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# European Beauty Standards and Native Cultures: The Lingering Effects of Assimilation

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## OUR QUESTION:

How have European beauty standards affected Native American cultures, specifically the Aztecs and other Mesoamerican peoples?

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# HOW WE ANSWERED THE QUESTION:

We found our answer by researching other, smaller questions that then gave us the background information to answer the question ourselves.

Some of our smaller questions were things like:

1. Is lighter skin sought after by Native American girls?
  2. How common is plastic surgery in the Native community, and are procedures that make features more Western popular?
  3. Are eating disorders and self esteem issues common among young native women? What is assimilation and how does it affect Native Americans today?
  4. What were the original beauty standards of Native Americans, specifically Aztecs, and how have they become Westernized?
  5. What are European beauty standards?
  6. What is the other side of the issue, how does the fetishization of Native culture and beauty affect Native Americans?
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# Assimilation- What is it?



Assimilation is defined as the process by which one group's culture comes to resemble another's (Wikipedia).

Assimilation was forced onto the North American Native Tribes by the American government from 1790-1920 through education, (detrimental and abusive boarding schools that erased culture), and legal incentives to conform.



One of the lasting effects that this process has had on Natives today is the internalization of being inferior, as we read in *"Superman and Me"*.

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# What Was Considered Beautiful Before Colonization?

We will focus on Aztec culture as an example, but these patterns are similar to other Native tribes.

Specifically for the Aztec people, girls were wanted to be “modest, demure and very simple”, wearing “bright coloured clothing and lots of shiny jewellery, materials such as gold, feathers, and precious stones” was considered beautiful, and hair that was “long and straight” (Legends and Chronicles). There was “disgust for an extremely thin woman”, but also “sagging breasts and wide hips were not considered desirable” (Bordain). We can also look to Xochiquetzal, the Aztec goddess of feminine beauty and sexual power, to see what was Aztec beauty standards were like. She is often depicted with “extravagant dress, dark skin, a full figure, round face, and large features”.(Friedlander)



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# How Have Beauty Standards Changed Because of Colonization?

Continuing the focus on Aztec culture: When the Spanish colonized Mexico and the Aztec people, they brought with them European standards of the time. In most instances where one civilization is conquered by another, acculturation happens. When the indigenous people of Mexico were colonized, they were forced to conform to Spanish culture. In places that have been colonized, the “definition of beauty is based on the prototype of those who are in power”. When Spain controlled Mexico, they brought with them feminine beauty ideals that were popular in Europe at the time, such as: “extravagant dress, pale skin, small features, curves. Many of which were unattainable to the majority of indigenous people, due to the following factors: they weren’t wealthy, so they couldn’t afford extravagant dress, their complexion generally prohibited them from looking pale, and (In extreme cases) they couldn’t enough food — or days off from work — to make themselves heavier” (Friedlander).

This effect contributed to the oppression of indigenous peoples, as it helped to reinforce the idea that the Natives were inherently worse than the Europeans.

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# How is this still affecting the world today?

By analyzing beauty pageant winners, we can (to an extent) understand what modern beauty standards are like in different parts of the world. As you can see, people who look like Ximena Navarrete Rosete, win Mexico's beauty pageants. She looks very different than the Aztec goddess Xochiquetzal and very similar, at least in looks, to the 2009 winner of the Miss America Pageant, Katie Stam. Two countries, "whose histories are so different, yet have one thing, European presence, in common have two very similar beauty queens at the same time." (Friedlander).



Rosete



Stam

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## A Similar Disparity is Reflected in Native Communities:

As Native American writer Cristina Castro wrote in an article for Indian Country Media after seeing the winner of “Hottest Native” Facebook contest who had “some semblance of a Navajo; brown skinned and big breasted (read: fake) with bleached blonde hair; a rez Pamela Anderson. That got [her] thinking. Is “hot” just code speak for white, mainstream beauty? Furthermore, how much of [her] own beauty aesthetic has been influenced by Eurocentric standards? Has our beauty standard as Native people become so colonized that we only recognize beauty if it looks white and thin?” (Castro).

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## Real Native American Women:

From the Navajo, Lakota, Hopi, and Pueblo tribes, respectively



## Google Search Results for “Attractive Native American Women”:



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# What Effect Does This Have on The Society and Culture of Native People?

Similar to the tragic phenomenon of Native languages dying out because new generations want to learn English instead, aspects of Native dress and style are being lost to time because Native girls, after growing up being told that their own features are unattractive, favor western styles. This process, one negative of globalization, fails to keep their unique culture alive.



Photos of Native Americans from the Standing Rock protests of 2017, wearing their normal clothes: non-traditional dress.

