

Cultural Appreciation or Cultural Appropriation?

A zine on culture, respect, allyship, and racism

This was written in the spring of 2011 in occupied coast Salish territory, Olympia, Washington.

None of the ideas in this essay are original or new. Please copy and distribute at will. Take what you want, re-format it, add to it, I don't care.

If I've made glaring mistakes in this essay or you want to talk with me about cultural appropriation (or anti-oppression and anarchy in general), please get in touch: vegetablesforbreakfast@gmail.com.

What is cultural appropriation?

Cultural appropriation is the adoption or theft of icons, rituals, aesthetic standards, and behavior from one culture or subculture by another. It generally is applied when the subject culture is a minority culture or somehow subordinate in social, political, economic, or military status to the appropriating culture. This “appropriation” often occurs without any real understanding of why the original culture took part in these activities or the meanings behind these activities, often converting culturally significant artifacts, practices, and beliefs into “meaningless” pop-culture or giving them a significance that is completely different/less nuanced than they would originally have had.

Why does cultural appropriation happen?

Cultural appropriation is a by-product of imperialism, capitalism, oppression, and assimilation. Imperialism is the creation and maintenance of an unequal cultural, economic, and territorial relationship, usually between states and often in the form of an empire, based on domination and subordination. Imperialism functions by subordinating groups of people and territories and extracting everything of value from the colonized people and territories. In the case of cultural appropriation, culture is treated as a “natural resource” to extract from People of Color.

Cultural appropriation is profitable. Objects and traditions (but not the people) of marginalized cultures are seen by the dominant culture as exotic, edgy, and desirable, which translates to profits. Capitalism works best when people are not individual people with celebrated differences, but identical workers, cogs in the machine. Once diverse cultural identities are stripped away, the only culture left to identify with is capitalist culture.

This is one aspect of assimilation, in which marginalized communities lose their cultural markers and are folded into the dominant culture. The process of assimilation is sped up when culture markers are appropriated by the dominant culture. Once the dominant culture has access to the cultural markers of a marginalized culture, they are no longer markers of the marginalized culture, and the marginalized culture is gobbled up by the dominant culture.

Why is cultural appropriation so harmful?

Cultural appropriation is harmful because it is an extension of centuries of racism, genocide, and oppression. Cultural appropriation treats all aspects of marginalized cultures (also known as targets of oppression) as free for the taking. This is the same rationale that has been (and still is) used to steal land and resources from People of Color, particularly Native people. Put together, the theft of the lands, resources, and culture of a marginalized group amount to genocide.

The defense of cultural appropriation is based upon the misconception that race relations exist on a level-playing field, as though racism no longer exists. Systematic racism does still exist – white people have power and privilege in this society, while People of Color are systematically denied power and privilege in this society. There cannot be a truly equal and free flow of ideas, practices, and cultural markers as long as one group (white people) have power and privilege over another group (People of Color).

Spiritual practices of Native peoples are particularly prone to appropriation by the dominant culture. This is exceptionally ironic, given that after colonization, it was not until the passage of the 1978 American Indian Religious Freedom Act that Native people in the United States were legally permitted to practice their traditional spirituality. Since the colonization of this continent by white settlers, Native people have faced monumental obstacles to the free exercise of their spiritual practices, including boarding schools,

forced relocation, endless broken treaties, “kill the Indian, save the man” policies, and forced assimilation. So it is particularly insensitive for white people to attempt to justify their/our use of Native spiritual practices when Native people themselves have often been brutally persecuted for the same.

Cultural appropriation is not an acceptable way to honor, respect, or appreciate People of Color. If you wish to honor, respect, or appreciate Black people or Black culture, then you should learn how to recognize, confront, and dismantle systematic racism instead of appropriating dreadlocks, a symbol of the wearer’s commitment to Jah Rastafari and Black resistance to racism. If you wish to honor, respect, or appreciate Native people or Native culture, learn how to listen to Native people when they identify very real problems (and how to confront them) faced by Native people today, such as astronomical suicide and alcoholism rates on reservations or the continued theft of Native lands by resource extraction companies.

Many well-intentioned and self-proclaimed anti-racists will engage in cultural appropriation in the name of “solidarity.” A prominent example of this is white pro-Palestinian activists wearing keffiyehs, Arab headscarves and symbols of Palestinian nationalism and resistance to occupation. But simply wearing a keffiyeh will not end Israel’s occupation of Palestine. There are many real, concrete steps one can take to support Palestinian liberation, such as the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement. In addition, one must also take into account the very real climate of Islamophobia and Arab-phobia in the United States – people who are perceived as Arab and/or Muslim are treated with hostility, suspicion, and violence, and assumed to be

terrorists. This is only aggravated when these people are seen wearing articles of clothing associated with Islam or Arab culture. For white people to wear keffiyehs is to wave around our/their white privilege – white people aren't automatically assumed to be terrorists. White people wearing keffiyehs are seen as hip, fashion-forward, and worldly, whereas Arab- and Muslim-perceived people wearing keffiyehs are seen as dangerous, Others, and terrorists.

