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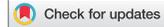
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Native voices on Native appropriation

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ABSTRACT

In U.S. media, appropriation of American Indian cultures and identities is a recurring topic. Yet, there is no academic research that examines American Indian experiences with and attitudes towards multiple types of this appropriation. We analyzed written responses about appropriation from 362 tribally-enrolled American Indian participants. We found that these participants witness many types of appropriation on a regular basis. While a small percentage expressed support for this appropriation, the vast majority voiced opposition, most commonly because they perceive it as disrespectful, ignorant, and oppressive. Many participants described negative feelings they experience when encountering appropriation, especially anger. Some take action to eliminate appropriation, especially educating others. We situate our findings in the context of settler colonialism, and explain how this appropriation operates as microaggressions, which generate a hostile climate. Lastly, we discuss ways our findings can inform social change and uphold the sovereignty of American Indian tribal nations.

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For almost 50 years, the Jeep company has named vehicles “Cherokee” (e.g. “Grand Cherokee”). In 2021, Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation, Chuck Hoskin Jr., spoke out against the company’s ongoing use of the Cherokee name (White 2021):

The use of Cherokee names and imagery for peddling products doesn’t deepen the country’s understanding of what it means to be Cherokee ... It diminishes it somewhat ... The best way to honor us is to learn about our sovereign government, our role in this country, our history, culture, and language and have meaningful dialogue with federally recognized tribes on cultural appropriateness.

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The Jeep company use of the Cherokee name is an example of Native appropriation (NA),¹ which is a type of cultural appropriation. We define NA (Keene, n.d.) as: when people who are not American Indian (AI)² use aspects of AI identities, cultures, and/or pseudo-culture (i.e. what they perceive to be AI culture but is often stereotypical) for their own purposes.

Some scholars have studied the effects of NA. Research with AI samples reveal that AI mascots are harmful to AI Peoples (Fryberg et al. 2008; LaRocque et al. 2011). Exposing non-AI people to these mascots increases their bias toward AI Peoples (Angle et al. 2017; Burkley et al. 2017). Among non-AI people, support for these mascots is associated with more prejudice against and less support for AI Peoples (e.g. Foxworth and Boulding 2022; Kraus, Brown, and Swoboda 2019). Epperson and Prochaska (2023) found most AIs in their sample falsely believe that the “Natural American Spirit” brand of cigarettes (which uses AI imagery) is owned by AI people and the tobacco is grown on AI lands. More broadly, using a White American sample, Davis-Delano, Galliher, and Gone (2022) found that more support for multiple types of NA was associated with more prejudice against and less support for AI Peoples.

Most empirical research on NA is focused on AI mascots. There are limited studies focused on other types of NA. Further, most researchers do not utilize AI samples. There are three academic publications that report findings on AI attitudes about AI mascots (Fenelon 2017; Fryberg et al. 2021; Laveay, Callison, and Rodriguez 2009), and two on AI perceptions of cigarette brands that use AI imagery (Epperson and Prochaska 2023; Unger, Soto, and Beazconde-Garbanati 2006). Yet, there are no academic publications that report AI attitudes toward *multiple* types of NA. Further, there are no academic publications that enable readers to hear AI people describe their experiences with multiple types of NA.

Our study fills this gap, as we use qualitative data from an original survey of AIs to explore AI experiences with multiple types of NA. In this article, we discuss the most common types of NA described by our sample, reasons they oppose and support this appropriation, feelings they experience when encountering this appropriation, and actions they have taken relative to this appropriation. Then, we situate our findings in the context of power, settler colonialism, and a critique of individualism in U.S. society. Lastly, we discuss the implications of our findings for AI Peoples.³

Types of Native appropriation

Scholars have noted that NA is common in U.S. society (e.g. Green 1988; Merskin 2014). There are so many types of NA that we cannot list them all, but examples include: art (e.g. Root 1996), toys (e.g. Hirschfelder 1999), adornment (e.g. Lopez, Eason, and Fryberg 2022), consumer product names and

images (e.g. Merskin 2014), military operations and weapon delivery systems (Yellow Bird 2004), names, adornment and activities at summer camps and in youth development organizations (e.g. Brasch 1999; Wall 2009), spiritual practices (e.g. Whitt 1995), “playing Indian” (e.g. Deloria 1998), and “going Native” (which is more permanent than “playing Indian”) (Huhndorf 2001).

The colonial context of Native appropriation

In order to understand objections to cultural appropriation, it is critical to focus on power, as it is usually subordinate groups who object to dominant groups appropriating aspects of their cultures (Ziff and Pratima 1997). Root (1996) asserts that appropriation involves the taking, commodification, and consumption of perceived aesthetic exotic difference by those who have no stake in the culture being appropriated and yet have power over the people whose culture is being appropriated.

