

WHAT IS CULTURAL APPROPRIATION



Cultural appropriation is often considered a somewhat ambiguous category. At its most basic level, cultural appropriation is adopting aspects of a culture that is not your own (Johnson 2015; Blackistone 2015).

Culture, of course, is comprised of a lot of different elements, including clothing, hair styles, food, and music. Cultures are not stagnant. **Cultural exchange** occurs when people mutually share cultures with one another (Johnson 2015). So what then is the difference between cultural exchange and cultural appropriation?

According to Maisha Z. Johnson, cultural appropriation "...refers to a particular power dynamic in which members of a dominant culture take elements from a culture of people who have been systemically oppressed by that dominant group" (Johnson 2015).

So unlike cultural exchange, which is equitable, cultural appropriation is rooted in the relationships formed out of histories of oppression of marginalized communities. While people may think that adopting aspects of another culture is celebrating that group of people, in many cases, this appropriation is reifying systems of racism and colonialism.

CHECK OUT THESE RESOURCES



"Don't Cash Crop On My Cornrows"
Amandla Stenberg

"What's Wrong with Cultural Appropriation?
These 9 Answers Reveal Its Harm"
Maisha Z. Johnson (Everyday Feminism)

"Arguments over the Appropriation of culture
have deep roots"
Viet Thanh Nguyen (LA Times)

"Is Your Halloween Costume Racist"
Kat Lazo (Everyday Feminism)

"Washington football fans are as guilty of
cultural appropriation as Rachel Dolezal"
Kevin B. Blackistone, *The Washington Post*



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"My Culture Is Not A Costume" The Politics of Cultural Appropriation

This information resource was created to aid students, faculty, staff, and individuals of the broader community to better understand cultural appropriation and to take steps towards active allyship. The aim of this resource is to foster intergroup dialogue on campus, in the workplace, and in the Tucson community.



HALLOWEEN



Many popular costumes — such as Geisha, Mexican Serapes, and “Gangsta” apparel — not only appropriate other cultures, but also stereotype them or suggest inaccurate histories. For example, a Pocahontas costume does not reflect the history of the real Pocahontas, who was abducted from her tribe as a teenager and taken to Europe, where she was forced to marry an Englishman (Johnson 2015; Lazo 2013).

In some cases, these costumes involve blackface (or brownface, yellowface, or redface). There have been highly publicized cases of college students throwing parties in which white students paint their faces black or brown and enact cultural stereotypes. Far from harmless fun, this practice is deeply imbedded in the origin of blackface — minstrel shows — which were a form of entertainment originating in the nineteenth century in which white actors used make up and clothing to portray black characters. Their depictions were racist and predicated on maintaining control over communities of color especially after the end of slavery.

In 2012, Ohio University students started a “We’re a culture, not a costume” campaign to call attention to the issue of cultural appropriation at Halloween.

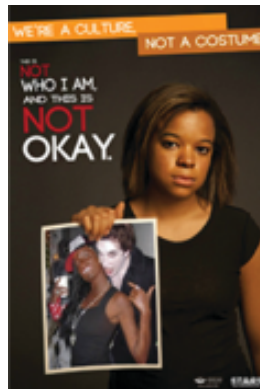


Image Credit: Ohio University
S*T*A*R*S

FASHION AND POP CULTURE



From music videos with white women like Miley Cyrus twerking to celebrities such as Gwen Stefani wearing a bindi, the fashion and pop culture industries are notorious for cultural appropriation. This is problematic especially because celebrities have a large amount of social capital and, consequently, influence over the population.



In April 2015, Amandla Stenberg, perhaps best known for her role of Rue in *The Hunger Games*, released a video on the politics of cultural appropriation in relationship to black women's hair. She discusses the ways in which black culture has been fetishized with the integration of hip hop into pop culture (Stenberg 2015).

This fetishization is problematic in multiple ways. For black folks, especially women, wearing one's hair natural can have a lot of consequences — from stigmatization as being “ghetto” to employment discrimination. When white folks wear their hair in cornrows or knots, they are gaining social esteem and fashionability by taking elements from a culture that is culturally and systemically subordinated (Lazo 2013). As Johnson summarizes, through cultural appropriation, “white people can freely do what people of color were [or are] punished for doing” (Johnson 2015).



Image Credit:
Gwen Stefani: Pinterest
Katy Perry: Democratic Underground

SPORTS



10 years ago, the American Psychological Association (APA) called for the termination of using any indigenous symbols and images in sports, citing the ways in which this stereotyping had an extremely negative impact on Native American children's identity development and self-esteem (Blackstone 2015). Still today, however, there is debate over whether or not teams like the Washington Redskins should be forced to change their name and mascot. Johnson describes the ways in which this form of cultural appropriation “trivializes violent historical oppression.” The term “redskin” itself was used to describe the scalps and genitalia of Native Americans that white people used to be paid to gather as proof of their “Indian kill” (Johnson 2015). Thus, the issue of this NFL team's name (among others in sports) is not only that of stereotyping Native Americans as “wild” or “savage.” It is also capitalizing on histories of colonization and perpetuating the inter-generation trauma still experienced by indigenous populations today.

Image Credit:
Outsports