
Magazine

Is Cultural Appropriation Always Wrong?

First Words

By PARUL SEHGAL SEPT. 29, 2015

It's a truth only selectively acknowledged that all cultures are mongrel. One of the first Indian words to be brought into English was the Hindi "loot" — "plunder." Some of the Ku Klux Klan's 19th-century costumes were, of all things, inspired in part by the festival wear of West African slaves; the traditional wax-print designs we associate with West Africa are apparently Indonesian — by way of the Netherlands. Gandhi cribbed nonviolence from the Sermon on the Mount.

We sometimes describe this mingling as "cross-pollination" or "cross-fertilization" — benign, bucolic metaphors that obscure the force of these encounters. When we wish to speak more plainly, we talk of "appropriation" — a word now associated with the white Western world's co-opting of minority cultures. And this year — these past several months alone — there has been plenty of talk. In film, there was the outcry over the casting of the blonde Emma Stone as the part-Chinese Hawaiian heroine of Cameron Crowe's "Aloha." In music, Miley Cyrus wore dreadlock extensions while hosting the V.M.A.s and drew accusations of essentially performing in blackface — and not for the first time. In literature, there was the discovery that Michael Derrick Hudson, a white poet, had been published in this year's Best American Poetry anthology under a Chinese pseudonym. In fashion, there was the odd attempt to rebrand cornrows as a Caucasian style — a "favorite resort hair look," according to Elle. And floating above it all has been Rachel Dolezal, the presiding spirit of the phenomenon, the white former N.A.A.C.P. chapter president who remains serenely and implacably

convinced of her blackness.

Questions about the right to your creation and labor, the right to your identity, emerge out of old wounds in America, and they provoke familiar battle stances. The same arguments are trotted out (It's just hair! Stop being so sensitive! It's not always about race!) to be met by the same quotes from Bell Hooks, whose essays from the early '90s on pop culture, and specifically on Madonna, have been a template for discussions of how white people "colonize" black identity to feel transgressive: "Ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture." It's a seasonal controversy that attends awards shows, music festivals, Halloween: In a country whose beginnings are so bound up in theft, conversations about appropriation are like a ceremonial staging of the nation's original sins.

It can feel like such a poignantly stalled conversation that we're occasionally tempted to believe we've moved past it. A 2013 NPR story on America's changing demographics and the evolution of hip-hop made a case that the genre has lost its identification with race, and that young people aren't burdened by anxieties about authenticity. "The melding of cultures we're seeing now may have Generation X and Generation Y shaking in their boots with claims of racial 'appropriation,'" the rapper and performance artist Mykki Blanco said in an online discussion about fashion's debt to "urban culture." "To Generation Z, I would clearly think it all seems 'normal.'" Hip-hop culture is global culture, according to this wisdom: People of Korean descent have dominated the largest international b-boy championships; twerking is a full-blown obsession in Russia. "We as black people have to come to grips that hip-hop is a contagious culture," Questlove, the drummer and co-founder of the Roots, said last year in an interview with *Time* magazine in which he defended Iggy Azalea, the white Australian rapper derided for (among other things) affecting a "Southern" accent. "If you love something, you gotta set it free."

But many of the most dogged critics of cultural appropriation are turning out to be the very people who were supposed to be indifferent to it. Members of supposedly easygoing Generation Z object — in droves — to Lena Dunham's posting a photograph of herself in a mock hijab. Others argue that the cultural devaluation of black people paves the way for violence against them. "What would

America be like if we loved black people as much as we loved black culture?” Amandla Stenberg, the 16-year-old star of “The Hunger Games,” asked, in her video message “Don’t Cash Crop My Cornrows,” which criticized pop stars like Katy Perry for borrowing from black style “as a way of being edgy.” In June, young Asian-Americans protested when the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, as an accompaniment to a lecture called “Claude Monet: Flirting With the Exotic,” invited visitors to pose next to Monet’s “La Japonaise” while wearing a matching kimono. And South Asian women, objecting to the fad for “ethnic” wear at music festivals like Coachella, continued a social-media campaign to “reclaim the bindi,” sharing photographs of themselves, their mothers and grandmothers wearing bindis, with captions like “My culture is not a costume.”

Is this just the latest flowering of “outrage culture”? Not necessarily. “The line between cultural appropriation and cultural exchange is always going to be blurred,” Stenberg acknowledges in her video. But it has never been easier to proceed with good faith and Google, to seek out and respect context. Social media, these critics suggest, allow us too much access to other people’s lives and other people’s opinions to plead ignorance when it comes to causing offense. When Allure magazine offers tips on achieving a “loose Afro” accompanied by a photograph of a white woman, we can’t overlook how actual black women have been penalized for the hairstyle — that two years ago it was widely reported that a 12-year-old black girl in Florida was threatened with expulsion because of her “distracting” natural hair, and that schools in Oklahoma and Ohio have tried to ban Afros outright. We can’t forget that South Asian bindis became trendy in the mid-’90s, not long after South Asians in New Jersey were being targeted by a hate group that called itself Dotbusters, referencing the bindi, which some South Asian women stopped wearing out of fear of being attacked.

Seen in this light, “appropriation” seems less provocative than pitifully uninformed and stale. It seems possible that we might, someday, learn to keep our hands to ourselves where other people’s cultures are concerned. But then that might do another kind of harm. In an essay in the magazine *Guernica*, the Pakistani novelist Kamila Shamsie called for more, not less, imaginative engagement with her country: “The moment you say a male American writer can’t write about a female Pakistani, you are saying, Don’t tell those stories. Worse,

you're saying: As an American male you can't understand a Pakistani woman. She is enigmatic, inscrutable, unknowable. She's other. Leave her and her nation to its Otherness. Write them out of your history."

Can some kinds of appropriation shatter stereotypes? This has been literature's implicit promise: that entering into another's consciousness enlarges our own. Reviewing "Green on Blue," Elliot Ackerman's new novel that looks at America's war in Afghanistan from the perspective of a young Afghan, the writer Tom Bissell said "there would be fewer wars" if more novelists allowed themselves to imagine themselves into other cultures. It's a seductive if utterly unverifiable claim. But what cannot be disputed is how profoundly we exist in one another's imaginations. And what conversations about appropriation make clear is that our imaginations are unruly kingdoms governed by fears and fantasies. They are never neutral.

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