More specifically, some scholars perceive NA as a component of settler colonialism. Huhndorf (2001) and Riley and Carpenter (2016) posit that NA is part of a long history and continuation of dispossession. Coombe (1998) argues that NA must be understood in the context of colonial policies and practices with the goals of controlling, suppressing, denying, and eradicating AI identities and cultures. She observed that NA is enabled by a long period of AI political powerlessness, during which settler colonists generated imagery and myths in the absence of AI voices. Smith-Rosenberg (2010) asserts that early mimicking AIs in the U.S. conveyed that European Americans had replaced AIs as rulers of U.S. lands and could control conceptions of AIs for their own purposes, so “all that remained was the parodic performance of Native American absence” (204). Todd (1990) and Root (1996) argue that settler colonists perceived that various aspects of AI cultures belonged to them. Many scholars have discussed how NA is used as raw material to serve White American interests, such as profit, and conveyance of: nationalism, freedom, resistance, masculinity, spirituality, nature, and criticism of modernity (e.g. Deloria 1998; Green 1988; Root 1996; Smith-Rosenberg 2010; Wall 2009).

Defense of and objection to Native appropriation

Scholars have discussed some defenses of and objections to NA. Defenses include that NA is: educational, honoring AI Peoples, a human right, and supported by AI people (e.g. Coombe 1998; Green 1988; Riley and Carpenter 2016; Todd 1990; Wall 2009; Whitt 1995; Ziff and Pratima 1997). Objections include that NA: objectifies and dehumanizes, conveys and spreads misleading beliefs, fuels other oppression, ignores or dismisses the voices of AI people, negatively impacts AI mental and physical health, reduces AI

economic opportunities, is a manifestation of unequal power and colonialism, and thwarts AI nation self-determination over their own cultures and identities (e.g. Coombe 1998; Hirschfelder 1999; Riley and Carpenter 2016; Root 1996; Todd 1990; Tsosie 2002; Wall 2009; Whitt 1995)

Activism focused on Native appropriation

Recently, AI activism focused on NA has proliferated. In the 2010s, blogs like Chelsea Vowel's (Metis) *Aphtawiksoosisan*, Jessica Metcalfe's (Turtle Mountain Anishinaabe) *Beyond Buckskin*, Adrienne Keene's (Cherokee Nation) *Native Appropriations*, the anonymous Tumblr *My Culture is Not a Trend*, and many more blogs, op-eds, and Twitter conversations have pushed "cultural appropriation" from an academic term to daily use. This online activism sparked apologies from large companies like Paul Frank, Urban Outfitters, and Victoria's Secret for appropriating AI designs and cultural practices. In addition, in-person protests targeting AI mascots, anti-mascot billboards and campaigns, and efforts by organizations such as *Illuminative*, have kept the focus on harms of NA in the mainstream. Resulting from this activism and other social pressures, in the last decade major changes include dropping the Washington Redsk*ns name, modification of the Land O'Lakes logo, removal of the name squ*w from popular ski resorts and other sites, and removal of "Indian" costumes from Spirit Halloween stores. This public activism seems to have generated more understanding of how to recognize – and for some – challenge NA.

Method

Positionality

This study was inspired by the authors' collective concern that there were no academic publications that feature the voices of an AI sample on multiple types of NA. The first author is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation, a blogger on NA, and researcher focused on AI experiences in education. The second author is a citizen of the Northern Cheyenne Nation and Chicana, and studies AI demography, including AI identity. The third author is a White American who studies White American beliefs, representations, and practices associated with AIs.

The survey

We developed a survey instrument drawing on existing scholarship on NA, our experiences observing and addressing NA, consultation with AI scholars

who reviewed the survey, and feedback from AI individuals who took a pilot version of the survey. On the survey, participants were provided with the definition of NA and asked a series of close-ended and open-ended questions. Closed-ended measures, not utilized in this article, were focused on: attitudes toward various types of NA; reasons for opposition to and support for this appropriation; positive and negative feelings when encountering this appropriation; and behavioral responses to this appropriation. The focus of this article is on written replies to open-ended questions, the primary one being the following:

Fully describe an example of Native appropriation that you witnessed.

Here are some questions to guide your response:

- (a) Where did you observe this appropriation?
- (b) Who was engaged in the appropriation?
- (c) What did they do that fits the definition of appropriation?
- (d) What are your thoughts and feelings about this appropriation?
- (e) Why do you think and feel this way?

We also analyzed written replies to several optional open-ended questions, which led some participants to write about additional: types of appropriation, reasons for their attitudes, feelings they had when encountering appropriation, and/or actions they took in response to appropriation. Participant replies ranged from 23 to 1,242 words, with a mean of 114 (which is approximately six to seven sentences).

Data collection and participants

This research project was approved by the UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program (IRB#22-00044). Three different online data collection companies (Prolific, Qualtrics Panels, and CloudResearch) offered our survey to pre-screened participants who self-identified as AI. We paid these companies (\$5.20–\$8 per survey) and they compensated participants. We programmed the survey to automatically remove those who did not identify as AI/Alaskan Native/Native Hawaiian, indicated that they had no Native ancestry, and failed one of three attention checks. To increase the quality of our sample, we manually removed those who took the survey more than once, selected identical answers to all items in measures that included contradictory items, replied to the required open-ended question with nonsense, or were unable to accurately identify the “complete official” name of their U.S. tribe. Our final sample totaled 600 participants. For the study discussed in this article, we included only the 362 participants who indicated they were enrolled in a federally-recognized or state-acknowledged tribe. There were two reasons we made this decision. First, we needed to make our qualitative analysis more

manageable. Second, to acknowledge the sovereignty of AI tribal nations to define who is and is not AI.⁴

