Culture versus Caricature: Suggestions for Practice as Halloween Approaches

While Autumn is a beautiful season with cool, fresh air and the crunch of colourful leaves underfoot, it is also time again for Halloween, complete with a multitude of costume choices. While dressing up is meant to be fun and exciting, Halloween offers the opportunity to discuss costume choices with both colleagues and students. A quick internet search or trip to the store reveals infinite possibilities, including "Pocahottie" or "Tribal Temptation," invitations to "become a tribal beauty with this women's tribal Native American costume." Such questionable costumes prompted Ohio University students to begin a poster campaign, which is inclusive of many cultures and uses the slogan, "We're a culture, not a costume."

While dressing as a super hero is one thing, dressing in a way that reduces culture to caricature suggests that the culture being portrayed is less important than others. Invitations to become a "Pocahottie" by donning an "authentic Indian costume" negate the fact that regalia such as headdresses and jingle dresses traditionally have to be earned. Furthermore, the dehumanization and sexualizing of Aboriginal women and girls is inextricably connected to the continued legacy of violence against us. The number of missing and murdered Aboriginal women has risen to over 2000. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) report calls for an investigation into missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls (#41 i), and open dialogue about costume choices provides an opportunity for educators to raise these issues in both the lunch room and the class room.

Suggestions for practice include:

- talking with both colleagues and students about these issues and implications of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission recommendations
- showing students posters from the "We're a culture, not a costume" campaign and having a discussion or debate, which supports the TRC recommendation to build student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy and mutual respect (#63 iii)
- with the younger grades, reading a book such as ***Jingle Dress Dancer*** (available to borrow from the AEC library) provides an opportunity to learn about regalia, what it means, and why it is not a costume

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