



NEW AGE INTEREST  
IN NATIVE AMERICAN  
SPIRITUALITY:

NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE  
PERCEPTIONS OF NEW AGE  
INTEREST IN AND USE  
OF NATIVE AMERICAN  
SPIRITUALITY.

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### **Abstract**

Western and New Age interest in Native American spirituality is often approached as an empty, consumerist phenomenon. Much research has been done on the negative effects of this phenomenon. This thesis explores both the alleged negative and the potentially positive consequences of New Age interest in Native American spirituality through the opinions of New Age critics, proponents and Native Americans themselves. A specific emphasis is laid on positive effects of western interest in Native American spirituality as this information seems to be lacking. Analysis of scholarly literature and primary sources related to reception studies provide the grounds on which the claim is made that there are both negative and positive sides to the phenomenon and that New Age Neo-Native spirituality cannot just be written off as empty consumerism. The research provides a basis for the ongoing conversation regarding cultural appropriation and western interest in non-western phenomena. It will provide a level of understanding and open-mindedness for further explorations.

**Keywords:** Native American, American Indian, New Age, spirituality, religion, perception studies, cultural appropriation, cultural property, consumerism, literature analysis, communication.

## **Introduction**

The New Age movement has been the object of conflict since it first came into being. After emerging out of the Hippie movement of the 1960s it truly reached its height in the 1980s. While it is a widespread, unregulated movement (that many of its members do not openly identify with), New Agers do have certain shared elements. These shared elements include, as indicated by Vincett and Woodhead, focus on the individual self, universalism, optimism, evolutionary progressivism and eco-consciousness. In their search for an individual practice many New Agers have borrowed from other religions and spiritual practices, especially those from the east – such as Buddhism and Hinduism – and non-traditional western ones – such as Native American spirituality. New Agers believe they can find help and information in these other traditions that they cannot find in established Western religious traditions. It is the question whether this interest in and adoption of other practices is culturally appropriate and respectful. Is it acceptable for someone to adopt something into their lives that is not originally part of their historic lineage? Can non-Natives ever really grasp the full concept of Native American spirituality? Is the information that is put out there accurate and sufficient? Does a person have the right to adopt and alter practices and beliefs into their life when these do not belong to their “cultural property”?

### *Overview*

This thesis deals with the positive and negative responses to the New Agers’ embrace of Native American spirituality. I will be discussing the classic New Age, which existed between the 1970s and 1990s, unless indicated that something concerns the neo-New Age, which exists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In the first chapter, I expand on the historical background of the New Age movement, the way it grew to what it was in the 1980s, its basic elements and main received criticisms. Following that I deal with the possible negative consequences of New Age interest in Native spirituality; the way in which individualism seems to be prioritized, the way in which New Age use of Native spirituality can be viewed as another way Native are being exploited by whites and the way in which consumerism devaluates spiritual content. Subsequently the positive perceptions are dealt with; the good intentions New Agers predominantly have in looking for Native spirituality, the way in Natives share with non-Natives and the way in which cultural mixing is a timeless and necessary part of religious development. Lastly, I will converge these into a temporary conclusion that can serve as an informational basis for future research.

This study is based on literature analysis. Scholarly articles and books constitute the main part of the sources. Aside from both the academic circle's perception and the New Agers' perception, I will also include Native Americans' opinions regarding the subject. These will be ones that have been printed in academic articles, interviews or videos that have been uploaded to YouTube in which people of Native American heritage put forth their own opinions regarding the research's subject.

Native American studies is a multidisciplinary field. Depending on the specific research subject the disciplinary theories differ. As this research revolves around the different perceptions of the phenomenon (i.e. New Age interest in Native American religion and spirituality and its consequences) this thesis stays within the realm of reception studies. It specifically deals with the positive perceptions and negative perceptions of New age use of Native American spirituality. The main focus will lie on presenting and interpreting the different opinions regarding the subject

that have been voiced through academic articles, published interviews and social media. One existing theory that will be employed, however, is Stuart Hall's encoding and decoding theory. This will help provide insight in the underlying communication issues that are the root of the eventual disagreements and problems.

As a rule, New Age interest in Native spirituality is regarded as diminishing and harmful. While these possible negative consequences will be dealt with, the main focus lies on also bringing to light the potential positive consequences. The findings support the hypothesis that there are both negative and positive consequences of New Age interest in Native American spirituality, and that these are acknowledged by New Agers, critics and Native Americans, alike. The research will provide an informational basis for the ongoing conversation regarding cultural appropriation (i.e. the situation in which members of a dominant culture adopt, and occasionally adapt, elements of a minority's culture) and western interest in non-western phenomena.

### *Hall's Theory of Encoding and Decoding*

Hall proposes that communication is a constant process of encoding and decoding. Hall states that a communicative message is interpreted based on someone's "structures of understanding" (166). Someone's history and socio-economic situation influence the way someone interprets any given message. This also causes religious messages to be interpreted in different ways. However, within a culture, some ways of interpretation can be so ingrained that they become culture-specific and no longer appear to be constructed, but rather a "naturally" given code (167). This provides a possible explanation for the disagreements surrounding non-native use of Native spirituality. While the "preferred reading" of many Native practices and texts may be the one that fits within the culturally specific Native American frame, this does not mean that any non-Native person who is not accustomed to the Native American specific culture frame

interprets the information regarding the subject in this previously stated preferred way. A different frame of reference leads to a different interpretation. Consequentially, Hall indicates, “‘distortions’ or ‘misunderstandings’ arise precisely from the lack of equivalence between the two sides in the communicative exchange” (166). So, because New Agers and Native Americans have different frames of reference, and therefore interpret the intricacies of spirituality in distinct ways, misunderstandings and discussions about what is appropriate in the practice of spirituality arise. This theoretical basis for miscommunication and culturally preferred readings will be employed to explain the issues that occur when New Agers copy, or enquire into, Native American spirituality.

#### *Existing research*

A significant amount of research has been done on the New Age movement and the influence their non-Native interest in Native American spirituality has had on Native spiritual culture and the practical application of Native spiritual practices (Aldred, 2000; Deloria, 1998; Donaldson, 1999; Jenkins, 2004; Jocks, 1996; Miskimmin, 1996; York, 2001). However, most of said research seems focused on the roles of well-known, profiting individuals and the negative consequences. Consequentially, most write New Age Neo-Native spirituality off as an empty, consumerist phenomenon that only hurts the Native American culture from which it is derived.

The New Age movement seemed to have peaked in the 1980s. It was during this time that the movement was at the height of its influence. After the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978, it seemed like Native people were finally free from white interference. It was through this act that the federal government showed its acknowledgement of the fact that Native American spiritual and religious practices are an integral part of their culture and should be left

alone. “The federal government recognized that, through the years, the ‘abridgement of religious freedom for traditional American Indians’ had been a persistent problem” (Jenkins 226). It was only after the implementation of this act that it became clear the cultural-loss problem would not be solved simply by stopping governmental interference. It became apparent that the New Age movement was very much interested in, altering and using formerly Native American religious practices. By doing this, many American Indians experienced a whole new way of non-natives interfering in their culture. Instead of (predominantly) whites suppressing and trying to eradicate Native culture and religion, they now started copying, adopting and changing Native practices in their own lives with the “Native American” label still attached. New Agers started taking what they were interested in and using it in their own lives.

The people – both Native and non-Native alike – that also commercialized and sold their distorted Native products and services were an even more complicated way in which whites were interfering with Native culture. This, of course, did not come without challenge. “Indian criticisms of neo-Native activity [also] developed during the 1980s, originally in pamphlets and newspaper articles, but soon spreading to direct action.” (Jenkins 237) Not only were seminars and ceremonies protested against and disrupted, New Age leaders were even attacked. All together this makes the New Age of the 1980s an interesting part of the field as it was a time when government was no longer interfering, and it were solely “normal” people that had a potential influence on the Natives and their traditions.

So why were many young people so eager to learn from Native American spiritual knowledge? New Agers looked into other ways of thinking, both eastern philosophies and Native spirituality, in an attempt to improve their lives. Western spiritual traditions did not fulfill their need for personal improvement. They believed they had the right to look to other cultures as

many New Agers believed that “spiritual seekers are free to borrow from many traditions because of a widespread sense that all of them are built upon common insights” (Woodhead). In addition to that, there was a certain individualistic aspect to the phenomenon. Ever since the second part of the twentieth century western culture has focused more and more on the individual, its wants and its right to do as he or she feels appropriate. This is why, as indicated by Lisa Aldred, they believed they were justified in making use of other traditions in their search for personal transformation and spiritual growth (330).