For this study, our final sample included 341 participants enrolled in federally-recognized tribes and 21 enrolled in state-acknowledged tribes. In total, our respondents belong to 112 federally-recognized tribes and 11 state-acknowledged tribes. Participants were 74 per cent women, 24 per cent men, and 2 per cent another gender identity. Mean age was 38. Participants lived the longest in 41 of the contiguous U.S. states, most often Oklahoma (23 per cent), Arizona (9 per cent), and California (8 per cent). Other than Native American ancestry, 28 per cent also indicated White ancestry, 5 per cent Latinx, 1 per cent Black, and 1 per cent Asian. Median scores for other demographic variables were: “moderate” for political ideology, “some college or associate’s degree” for education level, “\$25,000–49,999” for annual household income, and “some, but not half” of their lives resided on a reservation. Median involvement in their Native culture was “frequent”, and importance of Native identity was “very”. Median frequency of witnessing NA was “about once a month”.

Data analysis

In the first phase of analysis, we took an inductive approach by independently reading through written replies and identifying the most common themes. For the second phase, we developed a codebook for deductive coding. Themes in the codebook fell into several categories: types of appropriation, opinions about appropriation, reasons for opinion, feelings about appropriation, and actions taken in response to appropriation. The codebook also required recording of “other” themes that were not part of the codebook, in case we neglected to include some common themes in the codebook. Third, we began by coding 20 written replies together, sharing interpretations and coming to agreement. Fourth, we independently coded 20 per cent of the remaining replies. Three times during this phase, we came together to determine the degree of alignment between the coding, as well as to discuss disagreements in coding, toward the dual goals of learning from each other and determining final codes. Because Cohen’s Kappa becomes erratic when trait prevalence is close to either 0 or 1 (Gwit 2008), which was the case for many of our codes, here we report percentage agreement in our coding: The range of agreement was 87–100 per cent, with a mean and median of 97 per cent agreement. Fifth, we independently coded the rest of the written replies. Sixth, when the coding was complete, we calculated the percentage of participants who articulated each theme in order to determine the most common themes. Lastly, we analyzed relationships between the common themes, and utilized prior scholarship and theory to interpret our findings.

Results

Overall attitudes toward Native appropriation

Sixty percent of the sample indicated opposition to NA, while only 5 per cent support. In addition, 10 per cent expressed a mixture of opposition and support, 3 per cent indicated they were indifferent, 9 per cent did not have a clear position, and 4 per cent wrote about an irrelevant topic. Interestingly, 9 per cent wrote about instances that were not directly related to NA, but were related to discrimination, racism, or ignorance faced by AI Peoples, perhaps because they saw NA as related to other oppression experienced by AI Peoples. Among those who expressed an opinion about NA, 80 per cent expressed opposition, 7 per cent support, and 13 per cent mixed attitudes.

Types of Native appropriation

When asked to describe an example of NA they had witnessed, 72 per cent of the sample ($N = 261$) provided at least one example. The percentages described below represent findings for these 261 participants. Many different types of NA were described, including: telling AI stories, playing AI music, using consumer products with AI names/logos, acting in AI roles in theater or media, formally teaching about AI cultures, and various activities associated with Thanksgiving. Often multiple types of NA were evident in participant descriptions of a single instance of NA, and thus we coded these instances as multiple types.

Body adornment

The most common type of NA, described by 56 per cent, was related to body adornment. Examples included face paint and patterns on clothes. The most common type of body adornment, identified by 64 per cent of those who wrote about body adornment, was costumes and/or regalia. Referring to costumes, one participant communicated: “[On] Halloween, non-Native Americans wear indigenous regalia (fake buckskin dresses, feather headband to mimic the white American image of Pocahontas), which is VERY INACCURATE”. Referring to regalia, another participant reported: “There was a local community event that encouraged everyone to dress as indians for this ‘powwow.’ No Natives went, only wyt [white] people. They played Native-looking drums, wore fake regalia, and did dance interpretations”. Twenty-eight per cent wrote about headdresses, such as: “When we were growing up we always saw [NA] during thanks giving time. [They] think they are just so cute with fake head dresses and stuff”.

Impersonation

The second most common type of NA described by the participants (21 per cent) was impersonation, most often including stereotypical vocalization and

commonly including dance. In regards to impersonation with vocalization, one participant reported: "I observed [NA] at a college football game. It was men who dressed up as Native Americans with headdresses and 'war paint' and were holding fake tomahawks and making 'tomahawk' chops and attempts at war cries". Related to impersonation with dancing, a different participant observed: "Caucasian people ... at work ... were engaged in this appropriation. They had heard that it was Native American heritage month, [and] thought it would be funny to make headdresses and other regalia to wear and dance to some pow wow music".

Spirituality

The third most common type of NA was related to spirituality (20 per cent). This included spirit animals and peace pipes, but more commonly participants described ceremony (37 per cent), medicines (14 per cent), and dreamcatchers (14 per cent). Here, one participant discussed appropriation of ceremony:

I met a white woman who claimed [to be] AI and her name was running deer, a name she gave herself. She was selling the AI spiritual items and charging people to do a sweat ceremony [while] wearing AI regalia, as she called it, [but which was] cheap things she either made or bought from overseas.