Many traditions that have been appropriated from Native people (such as sweat lodges and “medicine wheel ceremonies”) are performed by white people allegedly in the name of such lofty goals as world peace, spiritual mending, and mutual understanding. One of the things needed for world peace, spiritual mending, and mutual understanding to occur is an end to racism. But cultural appropriation is a form of racism, and as long as racism exists, there can be no world peace, spiritual mending, or mutual understanding. Many concrete steps to dismantle racism have been identified by many different people, including recognizing one's role in perpetuating racism, confronting one's own white privilege, and attacking the systems of oppression that give white people privilege in the first place. None of these steps require cultural appropriation. And it is unacceptable for white people's healing to come at the expense of the cultural survival of People of Color.

Cultural appropriation of ceremonies and objects removes and distorts these traditions and things from their original contexts and into gross caricatures that are a slap in the face to the original practitioners of the ceremonies, with complete disregard for the history and present day reality of oppression (usually perpetrated by white people who feel similarly entitled to all aspects of these peoples' lands,

resources, and cultures) faced by the people to whom those ceremonies belong. Cultural appropriation is insensitive and ignorant at best, and blatantly and knowingly racist at worst.

Cultural appropriation often perpetuates inaccurate stereotypes about People of Color - what most white people think they know about Native Americans often comes from inaccurate stereotypes of a monolithic culture involving teepees, sweat lodges, and dream catchers. When these inaccurate stereotypes are perpetuated, they create a mold that white people demand People of Color fit into. When People of Color don't fit those stereotypes, they are often ridiculed, attacked, dismissed, and marginalized for not fitting into a white person's inaccurate idea of what it means to be a Person of Color.

People of Color - including Native Americans - still exist. Often, the justification used for cultural appropriation is something along the lines of "I just love the way these people lived! It was so simple and beautiful!", as if they're all extinct. This tells real life People of Color that they don't actually exist. Being told you don't exist is extremely hurtful, and it tells white people that there is no more need for anti-racism since if People of Color don't exist anyway, then of course they can't possibly be oppressed.

Even if you don't understand why it is hurtful to see various aspects of one's culture appropriated, or you think there are worse problems that People of Color should spend their time confronting (even though it is white people's responsibility to confront racism), it is still imperative to listen to People of Color when they identify - and call for an end to - cultural appropriation. As targets of racism, People of Color are the experts in racism, and therefore

anti-racist efforts should be directed by the needs identified by People of Color.

It's complicated

Calling each other out for appropriating other cultures (or even navigating less confrontational discussions around cultural appropriation) can be tricky. As always, it's really important not to assume anyone's identity. Just because someone has light skin doesn't mean they're white. Treating "white" as the default race is one of the many aspects of racism, and assuming that everyone with light skin is white is racist and erasing. So for example, it's not ok for me to immediately tell a light-skinned person wearing a beaded headband that they're appropriating Native beadwork and need to take off the headband - that person could very well be Native. That's why it's important to talk about this stuff. If you think someone is being appropriative, ask them about it!

Sometimes we're invited to take part in others' cultural traditions, by members of that culture. It is an honor to be invited to do so, but we also must remember that being invited to take part in something doesn't give us the right to perform said activity outside of that invited context. Even if you've done a ton of research and know all about some tradition you find really interesting, if you are not a member of the culture that practices that tradition, you still have the potential to strip that practice of its original meaning.

Where it gets really tricky is with traditions or symbols that have roots in several different cultures. For example, dreadlocks are found in Indian, Buddhist, Rastfari, African, and Celtic culture. Most recently, dreadlocks are known as a symbol of Black resistance to racism and Rastafaris'

commitment to Jah. When white people wear dreadlocks, we/they strip dreadlocks from their symbolism of resistance to racism and a commitment to Jah. But as a general rule of thumb, it's not appropriation if it's from your own culture.

So what about white people of Celtic heritage who wear dreadlocks? Dreadlocks are part of their culture, but someone walking down the street would not be able to tell that some random white person with dreadlocks is Celtic. I don't have any quick and easy answers for this, but I think that context is really really important. I live in the United States, where dreadlocks are not widely recognized as a Celtic cultural marker. All white people have the ability to strip dreadlocks of their symbolism for People of Color, regardless of our ethnicity. Does this mean that white people with Celtic heritage living in the United States should never wear dreadlocks? I don't know. I do think it means that the decision to wear dreadlocks must be approached very carefully, and with the knowledge that one must be prepared to engage in continual conversation about what dreadlocks mean for a variety of cultures.

Further resources

Native Appropriations: www.nativeappropriations.blogspot.com

My Culture Is Not A Trend: www.mycultureisnotatrend.tumblr.com

Feminist Intersection: On hipsters/hippies and Native culture: <http://bitchmagazine.org/post/to-the-hipstershippies-on-native-culture-%E2%80%93-please-stop-annoying-the-fuck-out-of-me>

Answers for White People on Hair, Appropriation, and Anti-Racist Struggle: <http://zinelibrary.info/answers-white-people-appropriation-hair-and-anti-racist-struggle>

Hipster Appropriations: www.hipsterappropriations.tumblr.com

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