Previous research has shown that a number of well-known people within the New Age movement in the 1980s exploited the Native material by commercializing it and by only incorporating a few of many traditional practices, often claiming they were authentic. Important historical aspects of Native culture were neglected, and a simplified version of traditional beliefs was sold to a (largely white) audience. The interesting part about this, however, is that this was done both by non-Natives and Natives alike. Some examples of this capitalist use of Native traditions are the publication of books, such as *Jaguar Woman* by Lynn Andrews or *Phantoms Afoot: Helping the Spirits Among Us* by Summer Rain. The running of paid workshops or seminars that teach ‘Native American spiritual practices’ was also a common occurrence. An example of this is an American Indian woman who goes by the name Mary Thunder. She ran a New Age center where she let people pay for sweat lodge experiences, pipe ceremonies or talks with other beings (Aldred 332).

While it seems that New Age interest may simply be a consumerist phenomenon, a religious marketplace, if you will, I believe that this does not simply mean that it is without its merits. As indicated by Stewart Muir: “the deployment of commoditized representations is not

always harmless. However, nor are such processes [in which spiritual and cultural exchange, appropriation, commodification and consumption take place] necessarily malign” (247). New Age interest, or any modern interest, for that matter, seems to be inherently consumerist. It seems an inescapable part of modern day society. Several social theorists such as Lisa Aldred have actually proposed for decades that “lifestyles, identity, cultural, and even spiritual meaning have become commodities for purchase” (338). The consumerist aspects of twentieth and twenty-first century western culture do not mean that the interest cannot be based on genuine interest and respect for cultural traditions. Rather than assuming that the New Age’s consumerist characteristics diminish anything it touches, there may be some merit to the idea that the New Age phenomenon is just the next step in a natural evolutionary process of spirituality and that both parties involved could benefit on some levels.

### **The New Age movement**

The New Age movement is a phenomenon unlike any other. Many of its members do not officially call themselves “New Agers” but with an estimated 3.5 million people taking part in its practices (“Religion Library: New Age”) it is an incredibly interesting subject. How did the New Age movement come to be? What are some of the practices associated with the New Age movement and why are so many people interested in it?

### *Historical background*

The New Age movement can be traced back to the Hippie movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Hippies had a way of rejecting the established western ideas and searched for a more meaningful way of life in other cultures. They went against the established culture, wore headbands, love beads and feathers and were inspired by cult books, such as *Be Here Now* by

Ram Dass, *The Teaching of Don Juan* by Carlos Castaneda or any of the books by Timothy Leary. It was already during this time that many went to American Indian reservation areas in search of “higher consciousness” (Miskimmin 207). It is clear that a fascination with non-western spiritual practices and an interest in Native American spirituality was already on the rise during the 1960s and 1970s.

Hippies were dissatisfied with the way of life in the United States at the time. The US government and its wars – particularly the Vietnam War – younger Hippies’ parents and their set male-female roles, the restricted way of living and staying within your social sphere and even the restrictions in looking the way you wanted to; these were all seen as detrimental to personal development and growth. Hippies wanted to learn more about the world, find themselves and create peace. In order to do so, they had to go against the grain and discover new ways of living as they believed the Western ways had proven ineffective. As indicated by Lisa Aldred “In the so-called postmodern culture of late consumer capitalism, a significant number of white affluent suburban and urban middle-aged baby-boomers [complained] of feeling uprooted from cultural traditions, community belonging and spiritual meaning” (329). It is for these reasons that the counterculture of the 1960s sparked a rejection of the white suburban middle-class culture of gender division, church and “proper” way of life. Particularly younger people between the age of 15 and 40 were no longer interested in the traditional housewife, working man, Sunday morning church status-quo. They became more individualistic and more critical of their government and the world.

In addition to that, many Hippies believed that it was during this time that the Age of Aquarius was dawning. This meant that it was the perfect time to change their way of life. This

phenomenon is also sung about in the 1967 Hippie musical *Hair*, that was made into a movie in 1979. Here they describe the dawning of this coming age as follows:

When the moon is in the Seventh House  
And Jupiter aligns with Mars  
Then peace will guide the planets  
And love will steer the stars  
This is the dawning of the age of Aquarius (*Hair*).

Hippies believed that the Age of Aquarius was coming and that it would be a time in which peace would win and love would spread around the world. It is just this message of peace and love that was so central to the Hippie movement and their protests.

After the initial push away from the established culture by the Hippies in the 1960s, the ‘classic’ New Age movement emerged. During the 1970s and 1980s the New Age movement gained popularity through the teachings of David Spangler and other New Age gurus and teachers. David Spangler is a writer of spiritual books who has since denounced the over-commercialized elements some members of the New Age movement have adopted. Spangler attracted many leaders and teachers to the movement when he published his first book in the 1970s; *Revelation: The Birth of a New Age*. Many New Agers were buying his books and coming to listen to his presentations as a way to expand their knowledge and adopt ideas about new ways of living their lives. David Spangler laid the foundation for New Age thinking. He believed that, at the time, waves of spiritual energy were released due to astrological changes. Which everyone should employ to bring about a new age (Melton). This idea of a new age dawning is known as

the aforementioned Age of Aquarius. David Spangler greatly popularized this idea and introduced it to a greater public. The active stance evoked by the idea of a new age dawning contained in it a positivity and potential for peace and love, that really attracted counterculture youngsters.

Another person that greatly popularized the New Age movement during this time was best-selling author Lynn Andrews. Her books supposedly are “true accounts of her mentoring experiences with two Canadian Cree medicine women – Agnes Whistling Elk and Ruby Plenty Chiefs” (Aldred 331). Andrews’ books were sold to a wide audience, having been on the Los Angeles Times and The New York Times best-seller lists for quite some time. While incredibly popular, she has been under constant scrutiny from the Native community, who criticized her for commercializing and inventing Native Culture for financial gain. Many American Indians even stated that she mixes and matches elements from many different Native communities and presents them as one in her book, thereby attacking and diminishing their culture.

While individuals like Lynn Andrews initially popularized the movement, it seems that over time (starting at the end of the 1980s) many New Agers have strayed away from the “guru” or “teacher”-based way of being involved. Aldred indicates that

Many New Age books have seeped into the mainstream and have influenced the views of people not consciously identified with the movement. The New Age is thus [no longer] a strictly defined community headed by formally recognized leaders with an articulated dogma. Rather, it is a term that is applied to a heterogenous collection of philosophies and practices (330).

While certainly part of the cause, the introduction of new ideas does not necessarily correspond with an increase in interest. For what reason did the movement grow so much during the 1970s and 1980s?

During the 1970s and 1980s the New Age movement had a new way of communicating. Instead of the formal meetings still used within established western religious communities – such as Sabbath or Sunday morning church – they communicated with one another through mailing lists, conferences, conventions and publications (“Religion Library: New Age”). Where before they would have to rely on mouth-to-mouth communication, call everyone individually or go with the costlier option of sending letters, new modes of communication simplified the process. Informal events were hosted, and an array of people were invited through emails sent to mailing lists of people they knew were interested. It was much easier to find people to come to their conventions or sell their publications to. Additionally, the reach of event planners and product sellers was constantly expanded by new email-addresses being added to their lists. These easy access, low-barrier communication methods, events and sources provided a “common core” for the emerging New Age movement. They brought together different people that were interested in self transformation and world improvement through the sale of products and tickets to events related to non-traditional spiritual practices. Easy-access events and popular informational books lowered the barrier for inclusion and made it easier for strangers to take part in New Age practices. Really, the only thing you needed to do was pick up a New Age book and start reading. This saw to it that the New Age movement, in contrast with its other theological and spiritual counterparts, did not spread through institutional growth, parental introduction or face-to-face contact but through the sale of New Age information sources and events. By the 1980s the New Age existed as an “informal network of spiritual seekers who shared subscriptions to similar magazines, read similar books and shopped at the burgeoning number of New Age stores”

(“Religion Library: New Age”). It is interesting to note that most elements that are part of the movement – from dietary change to interest in spirituality – predate the 1970s and 1980s, but it was through the New Age movement that they were combined in a way that never occurred before.