Another participant experienced appropriation of traditional medicines:

A friend of mine wanted me to teach her how to make medicine pouches to tie to a fence as a sign of solidarity with native peoples ... It is a sacred undertaking and is very personal for the individual making the pouch and the one receiving it ... My friend had no business messing with native medicine like that.

A third participant mentioned appropriation of dreamcatchers: "[The NA I have seen includes] all the jerks that put dream catchers on the rear view mirror [and] get them tattooed".

Selling or making items

Many of the participants chose to write about instances related to selling or making AI or pseudo-AI items (40 per cent of the time art), with 20 per cent discussing selling specifically, and 15 per cent making items associated with AI people. As one participant commented: "I observe appropriation a lot in my everyday life just walking past someone in the grocery store who is not Native that is wearing a 'tribal patterned' shirt/jacket they bought at a mass merchandiser ... such as Walmart, [which sells] sacred patterned clothing". Another participant related: "I've encountered appropriation on many occasions, but one memory that immediately comes to mind is this one time when I came upon a white woman who was selling 'authentic Native American beaded earrings' that she made herself at our local farmers market".

Mascots

The next most common type of NA mentioned by participants was AI-themed sport mascots (19 per cent). For example, one participant communicated:

There are so many ... [examples of appropriation of] AI [that] is witnessed nearly every day. The most persistent to my family is our school district's use of ... Chiefs and Lady Chiefs for its team name and the depiction of an Indigenous male in profile with feathers in his hair and painted face as the logo. The logo can be seen in all the school buildings.

Other types of Native appropriation

Sixteen percent wrote about non-AIs who claim AI ancestry or identity as a type of NA, such as:

Anytime I have ever mentioned my tribe or my heritage, a white person always likes to claim they are "part Cherokee" and that their great grandmother was a "full blooded Cherokee princess." ... Native people are invisible or extinct to most Americans, but somehow all of these people are part Cherokee.

Lastly, 15 per cent described the use of AI words or pseudo-AI words as a type of NA. As one participant relayed: "When getting a haircut, the barber in one of the shops used to say 'how' as a greeting, ... and he was black. He thought it was funny".

Reasons for opposing Native appropriation

Now we turn to reporting our second group of findings, which involve reasons participants oppose and support NA. Sixty-seven percent ($N=243$) of participants provided at least one reason why they opposed NA. The following percentages are based on this subgroup of 243 participants.

Broad reasons

In terms of reasons for opposition, very broad reasons were given by some participants, including that NA was immoral, hurtful, or harmful. Thirty-two per cent of participants argued that NA is disrespectful, insensitive, insulting, or inappropriate. As one participant remarked: "The latest example I have seen was a bunch of high school kids and teachers dressing in full [head]dress pretending to do rain dances and other types of dances. I thought it was super disrespectful, and they don't seem to understand what they're doing is wrong". Thirteen percent used the term "offensive" to describe their opposition, for example: "[An example of NA I witnessed] was at a gathering of Boy Scouts. They were dressed in AI clothing, and I corrected their scout master on what they were doing and how it offended not only myself, but other AI people". Eleven percent wrote that the offense or disrespect was related to spirituality.

Inaccurate or ignorant

A variety of more specific reasons were given, such as that NA takes power/control away from AI people, NA harms AI cultures, and other racial/ethnic groups do not face appropriation like (or as much as) AI Peoples. The most common specific reason for opposition was that NA is inaccurate or ignorant (41 per cent). We know the vast majority of participants who articulated this reason would not find NA acceptable if it was “accurate” because 86 per cent gave at least one other reason they opposed NA. As one participant articulated, “Cultural appropriation is not right [because] it’s mocking that race and their beliefs, they are not accurate, and they don’t have respect for the people ... I oppose native appropriation, because most people don’t bother to do the research on the problem and think it’s all okay to do”. Another participant conveyed:

I remember as a kid watching fully grown adults dress as “Indians” for Halloween and mocking a “war cry”. I remember asking my [mother] why they were acting like that and she replied because they were never properly educated about our peoples ... [When] growing up, ... I ... wish I could have educated those adults on why it is hurtful to act that way ... I don’t support native appropriation because I view it as very disrespectful to our culture ... [Today], I have corrected many people on things they thought were fact because of appropriation.

Oppression

The next most common specific reason for opposing NA was 37 per cent of participants labeled NA as oppression. Examples included labeling NA as racist, discrimination, and dehumanizing/objectifying. Some argued that NA not only *is* oppression but that it also *contributes* to (other) oppression. Of those who opposed NA because they saw it as oppression, 45 per cent described NA as mocking AI Peoples, such as:

Nothing fills me with more rage than seeing a bunch of privileged white kids mocking my culture and heritage. On the other hand, nothing fills me with more pride than watching my tahsidoh dance and sing. or watching my little brother hunt ... i feel that I’m very protective of my culture. It’s the only thing my ppl have left. and i will be contributing to pass it down to the next gen.

