As societies evolve, technological and cultural artifacts also evolve. Our world is transnational and transcultural, composed of individuals with their own values and beliefs, cultures and histories. Once exposed in a new society, technological and cultural artifacts may lose their original significance and unique attributes. The new society will often adopt and modify these artifacts to meet the context of their own cultural experiences.

An example of this occurrence is the dream catcher. Deriving from the Native American tribe of the Ojibwe, they are now extremely prevalent in mainstream Western culture, ranging from jewelry, tattoos, to the actual (yet unauthentic) object. The purpose of this report is to reinstate the tangibility of the dream catcher's origin and its significance to the Ojibwe.

First, a brief ethnographic description of the Ojibwe tribe is given for background information. Second, a demonstration of the dream catcher as a cultural artifact: the legend of its inception and its significance to the Ojibwe. Third, an examination of its portrayal in mainstream Western culture, and subsequently, a critical analysis of how the dream catcher's cultural rhetoric differs in these contexts.

Ethnography of the Ojibwe Tribe

In his book *History of the Ojibway People*, William W. Warren writes “the original homeland of the Ojibway was immense, stretching from the northern reaches of the plains to the southeastern shores of the Great Lakes.” Today, many of the Ojibwe peoples live in the Great Lakes region. The tribe is most commonly referred to as the Ojibwe, Ojibway, or the Chippewa. As part of the Algonquian family, the Ojibwe is among “the largest group of Native American/First Nations north of Mexico” (Heart).

The Ojibwe focus on the preservation of their identity and culture, recognizing their tribe as the Anishinabe: the “original people,” or “original man” (Warren). The Ojibwe are extremely spiritual, believing in the Great Spirit, and live in accordance with the land, as “nature is a profound teacher” (Callahan). Warren suggests:

> The fundamental essence of Anishinabe life is unity. The oneness of all things . . . Key to this is the belief that harmony with all created things has been achieved. The people cannot be separated from the land with its cycle of seasons or from the other mysterious cycles of living things—of birth and growth and death and new birth.

Origin of the Dream Catcher

The legend of the dream catcher and its inception has developed within the Ojibwe tribe through generations of storytelling. With this said, there are multiple stories, each its own comprehension of themes and discrepancies. For the purposes of this report, I chose three authoritative variations in order to establish the dream catcher's inception as accurately as possible.
It is considered that the Ojibwe “were all located in one general area of that place known as Turtle Island” (Dearborn). The Ojibwe refer to North America as Turtle Island “because it is shaped like a turtle (Florida is one hind leg, Baja California is another, Mexico is the tail)” (Callahan). Asibikaashi, the Spider Woman, is known as the caretaker and protector of the land and its people. Asibikaashi creates a “special lodge before dawn . . . she capture[s] the sunrise as the light sparkles on the dew which is gathered there” (Dearborn). Dearborn continues by describing how Asibikaashi:

Helped Wanabozhoo [the Great Spirit] bring giizis (sun) back to the people [each morning] . . . When the Ojibwe Nation dispersed to the four corners of North America . . . Asibikaashi had a difficult time making her journey to all those cradle boards, so the mothers, sisters, & Nokomis (grandmothers) took up the practice of weaving the magical webs for new babies.

These magical webs, essentially, became what are known today as the dream catcher: a sort of “charm to protect sleeping children from nightmares” (“Dream Catchers”). It will “filter out all the bad bawedjigewin (dreams) & allow only good thoughts to enter . . . You will see a small hole in the center of each dream catcher where those good bawadjige may come through. With the first rays of sunlight, the bad dreams would perish” (Dearborn).

Traditionally, dream catchers helped the Ojibwe “teach natural wisdom” (Callahan). Small and comprised of willow twigs in the form of a hoop and sinew as thread, they “catch and hold everything evil as a spider’s web catches and holds everything that comes into contact with it” (Dearborn).

The structure and shape of the dream catcher is equally as significant, “a circle to represent how giizis travels each day across the sky” (Dearborn). Furthermore, the form of a hoop “symbolizes strength and unity” (Callahan) and the “temporary-ness of youth” (Dearborn). The web connects to the hoop at eight points, symbolizing each of Asibikaashi’s legs; a reminder that “when we see little asibikaashi, we should not fear her, but instead respect and protect her” (Dearborn), just as she protects her children. Each web holds one gemstone “because there is only one creator in the web of life” (Callahan).