By the start of the 1990s the New Age had lost its popularity. It was condemned for the use of occult practices such as tarot cards and crystals. Since then, however, the individualistic aspects of the movements have made it so that each member defines their spiritual practices in a different way. This change has become most apparent since the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, during the neo-New Age, if you will, in which New Age books have seeped into the mainstream and many people find their own ways of informing and practicing spirituality in their daily lives. Some prefer to read about Eastern philosophies, some use oracle cards, all practice spirituality in their own personal way.

The term New Age has become more and more obscure, with even fewer ‘New Agers’ proclaiming themselves to be just that, than before. Woodhead indicates that partly due to ridicule in the media the term ‘New Age’ is falling out of use even though people occasionally still borrow elements from the movement. The main focus, however, remains common: individualism, personal development, positivity and spiritualism. So, while the term New Age, denoting a uniform movement, is disappearing from the common vocabulary, the ideas and practices remain used to this day. From the late 1980s on, it has simply become more mainstream, less sensationalized by celebrities within the New Age, less community-based and individuals have all found their own way of practicing spirituality (Woodhead).

*Basic elements*

So, what were the basic elements of the ‘classic’ New Age? Were they simply an interest in spiritualism, focus on personal development and a positive view of what the world could be?

The cause for many New Agers’ search for alternative day-to-day spirituality stems from an emotional need within dominant society, at the time (1970s & 1980s); feelings of spiritual emptiness and meaninglessness in their daily lives led many young adults into the arms of non-western philosophy and religion (Miskimmin 206). The knowledge and practices they found in Asian, Eastern and Native American cultures were tools to help them find their way and develop their sense of self in a world that, in their view, was impersonal and obsessed with objects, status and financial gain.

New Age beliefs have many different origins; from Eastern philosophies such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism to Native American practices. Anything not traditionally western was viewed as interesting and potentially helpful. Non-westerners were viewed as having a different relationship with spirituality and nature. Native Americans, especially, were thought to have a special connection with nature. Jenkins indicates that “Native tradition promised things that, many believed, could not be found in conventional Western religion, an inner peace, a wholeness, and an integration with the earth and nature” (181). Spiritual traditions, including the Native American ones, became more popular in the 1970s and 1980s through the dispersion of translated spiritual texts from India and Asia. Jenkins also indicates that a publishing boom during the 1980s and early 1990s indicates a mass interest in Indian religions (176). In addition to the interest in older non-traditionally-western traditions, many New Agers were also interested in mystic practices such as shamanism, oracle or tarot cards, crystals, non-conventional or holistic healing, meditation and diet reform, particularly vegetarianism and later veganism (“Religion

Library: New Age.”). It was also during this time that the practice of Yoga – another practice many New Agers have incorporated in their lives – was popularized in the West (“Religion Library: New Age”). A clear distancing from western philosophies and religions has been apparent since its inception.

The closest non-traditional communities that American New Agers could find were those of Native Americans. This was fortunate for them, as Aldred’s research has shown that Native American spirituality was one of the New Agers’ most popular interests (Aldred 330). Because of this popularity at the time, reservations were visited by many who were interested in learning the ways of Native Americans. Some people were welcomed, Native American journalist Christina Rose, indicates in her article for the *Indian Country Today* that many appreciated Caucasians when they came to them “the right way” by coming to them help and learn in the process. More often than not, however, New Agers were either turned away, protested against or money was solicited for admission to ceremonies, a practice which legitimate Native American spiritual leaders would never have approved of (Butterfield). Jenkins also states that Native American criticism of neo-Native activity developed during the 1980s. It started in pamphlets and newspaper articles, but quickly spread to direct action (237). Many Native Americans were simply not interested in people coming to them for some quick fixes with no regard to their tribes’ specific history, culture or socio-economic situation. In the same way that Natives were once stigmatized, they now tried to do the same with New Agers.

Part of the problem many Native Americans had with New Agers was the fact that they applied the same ‘self-religion’ mentality that they adhered to with other traditions. “The history of New Age is that of crossed borders, transnational influences, and localized forms” (Sadovina 84) New Agers combined elements from different cultures from different parts of the world and,

comparatively, most tended not to distinguish between different Native American tribes. This means a lot of history was ignored and spiritual practices that were not supposed to go together were in fact combined.

All practices and knowledge New Agers adopt from other cultures is done in search for self-development and spiritual growth. The focus lies on the practices, their functionality in daily life and their use in search for personal development. Context, history and socio-economic issues are often ignored or avoided when considering the origins of these practices. As indicated by Deloria, one of the most prominent researchers on the subject and of Standing Rock Sioux Native American descent, “New Age thinking tends to focus on ultimate individual liberation and engagement with a higher power, having little interest in the social world that lies between self and spirit” (170). Susanne Miskimmin also states that the items New Agers produce and market as Native American Spiritual products, do not reflect the history of American Indians. Instead they are Native representations by non-Natives, and therefore devoid of any historical value (208). In addition to that, most New Age products and services are sold for profit. This makes them contested, as religion and consumerism are often viewed as highly incompatible. Especially to many Native Americans, the sale of tickets to spiritual ceremonies is unacceptable. A Lakota traditional member has written on the website for non-profit organization Native Languages of the Americas, that Native Americans would not ask money in exchange for spiritual lessons or guidance as it would make the ceremony useless (“Differences between Indian Beliefs and New Age [Archive]”).

So, in its entirety, New Agers “ascribe to an eclectic amalgam of beliefs and practices, often hybridized from various cultures. New Agers tend to focus on what they refer to as personal

transformation and spiritual growth” (Aldred 330). Many products and sources they use are copies from, or inspired by, other spiritual traditions and produced in mass and sold for profit. All this together makes the New Age movement a highly controversial phenomenon.

### *Membership*

It is estimated that over 3 million people engage in New Age practices (“Religion Library: New Age.”). These numbers, however, are tentative at best. Aldred estimates that people identifying with the New Age movement has ranged between ten and twenty million (330). Considering the fact that most “members” of the movement do not openly identify with the movement it is hard to make a proper estimate. Additionally, as Aldred indicates, “there is no circumscribed creed or defined tenets in the New Age movement. Nor are there any requirements for membership, although studies show most tend to be white, middle-aged, and college educated, with a middle- to upper-middle-class income” (330). As it is possible for people to engage in New Age behavior in many different ways – from reading books classed as New Age to the use of tarot cards or crystals – it is possible that many do not even know about the term they could be classified as. Those that are aware of the terminology, Michael York indicates, often renounce the term, even when sociologists class them as belonging to the cultural group (364).

The lack of requirements, administration, people in managing positions and identification with the term makes members of the New Age movement to be impossible to estimate. It is clear, however, especially as many “New Age books” have seeped into the mainstream, that a widespread group of people engages in New Age practices and buys New Age products.

*Consumerism and criticism*

As indicated by Stewart Muir, New Agers have been the recipient of harsh criticism. They are dismissed as self-indulgent, consumerist and a source of the corrosion of several ancient spiritual practices. While they are interested in multiple ancient traditions – Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism and Native American religion to name just a few – their interpretations, application and conjugation of these traditions tend to be very different from the original. “The New Age emphasis on tradition does not reflect actual continuity between ancient and contemporary beliefs. [...] New Agers re-work older esoteric elements to create something new” (Sadovina 89). They search for common points and underlying principles that connect to them personally and adopt into their lives these altered practices under their original name. This, while possibly effective for them, can be harmful to the people and the cultures they appropriate from.

It is often stated that profit-seeking is at the heart of New Age interest in Native spirituality. Many, if not most, researchers who address New Agers end up touching on this. Aldred states that the New Age movement is, first and foremost, a consumerist phenomenon (330). The sale of goods and services were at the heart of its very existence. Sadovina, Muir and more think of the New Age movement more as a “spiritual supermarket”. A place in which information about almost any spiritual tradition is shared and people can pick and choose which parts they like to “take home”. “The term [spiritual supermarket] not only evokes profit-seeking cynicism, but also the ‘variety and choice’ in individual practice” (Sadovina 90).

