

February 28, 2020 | Makwa Giizis (Bear Moon)

Aanii President Stanley,

We write as leaders of Indigenous-led organizations on campus that work to support Indigenous peoples through teaching, engagement, research, mentorship, and service.<sup>1</sup> Where appropriate, especially in the case of the American Indian and Indigenous Studies program, we directly consulted our memberships.

We seek to share our sincere concern that MSU is hosting the 2020 Order of the Arrow national conference. MSU hosted the national conferences in 2015, 2012, and 2006. The Order of the Arrow (OA) is the Boys Scouts of America (BSA) honor society. OA is known for its record of practices of explicit and harmful appropriation of American Indian culture.<sup>2</sup> In 2015, the *State News* published reporting by Matthew Argillander and Ryan Kryska about the observations of MSU students who witnessed the behavior of some OA conference attendees (August 7).<sup>3</sup> Two days earlier, MSU student Phillip Rice published a *State News* opinion letter about his experiences witnessing the 2015 conference on campus as a member of OA. The letter is titled **“Boy Scouts on campus demonstrate insensitivity to Native American traditions”**, and this is a quote from Rice:



American Indian &  
Indigenous Studies

Indigenous  
Law & Policy Center

Native American  
Institute

Educating Anishnaabe:  
Giving, Learning &  
Empowering

Michigan Indian  
Leadership Program

Native American  
Business Institute

“High visibility is precisely what seems to be going on at the corner of Shaw Lane and Harrison Road, where two huge teepees stand next to a 15-foot inflatable Boy Scout gesturing the Scout’s honor sign of three fingers pointed to the sky. You might have seen a hot air balloon decorated with the stylized image of an American Indian’s face in profile gracing the campus grounds. But what do Native Americans have to do with Boy Scouts? The answer is —nothing — except that the Order of the Arrow has used American Indian ‘styled’ images and attire in its events and ceremonies for 100 years.”<sup>4</sup>

In light of the students’ testimonies and some of our own personal experiences in 2015, **we are concerned about the risks posed to the campus community** by some attendees of the 2020 OA conference. The OA has an appalling record when it comes to some of its members **using ‘red face’ and ‘playing Indian’**. ‘Playing Indian’ is a technical term developed by Harvard historian Philip Deloria based on his research.<sup>5</sup> A Brief YouTube and Google search will uncover some **offensive misuses of Indigenous material culture** in the particular instances of OA ceremonies featured in the videos. The videos demonstrate the overtness of OA’s record of appropriating Indigenous imagery and practices.

The concerns we have about OA occur within the larger context of the BSA organization. In a *USA Today* report published on February 18 of this year, it is claimed **the organization failed to address child sexual abuse**.<sup>6</sup> Previously, BSA has grappled with **discrimination based on gender and sexuality**.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> We want to acknowledge the authors and signatories of the 2015 letter, of which this 2020 letter was adapted (Reference *2015 Letter Regarding Order of the Arrow*).

<sup>2</sup> <https://newsmaven.io/indiancountrytoday/news/research-compiled-in-the-boy-scout-series-in-indian-country-today-iHVohLu1TEyc1jdf4jqn0A>

<sup>3</sup> <https://statenews.com/article/2015/08/members-of-the-indigenous-graduate-student-collective-stage-protest-on-noac>

<sup>4</sup> <https://statenews.com/article/2015/08/letter-boy-scouts-on-campus-demonstrate-insensitivity-to-native-american-traditions>

<sup>5</sup> Philip Deloria. (1998). *Playing Indian*. Yale University Press.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/investigations/2020/02/18/boy-scouts-bsa-chapter-11-bankruptcy-sexual-abuse-cases/1301187001/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-boy-scouts-evolution-2017-story.html>

We understand that OA has made formal institutional changes to be less harmful to Indigenous peoples—such as changing their ‘MGM Indianhead’ logo and forbidding face paint to be worn without Tribal consent by non-Indigenous persons at BSA activities. On February 10, 2020, OA published a “Ceremonial Update” on its webpage focused on attire. One of the statements in the update is the following: “If lodges use American Indian attire, all efforts should be made by the lodge to depict the American Indian tribes that are native to the area. It is recommended that a lodge engage and work with the American Indian community to determine what attire would be appropriate and accurate.” We encourage you to read the entire update.<sup>8</sup>