Of those focused on oppression, 34 per cent referred to stereotyping, including:

[NA] ... further[s] misconceptions about the lives and activities of AI people past and present. For example, Disney’s depiction (and story) of Pocahontas; full length feather head dresses to depict a “chief”; teepees; men depicted only in hide pants and women in short hide dresses; communal “peace pipes” at any meeting, etc. ... The [mascot] name and image ... implies to students, particularly the youngest, that all Indigenous people look like that and since they never encounter anyone that does look like that, they must all be gone ... It

implies that Indigenous males are always fierce and ready for battle. When witnessing AI [appropriation], particularly stereotypical images, ... [I] explain what is incorrect and why it is wrong. Teach my children to do the same.

A third concern about oppression, articulated by 29 per cent, was that NA makes fun of AI Peoples. As one participant remarked: “[NA] is worse than someone just making fun of you. They’re making fun of something deeper, they’re making fun of your ancestors that died fighting for your freedom and right to even speak your language or learn where you came from. It hurts on the deepest level”.

Less common reasons

One less common reason for opposing NA is that non-AI benefit financially from it (15 per cent): “I oppose Native American appropriation ... [because] I just don’t want them using my culture to benefit themselves – whether it’s selling art, clothing, or the like”. Another less common reason (14 per cent) is the principle that only AI people should or do possess AI phenomena: “Our culture is the ONLY thing we have left. it is OURS you cannot have it. you cannot pretend to be one of us. you don’t have the resilience in your blood. we’ve been beaten down and we are still here teaching our kids our traditions”. Other participants (13 per cent) were opposed because they perceived NA as an aspect of or related to colonialism, such as: “I oppose Native appropriation because it is just a continuation of colonization in this country. It is just another way for non-Native peoples to try to take our agency away from us and continue victimizing us for their own profit/amusement”. Finally, 9 per cent argued that NA renders AI people invisible, ignores AI people, or dismisses AI people, as illustrated here: “Every day our voices are ignored, and our culture/traditions/regalia/language are adopted by those who choose not to listen, [and] those who have forgotten that we’re still here ... We are invisible”.

Reasons for supporting NA

As previously mentioned, the vast majority of participants who provided reasons for their positions on NA were opposed, but 20 per cent ($N=72$) described at least one reason why they supported NA, which we used as the base for the percentages mentioned below. Reasons for supporting NA were not articulated by many participants. Further, many of these participants had mixed views, as they were opposed to some NA but supported other NA. Examples of reasons participants gave for support include: it preserves AI cultures, people are being too sensitive, AI people approve of it, individuals should/do have the right to do whatever they wish, and “we are all one people”.

Most common reasons for support

The most common reason given for supporting NA was the belief that it educates about AIs (28 per cent of those who gave a reason they supported NA), especially about AI cultures. An example of this reason is: "I support [NA] because it educates people about our culture". Others (17 per cent) support NA because they believe it creates awareness that AI Peoples exist or existed, such as: "I think naming places like Indian Point, naming cars Jeep Cherokee, or even being a sports logo (Atlanta Braves), shouldn't be frowned upon, because it does make people think about our people, and as long as that sticks then our people will never be forgotten". The next most common reason for supporting NA was belief that it honors, flatters, celebrates, or shows respect for AIs (13 per cent). As one participant stated: "We're proud of our traditions and our jewelry and our clothing, and want others to celebrate them with us ... I think it's flattering". Others (13 per cent) indicated that everyone should engage in AI cultures because these cultures are awesome or helpful, such as: "All mankind and life of this earth is brother and sister, and if someone wants to learn our way we should welcome them in! Maybe they may need to find peace or even harmony". Ten percent of those who gave reasons for supporting NA believe cultures should be shared and open to all, including this participant: "It is a beautiful thing to want to enjoy every culture and experience others' practices and beliefs. More people should want to be more open to seeing the world through others' eyes". Finally, 10 per cent of those who gave reasons for supporting NA indicated that they are not personally impacted by NA, such as:

My culture has been so wiped out that I don't even consider it as ever having been a reality. At least not one that I've ever experienced ... [NA] doesn't really affect me one way or the other. If someone wants to portray themselves as something they're not, that is their business. It may affect other AIs in regard to their feelings.

Mixed opinions

Of those who expressed at least one reason for supporting NA, 38 per cent (mostly those with mixed opinions) indicated that NA is acceptable if it meets certain conditions. Most often the conditions were: 56 per cent if it is respectful, 41 per cent if the appropriators have good intentions, 37 per cent if the NA is accurate, and 22 per cent if the NA supports AI cultures. Here a participant mentions the condition of good intentions: "I don't think there's really any harm in doing [NA] as long as they aren't doing it with bad intentions". Another participant specified the condition of accuracy: "The only reason why I wouldn't support [NA] is if the people who are appropriating our culture are not researching and taking the time to understand". Lastly, a third participant emphasized the conditions of respect and support

for AI cultures: “I support it as long as it stays respectful [and] gives awareness to Native cultures”.

Feelings associated with Native appropriation

The next category of findings is focused on participants’ feelings associated with NA. Fifty-six per cent of participants ($N=203$) described feelings in their written responses, which is used as the base for the below percentages.

