

# INDIANS, MONSTERS, AND APPROPRIATION

*When Uncle John was a kid, he played “Cowboys and Indians.” That game hasn’t aged well—mainly because the Indians were usually the bad guys. These days, as we learn more about indigenous cultures (properly referred to as American Indians in the United States, and First Peoples in Canada), it becomes obvious that negative portrayals in games aren’t the only way a culture can be co-opted.*

## GATHER 'ROUND THE FIRE

Every culture has its own rich mythology. In modern times, the larger-than-life characters that were born out of these myths mainly serve as distractions from the daily grind. But for many American Indians (a term that most Indians prefer to Native Americans), legends play a sacred role, as they have for thousands of years. It’s no secret that following the Europeans’ arrival in the New World, most native peoples were driven from their ancestral lands and later forced onto reservations, where they were often forbidden to speak their own languages. But that didn’t stop many of their myths and legends from being co-opted by their conquerors.

Known today as “cultural appropriation,” the practice goes back to ancient times. For example, the Romans conquered the Greeks and appropriated their gods: Zeus became Jupiter, Aphrodite became Venus, and so on. But the Romans considered the Greeks to be superior, which is not how most Europeans viewed Indians. Over time, it became an accepted fact that members of a dominant society could appropriate aspects of a minority culture—music, art, religion, fashion, sports, stories, language, etc.—and use them in any way they choose, the grown-up equivalent of playing “Cowboys and Indians.”

In fact, that’s what happened to one of the most famous indigenous legends of them all.

## SASQ'ETS

When it comes to American Indians and First Peoples, it can be difficult to trace a mythical monster’s origin back to a single tribe or nation. In many cases, the stories were passed between neighboring cultures that spoke different languages, few of which were written down. (Today, most of those languages are gone or critically endangered.)

But one legend—that of a mystical race of tall, hairy Indians called *Sasq’ets* (pronounced sess-kah-uts) was first attributed to the Chehalis Band that lived along the Harrison River in southern British Columbia. Now known as the Sts’ailes First Nation, they speak a language called Halq’eméylem, but they’re part of a larger



The U.S. government banned sliced bread during World War II to “conserve resources.” Consumers hated it, and the ban was lifted two months later.

language group known as the Salish (specifically the Coast Salish), who shared common words for trading and negotiating...and for sharing stories. Other tribes in southern British Columbia and western Washington called these mystical beings similar-sounding names like *Sésquac* and *Sas-ke-t*, which mean “wild man” or “hairy man.” You probably know them better as the Sasquatch.

### WHAT'S IN A NAME?

“Sasquatch,” it turns out, isn’t even an Indian word (nor is “Indian”). It was coined in 1929 by a white teacher named John Burns, who was the “Indian agent” on the Chehalis Reservation in Harrison Hot Springs, 80 miles east of Vancouver. Burns collected stories of these “wild men of the forest,” combining the similar names to come up with the amalgamation “Sasquatch.” Over the next 25 years, Burns wrote more than 50 articles about Sasquatch in *Maclean’s* magazine, pushing the narrative that it was no myth:

“I am convinced...the Sasquatch do still inhabit the inaccessible interior of British Columbia. Only by sheer luck, however, is a white man likely to sight one of them because, like wild animals, they instinctively avoid all contact with civilization and in that rocky country it is impossible to track them down. I still live in hope of someday surprising a Sasquatch, and when that happens, to have a camera handy.”

### A NEW LOOK

When you think of Sasquatch, you probably picture an apelike creature covered in thick, brown fur that speaks in grunts, growls, and howls. That’s a far cry from the beings that the Salish people originally described to Burns. They described the Sasq’ets as a tribe of humans, not beasts, who are covered in hair, not fur. Most were very tall, and they were naked. The Chehalis described them as a secretive tribe with its own language, who are almost always seen just one at a time. In many of the legends, they have the ability to pass between this world and the spirit world.

