

Our understanding of cultural appropriation

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In Our Hands: An Essay on Appropriation

Appropriation is a tricky subject to navigate because opinions on its morality, artistry and ethics are so widely varied. Many artists use appropriation in their work to appreciate a specific culture or to enhance and influence their creations. However, when working with outside sources you must always take into account who you are taking from, why and how their work is going to be manipulated. Appropriation by definition is, “ the use of pre-existing objects or images with little or no transformation applied to them”. Sometimes this subtle transformation of an already existing image or object is what makes the new work offensive. Through the lens of culture jamming, cultural appropriation and representation we will take a look at the ethics behind different types of appropriation.

Culture jamming is a tactic used by many artists and social activists to “ disrupt or subvert media culture and its mainstream cultural institutions.” It is meant to challenge an existing mentality in a way that causes the individual to question another aspect of the situation or draw their attention to a civil issue incorporated. Culture jamming is often used to take the power away from corporations and place it in the hands of the people, such as in the cases of faux ads created to mock the products they advertise. This is completely moral because the creators of these mock ads are not claiming the images as their own but simply using the existing picture to destroy its own branding. From “ Never Mind the Bollocks” by Evelyn McDonnell, she states that, “ sampling intelligently from the existing cultural reservoir requires a close analysis of the existing structures and uses of this material; remixing requires an appreciation of emerging structures and latent

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potential meanings.” So these creators are not “stealing” but simply remixing, like a Jazz musician would.

Looking at Jazz music as a genre, we can see that appropriation of pre-existing songs in the form of remixing is the majority of the art form. This is widely known among musicians and you can easily find dozens of unique remixes of the same songs made by different jazz musicians and bands. This is a rule that has been followed by African Americans and members of the Black jazz community since its creation. However the notion of remixing someone else’s culture changes once the remixer is not of the underprivileged group or from the specific culture that is being appropriated.

When thinking about cultural appropriation the first question I like to ask is: What is the context? Who/ what is being appropriated and by who? Context is key when viewing appropriation because depending on the power levels between the parties at play, certain things are okay while others are not. For example, a white person getting cornrows, wearing a sari, kimono etc. would not be fine in my book. These styles and forms of attire are specific to an ethnicity or culture that has been oppressed because of their differences by White people and White culture, therefore it is unacceptable for a White person to partake in.

Another question to consider when looking at the appropriation of oppressed ethnicities is; what is white culture? “White people are so defensive when it comes to cultural appropriation because they think everything they are doing is already offensive, when really it is a certain approach they have to keep in mind.” White history is plagued with stories of genocide, terrorism

and colonization which has brought them to the “ high pedestal” they now reside upon. This dark past has roots in every continent of the world and every individual at heart. Being a part of the system created from this amount of destruction comes with certain restrictions especially for those who “ caused” it. But since these restrictions don’t involve changing who you are as a individual from the outside in, as it still does for countless oppressed citizens, they should be respected with the utmost resilience and humility.

White culture is undefinable because it is a systematic structure not a way of living. The strong defining characteristics we see of culture around the world are made strong by the attempts to remove them. “ It is particular genealogies of racial and ethnic subaltern (lower rank) groups that makes their concern for cultural preservation a logical priority.” Richard Fung. Ethnic groups cling tightly to the aspects that they feel define them in order to not be lost completely in the whitewashing waves of colonialism. Some may argue that as artists we should have all aspects of creation at our fingertips, but the simple fact is that by allowing art to be a free for all we are allowing a system of injustice to continue, benefiting those at the top through unequal opportunity and representation.

Underrepresenting and misrepresenting groups is one of the biggest issues of appropriation, because the ways in which these cultures are being shown to the public (if at all) is through often negative and degrading stereotypes which brainwash the public to believe that is the truth. Interracial or intellectual desire to utilize and manipulate an aspect of another culture does not change the inequality of the system we live in. Just because one may claim to love a culture does not give them the right to participate in it, <https://assignbuster.com/our-understanding-of-cultural-appropriation/>

especially if that individual is of the dominant oppressive culture. For example, the stereotype of the Black wo/man has become so perpetually distorted that “trauma is evoked when a black body enters a white space” due to the amount of eroding power that has been placed upon it, as an object, over time. The stereotypes placed over a black body have become so ingrained into our beings that we no longer view them as individual but as a collective, explained in *My Black Death* written by Arthur Jafa.

In conclusion appropriation taken out of context is not inherently wrong. Utilizing outside ideas and incorporating them into our work is something we do every day without knowing. Influence is unavoidable but the ways in which we incorporate it are up to us. Plagiarism is defined as “the practice of taking someone else’s work or ideas and passing them off as one’s own”, and the line between it and inspiration runs thin and subjective. It is up to each individual artist to know when to credit others and educate themselves about the unequal representation and opportunities in society to be able to create in a way that is respectful and helpful to everyone. More fragile however is the subject of cultural appropriation. This is because it is directly tied to a history of maltreatment and subjugation that still affects people in society today. In my opinion if you are not of a certain ethnic group or extremely knowledgeable and competent in the legitimate culture of said group you should not attempt to represent it through attire, language, or any other form of personal expression. We can all do better to be aware of the differences between us and how these differences affect our standing in society, whether it comes to making our art or defining ourselves.