Positive feelings

Of those who described feelings, only 11 per cent ($N=22$) mentioned positive feelings, and there were few commonly named positive feelings, although among these participants 27 per cent indicated they experienced happiness in association with NA and 23 per cent pride. Here, a participant expressed happiness: “[I witnessed] a white man fancy dancing on the street ... I was awed and happy”. A different participant indicated that they felt pride in association with a white store owner who was selling items created by AI people: “It made me proud in a way because it showed the beautiful clothes and jewelry that had been made by American Indians”.

Negative feelings

Ninety-two per cent ($N=186$) of those who described feelings mentioned negative feelings. Some used broad terms to describe these feelings, especially the term “upset” (16 per cent). Participants described many more specific negative feelings, such as: frustrated, unsettled/uncomfortable, hopeless/powerless/helpless, marginalized (i.e. invisible/unheard/ignored/dismissed), and humiliated/ashamed/embarrassed.

Anger. The most common specific negative feeling mentioned by participants was anger (33 per cent). As one participant put it: “Whenever I see an example of clear native appropriation, it truly makes my blood boil”. Another participant commented:

There have been so many times I have witnessed Native appropriation that I can’t think of one specific time. Besides the violations of the Arts and Crafts act, what bothers me the most is when people claim to be AI for clout or to act as a BIPOC person online (or worse, in academia) ... Thousands of people engage in this activity on social media and speak over actual Native voices, and it’s infuriating.

Hurt, offended, disrespected, or insulted. Feeling hurt, offended, disrespected, or insulted was mentioned by 30 per cent of those who described a negative feeling. For example, this participant mentioned feeling offended: “Online, [I watched] some Caucasian people wearing our regalia,

saying they knew our traditions and know how to perform our ceremonies. I was highly offended, because I went through a ceremony myself and it was one of the hardest yet rewarding things I've ever done". Another participant reported feeling hurt:

At the carnival ... a grown Caucasian man ... was drunk wearing a headdress. He was singing in gibberish, and telling people he was speaking Cheyenne. I was so angry and hurt. I don't ever want to experience anything like that again, and now [that] I have a son I never want him to run into someone disrespecting his culture and ancestors like they don't matter.

Less common negative feelings. Less commonly, participants discussed feeling irritated, annoyed, or bothered (12 per cent), disgusted (10 per cent), and sad (10 per cent). Here a participant mentioned feeling annoyed: "I oppose Native appropriation in almost all cases. Most annoying is the usage in sports and for monetary gain". A different participant indicated that they felt disgust: "When I have seen teams, mascots, or fans engage in disrespectful behavior it has made me feel angry and disgusted". Lastly, a participant shared their feeling of sadness:

I see [NA] all the time online. A lot of people love being fake. [They] dress up and make fun of our people in nasty ways. It saddens me, as we have already had almost everything taken away from us, yet these fake people take what little bit we have left and have no respect for our people.

Actions taken to oppose or support NA

The final group of findings we report involve actions taken by participants when they encountered NA. Thirty-eight percent of participants ($N = 137$) described at least one action they took relative to NA, which we used as the base for the percentages mentioned below. Of those who took at least one action, 7 per cent indicated that they took action to support NA. There were no common actions taken by these participants, except that some of their actions involved education to support appropriators or appropriation. The vast majority (96 per cent) of participants who took action did so in opposition to NA. Participants reported many different actions they took in opposition, including: attending a protest and physical actions (e.g. fighting; physically removing the NA).

Opposing NA via education

The most common oppositional action was educating non-NA people (59 per cent). Some directed their education toward individuals, such as:

On Halloween, I saw a woman dressed as "Pocahontas" many years ago. It made me very angry. I approached her calmly and told her that Pocahontas was a 9 year old girl who was kidnapped and raped and taken from her people then

forced to marry a grown man, and did she think her sexy Pocahontas costume really represented that reality?

Sometimes participants worked to educate a wider audience, such as: “I was at [a] school ... I felt very angry and upset [by their NA]. We used social media to bring attention to this ... We gained a lot of attention using social media and the school was later addressed”. Sometimes participants educated both individuals and a wider audience: “It is important to shut down all AI appropriation in any way possible, ... [so] I’ve spoken about native struggles on all social media platforms, corrected people’s judgment about natives on the street, [and] corrected people for buying native items as a non-native person such as sage”.

Opposing NA by challenging the appropriator

Less common than education, 17 per cent of participants who took action against NA verbally challenged the appropriator with no indication that this challenge involved education. For example, one participant declared: “If you are not native american, you don’t need to be seen wearing our clothes or selling fake american indian pottery ... [I take action by] telling someone they can’t wear that”.

