

What is cultural appropriation?

IF YOU TRAVEL A LOT, YOU BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND THE importance of airport food. When you are frazzled, frustrated from long lines, and nervous about your upcoming time in a metal capsule hurtling through the air, airport food can be the much-needed pause to collect yourself and feel human—or the final indignity that sends you to tears. And so it was, at the airport for my third trip of a very busy week, that I thought I'd found the respite that I desired.

I had spent the entire week driving from city to city eating fast food and disgusting edible cardboard from gas stations in my job as a marketing consultant. In the airports, I'd been lucky to find food that hadn't been shipped in prepackaged and then microwaved into a rubbery mass, and I'd have been even luckier if said restaurant sold a glass of wine fresh from a Franzia box. So by the time my last trip of the week had arrived, I was sick to death of travel food. But I'd been running around in meetings all morning and hadn't been able to eat properly before leaving for the airport. After having to return home ten minutes after leaving the house, realizing I'd left both my laptop charger and underwear at home, I'd fought torturous traffic, stood through the long security lines, took off my shoes, stood in the scanners, and finally made it to my gate with my bags, a tiny piece of my sanity, and a cavernous hunger.

Having safely located my gate and reassuring myself that I had enough time, I searched for a place to grab a quick bite and a glass of wine. I would catch my breath and the board the plane with a little less anxiety than had followed me through airport security. Provided I could find the right place to eat. This was not a gate I was used to, it was far off at the end of a terminal, where the nice seated restaurants are often replaced with vending machines. But I had hope. And after a few minutes, I found what I was looking for.

I found better than what I was looking for.

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I found Africa Lounge.

Could this be? Had I possibly found African food in a sea of stale bagels? What type of food might it be—West African? Ethiopian? We had a large Ethiopian population in the area. What a great idea, to put an African restaurant in the international airport and to showcase to new arrivals some of the ethnic and cultural diversity of the area and to make people of different backgrounds feel more welcome. Also, have you had African food? No matter which region you are sampling—it's delicious. I almost jogged over, smiling in excitement.

But as I got closer, the warning signs started to appear. Were those zebra print chairs? Oh no, was that a caveman mural on the wall? My joy was rapidly plummeting.

The menu was placed on a placard out front. I took a look with a small bit of remaining hope

Bacon & Swiss Burger.... hmm, okay not that.

Grilled Italian Chicken.... nope.

I scanned further and quickly saw that there would be no African food. No fried plantain, no kitfo, no egusi soup. This wasn't an African restaurant; it was an American restaurant with "African-themed decor." And a pretty sad one at that.

And suddenly, I was very sad. I thought of the amazing African food I'd grown up with, and the few African restaurants I'd been able to find in the Pacific Northwest. Food that most white people had probably never reveled in the way I had. Food that wouldn't be able to command the prices that four-star restaurants would, even though just as much time, care, and skill went into its preparation. Restaurants that would always be expected to be a "bargain" until they were helmed by white chefs who drastically Americanized their menus and called it "fusion" so they could impress food critics. I thought of the Ethiopian restaurant that my mom's best friend used to own. I remembered watching her spread large circles of batter on a griddle to make fermented bread (injera) to eat with spiced lentils cooked in butter. I told all of my friends about how great Ethiopian food was even though I knew that there was a good chance I'd be met with the tired joke, "They have food in Ethiopia?" I thought of the really amazing Nigerian restaurant I used to go to years ago. It had to shut down because there weren't enough West Africans in the area to bring in the revenue it needed. I had loved taking my oldest son there, to a restaurant filled with traditional West African décor. Showing my son how to roll his fufu into round balls to dip in his stew. The room smelled like my childhood, and the music brought me back to memories of slightly tipsy Nigerian men dancing in my childhood living room, full of Jollof rice and happiness. But Nigerian food hadn't been popular-



ized here yet—that is just beginning in the US within the last couple of years. I thought about how great it would be to come across a restaurant like that in an international airport. What a great way to show how international an American city could be.

But instead what I was standing in front of in that airport was a caricature of my culture. A caricature of the vibrant decorations and festive music. Everything I'd loved about African food had been skinned and draped around the shoulders of a glorified McDonalds. This was as close to African food as I was going to get here, and it was going to be served to me by a white man, in front of a caveman mural, and it would come with nachos.

ONE OF THE TRICKIEST CONVERSATIONS YOU'RE BOUND to have regarding race in America will likely be about cultural appropriation. While not as charged as “racist” or “privileged,” “cultural appropriation” is a term that carries a lot of emotion and confusion for many people of all races.