We also understand that there are individuals within OA, some of whom are Native American, who seek to reform the organization’s appropriative behaviors. We have heard from persons involved in the organization that more substantive changes have been discussed internally. The changes would eliminate the possibility of any cultural appropriation from happening at OA ceremonies in particular. And there are certainly cases in which particular members or groups within OA have chosen not to be appropriative, and have had positive relationships with Native American communities. However, **we have yet to see evidence that satisfactory changes have been made—both formally and in actual practice—that would eliminate all forms of appropriation.** For even the February 10 “Ceremonial Update” does not call for Indigenous peoples’ consent. Instead, it provides a “recommended” practice. It suggests that if an OA lodge simply makes efforts to use attire that is locally accurate, then the attire cannot be appropriative. This suggestion, of course, is not true—as appropriation is problematic even when it is done with the intention of local accuracy. Hence, there is every reason to be concerned that some attendees of the 2020 national conference will engage in overt and harmful behavior. We welcome any documentation from OA that satisfactory changes have already occurred beyond what we are aware of.

**The appropriative practices that will potentially be performed by some members of OA while on campus, regardless of those members’ intentions, are ones we feel certain would be judged to be wrong for an MSU student, faculty, or staff member to perform in a class setting, as part of a meeting, or at a campus event.** Insofar as it is unclear to us whether OA members may be subject to formal reprimand or peer pressure for their behavior during OA gatherings, then **OA’s very presence on campus could challenge what we see as Michigan State University’s commitment to Michigan’s Indigenous peoples and to creating a safe, diverse, equitable, and inclusive climate for all.** In fact, as Native persons on campus, we have no knowledge of whether our colleagues at MSU who negotiated with OA for the conference contract even had a serious conversation about OA’s record of engaging in discriminatory practices. We do not know whether a formal agreement or memorandum was established to ensure that the campus community will be able to be free from fear of having to endure any forms of cultural appropriation.

It is certainly true that some leaders in OA likely maintain that those in their membership who still engage in cultural appropriation have misplaced, but good, intentions to honor Indigenous people by borrowing from our cultures. Yet we must be concerned about using the reason of good intentions to mask what is actually a **taking of Indigenous material culture without any concern about the consent of Indigenous peoples. Indigenous students and faculty—as well as non-Native allies—are made to feel unsafe in class and at work when their Indigenous cultures are misrepresented publicly.** Such misrepresentation shows that Indigenous peoples’ consent does not matter. Indeed, some of the practices we have witnessed or researched from OA’s record of appropriation are a mockery of our music and arts, ceremonies, crafts, knowledge systems, languages, stories, and histories. Behaviors of ‘red face’ and ‘playing Indian’ cannot be accepted on MSU’s campus.

Professor Deloria’s book, cited earlier, includes a section written on BSA and OA, which we encourage readers of this letter to review (pp. 126-127, 230). There is a long history in the United States of inappropriately borrowing Indigenous cultural practices, while not engaging with actual Indigenous people. This non-consensual borrowing has negative effects on Indigenous communities. In 2014, *The Guardian* published an article on a trend in which young non-Natives wear American Indian-style headdresses and discussed why the trend needs to be ended.<sup>9</sup> Professor Adrienne Keene (Brown University) publishes the *Native Appropriations* website, which is “a forum for discussing representations of Native peoples, including stereotypes, cultural appropriation, news, activism, and

---

<sup>8</sup> <https://oa-bsa.org/article/oa-ceremonial-update>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2014/jul/30/why-the-fashion-headdress-must-be-stopped>

more.” Dr. Keene is a nationally renowned speaker and researcher whose work brings attention to discrimination. The work of Drs. Deloria and Keene is needed because Indigenous material culture is continuously misused today.

It should not only be up to us, **as members of MSU’s Indigenous community, to point out the harmful nature of ‘red face’ and ‘playing Indian.’** As a university community, we should collectively work to find ways to prevent these behaviors from being staged. Moreover, it is important to note that Paulette Granberry Russell writes in a 2019 report—citing from an earlier “MSU Campus Climate Assessment Report” (2016)—that “American Indian and Alaska Native students reported the lowest levels of safety” at MSU.<sup>10</sup>

Today is a time when Native Americans are more likely to be killed by police than any other group.<sup>11</sup> The U.S. legal system has provided inadequate protections for Native women against sexual violence.<sup>12</sup> It is well documented that Indigenous peoples today suffer traumas from their experiences across generations of being forced to attend boarding and residential schools that robbed our communities of our languages, knowledge systems, and cultural practices.<sup>13</sup> **In this context, the ongoing use of Native American mascots has negative impacts on how Indigenous individuals see themselves and how non-Natives see them.** We do not understand why anyone in OA would feel that appropriating what they perceive as Indigenous material culture would be of any support to the health of Indigenous peoples moving forward.

