based on stereotypes of Indianness that ignored contemporary realities or tribal diversity. Starting with Wes Wilson's *Tribal Stomp* (February 19, 1966) poster advertising a Jefferson Airplane and Big Brother & The Holding Co. concert, images of Indigenous people and symbols of their cultures also found their way into hippie cultural productions. Rick Griffin's concert posters particularly favored Indian images and sketches to convey assorted notions of simplicity, naturalness, and the alternative (Parke-Taylor 1107). Such a pervasive desire for authenticity stimulated the circulation of elements issued from Indigenous religions, such as Plains vision quests, sweat lodges and peace pipes, Hopi prophecies, references to the Great Spirit, and ceremonies of the pan-Indigenous peyote religion. It also explains the wide readership afforded to books purporting to divulge Indigenous religious knowledge, such as Frank Waters' *Book of the Hopi*, Black Elk and John G. Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks*, or Carlos Castaneda's *The Teachings of Don Juan: a Yaqui Way of Knowledge*. Indigenous religions and spiritualities were indeed felt to be more authentic than Western religions, conversely perceived as artificial, rigid and dogmatic, not natural, experiential or visionary enough (Jenkins 15). As Standing Rock Lakota intellectual Vine Deloria Jr. explains:

> In a variety of ways the American public, searching for a sense of authenticity that it cannot find in its own tradition, is turning to American Indians as it wishes to visualize them. It is not simply the nobility of the novelists or the tragic vision of the historians that America is seeking. In a very real sense, the quest is for the religious insight of American Indians and the feeling of authenticity that Indians project. (Deloria *God is Red* 74)

Yearnings for Indian-inflected authenticity were perhaps most visible in hippie tribalism—counterculturalists presented their groupings as "tribes" and chose new Indian-sounding "tribal" names for themselves and each other. Tribal connections were portrayed as truer, more

natural and more reciprocal than traditional Western forms of association, especially given that hippies were progressively parting with the ideal of the nuclear family. As *Life* magazine reported, "[Hippies] seek out the old men who still remember the tribal patterns, for hippies are enormously attracted to the Indians' communal society, where all is shared and there is no feeling for property or material possessions, where disputes are settled through talk, where there is a sense of group ceremony and ritual" (66). Hippie tribes were decidedly varied in nature, sometimes motivated by a shared artistic, spiritual or political project, while others simply lived together, or used the term for their friendship group. Of countercultural tribes, *Life* explained that "[s]ome are small, five or 10 people who sample living together in a pad or house, sharing possessions, food and taking drugs together. But other tribes are more elaborate, almost corporate enterprises" (66-67). Such corporate enterprises included the Group Image, a New York tribe that ran an electronic rock group and an art boutique, or Chet Helms' Family Dog, the tribe running the Avalon Ballroom in San Francisco. A foundational event of the Sixties counterculture, the January 1967 Human Be-In in San Francisco epitomized the aesthetics of the tribe. It was billed as the "Gathering of the Tribes," and was tinged with Indianness from the outset through all types of advertisement media. In January 1967, an article sponsoring the Be-In was published in the *San Francisco Oracle*, promoting the idea that the event had been imagined as a "joyful Pow-Wow and Peace Dance" (Issit 120). Much of the publicity surrounding the event indeed toyed with meanings associated with tribalism and Native heritages, and it clearly encouraged Indian play: "everyone is invited to bring costumes, blankets, bells, flags, symbols, cymbals, drums, beads, feathers, flowers" (Issit 120). Above all, it was also the expression of "a mass yearning, especially among the young, for a return to the Indian tribal system" (Watson 212). Indeed, whereas the media portrayed the Be-In as a party of monumental scope, "people in the Haight believed that the Be-In had served notice of a new tribal collectivity" (Watson 212). Tribal symbolism was in fact so pervasive in countercultural communities beyond 1967 and the Human Be-In, that Indigenous scholars would later refer to these groupings as "tribe Wannabee" or "Wannabi" (Green 48).