But as Burns’s articles gained popularity, there were a growing number of “eyewitness” reports, and the creature’s features began to change. In 1955, a highway worker named William Roe claimed he was hiking alone in the remote mountains of eastern British Columbia when he spotted what he first mistook for a grizzly bear crouching on the ground, eating berries. “The shape of this creature’s head somewhat resembled a Negro’s,” he wrote in a sworn affidavit in 1957, adding, “The head was higher at the back than at the front. The nose was broad and flat. The lips and chin protruded farther than its nose...Its arms were much thicker than a man’s arms, and longer, reaching almost to its knees. I had heard stories of the Sasquatch, the giant hairy Indians that live in the legends of British Columbia Indians. Maybe this was a Sasquatch, I told myself.” After Roe described it as apelike, nearly every subsequent

Ever say a word over and over until it sounds weird and meaningless?  
That’s called *semantic satiation*.

eyewitness account painted the same basic picture.

A sanctioned “Sasquatch Hunt” held in Harrison Hot Springs in 1958 brought so many people to the region that even John Burns came to “regret that these harmless people of the wilderness are to be hunted with dogs as if they were criminals and if captured, exposed to the gaping and gaze of the curious. They have been referred to as monsters but they have committed no monstrous acts. It appears our veneer civilization does not hesitate to even use monsters for commercial purposes.”

He had no idea.

### THE BIGFOOTAGE

In 1958, about 1,000 miles to the south, a northern California man named Ray Wallace decided to have some fun with the Sasquatch fad, so he cut out two wooden feet, 16 inches long and seven inches wide...and left some “tracks” around a construction site. (He kept his hoax a secret until his death in 2002, when his family revealed the truth.) That summer, the *Humboldt Times*, which serves northern California’s Redwood Coast, published a “fluff piece” for the Sunday edition about some local loggers who reported finding those giant footprints in the forest. They called the creature that left them “Big Foot.” The article was so popular that the paper published an entire series of “Bigfoot” stories—mostly tongue-in-cheek, but serious enough to draw even more interest. That brought Bigfoot hunters to the ancient lands of the Yurok Indians, who live along the lower Klamath River and don’t even have a Sasquatch-type legend (though other California tribes do). It was in 1967 along Bluff Creek, a tributary of the Klamath, that two rodeo cowboys-turned-Bigfoot-hunters filmed the famous grainy 16mm footage of a mysterious creature (or a man in a suit) briskly walking along a creek bank, supposedly a female Bigfoot that they named “Patty.” The 59.5 seconds of blurry footage was one of the most scrutinized pieces of film in history (right up there with the Zapruder film of JFK’s assassination), but despite that, Bigfoot’s existence wasn’t—and still hasn’t—been confirmed by the scientific community. That classifies it as a *cryptid*, an animal whose existence is suggested but not proven.

### IN SEARCH OF...

By the 1970s, the names Bigfoot and Sasquatch were being used interchangeably, and the creature’s habitat expanded to wherever someone said they saw one. The sacred Salish legend joined other cryptids like the Abominable Snowman, the Loch Ness Monster, and Little Green Men on pseudoscience shows like *In Search Of...*, except that because the western United States still had large swaths of unexplored wilderness, people took Bigfoot’s existence a lot more seriously. The FBI opened a file on him, and an organization called the North American Wildlife Research Team constructed a 10-foot by 10-foot “Bigfoot Trap” in a southern Oregon forest where some big footprints had been spotted. More proof that Americans became obsessed



More French soldiers died in World War I than American soldiers died in all U.S. wars combined.

with the big, hairy beast:

- A 1976 two-part episode of *The Six-Million Dollar Man* called “The Secret of Bigfoot” pitted Steve Austin (Lee Majors) against Bigfoot (Andre the Giant). What was “the secret”? That Bigfoot is actually a robot built by aliens.
- “Bigfoot,” the monster truck that started the monster truck craze, debuted in 1979.
- In 1987, *Harry and the Hendersons*, a comedy about a friendly Sasquatch that moves in with a suburban family, made \$50 million worldwide and spawned a TV series.

Even today, the elusive cryptid is still a staple of such pseudoscience TV shows as *Finding Bigfoot* on Animal Planet and *Expedition Bigfoot* on the Travel Channel. Yet while non-Indians may enjoy searching for the creature and debating its existence, many indigenous people still hold him in the same high spiritual place they always have: “Here in the Northwest, and west of the Rockies generally,” said author Gayle Highpine of Idaho’s Kootenai Tribe, “Indian people regard Bigfoot with great respect. He is seen as a special kind of being, because of his obvious close relationship with humans. Some elders regard him as standing on the ‘border’ between animal-style consciousness and human-style consciousness, which gives him a special kind of power.”

