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The Stories These Jewelry Hold: Appropriation, Reinterpretation, and Reclamation in Southwestern Native American Jewelry and Art (Episode 10)

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Southwestern Native American Jewelry and Art

[00.00] *<< OtterPod theme music, intro>>*

[00:06] **Cathy Hsu**

This is an episode of the Otter Pod from CSU Monterey Bay.

Hi, everyone. My name is Cathy.

[00:12] **Gracie Douglas**

And I'm Gracie. We are your hosts for this podcast episode.

We have a very special guest here today, Lisa Davenport, who inherited some pretty interesting jewelry.

[00:24] **Cathy Hsu**

We had this great conversation a while back with our friend Lisa about her mother's jewelry collection, which is a great family story but also turns out to be a story about the politics of representation, identity, cultural appropriation, and the history, legacy, and ongoing nature of settler colonialism in the United States.

[00:50] **Gracie Douglas**

So Lisa, want to share with us what you have today?

[00:53] **Lisa Davenport**

So, yes, right here in front of me, I have inherited some jewelry.

It’s all this southwestern Native American silver pieces.

From the 1970’s when we took a family vacation to the desert southwest.

[01:07] **Cathy Hsu**

And just to give our listeners some context:

The U.S. Southwest is generally defined as Arizona, New Mexico and the southern portions of Utah and Colorado.

And when we're talking about Southwestern Native Americans, we're talking about the Pueblos people of Arizona and New Mexico in the Navajo Nation.

[01:27] Lisa Davenport

That's absolutely right.

[01:31] Cathy Hsu

So can you tell us more about the road trip you took with your mom?

[01:35] Lisa Davenport

You know, it was one of those old-style driving vacations that took over several weeks to see the landmarks and sites of the nation.

We cruised along Route 66, and these are all pieces that have that 70s look of bohemian style silver and a lot of turquoise.

[01:52] Gracie Douglas

Wow, that sounds like a pretty awesome vacation.

I imagine you made a lot of fun memories with your mom on that trip and that jewelry.

It looks so nice - since this is a podcast and we can't see the jewelry you have with you right now, Lisa, can you describe it for us?

[02:09] Lisa Davenport

Well, I have with me a bunch of big bracelets, squash blossom necklaces, concho belts.

They're all decorated with Thunderbirds, arrows, clouds and sunshines, many are studded with turquoise and agate gemstones.

So I've had this jewelry for a while, but it's only been this past year that I began to do more research into the origins of these things.

I wanted to sell them and I wanted to do my due diligence.

So I was told that I should speak to someone named Kelly Kilgore, who's a noted expert appraiser of Native American art and jewelry.

And some of the pieces I inherited were what she called “Harvey era” pieces.

[02:44] Cathy Hsu

What's an "Harvey-era" piece? I have never heard of that term before.

[02:55] Gracie Douglas

Me either. Can you explain what you're referencing when you talk about the Harvey area?

[02:58] Lisa Davenport

Of course, the term Harvey era brought about from the Fred Harvey pioneering tourism of the Southwest.

They built a series of hotels upon the Santa Fe route and these hotels included shops staffed by Native Americans that were filled with Mexican and Native American arts and crafts (Deitch, 1989).

These arts and crafts were an ornate way of making a souvenir to remember that special trick a.k.a. marketing.

And that's exactly what my mother did. She purchased these pieces while on vacation.

The tourist trade motivated the production of jewelry like the examples I have.

[03:23] Gracie Douglas

So how did they make all of these pieces? They must have had people working for them or a seller of some sort.

[03:38] Lisa Davenport

So actually, the Fred Harvey Company sent out, quote unquote anthropologists, actually, corporate buyers who bought thousands of artifacts in bulk then encouraged the Indian producers to make new pieces to satisfy the demand they were creating and tourists, private collectors and museums (Luke, 2002).

And so as it happens, demand very quickly outpaced supply.

And soon these pieces were made on the production line with machines and workers, with the company dictating the iconography used in the jewelry.

The true Native American artifacts once made for home use or tribal ritual, or reimagined for store sales and corporate retail outlets, you know, like the gift shop at the Grand Canyon Lodge, which was a Fred Harvey establishment.

[04:25] Cathy Hsu

So are you saying these pieces were not handmade?

[04:29] Lisa Davenport

Well, sometimes they were. But the majority of these pieces from the era that I'm speaking about, 'Fred Harvey' turn out to be just Native American inspired or simply just 'southwest'.

Often they were produced in East Coast factories.

[04:45] Gracie Douglas

So I heard you say that iconography on these pieces was a corporate decision.

How does that work?

[04:51] Lisa Davenport

Well, silver-smithing in the southwest became a full time occupation to fuel the expectations of tourists, which was tailored to their idea of what Native American Indian jewelry and artistry should look like.