Hippie tribalism and the connected practice of Indian play nevertheless intensified towards the end of the decade and in the first few years of the Seventies with the "Great Communal Explosion" of the late 1960s. As counterculturalists streamed to such places as the rugged Southwest or the wild Pacific Northwest to establish intentional communities, they became animated with the desire to live "'like the Indians,'" who appeared to provide a convincing model for a more self-sustainable, natural, and authentic existence in the remote corners of the nation. Sherry Smith points that this was especially true of the Southwest, connected as it is to Navajo, Hopi, and Pueblo reservations: "The distinctive element of the New Mexico experience, one that separates it from the Pacific Northwest or the Bay Area of San Francisco, is people went there to build lasting communities inspired, in part, by what they imagined

Indian communities to be" (114). Communes were therefore crucibles for countercultural Indian play, especially in the Taos area of New Mexico. There, the emblematic New Buffalo commune of Arroyo Hondo developed its identity through performances of Indianness. Founding settler of New Buffalo Joyce Robinson explains that the commune was indeed connected to Indian iconography from its inception, and adds: "At first we all lived in tipis" (Keltz 40-41). The same was true of many a commune in the area: some people of the neighboring Morningstar East ranch also lived in Plains-inspired tipis, as the correspondents of *Time* noted in their investigation of the counterculture (66). Hippie Indianist costuming and posturing were however not unanimously well-received among the inhabitants of nearby reservations: the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* reports the words of a local man, Pueblo-born Tony Naylor, who accuses hippies of being mere parasites, "like the fleas on the dog" (20). The newspaper then describes other Natives of the area as equally critical of the phenomenon.

**The Conceptual Prison of Authenticity**

Indeed, many Indigenous people—including scholars and intellectuals, tribal elders, as well as militant members of the American Indian Movement—have voiced their disapproval at of? the phenomenon. The act of perceiving Native heritages through the prism of modernity-in-crisis naturally engendered misrepresentations of Indigenous cultures, furthering already well-worn prejudices and propagating images of Indians steeped in romantic primitivism. In their 1935 book *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity*, Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Boas define primitivism as "the discontent of the civilized with civilization, or with some conspicuous and characteristic feature of it" (7), a definition that appears to remain relevant decades later and which echoes (Philip)Deloria's analysis of countercultural interest in Indigenous cultures. As historian Brian Haley notes, "the 1960s youth counterculture was a primitivist movement par excellence in which correcting or avoiding the flaws of the dominant modernism was the principal focus" (211). Over the years, historians have therefore characterized white Indian play as cultural intrusion, theft of cultural property, colonialist expropriation, or even as the final stage in cultural genocide, seeing in the phenomenon a continuation of the unconscious strategies inherent in settler colonialism (Green). They have pointed at the fact that appropriators use decontextualized knowledge, cherry-pick the concepts that appeal to them, often with very little understanding of their cultural importance, and trivialize and desacralize important cultural objects.

The criticism leveled at countercultural Indian play has consistently emphasized that hippies' spiritual productions distort, misrepresent, and trivialize *authentic* Indigenous cultures, circulating falsehoods and inauthentic fabrications that pass for Indigenous culture in the

process. In “Spirituality For Sale: Sacred Knowledge in the Consumer Age,” Kahnawake Mohawk scholar Christopher Jocks develops a typology of the arguments used to criticize practices of cultural appropriation and identifies, firstly, the “inaccuracy” of appropriations, citing outright falsification, distortion, and violation of context as subcategories of the argument (417-418). In the debate, proponents of cultural appropriation have, however, relied on notions of cultural relativism and postmodern understandings of culture to counter this argument, challenging the defining criteria of what constitutes *authentic* Indigenous culture, and questioning who has the power to define authentic heritage (Taylor 198). It has also been argued that clinging to notions of authenticity to criticize or identify cultural appropriation implies denying cultural practices the possibility of evolution. However, Indigenous people have persistently maintained that this line of reasoning is an extension of imperialist and neocolonial logics that seek to strip Indigenous people of any remaining power they have over their own cultural productions.