Opposing NA by submitting a complaint

Fourteen percent of those who took action opposing NA submitted a complaint. The recipients of these complaints varied, including non-AI government, school officials, tribal government, and companies. This action was directed at a company: “a wyt man on tiktok [was engaged in NA], ... so i reported the video multiple times until it got deleted”. This participant reported NA to the federal government: “I am a basket weaver and jewelry maker, and I often come across items online that violate the Arts and Crafts act, and I report them always”. A third participant addressed school officials: “[I have] spoken to school and district administrators about the ... inappropriateness of the school mascot”. Lastly, this participant’s son contacted a Native nation government when working to address his complaint:

I was on a road trip from California to Tennessee with one of my adult sons. We stopped at a Native gift store in New Mexico. I was rather certain there would be no natives employed with the store but I thought I’d ask anyway. The woman stated there were not ... My son then researched a local tribe and gave them a call. By the next day he had connected two tribal members with the store owner. I was very proud of him. Natives have been silenced and marginalized for decades. I believe we need our voices back.

Discussion

This is the first empirical study on AI attitudes towards multiple types of NA. In this article, we first and foremost center AI voices. We analyzed responses

to a broad question about NA written by 362 participants who are enrolled in 123 Native nations. Most participants witness NA on a regular basis. They chose to write about many types of NA, most commonly adornment. Also common were descriptions of stereotypical AI impersonation, AI spirituality, AI mascots, and making and selling AI or pseudo-AI items. What the vast majority of participants wrote indicates opposition to NA; and feelings that arise from their experiences with NA are overwhelmingly negative, especially anger, as well as feeling hurt and disrespected. The most common reasons participants oppose NA are that they perceive it as inaccurate or ignorant, oppressive, and disrespectful. Participant writings about opposition to NA sometimes reveal keen insights about relations between NA and colonization, settler-AI power dynamics, and/or AI nation sovereignty. In contrast, the writings of a small percent of participants indicate support for NA. Challenges to settler colonial power are rare in writings of those who support NA.

NA was, and continues to be, an element of settler colonial power over AI Peoples. White settlers not only took AI lives and lands, but they also used their power to take, and exert control over, aspects of AI cultures. More narrowly, White settlers created, and continue to use, stereotypical AI pseudo-culture, which they perceive belongs to them (Coombe 1998; Huhndorf 2001; Riley and Carpenter 2016; Root 1996; Smith-Rosenberg 2010; Todd 1990). Given this, it is not surprising that the vast majority of our participants witness NA, and many perceive it as disrespectful and a manifestation of the oppression and ignorance faced by AI Peoples.

Historically, settlers attempted to eradicate Indigenous nations and cultures, and thus Indigenous identities (e.g. McKay, Vinyeta, and Norgaard 2020; Wolfe 2006). When non-AI people engage in NA, they are continuing the erasure of AI identities and cultures. When NA occurs, AI Peoples do not have control over how AI identities, aspects of AI cultures, and AI pseudo-culture are used. In this context, many contemporary AI nations, organizations, and individuals are especially concerned about maintaining and strengthening AI nation sovereignty and associated cultures (for examples, see the websites of the National Congress of American Indians and Association of American Indian Affairs). Thus, many AI people perceive NA as an affront or threat to AI nation control of their cultures and identities. As theorists have pointed out, social identities are derived from group membership (e.g. Turner and Oakes 1986), and group boundaries enable the existence of groups and thus social identities (e.g. Ellemers 2010). Applying these principles to NA, we theorize that NA threatens AI nation control over group boundaries and thus AI nations and identities. This is why many of our participants directly or indirectly expressed a desire for AI control over AI cultures and identities.

As scholars have explained, settler colonialism involves erasure of contemporary AI Peoples (e.g. McKay, Vinyeta, and Norgaard 2020; O'Brien 2010; Wolfe 1994), and contemporary AI Peoples remain largely invisible in mainstream consciousness. Thus, it is not surprising that our participants encounter people engaged in NA that are oblivious to contemporary AI Peoples and/or their perspectives. This phenomenon fits into the concept of "omission", as identified by Fryberg and Eason (2017), which is caused by segregation as well as invisibility of contemporary AI Peoples in mainstream media and education curricula (Davis-Delano et al. 2021). In regard to omission, when past settler colonists created and engaged in NA, living AI people were rarely considered. Today, as many non-AIs in the U.S. continue to create and engage in NA, they often do not consider the existence, perspectives, and/or interests of contemporary AI Peoples.

Most of our participants are keenly aware of "commissions" evident in NA. Commission refers to bias in attitudes, behaviors, representations, and social structures (Fryberg and Eason 2017). This includes AI Peoples being "seen" through colonizer eyes and not on their terms. As our participants pointed out, the NA they encounter often involves inaccurate, ignorant, and stereotypical portrayals of, and messages about, AI Peoples and their cultures. And, not surprisingly, these portrayals/messages led many of our participants to feel anger, as well as feeling offended, insulted, and hurt. These reactions reveal that NA should be seen as microaggressions that generate a hostile climate for many AI Peoples. Scholarship demonstrates that microaggressions, which can be seen as a type of discrimination, create a hostile climate that can negatively impact AI mental and physical health, as well as other outcomes (e.g. Baca 2004; Findling et al. 2019; Fryberg et al. 2008; Holter et al. 2023; Walls et al. 2015). Beyond ignorant and oppressive aspects of NA, knowingly dismissing the concerns of AI Peoples about NA is also a commission.