We faithfully recognize that MSU has a commitment to creating a diverse and inclusive campus climate. When MSU actively hosts an organization, whose record suggests the likelihood that some persons will denigrate Indigenous peoples on campus, we wonder if MSU is truly committed to Indigenous students, faculty, staff, and the larger community. We believe that OA’s having their national conference at MSU is concerning for reasons of prohibitive discriminatory behavior. We respect free speech, and understand that free speech can be offensive in certain cases. Again, here we are focused on the potential of directly harmful practices on our campus that may be associated with or motivated by OA’s holding its national conference.

**We ask MSU’s leadership to take our reasoning in this letter to warrant consideration at the level of their cancelling the contract with OA for the 2020 national conference. Our reason for considering such a measure is the potential risks to persons who will be harmed in the event that some members of OA choose to appropriate Indigenous peoples’ material cultures. MSU should make a commitment to not host the OA conference in the future until there is acceptable and transparent evidence that both OA’s formal policies and MSU’s agreements with OA are capable of ending the risk of all forms of ‘red face’ and ‘playing Indian’. We also hope that MSU’s leadership will think critically about how they make agreements with any organization that has a record of engaging in ‘red face’ and a record of encouraging or merely allowing ‘playing Indian’.**

We encourage colleagues at MSU to do more research about OA on their own. We ask that MSU use this moment to reconsider its commitment to Native America and Indigenous peoples globally by creating an Indigenous Task Force to investigate how the University can better serve the Native community—including students, faculty, and staff—and do a more apt job recruiting and retaining high-caliber Indigenous students and professionals. Current figures indicate that student enrollment for American Indian and Alaska Native students are shockingly low at MSU. According to the 2013-14 Annual Progress Report on Diversity and Inclusion, there were only 80 American Indian and Alaska Native undergraduate students and 39 graduate students during Fall 2014. According to the 2017-18 Annual Report, there were only 71 American Indian and Alaska Native undergraduate students and 33 graduate students during Fall 2018. This is a trend that we need to address.

As the MSU community, we can use this unfortunate conversation we have to have to move forward and transform MSU into the truly diverse and inclusive place that we know it can be. In 2013, Northwestern University, a peer CIC institution, created a similar Task Force,<sup>14</sup> which could be used as a model. The University

---

<sup>10</sup> Erich N. Pitcher and Genyne L. Royal (2016). MSU Campus Climate Assessment Report. Michigan State University; Paulette Granberry Russell (2019). Report on the Proposed Establishment of a New Multicultural Center. Michigan State University.

<sup>11</sup> Elise Hansen (2016). “The forgotten minority in police shootings.” <https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/10/us/native-lives-matter/index.html>. CNN.

<sup>12</sup> Sarah Deer. (2015). *The Beginning and End of Rape: Confronting Sexual Violence in Native America*. University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>13</sup> K. Tsianina Lomawaima, Brenda J. Child, and Margaret L. Archuleta (2000). *Away from Home: American Indian Boarding School Experiences, 1879-2000*. Heard Museum.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.northwestern.edu/president/committees/native-american-outreach-inclusion/Task-Force-Report.pdf>

of Michigan also created a committee in March of 2018, the Native American Student Task Committee. We sincerely hope to make MSU the diverse, inclusive, and excellent university that we know it to be. You may address future correspondence to Professor Kyle Whyte ([kwhyte@msu.edu](mailto:kwhyte@msu.edu)).

Miigwech,

Dr. Kyle Whyte, President of EAGLE ([kwhyte@msu.edu](mailto:kwhyte@msu.edu))

Matthew Fletcher, Director of the Indigenous Law & Policy Center

Dr. Dylan Miner, Director of American Indian & Indigenous Studies

Dr. Christie M. Poitra, Interim Director of the Native American Institute

Dr. Kevin Leonard, Director of Native American Business Institute

Stephanie Chau, Director of Michigan Indian Leadership Program

#### **Native Campus and Community Signatories**

Dr. Estrella Torrez, Co-Director of the Indigenous Youth Empowerment Program

Emily Sorroche, Co-Director of the Indigenous Youth Empowerment Program

Dr. Elizabeth LaPensée, Assistant Professor in Media & Information; Writing, Rhetoric, & American Cultures