It has also been argued that hippie Indian play promoted the imperative for Native people to conform to white ideals of Indianness, notably the ideal of authenticity. In *Hippies, Indians, and the Fight for Red Power*, historian Sherry Smith highlights that defining Native people as more culturally authentic was a form of racism and neocolonialism which trapped Native Americans in conceptions shaped by non-Natives’ assumptions, namely, that indigenous people are more spiritual, traditional, pre-capitalist, culturally pure, etc. (8). “Authenticity,” the assumptions it carries and the imperative it has become, are therefore widely discussed in Indigenous circles.

White Earth Ojibwe writer Gerald Vizenor has for one consistently argued that “authenticity” is an oppressive concept of the dominant discourse which “created division, dissension and damage within Native communities or individual Indians’ psyches” (Smith 8). The colonial gaze defines the authentic, and, in the process, ascribes a certain Indianness to which Indigenous people must conform to be recognized as such. Imperatives of authenticity therefore entrap Native people in settler expectations—Vine Deloria Jr speaks of a “conceptual prison” that categorizes indigenous peoples, their worldviews and cultural practices only in Western imperialist terms (*Custer* 93). Gerald Vizenor also notes that this emphasis on authenticity denies indigenous people the dynamism of cultural growth, and places Indigenous people outside history, or in a pre-colonial Arcadian past. And indeed, it may undeniably be said that counterculturalists unwittingly articulated a circulating definition of authentic Indianness centered on premodern notions, instead of embracing the complexities of contemporary Indigenous cultures. Underground newspapers of the counterculture for example offered a platform to Rolling Thunder, a self-proclaimed Cherokee-Western Shoshone hippie spiritual leader whose claims of Indigenous ancestry have recently been refuted (Haley

86). In the *Oracle of Southern California*, Rolling Thunder was then able to state that "there's a great difference between the 'Traditional Indian' and the what we call 'brainwashed' or 'whitewashed' made-over Indian" (12). It thus appears that, from an elusive ideal desperately sought in Indigenous heritages by alienated American youth, authenticity became the measure of correspondence between Indigenous lifeways and popular or dominant representations of Indianness, which are largely based on misconceptions and misrepresentations. The consequences of this imposition are cultural, but they are also political: Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson demonstrates in *Mohawk Interruptus* that when people from her community stray from stereotypes of Indianness, for example by engaging in the sale and contraband of cigarettes across the Canadian border, they are considered less authentic, and thus less deserving of their rights as a sovereign people (127).

Conversely, some have contended that indigenous peoples could—and have—exploited whites' definition of authenticity for their own purposes. According to Philip Deloria, authenticity is positive and powerful for Native people, because it contradicts post-modern logics that unmoor cultural meanings from social realities, and because it connects Indian play into a material world where Indigenous people must be acknowledged: it forces appropriators to refer to and seek out real, live, Native Americans, and their actual living conditions, or else to lose claims staked at authenticity (146). Deloria actually points out that a difference between countercultural Indian play and later New Age appropriations of Indigenous heritages is the sidelining of concerns for authenticity, now understood rather as a token of accuracy. According to the author, the New Age spiritual movement embraces an individualistic what-works-for-me approach to spirituality and religion in which imperatives of authenticity disappear, which is cause for concern, as it deprives Native people of agency and completely separates cultural productions from the cultures that produced them (P. Deloria 181).