Many non-AI people do not understand and/or accept AI objections to NA. One cause of this ignorance, and dismissal of AI objections, is the individualistic ideology that is a fundamental aspect of Western cultures, practices, policies, and structures (e.g. Coombe 1998; Oyserman, Coon, and Kimmelmeier 2002; Riley 2000; Tan 2013). For example, when challenged, many appropriators defend themselves by asserting that they have an individual right to free speech and they privately own rights to NA (Riley and Carpenter 2016; Whitt 1995). Furthermore, individualistic U.S. law and policies make it extremely difficult for AI Peoples to address problems associated with NA (Coombe 1998; Riley 2000; Tan 2013; Whitt 1995). Relatedly, many non-AIs lack awareness of, and respect for, AI nation sovereignty (Conner, Fryar, and Johnson 2017; Reclaiming Native Truth Project 2018). The individualism embedded in U.S. culture conflicts with the collective approach of many Indigenous societies (e.g. Riley 2000; Tan 2013), and more specifically with AI nation sovereignty.

For more than five hundred years, AI Peoples have resisted settler colonialism. Recently, AI Peoples are growing in numbers and political strength (see 2020 Census). More narrowly, resistance to NA has increased in recent years (Riley and Carpenter 2016; Todd 1990; Tsosie 2002). Relatedly, over a third of our participants discussed actions they have personally taken to resist NA. Most often, they strive to educate non-AIs. From a more collective perspective, there are hopeful signs, as AI activism resulted in passage of two U.S. policies focused on NA: Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (1990) and Indian Arts and Crafts Act (1990). Other examples include the long-running campaign of the National Congress of American Indians against AI mascots, and Cherokee Nation and Navajo Nation efforts to address appropriation of their tribal names.

Implications

Our research is relevant to both policy and practice. First, AI individuals, organizations, and nations (and their allies) can draw on our findings, including the AI voices that illuminate these findings, in their efforts to address NA. Information from this article can be used to show NA is widespread and takes many forms. In addition, our findings can be used to demonstrate that there is significant objection among AIs to NA, and to explain reasons for this objection. Further, our findings can be used as evidence that NA generates negative feelings, and thus that NA operates as microaggressions that create a hostile climate, which other research reveals contributes to negative outcomes for AIs.

We recommend both legal and educational strategies to address NA. Possible legal avenues include: extension of existing laws that already address NA (e.g. Indian Arts and Crafts Act) to cover other types of NA, AI nations creating laws that address NA in their territories, efforts to expand conceptions of AI nation sovereignty to control of their cultures, efforts to reduce individualism in the legal and political system, and efforts to demonstrate that NA constitutes microaggression and discrimination that generates a hostile climate and is therefore worthy of legal challenge. Education (in schools and media) should aim to increase understanding of: the nature of AI nation sovereignty and how this can include AI nation control over their cultures; how the individualistic nature of U.S. culture creates ideological and structural barriers that do not serve the collective interests of AI nations; the history of NA as rooted in settler colonial taking of aspects of AI cultures while simultaneously prohibiting these cultures among AIs; and how NA constitutes microaggressions that generate a hostile climate harmful to many AIs. It is crucial that education associated with NA draw on valid social science research findings and not flawed media polls or individual opinions.

Strengths, limitations, and future research

The main limitation of our research is that our sample is not representative of AI Peoples and thus not generalizable. Having said that, our participants are diverse in regard to AI nation, age, education, and political ideology. Strengths of our research include our efforts to verify AI identity, and inclusion of both inductive analysis to determine the content of our codebook and deductive analysis to determine frequency of codes.

There are many possibilities for future research. First, we plan to publish quantitative findings on AI experiences with, and attitudes and feelings about, NA. In this publication, we will include 238 participants who are not enrolled in AI tribes, and compare them to the 362 who are enrolled. Second, we urge scholars to undertake content or discourse analysis of coverage of NA in AI-generated media (e.g. news, social media) to determine the most common themes. Lastly, we recommend experiments to examine the effects of exposure to NA (beyond mascots) on AI participants (designed so that they do not harm participants).

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to center the voices of AI people on the topic of NA. Our research shows that settler colonialism is not a vestige of the past; rather, it is an ongoing system of structures, interactions, and ideologies that negatively impact AIs. The AI respondents in our sample witness varied manifestations of NA on a regular basis. The vast majority indicate opposition to NA, most often because they perceive it as disrespectful, ignorant, and oppressive. Many experience negative emotions when exposed to NA, and some take action toward the goal of eliminating it. NA is a type of microaggression that creates a hostile climate for many AI people. We hope AI nations, organizations, and individuals (and their allies) are able to use our findings to address NA.

Notes

1. To align with prevailing practices among American Indian Peoples, we use the term Native appropriation instead of American Indian appropriation. To reduce verbiage, we use the abbreviation NA for Native appropriation.
2. To reduce verbiage, we use the abbreviation of AI for American Indians. We use the term American Indians because we are focused on Indigenous Peoples from the 48 contiguous U.S. states and this term is associated with AI nation sovereignty.
3. We use the term “people” to refer to AI individuals, and “Peoples” to refer to AI people and nations more generally.
4. The nuances and complexities of AI identity are beyond the scope of this article.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

We are unable to share our qualitative data because doing so has the potential to reveal information associated with the identities of our participants.

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