
Cultural Appropriation

From *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice* by Paul Kivel

The sense of entitlement white people are socialized to have leads directly to cultural appropriation: taking traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artifacts from someone else's culture without permission. This can include unauthorized use of another people's dance, dress, music, language, folklore, cuisine, traditional medicine, or religious symbols. It's most likely to be harmful when the source community is a group that has been oppressed or exploited in other ways or when the object of appropriation is particularly sensitive, e.g. sacred objects.¹

Cultural appropriation is often an extension of genocide, enslavement, forced removals, and land theft, as settlers take what does not belong to them. It can be the final step in a genocidal process that continues long after a nation or culture has been physically defeated. Memorialization, respect for, and acknowledgement of the cultural contributions of the defeated can even be used to demonstrate the "benevolence" of the conquering culture.

Cultural appropriation is based on unequal power relationships. People with less power cannot protect their cultures nor dictate the terms of exchange between themselves and others. They have been opened up and made vulnerable by the colonization process and a neoliberal economic market system in which everything can be commodified (made into an object and assigned a value or price) and then bought and sold, stolen or traded. Others are then free to come along and appropriate, distort, stereotype, and exploit whichever parts of the culture they want to.

Those of us in the US (and in other overdeveloped countries) are used to "discovering" or taking (stealing) things we like with little thought, understanding, or consequence. For white people this sense of entitlement can be all encompassing. After all, the original concept of Doctrine of Discovery sanctified by Papal Bulls in the 15th century not only gave Christians authority to "invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue" all people who were not Christian, but also to take their "dominions, possessions, and all movable and immovable goods." This included the land, the people themselves (slavery was encouraged), and all physical and cultural possessions.²

Cultural appropriation can take many forms such as:

- Misuse of sacred objects, prayers and rituals
- Native American Mascots
- The use of other people's names, images, icon and ritual objects out of context, modifying them, or turning them into products bought and sold in the marketplace
- The use of other people's names, images, icons and ritual objects solely for personal gain



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- The use of other people's sayings, music, literature, art, food, genes, or knowledge without permission, credit or as a commodity or for monetary gain
 - Camp Fire Girls, Cub Scout and Brownie/Boy and Girl Scout activities and many other Indian named and themed camps, party themes, covering songs and other music, and the adoption of cultural objects and rituals
 - Halloween costumes
 - Mock Spanish or disrespectful use of African American idioms or other forms of language
 - Taking, exploiting, and misunderstanding history and symbols meaningful to people of other cultures
 - Neglecting to recognize and acknowledge the origins of what one is using
 - Speaking as an expert on a culture or set of practices as an academic/researcher, writer, teacher, or guide without initiation or authorization

As with all forms of white privilege, rather than examining the roots of our privilege in the harm done to others, we resort to rationalizations to justify our cultural appropriation. Justifications that I and other white people give for these kinds of appropriation include

- We are actually memorializing, respecting, or honoring the culture
- We don't intend to be disrespectful
- We were told by somebody that it was OK
- We were taught by someone from that culture
- This practice is universal or is universally useful
- We gain so much personally from this practice
- There is always cultural exchange going on; cultures borrow and adapt from each other
- We don't see the harm in what we're doing

Jarone Uwujaren writes that "Using someone else's culture to satisfy a personal need for self-expression is an exercise in privilege



and entitlement regardless of the intentions of the one who appropriates. There needs to be some element of mutual understanding, equality, and respect for there to be true exchange.”³ Otherwise we who take are contributing to the further exploitation and marginalization of another people. We have a responsibility to listen to people of marginalized cultures, understand as much as possible the blatant and subtle ways in which their cultures have been appropriated and exploited, and educate ourselves enough to make informed choices when it comes to engaging with them. “Cultural exchange is engaging with a culture as a respectful and humble guest, invitation only.”⁴

Encouraging this awareness is not about telling people what they can wear or do. We live and act within a social and historical context, and without understanding the implications of that context and the historical harm white people have done and continue to do to people of color, we cannot avoid feeling entitled to take things that don’t belong to us. The racial double standard could not be clearer when people of color are prohibited or prevented from practicing their cultures while white people are allowed to and even rewarded for appropriating them.

There are no legitimate claims of ignorance or innocence for cultural appropriation, and the intentions of the inadvertent appropriator are irrelevant in this context. Therefore, as Jarune Uwujaren said so succinctly, “...educate yourself, listen, and be open to reexamining the symbols you use without thinking, the cultures you engage with without understanding, and the historical and social climate we all need to be seeing.”⁵

Endnotes

1. Susan Scafidi, author of *Who Owns Culture? Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law*, quoted in Nadra Kareem Nittle. “What is Cultural Appropriation and Why is it Wrong.” *Racerelations.about.com*, updated November 14, 2016. [online]. [cited December 9, 2016]. racerelations.about.com/od/diversitymatters/fl/What-Is-Cultural-Appropriation-and-Why-Is-It-Wrong.htm.
2. The Doctrine of Discovery. “The Bull Romanus Pontifex (Nicholas V) January 8, 1454.” [online]. [cited April 22, 2017]. doctrineofdiscovery.org/.
3. Jarune Uwujaren. “The Difference Between Cultural Exchange and Cultural Appropriation?” *Everyday Feminism*, September 30, 2013. [online]. [cited November 2, 2016]. everydayfeminism.com/2013/09/cultural-exchange-and-cultural-appropriation/.
4. *Ibid.*



5. Ibid. Also check out The White Noise Collective's collection of resources on cultural appropriation. [online]. [cited December 8, 2016].

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