Finally, “it was traditional to put a feather in the center of the dream catcher” to represent “air . . . [an] essential for life” (Dearborn). After passing through the dream catcher’s center, good dreams fall through the feathers into the sleeping individual’s unconscious; the feathers’ movement indicates this transference of positive emotion and knowledge. Figure 1 displays an early 1900’s traditional Ojibwe dream catcher.

![Fig. 1. Ojibwe dream catcher from the early 1900's](image-url)
Admittance and Portrayal in Western Culture

Western society's cultural context of the 1960s and 1970s is marked by the exigencies of social and civil activism. The American Indian Movement (AIM) was “founded in 1968 [as] an organization dedicated to the Native American civil rights movement” with two objectives being the “sovereignty of Native American lands and peoples [and] preservation of their culture and traditions” ("American Indian Movement"). Later, in 1977, the Pan-Indian Movement arose as a “non-violent liberation philosophy . . . to stabilize Indian youth . . . and to provide a way of practicing a Native American spirituality” (Robbins). These movements were part of a larger concentration; that is, to protect, influence, and unite all Native Americans and other indigenous peoples in the United States.

Through this assimilation of culture, other Native American tribes were exposed to the Ojibwe dream catcher and adopted it into their own cultural context. Likewise, this marked the introduction of the dream catcher into Western culture. In this way, dream catchers have become neo-traditional in our society; the inherent, traditional significance has become immersed with a unique, contemporary significance.

Metal hoops bound with leather are often used in the structure, as they are more durable than willow twigs. In addition, wire, string, yarn, or anything of the like, replaces sinew for webbing. Beads or gemstones are still common, as are feathers; however, the natural authenticity is lost—these craft store articles are mass-produced, and often are not unique. Dream catchers are often hung in cars, made as jewelry (see fig. 2), or sold in a kit so that an individual has all the necessary supplies to create their own. Dream catchers can even take the form of a tattoo (see fig. 3).

Critical Analysis of Cultural Rhetoric

The evolitional transition of the dream catcher's significance between the Ojibwe tribe and mainstream Western culture is evident, given the preceding information. In its origin, the dream catcher was considered an artistic, spiritual object. Its historical context is one of tradition, a symbolic expression of the Ojibwe peoples’ creation and identity. Elders used the dream catcher to teach and protect younger generations.
In the article “American Indian culture for sale,” three members of Ojibwe clans from Minnesota gave their opinion on the dream catcher’s growing popularity in Western culture. Millie Benjamin believes “it has gotten out of hand. It’s disrespectful for our people. It means something to us, it’s a tradition” (Associated Press). In agreement, Gerald White considers the dream catcher “a sacred item” and “it’s lost a lot of meaning, even in our own tribe. It’s like losing our language, our culture another symptom of a larger thing” (Associated Press).

Through the many generations of oral tradition, the initial cultural context has disseminated. While many of the Ojibwe still hold to the deep-rooted historical context, others embrace the new ideologies behind the dream catcher. Ruth Garbow sells her dream catchers in a gift shop, and believes “if people like and enjoy having Indian crafts. I feel great,” yet she also finds it “important that customers understand the catchers’ meaning” (Associated Press).

The cultural rhetoric of the traditional dream catcher and the Western representation are each unique in their own way. In Western culture, the dream catcher loses its unique symbolism and meaning. As it grew popular in the mainstream, it was almost inevitable that it would lose some of the characteristics that gave it significance in the first place. In no means is this fair to the Ojibwe tribe and culture, yet it occurs with technological and cultural artifacts every day. Dream catchers are beautiful and fascinating creations; and all individuals experience and interpret artifacts differently, in a way that is subjective to their own identity. These artifacts then become modified in new contexts. As dream catchers continue to be made, purchased, and used in Western culture, it is important to remember the historical context. Not only is it respectful to the Ojibwe and their heritage, but in doing so, the individual can draw upon their own connotation. As Slack and Wise write, “We forget that the past has something to teach us” (Culture + Technology: a Primer). In order to experience the dream catcher in the way the Ojibwe intended, Western society must acknowledge its historical context, as well as the cultural context.
Works Cited