A lot of these artists were just paid to make jewelry, and most of the silversmiths were not even Native American.

They were just responding to a trade.

[05:12] Cathy Hsu

Wow. And they were still selling them as authentically Native American?

That's pretty problematic.

[05:20] Gracie Douglas

Absolutely.

And that's so invalidating to genuine Native American artists that are trying to make a living in that area.

[05:25] Cathy Hsu

I'm really glad you brought up the counterfeit market because that's a huge problem for Native artists, despite legislation that the federal government has passed that makes it illegal to falsely identify goods as Native-made.

[05:40] Gracie Douglas

It's called the Indian Arts and Crafts Act, right?

Right.

And it was passed in nineteen thirty five more than 80 years ago.

I know that there are provisions added to the Act in 1990 as well, but the act has rarely been enforced (Mondalek, 2018).

And it's not only to insult Native tribes, culturally speaking, to claim their goods are Native made when they clearly aren't.

But it's also economically devastating.

[06:03] Lisa Davenport

Absolutely. You know, the poverty level for Native Americans is twice the national average.

And the Pueblo and Navajo peoples whose tribal lands are the southwestern U.S. and which make the jewelry that enrich Fred Harvey and so many other white Americans.

The jewelry– like my mom bought, they are particularly hard hit.

The employment rate is very bleak, not only when you compare it to the national average, but when you compare it to other Native American tribes living close or near to tribal lands (Mondalek, 2018).

[06:34] Gracie Douglas

So every dollar that goes towards these counterfeit jewelry is a dollar that doesn't go to Pueblo or Navajo artist supporting their livelihood.

[06:42] Lisa Davenport

Absolutely.

[06:43] Gracie Douglas

That is awful. Why is that?

Why are there so many counterfeit Native American jewelries out there?

[06:52] Cathy Hsu

OK, so I have a theory about that. Well, it's not really a theory, it's too unformulated to be called a theory, but I have thoughts.

[07:02] Gracie Douglas

Okay, go for it Cathy.

Tell us.

[07:05] Cathy Hsu

So in the US, how do we define who is and who isn't a Native American?

Gracie, you took this settler colonialism class last spring at CSUMB, right?

Do you remember?

[07:16] Gracie Douglas

Yeah, I did. It was blood quantum, right?

[07:12] **Cathy Hsu**

Exactly.

A person was considered Native based on the amount of Native blood that they had.

So I did some research into how curators and collectors authenticated Native art, and I found out that because there were so few records and documentation available in the 1970s and 1980s, people would use the degree of "Indian-ness" of the jewelry as a marker of authenticity, which is super problematic because there's no one right way to be Amer-Indian.

I wonder if jewelry designs like the ones Fred Harvey promoted were more likely to be deemed authentic because in our non-Native minds, those are the jewelry that we think of as Indian.

[08:00] **Gracie Douglas**

I really like where you're going with this, and I definitely think you're onto something.

If your identity is constantly being questioned, how does that affect your performance of that identity?

I'm not Native, so I can't speak on behalf of Native people, but I can imagine that if you're being told by the U.S. government that you're not a part of a certain tribe because you don't have enough of their blood or, on the other hand, being told that someone else is somehow quote unquote more Native than you because they have more of that blood.

I wouldn't be surprised if that kind of questioning has a really destructive impact on your psyche.

[08:37] **Lisa Davenport**

This is a really great discussion. So I didn't take settler colonialism, but I know that when the federal government passed the provisions of the 1935 Indian Arts and Crafts Act in 1990, <<*ambience, creepy wind*>> the blood quantum rule quantifying which crafts were considered authentically Native (Shaw, 2017).

Of course, there was a lot of controversy among Native artists who felt that they were being forced into some kind of quote unquote racial registration in order to practice their art (Baxter, 1994, 240).

I imagine the discussion of blood quantum is even trickier because the U.S. ongoing history of erasure of Native peoples.

So they're really stuck between a rock and a hard place in that Native, historically speaking, is not a racial group, but its meaning has been racialized by the U.S. government, and it's the right of every sovereign nation to determine who is part of their nation.

Native American tribes are no exception to that, but they have to define these definitions of what it means to be a member of their tribe under the purview of the US federal government.

[09:40] Gracie Douglas

I think that we're having a really interesting discussion here, and this is definitely a tricky conversation to have because none of us here are Native.

So none of us really carry the weight and history of what it means to be Native in the United States.

And I think that's kind of the heart of this podcast.

We're talking about Native art, but we're really talking about Native identity and who gets to define what kind of art is Native American art.

[10:04] Cathy Hsu

That should be such an easy question to answer, right?

Like, OK, Native art is art by Native American artists, or Native art is art that has these certain motifs.

Well, if you see Native art is Native American, then you have to ask the question, who gets to be considered Native?