Several researchers (Aldred, 2000; York, 2001) equate commercialization with diminishment in value. When something with spiritual content is sold, it is no longer as valuable as it once was. While commercialization does change the content of certain products, services

and information, and divorces them from their historical backgrounds, the immediate assumption that anything commercial is automatically diminished in value seems like a bold generalization. It seems that when it comes to religion, “commercial” endeavors are frowned upon. It is, however, a longstanding tradition for religious objects and information to be sold for profit (albeit sometimes invested in good causes). Christians have sold rosaries for decades and newer translations of the Bible or Koran are constantly appearing. In addition to that it seems that commercialism and globalization are an unavoidable part of today’s world. If anything, the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries are characterized by consumer capitalism. It would be hard to find an object, service or information source that is completely cut off from any commercial interests. This is why, as indicated by Michael York, Ph.D., ‘the spiritual and the commercial have [also] become increasingly wedded’ (371).

Within the United States, New Agers have had a specific interest in Native American spirituality. It is this specific interest that is of concern in this thesis. So, what are some ways in which the New Age movement has practiced this specific interest?

Individuals that have misused information and are asking for money for a makeshift sweat-lodge or people that lay claim to Native heritage in order to sell books are most prominently dealt with in a lot of research (among others Aldred, 2000; Donaldson, 1999 and York, 2001). These people are criticized and villainized for their commercialization of Native American traditions. It seems there is more to explore when it comes to everyday people. Part of the problem could be the faulty information many New Agers are supplied with. The sources of spiritual information in the 1980s were often white Americans who claimed to have been taught by Native American medicine people but with no further claim to Native knowledge or heritage.

This basis, while wrong, could explain why many New Agers in the 1980s were unknowingly insulting Native Americans through the adoption of fake Native American spirituality.

Additionally, most research spends very little time on the individualist aspect of all religions – i.e. everyone’s freedom to choose and practice religion in their own personal way. It even seems to be completely discarded by many. Aldred, however, does touch on this by stating that most New Agers defend their appropriation of Native knowledge by evoking their First amendment right to religious freedom (Adred 336). This argument, however, is part of the problem. It is part of a constitution that was drawn up by the very people that colonized Natives in the first place. It, therefore, will not hold a lot of value to the Native people, making the argument barely convincing for American Indians, at best. The question remains whether everyone is restricted by ethnicity and cultural boundaries or whether there is something to the religious freedom that many New Agers embody.

As they have received a lot of backlash from both Natives and outsiders for the adoption and modification of established practices, many New Agers argued that they had the right to incorporate other practices into their lives according to a so-called “public-domain” argument. Michael York, in his research concerning New Age, explains it as follows:

[During the classic age of the] New Age [people upheld] the idea that all past and present spiritual legacies are no longer private property, but belong now, in the New Age of Aquarius, to the public domain. This idea easily translates into the rationale and justification for appropriating whatever third-world institution has appeal to the individual religious consumer along with the ‘freedom’ to market what one allocates to others (368).

Some people, such as author Ted Andrews, take this argument even further. He argues that all religions have influenced and borrowed from each other. Andrews holds that it may be hypocritical for members of a certain religion or culture to attack others for adopting their traditions, as their forefathers will, most likely, have done the exact same thing. He also states that most religious traditions throughout time have believed that others stole their sacredness or diminished their beliefs (Andrews 6). These arguments, while they do not provide approval for all New Age actions, form the foundation most New Agers base their religious freedom upon.

New Agers tend to only take some parts of Native spiritual practices while leaving others behind. As indicated by Susanne Miskimmin, “the New Age Movement’s approach to native spirituality is a ‘grab bag’ of native spiritual traditions” (205). It seems, however, that many New Agers’ adoption of distorted and diminished Native spirituality is a result of the wrong information they are supplied with and their original interest stems from a willingness to learn and to grow. “Those who embrace native spirituality, for the most part, believe that in doing so they admire and express respect for First Nations. On the surface, this attitude toward native heritage may indeed appear a positive thing that native spirituality is being revered and celebrated.” (Miskimmin 206) The issues that remain, and will be dealt with in the following chapters, is whether respect and initial interest in Native culture are an important base of the New Age movement and how they relate to the feeling of intrusion and theft that many Native Americans are left with.

### **Negative perceptions of New Age interest in Native American spirituality**

In this chapter I will map out the main arguments used by those who are against New Age use of Native spirituality and provide an overview of their significance.

*Individualism over social struggles*

At the heart of many anti-New Age arguments lies the idea that New Agers believe their personal choice bears more importance than the opinions and intricacies of the culture they borrow from. History and socio-economic situations are often ignored by New Agers when they take interest in the spiritual part of a certain culture. This, in part, stems from the fact that “America has always been more about individual rights than responsibilities and many, though not all, New Agers have expressed this ‘right’ in their appropriation of all things Native” (Mello). New Age adaptations of Native American religious practices and beliefs, also known as New Age Neo-Native religion, are often completely unique manifestations. They are usually divorced from “real” Indians as they are produced by non-Natives, but New Agers tend to still use the same name; “Native American” when describing their practices and beliefs. From books written by Euro-Americans who claim they have been taught by Native American spiritual leaders to Sun Dances and sweat lodge workshops, Neo Native American spirituality was, and still is, used and practiced by non-Natives all over the United States and “many Native Americans have been offended by the mockery these bastardized versions make of their sacred ceremonies” (Aldred 333).

How is it possible that so many New Agers have a distorted view of what Native American Spirituality is? Why are they “bastardizing” the original? The problem lies with the original images of Natives that New Agers were confronted with. Miskimmin explains that the images of American Indians and their culture which New Agers encounter, do not reflect the actual intricacies of Native life. Instead they are the representations of Natives by non-Natives (208). “The wave of books and related materials on Native Spirituality is diverse in its content and in many cases, the actual relationship to any Native tradition past or present is tenuous” (Jenkins 197). A feather headdress, a picture of Natives dancing around a fire, even the tipis used

by some tribes (by no means did Natives in colder climates live in housing so ill-fitting for their environment), all these images were taken, romanticized and sold to the, largely white, public.

And this is exactly the problem that Aldred points out:

New age interest in Native American cultures appears more concerned with exoticized images and romanticized rituals revolving around a distorted view of Native American spirituality than with the indigenous peoples themselves and the very real (and often ugly) socio-economic and political problems they face as colonized peoples (333).

This observation displays the real problem: “though presented as a tribute, a kind of solidarity with Indians, the adoption of Indian-ness is highly selective, and ignores most of the all-too-practical pressing issues facing Indian peoples in the modern world” (Jenkins 242). By taking parts of American Indian culture and not paying attention to their struggles, New Agers push aside something that has played, and still plays, a huge part in Indian life for the last 400 years. “They [New Agers] do not want to acknowledge that which would deny them their romanticized vision of Indian reality” (Miskimmin 209).

So, while this taking and changing of Native culture can be seen as cultural appropriation or theft it is also possible to view the phenomenon in a different light. Since most appropriated Native culture is not really that, but rather already a westernized version of it, Muir indicates that “the lack of ‘real’ aboriginality in appropriated practices suggests that the ‘problem’ of cultural consumption and appropriation is something other than the direct ‘theft’ it is sometimes made out to be” (235). Instead, it could be a process of emulation and inspiration that causes a new spiritual tradition to come into being (further elaboration regarding this topic follows in the next chapter).

While the ignorance about the authenticity of their spiritual practices is problematic, the narrow view that New Agers were simply committing cultural theft does not accurately describe what was happening. Moreover, Hanegraaf, quoted by Sadovina, adds that “New Agers re-work older esoteric elements to create something new” (89). Muir indicates that “Such convergences of interest and representation tend to be obscured by the language of appropriation and alienation, which commonly describes two distinct groups whose only relation is one of dominance and subordination” (245). While this ‘language of appropriation and alienation’ is the one most academics are most well-versed in, it does not take into account the more complex relationships that are present when Natives and non-Natives create and use similar, yet different, spiritual ideas and practices. The phenomenon can then also be viewed as a new step in the religious world. The creation of a new spirituality or an evolution of existing concepts, if you will.

