

“Truly American”: An artifact analysis of Frankie Welch’s Cherokee alphabet scarf

Laura McAndrews & Jan Hebbard, University of Georgia, USA;  
Kristian Hogans, Alabama A&M, USA

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Frankie Welch was a leading American fashion and textile designer, whose career spanned from the early 1960s to the 1990s. Though her career began as a fashion consultant to Washington D.C.’s politician wives, she was determined to be more. Virginia Rusk, wife of Secretary of State Dean Rusk, who was a Georgia native like Welch, asked Welch to design something “truly American” for the White House and State Department to use as gifts (Callahan, 2022). During a family trip to her hometown in Rome, Georgia, her father showed her a book “History of Rome and Floyd County” which contained the Cherokee syllabary. She spoke at the time “And I thought what a good idea a signature scarf would be, made from the Cherokee alphabet” (Cawthon, 1970). On October 23, 1967, at Alexandria’s Athenaeum in Virginia, Frankie Welch debuted the Cherokee alphabet scarf. The event was attended by Washington “notables” including Virginia Rusk, Aida Gardner, Trudye Fowler, and Lady Patricia Dean, all wives of the secretary of state; secretary of health, education, and welfare; secretary of the treasury, and British ambassador (La Haye, 1967). By the 1960s, signature scarves were a ubiquitous fashion accessory as they were appealing for women of all ages, easy to wear, and practical with any outfit. Both Secretary Rusk and Lady Bird Johnson, the first lady at the time would use the Cherokee Alphabet scarf as official U.S. gifts. Beyond that, Welch’s use of the Cherokee syllabary achieved fashion success, as fashion designer Norman Norell used the Cherokee textile print for a skirt in his 1967 collection. Welch went on to use the Cherokee textile print for her own garments, including her signature Frankie dress (Callahan, 2022). The success of the Cherokee alphabet scarf catapulted Frankie Welch into the American fashion scene. More recently, in 2022, the Met displayed the Frankie dress incorporating the Cherokee syllabary acknowledging, “the late designer Frankie Welch, who was of Cherokee heritage” (WWD, 2022).

The aim of this paper is to challenge and possibly improve the understanding of this historical piece of fashion history to examine the use of indigenous cultural symbols in predominantly white fashion both at the time and presently. This paper uses an object-based research approach (Mida & Kim, 2018) to investigate Frankie Welch’s 1967 Cherokee Alphabet Scarf along with primary sources from archival and museum collection to critically analyze (a) Frankie Welch’s source of inspiration, (b) white claims of indigenous ancestry, and (c) re-colonization of Indigenous culture today.

A multi-method research approach was utilized to critically follow Frankie Welch’s design process and unpack problematic narratives. First, historic documents from multiple Frankie

Figure 1. Cherokee Alphabet scarf  
Frankie Welch Collection,  
Hargrett Library



Figure 2. Frankie Dress  
Metropolitan Museum of Art  
(WWD, 2022)



Welch collections, including books, newspaper clippings, and personal interviews were reviewed. In addition, an artifact analysis following Mida and Kim's (2018) checklist was conducted on the Cherokee alphabet scarf, along with other garments with the Cherokee syllabary.

In following the design inspiration of the Cherokee scarf, data revealed a distorted narrative at the foundation of both design and business decisions,

which is still a practice today in fashion. Frankie Welch was motivated by a historical and cultural inspiration, along with a belief in Cherokee family heritage leading her to copy the Cherokee syllabary from her father's book. Though current genealogical research does not support her Cherokee lineage, Frankie Welch incorporated Indigenous heritage into her creative designs and brand image. Distorted ancestral narratives are not unique to Frankie Welch's family, nor an abandoned practice. Genealogical research, such as ancestry.com is a big business and one of the most popular online activities today (Mahuika and Kukutai, 2021). The contest for Indigenous identities and the right to claim "Native-ness" has been glamorized by white (settler) people and willfully ignores long-standing Indigenous conventions about citizenship and kinship (Andersen, 2014). These Indigenous conventions extend beyond belonging but to ownership of land, seascapes, skies, and spiritual realms or what Brannlund (2019) considers as "genealogy of place" which is at the intersection of kinship, identity, culture, and land rights.

To the present day, this research extends the self-indigenization narrative. At the Met Gala's 2022 *In America: A lexicon of fashion* exhibit, Frankie Welch's Cherokee alphabet dress was misrepresented and perpetuated re-colonization, each longstanding customs in museum preservation. Indigenous and marginalized people have a complex history and relationship with libraries and museums, as they are both a place of distrust (McKemmish, Faulkhead & Russell, 2011) and places that hold significant language and cultural objects (Thorpe and Galassi, 2014). Libraries and museums hold evidence of the history of colonization. Therefore, a call to structurally dismantle these spaces (Thrope, 2019) would be necessary for constructing honest recitation of history.

The findings of this research have several implications for practices in fashion history, museum studies, and fashion design. Historians need to be hyper-aware of fashion designers' self-indigenization practices that re-colonize and (re)harm historically marginalized communities. Archival practices need to embrace multiple ways of knowing that acknowledge Indigenous frameworks of knowledge, memory, and archive as well as position Indigenous communities as

creators. Fashion designers need to acknowledge sources of inspiration especially when incorporating history and culture, so that misappropriation and destructive recolonization practices do not perpetuate continued harm to source communities (Hogans & McAndrews, 2022). Further, the concept of white claims of Indigenous ancestry brings a nuanced perspective to cultural appropriation, particularly in fashion. Whiteness has colonized much of the globe and appropriated culture, history, and beliefs of ancestry to stake claims and in turn profit from Indigenous peoples (Leroux, 2018). Therefore, further investigation of fashion history and design needs to incorporate the Indigenous standpoint to improve practices that lead to justice.

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