At its core, cultural appropriation is about ownership of one's culture, and since culture is defined *both* collectively and individually, the definition and sentiment about cultural appropriation changes with one's identification and sentiment about aspects of their culture.

If that last sentence sounded really complicated, that's because it is—and it becomes easy to see why cultural appropriation has been a difficult concept for many. But let's attempt to simplify what we can, so that even if we can't agree on everything about cultural appropriation, we can perhaps agree on some ways to discuss it.

We can broadly define the concept of cultural appropriation as the adoption or exploitation of another culture by a more dominant culture. This is not usually the wholesale adoption of an entire culture, but usually just attractive bits and pieces that are taken and used by the dominant culture. Some modern and fairly well known examples of cultural appropriation by the dominant white culture in the West are things like the use of American Indian head-dresses as casual fashion, the use of the bindi as an accessory, the adoption of belly-dancing into fitness routines, and basically every single “ethnic” Halloween costume.

In recent years, people of color have been able to draw more attention to the issue of cultural appropriation and the harm it causes, but it is still a concept that rubs many white people (and a few people of color) the wrong way. Many of us who were raised in the US were raised to think of America as a “melting pot.” Our beauty and our strength came from the exchange of cultures in this



nation of immigrants. Aren't we supposed to be appreciating other cultures? Doesn't this *fight* racism?

These sentiments are certainly understandable, but they err in conflating appreciation with appropriation. Appreciation should benefit all cultures involved, and true appreciation does. But appropriation, more often than not, disproportionately benefits the dominant culture that is borrowing from marginalized cultures, and can even harm marginalized cultures.

The problem of cultural appropriation is not in the desire to participate in aspects of a different culture that you admire. The problem of cultural appropriation is primarily linked to the power imbalance between the culture doing the appropriating and the culture being appropriated. That power imbalance allows the culture being appropriated to be distorted and redefined by the dominant culture and siphons any material or financial benefit of that piece of culture away to the dominant culture, while marginalized cultures are still persecuted for living in that culture. Without that cultural power imbalance, cultural appropriation becomes much less harmful.

Even if a culturally appropriative act means to respect culture, it cannot if it can't understand and respect the past and present power dynamics defining that culture's interaction with the dominant culture.

Let's look at the ever-tired example of rap music. Rap music was born from the rhythmic storytelling tradition of West Africa. Brought to the West by slaves, these rhythmic words wove their way through blues, jazz, and call-and-response and eventually birthed rap. From West Africa through slavery, the horror of the post-Reconstruction era, Jim Crow segregation, post-Reagan mass-incarceration—music has provided solace, hope, release, and strength to black people. And for all that black music gave to black Americans, it was not respected by white America. Blues, jazz, and rock were all deemed dangerous and unseemly forms of music at one time. Even as the art forms grew in popularity, the black musicians who performed them were treated like servants, often forced to enter and exit white-only clubs through the service entrance, to perform for crowds of white-only faces, for fees at a fraction of what white performers could command. The gain in popularity did little to increase the respectability of black music, until white artists began imitating it—and then most of the respectability and fame was given to the white artists. Think of artists like Elvis Presley who have been canonized in the annals of music history for work that was lifted almost wholesale from the backs of black musicians whose names most Americans will never know.

Rap has been long vilified by many in "respectable" white America. It is the language of "thugs" and is responsible for numerous societal ills from "black-on-



black” crime to single-parenthood. Rap music is the reason why your teenager is suddenly disrespectful. Rap music is the reason why kids don’t go to church anymore. Wife leave you? Pretty sure rap music told her to.

Rap is, in reality, a difficult and beautiful art form that requires not only musical and rhyming talent, but a mathematically complex sense of timing. Rap is a very diverse art form that can entertain, inform, enrage, comfort, and inspire. Like many art forms, many people will spend their entire lives working at it and will never be better than mediocre. Some, with rare talent, will rise to the top, others with rare talent will continue to toil in obscurity. But if you are a white rapper, you can be “okay” and go multi-platinum. Not only can a halfway decent white rapper sell millions of copies of a halfway decent album, raking in money that most black artists would never dream of, that white rapper is more likely to be accepted as “mainstream.”