### THE SKINWALKERS

The Sasq’et is just one of many indigenous monsters that have been co-opted by non-indigenous people. Another one is the Navajo Skinwalker. Actual information about the legend is scarce because, for the most part, the Navajo—who have lived in the Southwest for at least 700 years—don’t talk about Skinwalkers. What is known is that the Navajo call them *Yee Naaldlooshii*, which translates to “With it, he goes on all fours.” Part human, part animal, they roam at night, performing brutal acts of violence. According to legend, the Skinwalkers were once benevolent shamans who were lured to evil by a secret society, and were taught how to “walk in the skin” of any animal just by wearing its pelt. But the legend also says that, by day, a Skinwalker can look like a regular person, which is why it’s still taboo for a Navajo man to wear the pelt of a predator like a wolf or a bear.

The first reported sightings of Skinwalkers among non-Indians occurred in the 1960s. In 1986, a white author named Tony Hillerman co-opted the legend for his crime novel *Skinwalkers*, about two Navajo cops who must solve a murder blamed on the mythical monster. The book was so popular, it spawned a critically acclaimed PBS TV movie, and Skinwalkers have since joined Sasquatch and other Indian legends as creatures that cryptozoologists search for in desolate areas with night-vision goggles.

### NO-MAJ MEDICINE MEN

But the Navajo take the legend *very* seriously, and they view Skinwalkers as purely

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Norwegian delicacy: *smalahove*—boiled, salted, dried sheep’s head (with the brain removed).

evil. That's why J. K. Rowling received so much criticism in 2016 for her sympathetic portrayal of Skinwalkers on the *Pottermore* website, her highly anticipated expansion of Harry Potter's wizarding world. In the chapter "History of Magic in North America," Rowling wrote that "Native American skin-walkers" were actually "evil witches and wizards" who "assumed animal forms to escape persecution" by "No-Maj medicine men, who were sometimes faking magical powers themselves."

Among the complaints Rowling received—on her own Twitter feed, and in numerous opinion pieces—was that she replaced "Navajo" with the blanket term "Native American." But that wasn't the biggest issue. In an open letter to Rowling, Dr. Adrienne Keene, a member of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma and founder of the blog *Native Appropriations*, wrote that *Pottermore* is yet another in a long line of narratives that have helped to paint *all* Indians as fictional characters:

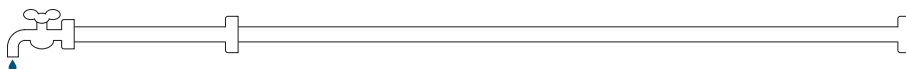
"Think about Peter Pan, where Neverland has mermaids, pirates...and Indians. Or on Halloween, children dress up as monsters, zombies, princesses, Disney characters...and Indians. Beyond the positioning as 'not real,' there is also a pervasive and problematic narrative wherein Native peoples are always 'mystical' and 'magical' and 'spiritual'—able to talk to animals, conjure spirits, perform magic, heal with 'medicine' and destroy with 'curses.' Think about Grandmother Willow in *Pocahontas*, or Tonto talking to his bird and horse in *The Lone Ranger*, or the wolfpack in *Twilight*...or any other number of examples."

At the worst, wrote Keene, these kinds of portrayals make it much harder for Native Americans to be taken seriously when trying to advocate for themselves. "We are fighting every day for the protection of our sacred sites from being destroyed. If Indigenous spirituality becomes conflated with fantasy 'magic'—how can we expect lawmakers and the public to be allies in the protection of these spaces?" (She also points out that it wasn't until 1978 that Indians were legally allowed to practice their religion openly.)

### THE VANISHING INDIAN

As Leanne Howe, a Choctaw Nation citizen and editor of *Seeing Red—Hollywood's Pixeled Skins*, summed it up to *National Geographic* in 2016: "The vanishing American Indian is in art, it's in stories—we're the so-called Last of the Mohicans. We exist in the minds of mainstream America as dead and forgotten because the white Americans won the American West."

But Indians are very much alive and worth remembering. If you're interested in learning about their cultures, myths, and legends, there are a multitude of books, films, and websites created by Native Americans and the First Peoples of Canada. That's where you'll find the *real* stories—which are just as fascinating as anything Hollywood could create.



Diamonds were first discovered in India in the 4th century BC, and then not again until Brazil in 1725.