But despite the fact that New Agers may or may not be committing cultural ‘theft’ why does the argument regarding history and social situation come up so often in the conversation? This issue appears so often because it displays the binary that underlies the New Age v. Native discussion. New Agers believed in a ‘perennial philosophy’. Woodhead defines this as “[the idea that] spiritual seekers are free to borrow from many traditions because of a widespread sense that all of them are built upon common insights”. This would make it ethical and right for them to take knowledge from other cultures and combine them into their own personal life-philosophy. They believe they have the freedom to create their individual version of a pre-existing spiritual traditions. This is exactly what goes against many Native philosophies. “Traditional American Indian communities do not conceive of ‘religious knowledge’ apart from its complex relations with other domains, including economics and politics” (Jocks 425). So, by taking part of their religious knowledge and disregarding everything else New Agers did something that was

impossible to most Natives. To Native Americans, throughout their history, their spiritual practices were intricately tied in with any other part of their lives. They do not conceive of religion as separate from any other part of their lives. Thereby, by essentially separating it from the other elements of Native life, New Agers not only do something that seems impossible to many Native Americans, they could actually be said to attack and destroy American Indian culture in the process of ignoring cultural traditions. Donaldson quotes Apache scholar Inés Talamantez, stating the following:

The belief that the traditions of other may be appropriated to serve the needs of the self is a peculiarly Western notion that relies on a belief that knowledge is disembodied rather than embedded in relationships, intimately tied to place, and entails responsibilities to others and a commitment and discipline in learning (692).

Jocks, a Longhouse Native American and academic researcher who considers himself to have an in-between perspective, corroborates this. He indicates that when people hold the Natives' perspective they believe knowledge cannot be traded in an imagined "marketplace" as if spiritual traditions were neutral and disembodied objects, because to them, they are not (420). It is in these 'perspectives' that we find the source of the problem. The underlying ideas that all people uphold, make the borrowing of practices and traditions wrong to some and right to others. While considering spirituality as something all on its own is not perceived as wrong in most western communities, it is viewed that way by most Native ones who consider all parts of their lives – from religion, to work, to politics – to be intertwined.

Hall's theory of encoding and decoding explains this dissonance more clearly. Due to the differences in in New Agers and Natives' structures of understanding there is a disagreement

surrounding what is right and wrong in the practice of spirituality. Hall indicates that “What are called ‘distortions’ or ‘misunderstandings’ arise precisely from the *lack of equivalence* between the two sides in the communicative exchange” (Hall 166). The Native Americans have a culture specific code which states that religion is intricately embedded in the other parts of life. This is a code that is considered natural as the idea is so embedded in many tribes’ cultures. As hall indicates: “Certain codes may, of course, be so widely distributed in a specific language community or culture, and be learned at so early an age, that they appear not to be constructed – the effect of an articulation between sign and referent – but to be ‘naturally’ given” (Hall 167). This code, however, is not present in New Agers. So, the dissonance in codes and frame of reference cause there to be a disagreement regarding what is right and wrong in the practice and use of spirituality.

#### *Continuing exploitation of American Indians*

A second major point of contention is the way in which New Age use of Native spirituality is seen as another way of (mainly) white Americans exploiting Native Americans, and in the process taking away the Natives’ freedom of speech. “Indian activists complain that most of those marketing Native spirituality have little or no claim to Indian-ness, and are thus engaged in cultural theft” (Jenkins 199). Individuals such as Lynn Andrews, Sun Bear and Mary Summer Rain enjoyed great success both in the traditional sense and financially. This caused great anger with many Native Americans, many of whom still live below the poverty line. “The source of this anger, at least in part, is the astounding success of these and like enterprises, and the fact that this success often displaces, distorts, marginalizes and belittles Native people’s own cultural production” (Jocks 417).

Natives from different tribes all over the country have criticized the appropriation of their culture for decades. The following paragraph contains just a few examples. The Southwestern American Indian Movement (AIM) Leadership Conference, held in Window Rock in the Navajo Nation in 1984, considered New Age use and commercialization as follows (quoted by Aldred): “The attempted theft of Indian ceremonies is a direct attack and theft from Indian people themselves” (335). In a YouTube Video, Native vlogger Kainoa Blackeagle and his friend discuss the topic and state that “wannabees” teach stereotypes, not real culture. They also explain that Native culture is something that has been passed down for generations, despite the violence and struggles they had to go through. They explain their anger as a response to white people that copy Native culture and are “stealing it, tarnishing it, you know, destroying it, breaking it” (Blackeagle). Nancy Butterfield, a Chippewa Indian, wrote in the Seattle Times that “non-Indian imitation of Native American religious practices is disrespectful and offensive, and is just the newest expression of the attitude that anything belonging to or used by Native Americans is up for grabs” (Butterfield). All these examples expose the underlying idea that many Native Americans feel they are losing culture and being exploited, and that this is just another in a long history of ways in which white Americans exploit Native Americans.

Considering the history of suppression and attack on Native Americans by white Americans, New Agers adopting their spiritual practices can be viewed as just another mode of exploitation and cultural loss. It started with whites who tried to actively eradicate Native American spirituality: “the federal government actively discouraged and even outlawed the exercise of traditional Native religions” (“Religious Freedom”). By the 1980s non-Natives were actively seeking to copy and take part in American Indian spiritual practices. In the process, New Agers take what they like and ignore American Indians as three-dimensional people with their

own ongoing political and social struggles. York explains that “from the position as an ‘endangered species’ on the verge of extinction, the loss of cultural artefacts, private practices, use of traditional sites or their own sweat lodges has been viewed as the final loss of American Indian identity” (368).

Deloria argues that countercultural spiritualism, such as practiced by New Agers, rarely engaged real Indians as that was not only unnecessary but also inconvenient (169). New Agers tended to rely on books or, often white, teachers to tell them what it means to practice Native American spirituality. Within the New Age movement, as indicated by Deloria, “authenticity had few material or social forms,” more emphasis and trust were put in a person’s individual interpretation (176). The distorted images many New Agers were confronted with were then only stereotypical, reduced versions of the very real people still occupying parts of the United States. In addition to that, “plastic shamans and their simulations undermine indigenous peoples’ struggles for survival” (Aldred 343). Miskimmin explains that the pervasive images New Agers see and produce, removed from Natives’ day to day lives, mask their struggles for empowerment and acknowledgement (208). By accepting the stereotypical images, many New Agers participate in the neglect of actual Native American struggles in exchange for personal growth.

One aspect that exacerbated the problem was the fact that one of the most frequently used defenses by New Agers was rooted in First Amendment rights. “New Agers consistently argued that their right to religious freedom gave them the ‘right’ to Native American religion” (Aldred 336). This is problematic as the First Amendment had never before been granted to Native Americans and the American Indian Religious Freedom Act that was passed in 1978 seemed to have very low priority at a time when Native Americans were supposedly better protected.

In a series of legal decisions, the Supreme Court gutted the already-weak American Indian religious Freedom Act, curtailing the exercise of Indian religious freedom in favor of federal environmental law, tourism and hydropower production, Forest Service-supported logging operations, and state regulation of controlled substances (Deloria 171).

This directly relates to the, aforementioned, ongoing struggle for empowerment. Essentially, New Agers were, fruitlessly, trying to justify an action by calling on a law that does not hold a whole lot of meaning with those they are trying to convince.

Another part of the problem may lie in the notion that “Native people today are not ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ and that this makes the appropriation of aspects of their cultural heritage a non-issue” (Miskimmin 208). New Agers that believed this were essentially undermining themselves and completely ignoring the very real communities of Native Americans living in close proximity to them. Through ignoring Natives and taking what was not originally theirs, Donaldson and others previously mentioned, believe that “non-Natives participate in an ideological structure of white supremacy” (680).

All in all, there are many arguments for considering New Age Native Spirituality cultural theft and exploitation. All of them seem rooted, however, in the idea that culture and religion belong to the ethnic group it originated from. It can be taught when you are a part of said group from birth but not when you are an outsider, and especially not if you are part of the ethnic group that has dominated the other for centuries. But is this correct? The question remains whether New

Age interest in Native American spiritual traditions is solely “misappropriation of [American Indian] traditions as alternative sources of knowledge and spirituality” (Donaldson 677).

*Devaluation through consumerism*

Another issue regards the consumerist aspect of the New Age movement and the idea that the commercial side of the movement diminishes its content. This argument appears in almost anything that touches on the subject. The New Age is viewed as a simply consumerist phenomenon that diminishes the original by only taking parts, changing them and selling them for a profit.

New Age adherents are commonly charged with stealing indigenous cultural products and supplanting the realities of indigenous life with a ‘white fantasy’. In particular the appropriative eclecticism of contemporary spiritual seeking has been linked to the alienating transformation of virtually all traditions, beliefs and practices into commodities, into marketable pastiches of the primitive (Muir 236).

