

Regional

Clothing tells important story for anthropologist

For many, the relationship between American Indians and Europeans can be explained through issues of wars and trade. But for many anthropologists and historians, it is much more complicated than that. In fact, many aspects of these relationships can be understood through items such as clothing and photographs. An anthropologist who has been studying these less well-known aspects of the relationship is Cory Willmott, an associate professor in the department of anthropology at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

A native of St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada, she obtained her bachelor's and master's degrees at York University in Ontario, Canada, and her doctorate in anthropology at McMaster University, also in Ontario. Willmott said that the work of anthropologists who study native cultures is delicate work that calls for sensitivity to the desires and opinions of the native people. For example, in his book "Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto," Vine Deloria Jr. stated that anthropologists were considered worse than government agents, missionaries and all other Westerners that Native Americans had to deal with.

"That was in the late 70s and early 80s and anthropologists really had to turn themselves upside down and look at themselves and say, 'Why are we being criticized that much?'" Willmott explained. "It is true they would go into the field and write their books and never give back to those native communities. Now it's all about collaboration." One of Willmott's areas of research is the role played by clothes in the relationship between the American Indians and the British.

"The most important point is the political power of clothing," she said. "This is illustrated very strongly in the fur trade era. The British and the early Americans would give gifts to the chiefs of a chief's outfit. Because our clothing represents our social identities, this introduced a stronger sense of hierarchy into Native American societies." This relationship also changed and bonded



Photo by Dominic Hardy

From left: Andre Delpuech, Curator at Musee du Quai Branly, Paris, Heidi Bohaker, Department of History, University of Toronto, Cory Willmott, Anthropology, SIUE, and Crystal Migwans (Anishinaabe), at the collections study facilities at Musee du Quai Branly, Paris, France, on May 23.

the relations with the American Indians and the British.

"So they would actually make chiefs by giving them outfits," she said. "So there is a category of chief in the Anishinaabe language which translates to 'made chief.' This situation became serious when we moved into the reservation era. The governments when making treaties dealt with these 'made chiefs' as if they were real chiefs. The traditional chiefs often never even got to deal with the political leaders." Since there was a lot

of fur trading between the American Indians and the British, one may wonder about its impact on their hierarchical relationship.

"What many people don't realize is that clothing is hugely significant," Willmott said. "Statistically cloth was the big-time seller in terms of volume and cost. That was going the opposite direction into the native community. So when we talk about trade we need to realize it was a two-way street. Early on the Native Americans actually had

the economic upper hand because they were discerning customers and when Britain was fighting with France and say France had a better product, or when Britain was fighting with the Americans and Britain had the better product, the Native Americans could play the traders off each other." And there were other factors playing a role.

"I think the other thing we need to realize because it became obscured during the reservation era was the tremendous amount of intermarriage," Willmott

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said. "This was a collaborative venture. The fur traders were in there living amongst the native people, not only in their forts, but they married into the native community. And there became this new society that shared properties of both the Native Americans and the Europeans."

Willmott has also been studying the pictures of Native Americans from the late 19th to the early 20th century, and although pictures are said not to lie, things are not so simple.

"Pictures are deceptive in many ways. At the same time, if we are talking about photographs, they are actually physically related to what they are representing," she said. "I use both paintings and photographs because if I'm going earlier into the time before photographs you have to rely on paintings and drawings and things like that. So it's of obvious relevance to my clothing research because they show people in clothes."

The native people Willmott has been most interested in studying are the Anishinaabe and she has a personal reason for that.

"People might know them in the States by the word Chippewa and in Canada they are usually called the Ojibwa. Their geographical distribution has been Ontario, Manitoba, Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan. I grew up primarily since I was about six in Ontario," she said. "I feel because of my international background it was always a challenge for me to feel very connected to my roots, so wherever I go I always work hard to understand the history and the sense of place."

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.