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Essay #1- Native American Stereotypes and Realities

In today's world, many of us struggle with being judgmental and failing to respect those who may appear different from us, despite knowing it goes against our values. Outward appearance is often the first thing we notice about others and something we are highly aware of in ourselves. People express themselves in various ways through their clothing, grooming, or personal style—whether to fit in, stand out, or reflect their identity. However, when someone's appearance significantly deviates from cultural norms, they may face unfair assumptions, discrimination, or mistreatment. For Native Americans, unfortunately, many people today hold popular stereotypes about their clothing, assuming it is all the same, overly colorful, or even wild.

The image many people have of Native Americans is often shaped by limited interactions with them. As Anton Treuer explains on page 146 of his book *Everything You Wanted to Know About Indians but Were Afraid to Ask*, "For most Americans, direct contact with an Indian is rare, and a deep conversation with one even more elusive." This reality helps explain why many people judge Native Americans based on appearance alone, and our limited exposure may cause us to lump all Native Americans together into a single, generalized image. Much of the exposure to Native culture today comes from movies, costumes, or professional sports teams—sources that often exaggerate and oversimplify historical elements, reducing real people to stereotypes. As a result, many may not even recognize their own cultural biases or the ways in which they perpetuate misconceptions about Native communities.

One of the most prevalent stereotypes about Native American appearance is the assumption that all Native people wear elaborate, traditional and older "savage" clothing daily.

While it is true that powwows and cultural events can feature elaborate crafted outfits with beadwork, feathers, and more, these are worn for special occasions, not as everyday attire. The assumption that all Native Americans dress this way is not only inaccurate but also ignores the diversity of Indigenous nations and the fact that most Native people wear contemporary clothing like anyone else. Many Native Americans today don't try to hide who they are, they just may show it in different ways such as the color or their clothing or a pen embedded in their suit.

Similarly, Hollywood has played a significant role in shaping misconceptions about Native American appearance. Many classic Western films depict Native Americans as either noble warriors or savages, often dressed in buckskin, war paint, and headdresses. In reality, traditional clothing varies widely between tribes, and not all Indigenous groups historically wore feathered war bonnets. One example of this is the native eagle feather that some group leaders wear. The feather is a big symbol of respect and only given for certain occasions such as high school graduation, being a war veteran, or being of older age. Stereotyping this feather to seem that all Native Americans have it or wear it can lose some of the importance and sanctity of what it really is to the people.

Another significant stereotype revolves around Native American hair. Long, dark, flowing hair is often depicted as a universal trait among Native Americans, reinforcing the idea that they must look a certain way to be considered authentic. Hair holds deep cultural significance for many Indigenous groups, symbolizing strength, spirituality, and identity. On page 39 of his book, Anton Treuer states, "Hair was a manifestation of spiritual strength or power but also a visible symbol of that power, and thus a source of pride and even vanity." This deep connection to hair makes historical attempts to suppress Native identity even more damaging. On page 40, Treuer continues, "You can imagine how it must have felt for many

Native children to have their hair cut against their will upon entrance into U.S. government-run boarding schools." These forced haircuts may have been a part of broader assimilation efforts aimed at erasing Indigenous identity, but either way, the action of making them cut their hair has much more significance than appearance alone.

The stereotype of Native Americans as being stuck in the past also fuels assumptions about their appearance. Many people expect Native Americans to conform to an outdated image rather than recognizing them as modern individuals who blend traditional and contemporary influences in their daily lives. This expectation can lead to harmful gatekeeping, where Native people who do not fit the stereotypical look are questioned about their authenticity. Such assumptions disregard the evolving nature of Native cultures and the ways in which Indigenous people navigate both traditional and modern identities and as we continue to view Native Americans in the same old way, we make it tough for their culture to make any advancements or adjustments towards who they are, or want to be, now.

Much of who we are as people have to do with the ways we represent ourselves. When we categorize a certain culture to stereotypes in the ways that they dress it becomes very harmful to understanding who they are as real people and to how they may view themselves. As we move forward as a society it is key for each one of us to do our part in making all feel accepted and not caving to the destructive stereotypes that may put others down with it.

Sources:

Anthony Treur. *Everything You Wanted to Know about American Indians, But Were Afraid to Ask*

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