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## Some Shocking Data

1. “A 2011 study found that the number of patients undergoing cosmetic surgery increased Native Americans by 105.5 percent over the decade from 1998 through 2007 (*Am Surg.* 2011;77:1081-1085).” (Adams)
  2. Native Americans, who often have thicker waists, sometimes want “figure 8” enhanced more.” (Branman)
  3. In a 2002 study of body-image perceptions among urban Native American youth in Minnesota, ‘revealed that 41% of the boys and 61% of the girls expressed a desire to be thinner.’ (DFSN)
  4. In a 2011 study of eating disorders among young Native women and young white women, “a significantly higher prevalence of AI/NA women reported disordered eating behaviors compared with white women” (Striegel-Moore).
  5. “In the 1940s, skin bleaching became popular for Mexican American women, Rhinoplasty is becoming more and more popular among Mexican Americans”. (Friedlander)
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## Flip side of the issue:

“Legal scholar Sarah Deer wrote “today, the eroticized image of Indian women is so commonplace in our society that it is unremarkable—the image of a hypersexual Indian woman continues to be used to market any number of products and ideas.” Normalization of these hyper sexualized images and historical attitudes contribute to views of Native women that disparage or fetishize their ethnicity.

In a report on the prostitution and trafficking of Native women in Minnesota, Native women share their experiences to illustrate how ethnicity is directly connected to why they became prostitutes and how they were treated by clients. One woman said “I’m put down anyway, so why not prostitution? I’m called a ‘squaw’, so why not?” Another, discussing a client said “[he likes my hair down and sometimes he calls me Pocahontas. He likes to role play like that. He wants me to call him John.”

1. “Native American children are overrepresented [in foster care] at a rate that is 2.1 times their rate in the general population and as many as 32.4 percent of Native children and youth live in poverty.
  2. “Intergenerational trauma patterns associated with the history of tribal relocations, boarding schools, and large scale adoptions of Native children have increased the likelihood that Native women and girls will experience additional predictive risk factors. Reports from Alaska also suggest that traffickers may target Native girls.”
  3. “In Hennepin County, Minnesota, roughly 25 percent of the women arrested for prostitution identified as American Indian while American Indians comprise only 2.2 percent of the total population. In Anchorage, Alaska, 33 percent of the women arrested for prostitution were Alaska Native, but Alaska Natives make up only 7.9 percent of the population. Canadian studies show similar results. In Winnipeg, 50 percent of adult sex workers were defined as Aboriginal, while Aboriginal peoples comprise only 10 percent of the population and 52 percent of the women involved in the commercial sex trade in Vancouver were identified as First Nations, while First Nations people comprise only 7 percent of the general population.” (Sweet)
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## Thesis:

European beauty standards are contributing to the loss of Native cultures.

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# What You Can Do To Help

Buy from Cheekbone Beauty! A makeup brand started by an indigenous woman from Canada which donates proceeds to helping the native community.

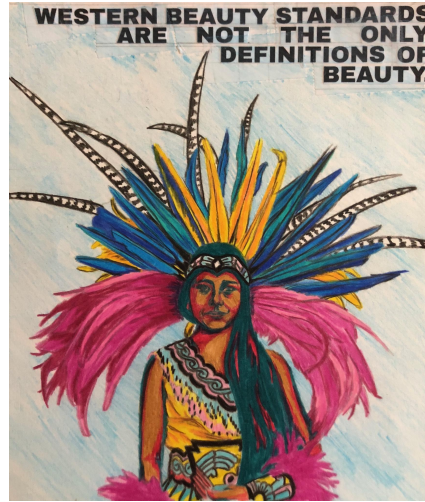




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## OUR PRODUCT

For our product, we painted a mural of a Aztec girl in traditional dress with the words “European beauty standards are not the only definitions of beauty above her”





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## Final Product:

Its located on the corner of 6th street and Navasota street, at Austin Body Works auto shop.

Before:







**EUROPEAN BEAUTY  
STANDARDS ARE NOT THE  
ONLY DEFINITIONS OF  
BEAUTY.**



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## How Our Product Answers Our question and How it's Tailored to Our Audience:

Our audience is Native Americans, people who were descended from Native Americans or other Indigenous peoples, specifically Aztecs, and anyone else that has been negatively affected by European beauty standards. To reach our Aztec audience, we wanted to paint the mural in an area that many Latino people live in, so we picked East Central Austin.

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## What We Would Do Differently

If we could start over, we would likely change our location from the gentrified area of East Austin to an area that is still home to many Latino people, and not people who just moved to Austin.

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