

Beware the Sombreros of March

When does a hat become a battleground?

When you're trying to have good, clean fun on a politically-correct campus, that's when.

Last week, [reports](#) Catherine Rampell in the *Washington Post*, two members of Bowdoin College's student government faced "impeachment proceedings" to be conducted over the weekend:

"What heinous transgression did they commit? Theft, plagiarism, sexual assault? Nope. They attended a party where some guests wore tiny sombreros."

That's right. It was the hats. Dare one ask why?

Well, it seems that a small group of students, including the one from Colombia who had emailed the invitations, decided to throw a "fiesta," which meant little more than a Latino-themed party. The drink of choice was tequila, and "mini-sombreros" were passed out to wear as part of the "fun." Seems innocuous enough, right?

Not to "college administrators," who launched an investigation into "ethnic stereotyping" constituting an "act of bias." Not to the rest of the student government, which "unanimously adopted a [statement of solidarity](#)" to "[stand] by all students who were injured and affected by the incident," and recommend that administrators "create a space for those students who have been or feel specifically targeted." The statement deemed the party an act of "cultural appropriation," one that "creates an environment where students of color, particularly Latino, and especially Mexican, students feel unsafe."

As I [wrote](#) several weeks ago—citing several other sources—campus agitation about "cultural appropriation" had

been getting out of hand even before this astonishing little incident. And as Rampell notes in her article, the Bowdoin uproar about hats seems rather strange given that

“...on the very same night of the “tequila party,” just across campus, Bowdoin held its annual, administration-sanctioned “Cold War” party. Students arrived dressed in fur hats and coats to represent Soviet culture; one referred to herself as “Stalin,” making light of a particularly painful era in Slavic history.”

So it seems that some acts of cultural appropriation are OK but not others. How to tell the difference?

While I do not presume to fathom the depths of the PC mind, it looks to me as though some people find cultural appropriation unacceptable only when they view the culture being appropriated from as a victimized culture in general. So apparently, if you're a “person of color” (which includes Latinos as well as blacks) then it's an act of oppression for people who are not of your ethnic culture to borrow something from that culture for their own purposes, no matter how innocuous the purpose may seem. It's so oppressive that we need to be concerned about whether you feel “safe.”

I doubt that any Latino actually feels unsafe in the face of gringos wearing mini-sombreros at a campus party—any more than a student of Slavic background would feel threatened by a Cold-War party at which people wear Russian-style fur hats. But it doesn't matter how the “victims” actually feel. What matters is how “we,” the non-victims, feel about them.

Which, when you think about it, is a rather selfish indulgence that only the privileged would think of.