

Introduction:

Note: this doc is easier to read with the Google Doc mobile app, or on a computer. I have no idea why the images get distorted when opened in a mobile browser, but they just do and I don't know how to fix it.

Hadìh, my name is Kit, my pronouns are they/them, and I am Wet'suwet'en. I've always been very proud of my culture, and I feel like I should make this educational thread to explain an issue involving character design that has been popping up every now and then. My experience from this has been mostly in the Warrior Cats fandom, so I don't know how much of an issue this is outside of that fandom, but I think this knowledge could be applied to other fandoms in terms of character design as well.

For those who are unaware of the Warrior Cats fandom (good for you, tbh) the fandom revolves around a children/YA novel series about wild/stray cats living in a society out in the wild. There is definitely a good bit of appropriation of Indigenous culture and “inspiration” taken from stereotypes of Indigenous tribe and clan systems, but for now I'd like to focus on one design trait that pops up quite a bit in fanmade designs of warrior cat characters: a feather or two behind the ear of the cat.



This issue was first brought to light by another twitter user whose name I unfortunately can't remember, and whose account no longer exists, so I

suspect that they got driven off twitter because the amount of people who crawled out of the woodworks to defend this design choice despite multiple Indigenous people saying that they were uncomfortable with people using it was surprising. Despite that, the decision by most of the artists in the warrior cats fandom was, if a feather was needed in the character's design, to put it anywhere except behind the ear, which I think is a good decision. However, I still see the character design choice showing up in lots of designs, whether it was in a warrior cat design or not, and I was emailing another artist talking about this design choice when I decided to make this thread, as there isn't a lot of info on twitter, and much of it is from people who aren't Indigenous.

So... to start off, I'd like to begin with the subject of the feather, and the importance it has to Indigenous people. The website Native Hope describes the feather's usage in Native American culture as "a powerful symbol that signifies honor and a connection between the owner, the Creator, and the bird from which the feather came. It symbolizes trust, honor, strength, wisdom, power, and freedom. It is an object that is deeply revered and a sign of high honor."

<https://blog.nativehope.org/the-feather-symbol-of-high-honor>

So feathers are incredibly sacred to Indigenous cultures. They are an honor to receive, and treasured greatly. They aren't small, insignificant parts of our culture.

With that in mind, let's move to the issue that is still prevalent in a lot of character designs, and parts of the warrior cats fandom, to this day: cultural appropriation.

If you do not know what cultural appropriation is, here is the definition of it from the dictionary: "the unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the customs, practices, ideas, etc. of one people or society by members of another and typically more dominant people or society."

Basically, it's someone (oftentimes the colonizer of an oppressed culture) taking parts of someone else's culture and fitting it into their own. Sometimes it's made into a joke, sometimes it's bastardized or sexualized, but any way it's done, it is still harmful.

"Now, why would it be harmful?" I'm sure someone will ask. "They're just appreciating your/someone else's culture." Let me explain why.

If you are not familiar with colonization, it is (dictionary quote) "the action or process of settling among and establishing control over the Indigenous people of an area."

Cultural Appropriation is a part of the process of colonization. It's the last step of the process, where parts of the colonized culture like practices, objects, artwork, terms, etc, are slipped into the colonizer's society. For example, white-owned companies mass-producing dreamcatchers to sell, or traditional and sacred Indigenous regalia being created and worn by white people. White sage, a plant sacred to Indigenous practices, was almost driven to extinction because white people were buying it so much simply for the token experience of "acting like an Indigenous person." And stereotypical and inaccurate depictions of Indigenous people were used quite a lot in marketing, sports, and advertisements, and some still linger to this day.

All of these things were meant to erode the Indigenous culture, to turn it simply into an object of commercial advertisements so that the white public did not care about the Indigenous people, because for all they knew Indigenous people were long gone, or dying off, or simply a figurehead used in advertisements. And it very nearly worked. It is only within the past 20, maybe 30 years or so that the governments have actually acknowledged how much the Indigenous people suffered throughout colonization, and even then it's only recently that the public as a whole has begun learning about what Indigenous people went through.

With that in mind, let's look at how feathers were displayed in stereotypical Indigenous advertisements.



(Logo of the MLB Cleveland Indians mascot from 1946-1950)





Postcardmark

www.delcampe.net

(Multiple advertisements for various brands)



("Warrior" cartoon artwork for a hockey mascot from www.beyond-mascot-art.com)



(NHL logo for the Chicago Blackhawks, which has been pretty much the same since 1927)



(Osceola and Renegade, mascots for the Florida State University Seminoles. This picture was taken in 2011)

As you can see, all of them are rampant in stereotypes, including one that may be familiar to warrior cat artists: the feather behind the ear. Just like much of Indigenous culture, the usage of the feather was taken by white people and turned into a “fun little” design choice to make their mascots, their characters, or themselves seem more “Indigenous”. So the usage of feathers behind the ear is a stereotype, as well as cultural appropriation.

“But it’s just a feather, Indigenous people don’t have total control over feathers.” We don’t. However, the way that artists tend to use the feathers in their design is very reminiscent of these stereotypical caricatures of Indigenous people. We don’t necessarily mind you adding a feather for some reason to your design, but placing it in your character’s hair or behind the ear in a way that is similar to these old caricatures is a no-go. Placing a feather in your character’s tail, giving them feather earrings, etc? Go for it. Beside/behind the ear? Don’t.

“But why so much fuss over a drawing?” Because these drawing stereotypes is what contributed to the destruction of the culture and ways of life of the Indigenous people. They were used to belittle and mock our culture, and make us seem like a funny skit in the Sunday funnies of a newspaper. Then, when Indigenous people began to become more and more oppressed and lose more of their right to stand up for themselves, suddenly it became “trendy” to have an “indian aesthetic”, which is why things like headdresses, dreamcatchers, and more sacred objects and practices in our culture got snatched up by white people. These caricatures aren’t just drawings. They very much played a part in the near destruction of Native Canadian and American culture. By using these stereotypes of headdresses or feathers behind the ear, you are contributing to the process of colonization, whether your intentions are pure or not.

“If I’m not allowed to put feathers behind the ear, what should I do?” There are so many options. If you’re a warrior cat artist, move the feather to the chest fur or the tail. Use a flower or leaves or moss instead of a feather. Just don’t contribute to a stereotype that serves to remind Indigenous people of how so much of their culture was turned into a commercial gimmick or an aesthetic for white people.



“I have an opinion about this issue that contradicts this document!” If you’re not Indigenous, then I don’t want to hear about it. Your opinion has literally no bearing on this subject whatsoever, as this stereotype has never affected you or your culture, and you **ESPECIALLY** have no weight in this argument if you are white, as it is **LITERALLY** your people that perpetrated these horrible things.

I understand that there are some Indigenous people who have no opinion on the cultural appropriation debate, but if you are one such person then I ask that you be respectful of Indigenous people like myself who are uncomfortable with it. Thank you.

I am more than willing to explain things I have not made clear, but I will not respond to racist or hurtful replies. I can understand if you aren’t Indigenous and haven’t heard of these things before and have character designs with these traits, and I ask that you use the helpful visual guide above to prevent your OCs/Designs from perpetrating a harmful stereotype and cultural appropriation.

Misiyh, thank you for your time.