

### ***Christina Fallin: “Appropriate Culturation?”***

In March 2014, twenty-seven year old Christina Fallin, daughter of Oklahoma Governor Mary Fallin, found herself at the center of controversy when she posted an image of herself wearing a red Plains headdress on Facebook and Instagram with the tag “Appropriate Culturation.” Fallin posed for this photo as a promotional piece for her band, Pink Pony. Public outcry criticized Fallin for appropriating Native American cultures, sparking uproar on social media and leading to protests at their shows.

In response, Fallin and Pink Pony removed the photo and released a statement on their Facebook page explaining their aesthetic appreciation for Native American culture. Fallin told the Indian Country Today Media Network that, “I think Native American culture is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen, so I was naturally drawn to it.” Musician Wayne Coyne of The Flaming Lips became involved in the issue when he fired bandmate Kliph Scurlock for criticizing Fallin online. To show his support for Fallin, Coyne posted Instagram photos of several friends and a dog wearing headdresses.

Some argue that Fallin’s photo could be an example of artistic appropriation. Throughout history, artists have borrowed objects and images from everyday life as well as other cultures in order to re-contextualize the object in a new manner. On the other hand, some argue that non-Native Americans do not have the right to adorn a headdress at all. Taking a sacred or meaningful object out of context is problematic even when touted as “art.” Summer Morgan, member of the Kiowa tribe in Oklahoma, believes that Fallin may have had good intentions, but there are better ways to express her appreciation of Native American cultures. Morgan believes that headdresses are not fashion accessories. Following Kiowa tradition, only men can own war bonnets and each feather represents a war deed. Female relatives may be given the right to wear a male relative’s war bonnet, but only after they understand what’s expected of them when they wear it, how to treat it properly, and when it is acceptable to wear.



#### **Discussion Questions:**

1. Did Christina Fallin do something ethically prohibited in posing in a war bonnet? Does it make a difference that she claims to love and respect Native American culture? Fallin wrote, “Please forgive us if we innocently adorn ourselves in your beautiful things.” Do you view her act as innocent or not? Explain your reasoning.
2. How should educators teach students about cultures other than their own? Do you think it is possible to avoid perpetuating stereotypes of other cultures? Why or why not?
3. What if Fallin’s record label asked her to pose in the war bonnet to gain publicity for her music? Would it make a difference if this were simply a business decision to sell records? Explain your reasoning.

4. Would it make a difference if the photographer of this image intended to hang it in a gallery as “art?” What if the goal of the artist was to make viewers mad or uncomfortable? What if the artist created this image as a way to engage viewers in critiquing both Native American and non-Native American cultures?
5. Is cultural appropriation always a bad thing? Why or why not?

**Resources:**

The Most Interesting Governor’s Daughter in the Country

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2014/05/04/meet-christina-fallin-not-what-the-public-would-expect-of-a-politicians-daughter/>

The Daughter of Oklahoma’s Governor Caused an Uproar After She Posed in a Headdress for her Indie Band

<http://www.buzzfeed.com/ryanhatesthis/daughter-of-governor-of-oklahoma-causes-an-uproar-after-she>

Oklahoma Governor’s Daughter Mocks Native American Protesters with ‘War Dance’

<http://www.rawstory.com/rs/2014/04/29/oklahoma-governors-daughter-mocks-native-american-protesters-war-dance/>

Native Americans React to Christina Fallin’s Fake War Dance Performance

<http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2014/04/28/native-americans-react-christina-fallins-fake-war-dance-performance-154627>

Christina Fallin, in Her Own Words: ‘I’m Tired of the Misinformation’

<http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2014/05/02/christina-fallin-her-own-words-im-tired-misinformation-154690>

Oklahoma Gov’s Daughter: A Woman in a Headdress is ‘a Beautiful Thing’

<http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2014/03/07/oklahoma-govs-daughter-woman-headdress-beautiful-thing-153915>

When Friends Disagree: Debate over Native American Mascot

<http://www.houstonpublicmedia.org/news/inside-the-classroom-when-friends-disagree>

**Author:**

Christina Bain, Ph.D.

Department of Art and Art History

College of Fine Arts

The University of Texas at Austin