

Catelyn Williams

Dr. Homer

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Why Is My Black Culture Only Accepted When A White Person Is Appropriating It?

“Cultural appropriation is a double-edged sword that can be beneficial or destructive depending on whether the appropriation strengthens the acquiring culture or not” (Sabnani). Cultural appropriation may be funny to some and even beneficial to the pockets of celebrities, but to me, the way I wear my hair as a protective style or the way my brother and father dress because that is all they have been accustomed to, is not a joke. Cultural appropriation goes beyond hairstyles and the joke of being “ghetto.” It is the constant oppression of black people. It is the acceptance and stealing of black culture, but not accepting black people. It is black culture being mocked by a society where blacks are seen as inferior. It is what happens when something is “too black” when done by Mo’Nique, yet “chic” when done by Becky.

Cultural appropriation is doing more damage than people care to or fail to realize. This paper will discuss the history of black culture, the hairstyles, and cultural appropriation in the media; the issues that come with cultural appropriation; and how we can possibly move forward from an issue that has been prevalent for years. Though cultural appropriation can affect many different races, my paper will explore the appropriation of black culture by mainly white individuals. This is an issue because there have long been conflict between the two races. Though blacks are seen as inferior by a large portion of society and have experienced great turmoil brought on by chiefly white Americans, black culture is accepted but not black people. Cultural appropriation is an issue for many reasons, but mainly because it allows prejudice and

racism to go on even though the ideas, styles, and fashions of black culture are loved and appropriated by a wide range of white people without having to like or care for the originators.

“What would America be like if we loved black people as much as we love black culture?” This question, raised by actress Amandla Stenberg in a video titled “Don’t Cash Crop My Cornrows,” went viral after its release in April of this year. In this video, which serves as such a great platform and example of current cultural appropriation to utilize throughout my paper, Stenberg digs into just how black hair has been appropriated and used for profit by white celebrities. Though cultural appropriation has just recently become a highly talked about topic in the media, it has been an issue for decades. In the book *Hair Story*, the authors dive deep into the history of black hair. Specifically in chapter five, “Politically Incorrect: Black Hair’s New Attitude,” the authors discuss instances of the eighties and nineties when black culture was appropriated by white people in the media. One of these instances included Bo Dyrek in the movie *10*, where she wore cornrows with beads on the end. Cornrows then became called “Bo Braids” by magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek* (Byrd and Tharps 101). Cornrows date back to the 1600s and days of slavery where in-house slaves were required to wear their hair tidy and neat, yet today they get little to no recognition until adopted by white individuals (13). The aims of protective styles are to reduce manipulation and eliminate tangling and breakage (The Natural Haven). Protective styles include, but are not at all limited to: cornrows, bantu-knots, twist-outs, two-strand twists, and flat twists. These styles are not “just because” styles like they are for those appropriating; they are necessary for the healthy life of black hair.

I am very knowledgeable of these styles because growing up I was very used to the hours of the week dedicated to detangling, twisting, braiding, and conditioning my hair. It is and always has been a way of life for me to upkeep my hair in a manner that would not lead to

shedding, tangles, and breakage. Though these styles are very much a part of mine and others' black culture and even date back to the days of slavery, Bo Dyrek, a white actress, is credited by *Los Angeles Times* as the standard for cornrows (Schmidt); and *Mane Addicts*, a beauty blog, posted a bantu-knot tutorial and called them "twisted mini-buns inspired by Marc Jacobs" (Finley). Why is that so? Why is it that my culture can only receive recognition when someone "high-fashion," rich, or white is behind the style? It hurts.

It hurts to have grown up in a culture that was never accepted and even talked down on, yet mocked by the majority of society. Kiesha Bowles, a writer and activist, wrote an article in September reflecting on cultural appropriation and what it felt like to be robbed of one's own creations and cultural make-ups. Her feelings were further backed up when she used the relevant example of her meme, which went viral, that exemplified the many ways society applauds white women for the same things that black women do but receive criticism for rather than appreciation. This meme that she unfortunately did not watermark was all over social media and no one ever applauded Bowles or credited her for her handiwork. She related this to cultural appropriation. The image used examples such as Kylie Jenner, a white teenage socialite, wearing cornrows and being labeled "chic" being compared to Ciara, a black R&B singer, being characterized as "ghetto" for the same thing. Bowles explained that after encountering Amandla Stenberg's video, she felt many emotions of anger and hurt. She expressed that being a black woman, she has struggled with feeling inferior to white woman all her life. She stated that we live in society where "White girls do it better" and that had become a lie that she believed (Bowles).