**The Indigenous Cultural Revival of the 1960s**

Towards the end of the 1960s, countercultural narratives of Indian authenticity were widely espoused in hippie circles, and had even begun to seep into the mainstream. However, the appearance of a militant and assertive branch of Indigenous activism at the end of the decade, which embraced radical tactics and civil disobedience, helped establish in the public mind the fact that Native Americans were modern people with modern aspirations, concerns and prospects, which effectively thwarted the circulating version of Indianness typical of the 1960s, and contradicted hippies' anti-modern longings. Often called the era of Red Power, the years between 1969 and 1973 witnessed the occupation of Alcatraz Island, the takeover of the Headquarters of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington D.C., fish-ins on the Nisqually

River, the birth of the American Indian Movement, and exchange of fire between the Army and the newly founded Independent Oglala Nation on the site of the 1890 Wounded Knee Massacre. As Native activists made their case for treaty rights and the return of Indigenous land bases, they also challenged pre-modern assumptions of Indianness. As Vine Deloria describes:

> "When the Indians of the Bay area occupied Alcatraz, the hippies descended on the island in droves, nervously scanning the horizon for a vision of man in his pristine natural state. When they found that the tribesmen had the same organizational problems as any other group might have, they left in disappointment, disillusioned with 'Indianism' that had existed only in their imaginations" (qtd. in Niman 141).

With militancy also came a renewed cultural awareness among tribal people, and a restoration of pride in traditional customs. It led to a tremendous surge of interest in traditional cultures and religions among younger Natives, prompted in part by the presence of medicine men and the celebration of ceremonies on sites of indigenous protest. At the 1973 occupation of Wounded Knee, for example, medicine man Leonard Crow Dog initiated many of the younger men and women present to Lakota rituals. Native people engaged in a revival of traditions, with the renewed performance of ceremonies that had long been discarded or suppressed—some even reinstituted a version of the Ghost Dance (Smith and Warrior 228). Some nations that had almost entirely lost touch with their spiritual or religious systems turned to Plains traditions, which are more documented and accessible than other traditions, and adopted them as their own in an attempt to revive an Indigenous form of religiosity in their own communities (Owen 116). This phenomenon then again questions Western assumptions about the authenticity of cultural heritages, and who has the power to define them as such.

**Conclusion**

In the article "Why Taos," published in the countercultural underground newspaper *Fountain of Light* in 1969, the authors seek to explain what prompted them and hundreds of others to move from the crowded hippie enclaves of major cities to the sprouting intentional communities (or communes) of New Mexico. They reference the strong presence of Indigenous cultures in the region (the homeland of Pueblo people), and explain that the move is for them a chance to embrace natural and authentic ways of life, contrasted with the "contamination" of urban areas (21). They conclude: "our concern is with the real […]" (21). Although seemingly innocent and well-intentioned, this article demonstrates the centrality of authenticity in countercultural desires and value systems, which translated into an interest for in? Indigenous cultures, defined by contrast with Western inauthenticity. It is thus worth restating that hippies' conception of "the real" or "the authentic" was but an ill-defined fictional production,

which centered around primitivist assumptions about human nature. As this paper sought to demonstrate, counterculturalists' understanding of authenticity ultimately imposed detrimental definitions of authentic Indianness constructed along pre-modern lines onto Indigenous people. During the 1960s and beyond, then, Indigenous people both *resisted* and *accommodated* hippie musings and misconceptions: while the Santa Clara Pueblo of New Mexico removed members of the Hog Farm—an itinerant hippie commune—from their lands at gunpoint after a disagreement revealed the latter's primitivist (if not racist) bias (Wavy Gravy 64), others, including Ojibwe actor and author Sun Bear, sought to financially profit from the hippie penchant for Indian-inflected authenticity (Deloria 169). Lately, especially since the 1980s and 1990s, with the development of the New Age movement and the newly visible issue of neo-Indianism in academic circles, Indigenous scholars and activists have asserted their own understanding of "authenticity"—one that emphasizes respect for the integrity of cultural practices and traditional protocols (Owen 110), and which challenges countercultural constructions of Indianness as well as the definition of Indigeneity along ethnic or racial boundaries.

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