In the climate of the 1980s, people were confronted with a new awareness about religious options. As previously indicated, this occurred through globalization, capitalism, immigration and the decline of western established religions (York 361). As American New Agers were particularly interested in Native American religion it is no surprise that, as indicated by Aldred, “Native American spirituality is one of the most popular and profitable sectors of [this] New Age commercialism” (331).

The issue that many critics (Aldred, 2000; Donaldson, 1999) touch on is that commercialization of spiritual practices strips them of meaning and diminishes the culture they

come from. Aldred states that “[New Agers] produce new interpretations by fusing bastardized versions of these traditions with self-help pop psychology, as well as exotic blends appropriated from other cultural traditions” (343). This mixing of different cultures and philosophies can be viewed as a form of pastiche; a quintessentially postmodern phenomenon. Donaldson believes that this pastiche of Native American religious and spiritual practices with others leads to a lack of value and content; “[a] flatness or depthlessness that constitutes perhaps the most important formal quality of pastiche” (Donaldson 682). It is believed that as they are all put together, these spiritual objects and practices are stripped from any “historical specificity or contextual depth” (Donaldson 682) and are therefore devoid of meaning.

Ethnicity and other-ness became a source of profit for capitalists. Very little attention was given to legitimacy, and New Agers’ focus on internal growth combined with the idealization of Indian spirituality has, according to Aldred, “erased the complex history of Indians” (344). She means that as the history previously attached to the products was erased, what was left was solely an empty object made for consumption. Aldred believes that commercialization of spirituality equals a trivialization of it (345). The spiritual traditions that products are based on now become as valuable – or devoid of value – as all the other products on the market.

Aldred indicates that “many New Agers interested in Native American spirituality participated only through commercially run seminars or the purchase of texts and products” (331). Aside from the previously problematic issues, this by itself is a violation of Native ideals. Many American Indians, with different tribal affiliations, uphold the idea that money entering a spiritual practice or ceremony makes it useless (“Differences between Indian Beliefs and New Age [Archive]”). There is an inherent belief in Native communities that money should in no way be involved in their religious practices and, consequentially, that anyone asking for money for a

“Native workshop sun dance or sweat lodge” is obviously a fake. Rose indicates that even when Native Americans do this, it is considered wrong; “Swift Hawk said, ‘It is up to our people to pray with all people, but when we start charging, that is not the Lakota way’” (Rose). Simply the action of Native spiritual knowledge being sold, in a sense diminishes Native culture as the ideals regarding money and spirituality that are inherent in the very culture they come from are put aside to sell a product.

There are some (York, 2001; Muir, 2007; Sadovina, 2017) who believe the consumerist aspects of the New Age movement are not necessarily harmful. Muir indicates that “by starting from the position that commodification is essentially alienating, critics overstate the passivity of consumers, elide the values (other than exchange) that consumer commodities can embody and activate, and obscure the complexities of ‘real world’ cultural transactions” (237). Sadovina also supports the idea that valuable, meaningful lives can be lived within the postmodern consumerist culture and quotes Gauthier and Martikainen to indicate why:

The connection between the New Age and the market is undeniable but some scholars have objected to such a one-sided view. Francois Gauthier and Tuomas Martikainen (2013), for example, define consumerism as a condition of modern life, ‘a culturally dominant ethos’ within which people ‘lead meaningful lives just as they have in other societies’. According to them, scholars should not brand religious movements as consumerist and compromised but ask what kinds of religiosity consumer societies enable (88).

During the 1980s the consumerization of society greatly influenced the New Age movement, but as consumerism was an essential part of the time, and still is, the commercialization of religion may just be the new way in which spirituality is moving with the times. A development which could be right as it is the natural way in which religions develop. The consumerist aspect does not necessarily diminish that which is sold. Muir indicates that the transformation of a good into a consumable object may disrupt but does not necessarily replace previous values (238). “For Heelas, the market-like quality of the New Age does not interfere with its ability to be individually meaningful and to effect social change” (Sadovina 88). This means that consumerism does not diminish spiritual practices, but rather, it is a new way in which spirituality is presented to the public with no necessarily inevitable, diminishing side-effects.

A somewhat commercialized spirituality may be the only one that is enabled, and best fits, the postmodern society that New Agers in the 1980s were a part of. “Late modern societies are characterized by unprecedented levels of affluence and by lifestyles, cultures, and identities formed around consumerism” (Woodhead). Woodhead’s statement may indicate a development in human life from certain practices being separated from the market to all aspects of life being led within the market system. This is not to say that everything becomes meaningless but rather, as Sadovina indicates, that people can still derive meaning and value from consumption of spiritual objects (88).

The previous text exposes a great issue: “as products of the very consumer culture they seek to escape, these New Agers pursue spiritual meaning and cultural identification through acts of purchase” (Aldred 329). Aldred states that New Agers try to escape consumer culture and do so by simply consuming other products. This is an issue that may be debated, however, as New Agers did not necessarily want to escape consumer culture, nor did they immerse themselves in

spirituality solely through acts of purchase (this will be elaborated on in the next chapter). As previously indicated, it was the status-quo they were done with. The western religions that were established in their social circles did not provide them with spiritual fulfilment, and that is why they turned to Eastern and, yes, Native spirituality. In the end, New Agers have created hybridized versions of spirituality in which consumerism plays an active role.

Essentially, New Agers rejected traditional power structures and tried to go against their society's traditions. Paradoxically, Natives will feel that they are simply continuing a historical pattern that started with colonialism. But while they went against this they still tried to ground their new ideals in ancient philosophies. This was a way in which they tried to establish some kind of legitimacy. "What makes the Indian packaging of New Age ideas so attractive is the appeal to authority and antiquity" (Jenkins 198). While it would be nearly impossible to stop New Agers from adopting new and re-created spiritual practices into their daily lives, it could be considered that their use of the Native American label is not justified, and harmful. Even when it is the way in which New Agers try to establish some kind of authenticity.

### **Positive perceptions of New Age interest in Native American spirituality**

To provide a complete picture of the debate at hand, this chapter will deal with the positive perceptions of New Age interest in Native American spirituality and their significance. Together, the previous and current chapters provide a map, if you will, that displays the landscape of the debate regarding New Age use of Native spirituality.

#### *Good intentions*

One of the most common defenses New Agers use for their use of Native American spirituality lies in their good intentions and deep found respect for Native culture. They believe,

as Deloria indicates, that when they obtain information about other spiritual practices, “they [usually] do so with a sense of compassion and concern” (172). This in turn provides a rationale that makes cultural borrowing okay, as it is founded on respect and interest.

The modern world, that was already existent in the 1980s, is a world in which anything is accessible at any time and open to individual use. More specifically: “in today’s world, [...] through globalization, capitalism, and large-scale immigration, along with the decline of traditional religious institutions, the Western individual is confronted with an awareness of religious options on an unprecedented scale.” (York 361). This plethora of information provides people with the opportunity to pick and choose that which they like to read about and/or practice. Jenkins writes that New Agers reject hierarchy and traditional authority and instead base themselves on principles of individuality and self-reliance. York states that “whether one agrees with the self-authority and self-accountability of New Age or not, it is the stance on this issue around which New Age finds much of its identity. Spirituality is here considered to be something that the individual decides for him/herself. There is a growing and concerted refusal to be told what to believe and what one must do and not do” (367). This includes by the original bearers of the culture they are inspired by.

Despite this shift, however, he indicates that there remains a belief that religion, and spirituality, must have some sort of authority. This authority can be found in traditions, charismatic power or alternative scriptural sources (Jenkins 198). The popularity of Native American spirituality within the New Age movement stems in part from its historic significance. While New Agers are known for going against the grain and breaking with tradition, they did look for some ancient roots to base their beliefs in. Native Americans provide New Agers with a claim to tradition, seeing as they practiced their spirituality long before “White Americans” even set foot on the continent.

Sadovina explains this phenomenon as follows:

In a world rapidly moving towards new products and forms of life, the appeal to 'tradition' becomes a radical act of 'thinking for oneself', which fits in well with the countercultural self-understanding of New Age movements. The relationship of New Age to tradition is complex. While vague truth claims emphasize personal cognitive and emotive benefits over historical accuracy, the need for legitimation often leads to references to ancient roots (89).