Not only has society allowed the "White girls do it better" stigma to contribute to the way that black women are demeaned, but has also sanctioned black culture to be profitable in the

media by mainly women who are not of color. Rapper Iggy Azalea has been guilty of cultural appropriation for majority of her career. Azalea, a white Australian woman who rose to fame after her rap debut single “Fancy” went five times platinum, has received backlash for her use of ebonics, or the scholarly term for blaccent. Critics condemn the rapper because while she uses a blaccent in rap, she speaks in a very blatant Australian accent (Clifton). “Blaccent” is a term used to describe speech and tone that is distinctive to the black community. Blaccent often uses slang and incorrect grammar because this is what society depicts as the expectation for how a black individual is supposed to talk. Blaccent is made up of slang words like home girl, “bruh,” “yo,” and “sister girl”; speaking like “I been,” not “I’ve been”; and words that are absolutely incorrect like “dat” to stand in place of “that.” Blaccent is an issue of cultural appropriation because it allows individuals to categorize and mock the way that some, definitely not all, black individuals speak. Iggy Azalea exemplifies cultural appropriation in more ways than one here because though she uses a blaccent to be popular in the music industry, she has rapped and called herself a “runaway slave-master.” Why would a white woman ever feel comfortable with including such a lyric if she cared about black culture? If she were trying to appreciate or love on black culture by rapping with a blaccent, then why or how would she have reverted to using such a touchy and deep-rooted issue as slavery in her song? Wanting to use black culture for fame, yet still oppressing the people. Oppressing a culture takes place when one contributes to the racist and hurtful stereotypes that society has deemed as humorous and profitable.

Furthermore, stereotypes constantly add fuel to the fire of appropriating cultures, and are on display in the media daily. Similar to Azalea’s partake in appropriating black culture, yet oppressing and contributing to the stereotypes of black people, singer Katy Perry has long been responsible for the same. In her 2014 music video, “This Is How We Do,” Perry sported her

green cornrows and “baby hairs” while eating watermelon and using her “blaccent.” The video that got over three hundred and fifty million *YouTube* views when she claimed to be appreciating black culture was the same video where the singer can be seen eating watermelon, having an attitude, and chunking up deuces—all stereotypes that have long been associated with black women. These things are not okay, and should not be looked to for humor, marketing techniques, or costumes. Perry, a white woman, appropriated these typical black, mainly female, stereotypes and in turn gained success and acknowledgement for her music video. Stereotypes are simply unfair to a culture as a whole. As stated by writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story” (Adichie). This furthermore highlights another issue that comes along with stereotypes and appropriating a culture; while it may be an outfit and an act for one, it is the identity and culture of someone else.

Katy Perry’s actions in her video highlighted many of the typical black woman stereotypes. From something very underlying as her “snappy attitude” that black women are usually expected to have and the image of Aretha Franklin, to the long history of the relationship between blacks and watermelon. Though many have probably seen the images and jokes surface on social media and even in political cartoons, blacks and watermelons became a racist issue dated back to post Civil War when blacks gained their emancipation. Blacks began to sell the fruit and it symbolized their freedom, but in turn Southern whites that did not approve of or were threatened by free blacks made the fruit “a symbol of black people’s perceived uncleanness, laziness, childishness, and unwanted public presence” (Black). Though Perry has been deemed “The Queen of Cultural Appropriation,” she does not seem to see any wrong in her doings. In a *Rolling Stone* interview, the singer asked “Can’t you appreciate a culture?” (Callahan). But

appreciating a culture does not mean that you utilize racist symbols and stereotypes and derogatory terms.

Appreciating a culture involves being aware of things such as: citing cross-cultural influences often and publicly, speaking or singing in one owns' voice, and not playing with stereotypes (Clifton). White singers like Adele and Sam Smith have never failed to acknowledge their soulful sounds being influenced by historically black genres and artists. This is so important because appreciating a culture means paying homage to its originators. Doing so means not stealing or trying to take something that was never a part of one's own culture. Secondly, appreciating a culture involves fixing the issue of speaking or singing in one's own voice instead of a "blaccent." Earlier this year after singer and actress, Zendaya Coleman wore faux locs to the Academy Award's, E!'s "Fashion Police" host Giuliana Rancic said that Coleman smelled of "patchouli oil, or weed." In an open letter to Instagram, Coleman stated "My wearing my hair in locs on an Oscar red carpet was to showcase them in a positive light, to remind people of color that our hair is good enough. To me locs are a symbol of strength and beauty, almost like a lion's mane." She went on to further respond in a more enlightening manner. Not only did she shed light on the issues of cultural appropriation, but explained the difference between cultural appropriation and appreciation. She explained that the key to appreciating a culture is to understand the history behind it and that she would never feel comfortable doing something without discovering its roots (Blay). If only the majority of society would go about things in the same fashion, then we could possibly eradicate and move forward from an issue that has haunted marginalized groups for years.

