

What are you talking about?

Why should I cut my dreads?

What's wrong with a Mohawk?

Answers for white people on appropriation, hair and anti-racist struggle.



A Few Good Reasons Why White People Should Not Wear “Mohawks” or Dreadlocks:

“Mohawk” is the name of a sovereign First Nation in the Iroquois Confederacy. Wearing “Mohawks” erases Mohawk people and culture.

Dreadlocks are a symbol of Black/African pride and resistance to white supremacist beauty standards and are rooted in Black/African struggles for survival and liberation.

Dreadlocks are rooted in Rastafarianism, a pan-African spiritual/religious movement for healing and decolonization for Africa and African people worldwide. Rastafarianism is a form of resistance to a history of white racism, slavery, colonization and genocide. The traditions of people of color/non-white people are still under attack across the planet. Appropriating our traditions and ways of dressing/presenting is a further attack on our communities.

Wearing “Mohawks” or dreadlocks plays into a racist society that believes people of color and our lands, bodies, cultures and spirits are up for grabs. “Mohawks” were popularized in Britain and North America because of the film “The Taxi Driver.”

Appropriating other cultures means you neglect looking at your own ethnic roots and traditions. By wearing “Mohawks” and dreadlocks, white people demonstrate they are unaware of anti-racist struggles and deteriorate trust between white and people of color/non-white people.

Being an anti-racist white person is counter-culture. Trying to present a counter-cultural image by appropriating other cultures is not. The hairstyle called “Mohawks” is rooted in distinct Iroquois and other First Nations/Native traditions that have only recently (1978) been legal in the United States. Non-native people who wear “Mohawks” appear naïve and condescending to this reality.

By cutting off their “Mohawks” and dreadlocks, white people take a concrete step towards an anti-racist journey.

The struggle against racism is more than just not saying racist comments or knowing that the United States was built by slave labor. It is also a struggle to recognize and understand the ways racism/white supremacy are woven into every aspect of life.

One of the ways racism plays out which is often ignored or not seen by white people is through *appropriation*, “the act of taking or making use of without authority or right.” Appropriation ignores the lives and struggles of oppressed communities, and instead takes what is seen as interesting, useful or beautiful, disregarding our cultures and lives. In the US and other countries, appropriation is part of long histories of racism and genocide. Colonial governments and peoples appropriated the homelands of First Nations/Native people. Europeans appropriated the bodies and labor of African peoples during slavery.

While our bodies, homelands and labor continue to be appropriated, so do our cultural symbols/lifeways. The New Age movement, for example, appropriates (and twists) the spiritual practices of First Nations, Asian, African and other cultures.

Among progressive/radical white people, the problem of appropriation continues to damage communities of color. Mohawks and dreadlocks worn by non-Native/non-African people is one form of appropriation that often goes unnoticed and unchallenged and is often misunderstood.

Healing the legacy and current reality of racism and colonization means looking closely at the ways we perpetuate these forms of violence. It means, in part, letting go of cultural symbols that are appropriated from people of color/non-white people and instead looking deeply at the complex issues that surround race and racism.

But, I’m not trying to appropriate anything. I just appreciate other cultures. Isn’t that okay?

Appreciating other cultures does not mean you need to appropriate any aspect of them. A true appreciation of other cultures means fighting against the forces trying to destroy them, not taking them on as your own.

It’s just a Mohawk. I don’t think of it as a Native thing.

And therein lies the problem.

But, I wear my hair this way as a statement against oppressive cultures and governments. How is that racist?

You can take a stand against oppression and dominant cultures without appropriating the cultures of the people being hurt by them. Appropriation actually enforces oppression, it does not stand against it. Appropriation is part of the problem, not part of the solution.

This is a free country. Can’t I do whatever I want?

This country has never been free for people of color/non-white people. Certainly, you can choose wear your hair however you want. Historically, however, people of color have not been able to make that choice. For instance, in the US and Canada Native children were forced to cut their hair and wear it like white people’s in “boarding” or “residential” schools created to destroy First Nations cultures. Slavery was an act of *owning humans*. Enslaved people had no legal right to do anything with their bodies. Their bodies were private property. When white people wear “Mohawks” or dreadlocks it twists those hairstyles into symbols of privilege rather than symbols of survival and resistance.

**CUT OFF YOUR DREADLOCKS AND “MOHAWKS” AND HELP
CONTINUE REVOLUTION AGAINST COLONIZATION AND
RACISM! HELP YOUR WHITE FRIENDS DO THE SAME!**