So, while the New Age movement was a relatively new phenomenon in the 1980s, there was still a desire to turn back to ancient philosophies and wisdom. This in turn shows a kind of respect to the bearers of the original culture as it shows a kind of acknowledgement of legitimacy. New Agers eagerness to learn indicates a certain care about Native culture, a respect for the knowledge it holds and a desire to preserve its wisdom. Jenkins supports this idea by stating that "much of the non-Native interest has been sincere, respectful, and motivated by a real desire to learn from the spiritual powerhouse of Native religions, and, where possible to absorb some of those strengths" (255).

Additionally, most New Agers do not try to imitate Natives, a practice that is widely seen as disrespectful and degrading. Doyle indicates that "most non-Natives are not portraying themselves as what they are not. The ones that do are not respected" (5). Most New Agers did not participate in this fake practice and consequentially had instilled into them a certain search for authenticity that made them weed out fakes and instead turn to traditional, authentic information. Sadovina explains that "New Age movements often privilege traditional authority in their commitment to seeking truth. The New Age cannot therefore be simply seen as a free-market

utopia (or dystopia). It is also a space of active social construction of truth narratives which can complete with or complement each other” (83). This phenomenon, Doyle indicates, is respected by the Native American community, which often upholds the idea that if someone takes the time to learn about their ways, they can find a place in their community (5).

While New Agers are often painted as selfish people who care only about themselves, the respect which pushes them to discover Native spirituality shows a certain selflessness. Seeing as this interest quite often leads to involvement in socio-political issues. “In the political sphere, spirituality now inspires and shapes commitment to a number of ‘progressive’ causes and movements including feminist and ecological movements” (Woodhead). there is even more to be said for the positive approach New Agers employ. Muir, in an interview with a non-Native practitioner of Aboriginal spirituality in Australia, indicates that “[she] believed that her purchase, and her admiration of the Aboriginal designs the Oracle featured, was an indicator of her interest in Aboriginal culture and of her desire to help foster understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples” (236). Muir indicates that many of his research participants expressed the same belief. The coming together of Native and non-Native people is, however, still obstructed by the discussion regarding ownership of religious cultural traditions.

Aldred believes that good intentions do not justify cultural appropriation. She indicates that some New Agers “defend their commercial exploitation by arguing that they are ‘good people’ who ‘give to Native American charities and support their causes’” (337). This justification does show that some New Agers are in fact engaged with Native American social and political issues, a point that was raised in the previous chapter. However, this does not completely justify the appropriation of Native spirituality, altogether. “This defense seems to rely

on the old Puritanical standby that ‘good intentions’ and ‘charitable acts’ somehow absolve someone from the political implications of their actions for an oppressed group” (Aldred 337). So just because their initial interest could lead to New Agers engaging in political action for Native American issues, that does not mean the issues that are created by engaging in Native spirituality are immediately cleared.

So, it seems New Agers were genuinely interested in, and had respect for, Native American knowledge but they were not willing to play by their rules. This issue seems like an inevitability, however, as it sometimes seems like there is no way for non-Natives to practice anything relating to Native Spirituality. This is illustrated by the article on the *Huffington Post* by Wes Isley, who indicates that although he feels aligned with many Native ideals and philosophies, he feels there is no way whites are allowed to be involved. As if “Indian spirituality is for Indians only”. He raises the question “whether culture, race or DNA forever determines our spiritual path” (Isley). This is something that still requires more research.

#### *Natives sharing with New Agers*

New Agers do not solely get their information from non-Natives who pose as Native or relay information they have supposedly received from Native teachers. As York indicates: “Those who feel their ways and identities are being appropriated are quite often actively part of the dissemination process itself” (368). There were a number of well-known medicine men and gurus within the New Age movement that had actual Native heritage. The controversial Sun Bear, active during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, was originally Native American and conducted spiritual ceremonies with non-natives on Native land (Butterfield). It is interesting to note that while there were Native Americans that believed it was okay for them to partake in the

commercial sphere of the New Age movement, these people of Native heritage are often highly criticized for it. Sun Bear remains one of the most controversial and criticized New Age “medicine men”. Precisely this fact proves that “a number of the most sharply attacked ‘plastic medicine men’ are of Native blood, and some of them can recount deep connections to their Indian contexts earlier in their lives” (Jocks 421). Some, though not all, American Indians have chosen to participate in the market and have published books and/or run workshops that engaged New Agers. Muir indicates that “some Aboriginal writers, entrepreneurs and healers have directly engaged with New Age and alternative spiritualities and/or used alternative spiritual terminology to articulate Aboriginal spiritualities and identities” (245). In much the same way, Native Americans have shared their knowledge, whether for the profit or to add some “legitimate” Native American products and information to the market.

So, while there is a lot of criticism directed at Native Americans sharing their culture’s spiritual knowledge, both from the academic community and the Native American one, there are also plenty people of Native heritage that choose to share their knowledge. Many New Agers, in fact, prefer this information in their search for authentic truth. This information is viewed as more authentic and New Agers feel it is more accessible and accepted when the information is presented by people of Native heritage. The fact that Natives share with non-Natives sends a message that there are Native Americans who do believe that non-Natives can in fact respectfully engage in Native American spirituality. Jocks, in his research, indicates that “no Native scholar I know has ever insisted that one must be Indian in order to understand or study Indian communities. To do so would be embrace notions of ‘wisdom in the blood’ that carry cultural and philosophical relativism to its untenable extreme” (424).

The Native American community itself seems divided on the issue. Some believe Westerners can be initiated in their traditions while others believe they should leave their cultural “property” alone. While York says that Indians are part of the problem when they share knowledge this may also be interpreted as Natives willfully sharing their knowledge to people they feel deserve it and thereby spreading their ideals to a greater audience. In the process, they may also counter faulty information that is spread by “New Age frauds”. York’s statement that the original bearers are often complicit in their religio-cultural exportation (368) may have to be viewed in a more positive framework in which the sharing of the knowledge is not part of the problem but part of the solution in that it creates cultural bridges and brings everyone together. As Jamie Sams, Native American New Age product creator, indicates: “every Native American person who has the courage to share the beauty and simple goodness of what they have been taught by their elders is creating a bridge between cultures” (4).

### *Cultural mixing*

Lastly, but definitely not least, it can be said that all religious traditions throughout history have taken from others in a never-ending journey for development and improvement. The New Age movement would then be nothing more than the next step in the development of spirituality. Their combining and hybridization of existing cultures can then be viewed, not as detrimental, but as innovative and progressive. Many researchers have stated the fact that religions have always borrowed from and adapted from each other to create new and improved versions (York, 2001; Jenkins, 2004; Woodhead, 2016; Andrews, 2003; Sadovina, 2017) and posed that it is an inevitable part of the religious development process. It is what Andrews calls “the phenomena of common threads”. Similar teachings can be found in most societies and traditions all over the world (6). York corroborates this, stating the following:

In defense of New Age, it could be pointed out that all religions appropriate from each other. Roman paganism, through its *interpretatio romana*, incorporated Celto-Gaulic deities; Hinduism included Gautama Buddha as an avatar of Vishnu; Christianity acquired pagan sanctuaries and festival for its own; Islam seized the Kaaba and the site of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. Inter-religious exchange may, in fact, be seen as an inevitable norm (369).

The New Age movement of the 1980s can be viewed as just another in a long line of new spiritual developments that produces a new and, possibly, improved way of incorporating religion in modern daily life. Throughout history, religious movement have evolved and adapted. Cultures are bound to collide and exchange. During this process people are involved, and the more individualistic a culture becomes, the matter of religion becomes a personal choice as well. A rising number of people during the 1980s were no longer controlled by central figures that decided what forms of spirituality they could and could not practice. There was a whole market of possibilities that were possible for New Agers to explore. In this process “cultures inevitably bump up against each other and when they do, they exchange and share cultural material, each becoming a kind of hybrid” (Deloria 172). The New Age movement is then not a group of people that tries to, crudely and wrongfully, emulate Native Americans, but a rather a group that is in the process of creating a new kind of spirituality that is based on elements from existing esoteric practices and altered to be suited for the consumerist and individualistic mindset of the 1980s and onward. The neo-Native spirituality that many New Agers claim to follow really is not that at all. Through only copying parts from Native lifestyles and by adapting them, New Agers are creating something completely different from the original. As Jenkins indicates “much of the [New Age

Native American] synthesis is historically recent and, at least in its present guise, largely artificial” (218).