And if you see Native, art is art with these certain motifs, then aren't you playing into the same stereotypes that people like Fred Harvey established?

Why do I feel like I'm going around in circles?

[10:39] Gracie Douglas

Because you are going in circles!

It's a super toxic cycle.

There are so many counterfeits available on the Native art market that there needs to be laws that can ban these fake Native art.

But the U.S. government and tribes define Native art as art that is made by a Native American.

So you have Native artists who may or may not fit within these definitions, who have to constantly perform their indigenous to justify the validity of their identity (Seaton, 2017, 38).

And the reason that they have to do that is because there is so much fake Native art out there.

[11:13] Cathy Hsu

That's an excellent point.

There is no answer that will make sense because this whole thing doesn't make sense.

You know what this reminds me of?

So I know we're specifically talking about southwestern Native Americans.

But I read this article about an exhibition called Contemporary Indigeneity Spiritual Borderlands that showcased Native American artists from the Great Plains.

I immediately thought about a class discussion we had about Borderland.

[11:46] Lisa Davenport

I remember that I really enjoyed that lesson because I always envisioned borders as physical fixed boundaries, but they're not.

They're socially constructed and they can shape shift and change.

[11:54] **Gracie Douglas**

And that's just like the U.S. government has changed what lands the Native people can call home.

[12:01] **Cathy Hsu**

Yes, that's exactly where I'm getting at.

I'm going to read this amazing quote from Melinda Seton, a museum administrator at the Great Plains Art Museum at the University of Nebraska.

I think she really nailed it when she talks about this dissonance that Native American artists go through.

Quote, “Artists who embrace their Aboriginal identity are, in essence, placing themselves in an art world borderland that requires one to choose whether their identity is based on being either an artist or an Indian first” unquote (Seaton, 2017, 38).

[12:36] **Gracie Douglas**

So what do we do? How can we support Native American artists?

[12:40] **Lisa Davenport**

Well, the conversation is on who gets to be considered Native Americans.

You know, none of us here identify as Native, so it's not really a conversation that we should take the lead on.

[12:51] **Cathy Hsu**

Definitely.

[12:52] **Gracie Douglas**

For sure.

[12:53] **Lisa Davenport**

That doesn't mean we can't play a part in supporting Native American artists.

I've been researching my mom's jewelry for months, and I've gotten to the point where I can look at jewelry and have a pretty good idea of whether it's Native American jewelry or a cheap forgery.

But I know not everybody will develop that level of expertise, and fortunately, you don't have to because there are a lot of resources out there that will direct you to Native artists…for those of you who are interested in buying authentic Native jewelry.

[13:19] Gracie Douglas

Absolutely, Lisa. Thanks for giving our listeners that incredibly important reminder.

[13:25] Lisa Davenport

No problem, Gracie. And one last note, while a lot of contemporary Native artists use motifs or styles that are derivatives of Fred Harvey and other White Americans conception of what Native arts look like; that doesn't mean that contemporary Native art that uses those designs are somehow invalid works of art.

What's so beautiful about contemporary Native art is that they have taken those designs and drawn their own history and culture to remake those motifs into their own image.

And, you know, it's just one of the many ways they have fought against cultural assimilation.

[13:59] Cathy Hsu

That's amazing.

It reminds me of scholar Paula Baxter talking about quote “hybrid designs” that satisfy bookmakers and consumers because they practiced a living art and we're not constrained by existing artifacts or conventions”, unquote (Baxter, 1994, 236).

I really love how you pointed out the use of art and specifically these motifs as acts of resistance.

[14:24] Gracie Douglas

So what can consumers do to support these acts of resistance?

How can we support Pueblo and Navajo artists and their livelihood?

Lisa, can you list some resources that can direct buyers to authentic jewelry?

[14:39] Lisa Davenport

Yes, there's medicinemangallery.com that's spelled m-e-d-i-c-i-n-e-m-a-n-g-a-l-l-e-r-y dot com, and santafemavericks.com, Santa Fe Mavericks is spelled s-a-n-t-a-f-e-m-a-v-e-r-i-c-k-s dot com.

Both galleries represent Native artists and make sure best practices are adhered to.

[15:07] Cathy Hsu

Thanks for giving us those links, Lisa.

It's so important to do your research.

[15:12] Lisa Davenport

Absolutely Gracie and Cathy, thanks for having me on the show.

It's so much fun speaking with you.

[15:20] Cathy Hsu

Thank you for agreeing to come on to the show.

[15:22] Gracie Douglas

Thanks so much, Lisa, for agreeing. It was a pleasure speaking with you.

[15:29] *<<Outro Music>>*

[15:30] Cathy Hsu

Executive producers of the Otter Pod are doctors Sara Salazar Hughes and Liz Zepeda.

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[15:56] **Gracie Douglas**

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[16:04]

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