That “legitimacy” bestowed by whiteness actually changes the definition of rap for the American culture. When the most popular rappers in the country are white rappers doing a decent impersonation of black master rappers, what kids see as legitimate rap changes. What they aspire to changes. Whom they give their money to changes. When these same white rappers are given Grammys for their attempts, over more talented black rappers, it makes it harder for rap by black artists to be accepted by mainstream culture—because it sounds different than what they’ve come to know as “good rap.”

And in all of this, the music that we see on television and hear on our radio is further divorced from the struggle and triumph that inspired it from Africa, through slavery, and through today. The art form that black Americans have relied upon for generations is no longer theirs. While the struggle remains.

So does this mean that if you are white, you should never rap? Should that avenue just never be open to you? This is the type of question that fuels the most heated debate around cultural appropriation.

First off, let’s acknowledge that you can do whatever you want. You can rap, you can belly dance, you can do anything allowed by law. But whether you “can” or “should” do something is a different matter—that it may be racially insensitive or harmful is beside the point. You can. If you are reading this book, I’m assuming you are doing so because you *don’t want to harm or offend people of other races*. And there’s a good chance that at least part of you is hoping that not harming others will also not cause you to have to give up too much of the social and cultural activities you have long enjoyed. But I’m not here to absolve you or condemn you for your rap aspirations.

And even if the question of whether or not you could become the world’s greatest white rapper hadn’t just been answered, it would be completely beside



the point. Continuing to look at rap as an example of cultural appropriation verses cultural appreciation: if you really love rap, you love more than just the beats. You love the artists, the pioneers, the science, the history of it all. You love the meaning and the significance of rap—not only what it has meant to you, but what it has meant to the artists and its fans. If you love rap you love the strength it has provided black people. If you love rap you understand that it is an art form that has been lovingly grown and nurtured in a hostile world. You also understand that the pain and adversity that helped shape rap is not something you’ve had to face. When you look at the history of rap, the heritage of rap, the struggle of rap, the triumph of rap—it may inspire you to want to rap yourself. But when all you can take is the art, and you can take the enjoyment and the profit and the recognition—and you can’t take any of the pain or the history or the struggle, can you do so and honestly call it rap if you love it at all?

But there’s an even bigger point to be recognized in all of this. Cultural appropriation is the product of a society that prefers its culture cloaked in whiteness. Cultural appropriation is the product of a society that only respects culture cloaked in whiteness. Without that—if all culture (even the culture that appropriators claim to love and appreciate) were equally desired and respected, then imitations of other cultures would look like just that—imitations. If all cultures were equally respected, then wearing a feathered headdress to Coachella would just seem like the distasteful decision to get trashed in sacred artifacts. If all cultures were equally respected, then white college kids with dreadlocks would look like middle-class white kids wearing the protest of poor blacks against the suppression, degradation, and oppression of white colonialists as costumes. But we don’t live in a society that equally respects all cultures, which is why what would otherwise be seen as offensive and insensitive behavior, is instead treated as a birthright of white Americans. And because we do not live in a society that equally respects all cultures, the people of marginalized cultures are still routinely discriminated against for the same cultural practices that white cultures are rewarded for adopting and adapting for the benefit of white people. Until we do live in a society that equally respects all cultures, any attempts of the dominant culture to “borrow” from marginalized cultures will run the risk of being exploitative and insulting.

That doesn’t seem fair on the surface, that we’d have to wait for a better world before we can start borrowing and adapting from other cultures with abandon. And it does not seem fair to those who feel that other cultures can take from white culture without the same risk of being labeled appropriative. But what actually is not fair, is the expectation that a dominant culture can just take and enjoy and profit from the beauty and art and creation of an oppressed

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culture, without taking on any of the pain and oppression people of that culture had to survive while creating it.

But who defines what is sacred to a culture? Who defines what was born of struggle? Who defines what is off limits? This is where things get complicated. What is offensive to one person in a marginalized culture, is not offensive to another. Some practices have been shared with white culture so long, and the emotional connection to the founding culture is so far changed, that for most, the question of appropriation is moot. And this is where the anxiety lies, because when you are trying to not appropriate a culture, but also trying to live in a diverse world, it can be hard to know what is or is not going to offend. And it can also be hard to be a part of the oppressed culture, and stand up for your ownership over your cultural art and practices, and know that other people from your culture may disagree with you and give permission for what is sacred to you to be used and changed.

However this debate plays out for the individual situations you may find yourself in, know that it cannot end well if it does not start with enough respect for the marginalized culture in question to listen when somebody says “this hurts me.” And if that means that your conscience won’t allow you to dress as a geisha for Halloween, know that even then, in the grand scheme of things—you are not the victim.