In this process, Isley indicates, “Native American spiritual traditions have an opportunity to evolve, too”. The New Age movement, in a way, mirrors and embodies Native American philosophies, even if it seems like they are very selective about what they incorporate from Native American religious traditions (Jenkins 242). As Mello indicates, there are tribes that have been able to maintain and grow their traditions, Plains people for example, largely because of a cultural tenacity and ability to adapt their beliefs. Native Americans found a way of taking what they liked from European Christianity when they were introduced to these new beliefs. Granted, that was a completely different situation but, in a sense, they were just as individually picking and choosing as New Agers in the 1980s. Just like Native Americans throughout time have done, the New Agers enact agency in their way, when choosing which parts from Native American religion they liked. Mello illustrates this as follows:

Many Native Americans [...] actively resisted the ‘global truth’ of Christianity when it did not make sense in comparison to their own cultural beliefs, thus enacting agency in choosing the parts they liked and rejecting the parts they did not, rather than wholeheartedly rejecting one for another. This would be typical of Native responses to religious change from the contact period to the present (Mello).

Nonetheless, all traditions have their own unique rituals, practices, objects and ceremonies. They can be very similar to other spiritual traditions either from cultural exchange or because they all crouch on similar ultimate truths and beliefs. “Some New Agers have based their

claim of a right to Native American religion on the reasoning that spirituality and truth cannot be owned” (Aldred 336). In this lies exactly the source of the problem. Hall’s encoding and decoding theory can be applied to clarify: it is the frame of reference in which the miscommunication occurs. New Agers believe that spirituality and truth cannot be owned, while many Native Americans believe that their culture, which is already in danger, is being stolen from them. Throughout time, this has led to arguments and violence when one group accuses another of stealing:

Most religions and sacred traditions have believed that others have stolen their sacredness or trivialized their beliefs at one time or another, but the truth is that most people only take what they can personally use from any religion or tradition. It doesn’t make it right or wrong, but problems usually arise when people think that one aspect contains the whole (Andrews 6).

When New Agers are inspired to think a certain way or incorporate Native rituals into their day-to-day lives, that does not necessarily mean they are stealing culture. Nor is the only solution for existing cultures to hang on tightly to what they once had. The times change and spirituality has to change with it. “Exclusiveness is what often kills a religion or tradition” (Andrews 6). Cultural exchange helps religions grow.

Sadovina further elaborates on this issue by stating that problems arise when several groups lay claim to similar ancient traditions which they interpret differently (91). Where Native Americans see their spirituality as entwined with, and part of, their daily lives, New Agers believe they can take the elements they like and leave the rest. The cultural exchange, which New

Age Native spirituality can be classified as, can be seen as the sharing of ideas and beliefs, something which helps build bridges and renews religion. York does indicate, however, that “New Age is not a phenomenon from which one can appropriate” (369). It thus remains a question whether the phenomenon can be classified as “cultural exchange” when dealing with a “one-way-street”. This is further complicated by it being a dominant group taking from a subordinate one. The subordinate group, i.e. the Native Americans, already feel like their lives and culture is on the brim of extinction. Their religious and spiritual practices, then, become part of that which is endangered, and which needs to be protected from being stolen. It is for this reason that Butterfield and Miskimmin believe that the conversation should be led in a different way. Butterfield states that “if New Age practitioners want to attain a higher spiritual level, they should begin by respecting other peoples’ religious beliefs and by learning or developing their own traditions – not by exploiting those of a people they seek to emulate”. Miskimmin believes that people who are interested in Native spirituality should first become engaged in Native political struggles and develop relations with Native communities. “When this happens, native people may invite a non-Indian to take part in a ceremony, but it will be on native terms” (Miskimmin 210).

Jenkins, however, believes the opposite. He states that “a case can be made that neo-Native spirituality is a rather more positive development than its critics claim, and may well have a solid claim to be a legitimate religious movement in its own right” (243). Rather than viewing New Age Neo Native spirituality as a bastardization and disrespectful appropriation of Native American culture, it could be interpreted as a new mode of spirituality that is developing. York concurs, stating that “what is dismissed as appropriation could be the type of exchange that is necessary for productive maturation” (371). The exchange and “appropriation” in which New

Agers engage could be a crucial step for spirituality to be adapted to postmodern life from the 1980s on. As Hall indicates in his theory, “the [encoder] can attempt to ‘pre-fer’ but cannot prescribe or guarantee the [decoder], which has its own conditions of existence” (170). So, while Native Americans, sometimes, prefer for everyone to think of their religious practices as they have done for years – as their culturally dominant reading prescribes them – they cannot demand that non-Natives have the same reading. Jenkins defines a “real” religion as “one that people are prepared to treat as such, regardless of the historical or scholarly grounds on which their views are based” (249). If the legitimacy of a religion or religious movement is measured according to Jenkins’ definition, the New Age can be considered a new religious movement in its own right, equally valid and deserving of respect as any other.

## Conclusion

In the end the “bastardized” versions of Native Spirituality, as Aldred calls them (343), may in fact be a completely new and unique phenomenon that was inspired by Native Spirituality, but through exchange and incorporation of many other elements has become a thoroughly new spiritual tradition. Neo-Native spirituality, while operating under the name of “Native American,” is a new spiritual creation that has evolved through cultural exchange and adaptation. Additionally, while the New Age movement is an inherently consumerist movement, it is founded on sincere interest and respect for different spiritual practices, including Native American spirituality. Its consumerist practices do not necessarily diminish its content or devaluates that which it takes from or is inspired by. Muir indicates that “Far from being empty commodities, valuable only for exchange, [New Age] goods are alive with meaning” (234). So rather than diminishing its content, consumerization of New Age spirituality alters it and helps create a new kind of spirituality that was suited, and still is, for the consumer age of the 1980s and the decades that have followed.

Many Native voices, and non-native ones, indicate that more opportunities should be created for Native Americans to voice their opinions and share as much or as little as they prefer to. However, in the age of information it would be hard to counter the spread of information, faulty or correct, by simply remaining quiet. It seems the public is interested in genuine, original information and the Native American community could supply this whilst also countering the fake information they oppose. Through participating in the informational sphere Native Americans could possible reap benefits. For example, a way could be found in which Native Americans, a generally less economically advantaged ethnic group, can use their unique knowledge and philosophies to advance their peoples economic status. This would have to be accepted by Natives themselves, however, which is often not the case. Muir indicates: “one

should [...] be alert to the occasions when both parties receive something of value” (247). As this is the consumer age, and everything operates within it, the best solution seems an equal footing and opportunity for advancement and sharing of knowledge.

In the end, any religion or spirituality is man-made. Interpreting religion is a matter of decoding and encoding. The New Agers, Native Americans and academic critics all have their own backgrounds, frame of reference and consequential connotative levels of signifiers. These all determine how people view spirituality and what is considered moral or not. Native American religion is often considered private, owned by the group from which it originated, incompatible with consumerism and most importantly: intricately tied in with every other part of Native American culture and therefore impossible to separate. New Agers, however consider Native, or Neo-Native, spirituality to be a public good, meant to be adapted so that it can improve everyone’s lives if they wish.

The ultimate issue lies in the consideration of who owns religion and what is appropriate, or even necessary, and what is not. Is someone from a different cultural and ethnic group free to choose when he or she adopts different religions or spiritual traditions, and can he or she alter them to suit their individual needs, or not? It would be hard to stop New Agers from developing their own kind of spirituality, but it could be argued they should not be allowed to pass it off as Native American, because it simply is not. As Jenkins eloquently enquires: “Even if neo-Natives are not reproducing Native traditions accurately, does that mean that what they are doing is necessarily spurious or deceptive, or that it can never become legitimate or accepted in its own right?” (243).

### **Future Research**

The question remains whether religion and spirituality can be owned. Much of the debate seems to be caused by an underlying belief that religion is, or is not, owned by the ethnic group from which it originated. Consequentially, more research is needed to provide insight in the question whether people can be excluded from adopting certain practices and beliefs into their personal lives, when they are not part of the ethnic group from which the spiritual tradition originated. In the current era of free information and individualism, especially, this issue is more pressing than ever.

Additionally, more research on the subject of religious development and cultural appropriation is needed to better understand when something is cultural appropriation and detrimental and when changes in the religious landscape are merely the next step in the evolution of religion and spirituality.

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