Imagine if the individuals that oppress the black community by contributing to racist stereotypes, utilized their platforms and privilege to highlight issues of racism. Failing to do such

a thing is another issue of cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation allows individuals to adopt the black culture, but not the issues that come with being black. This can be seen when white celebrities adopt blackness yet fail to speak on the racism that comes with black identity (Stenberg). This summer after Kylie Jenner uploaded an Instagram photo sporting her cornrows, social media went into an uproar. A specific comment left under the picture was from the “Don’t Cash Crop My Cornrows,” publisher Amandla Stenberg. She stated “when u appropriate black features and culture but fail to use ur position of power to help black Americans by directing attention towards ur wigs instead of police brutality or racism #whitegirlsdoitbetter.” Though written with abbreviated words and a hash tag, this comment speaks volumes. Jenner responded by saying “Mad if I don’t, Mad if I do...” followed by a jab to the *Hunger Games* actress about a boy (Devoe). It seems as though when confronted, white celebrities like Jenner cannot handle the truth. That would have been such an appropriate time to apologize, address her lack of knowledge of her wrong doings, or speak on what Amandla had called her out on, yet she dismissed the comment and responded with a low blow about Jaden Smith. Instances like this would be times for white, privileged individuals to use their platforms to make their counterparts more aware and in ways show that the issues of the black community do not have to be excluded to only black people. But not many white people do so; instead, they just act as though since they are not directly affected, then it is unnecessary to voice an opinion about. Is it that white celebrities do not care about the issues of black culture, but care about what the culture has to offer? These examples and questions that they invoke exemplify how cultural appropriation allows individuals to accept and participate in the culture, but not uplift the people or aid in their struggles.

This shows that an issue of cultural appropriation is not only failing to use one's white privilege, but also being a white, privileged celebrity and profiting from the culture of the marginalized group. In an article by Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, the author compares others profiting from black efforts to slavery. For example, when whites profited from the cotton that black slaves worked to pick. He expressed that seeing whites benefit and profit from the culture that Blacks have fostered to maintain who they are "makes us [blacks] want to holler" (Abdul-Jabbar). This issue dates back to the fifties when even the famous Elvis Presley was criticized for stealing from black culture. The rock-n-roll singer became a legend for his soulful sound. Elvis, whose sound was influenced by African-American blues, covered and made popular the song *That's All Right* that was originally performed by black singer Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup ten years after its release (Farley). More recently, an example of this was in 2014 when Macklemore, a white rapper, beat out black rap artists such as Jay-Z and Drake for four Grammy awards including: Best Rap Album, Best Rap Song, Best New Artist, and Best Rap Performance (Peart). After the win, the rapper posted an Instagram picture of a text message he sent to black rapper, Kendrick Lamar—who too was in the running for Best Rap Album. In the message he explained that he felt remorse for robbing the artist of a win (Lal). Sometimes, the artists are not always to blame, but society instead for crediting white individuals over blacks for the same things. It is as though accomplishments and styles will never receive credit as long as a black individual does them because society would rather have a face of no color being the one to profit.

Cultural appropriation promotes racism and stereotypes. Though cultural appropriation is something that may never be ridded of because some people do not see it as an issue and it is so widespread, there are things for individuals to consider when looking into the lenses of the oppressed and empathizing what it is like to walk in their shoes. Firstly, to avoid appropriating a

culture, simply ask. Sometimes individuals may truly not know they are offending someone, other times they simply do not care, but asking can clarify any confusion and one can find out whether their action is ill-informed or offensive (Blagrove). Secondly, engage with other cultures on more than an aesthetic level (Avins). Black rapper Nicki Minaj stated “If you want to enjoy our culture and our lifestyle, bond with us, dance with us, have fun with us, twerk with us, rap with us, then you should also want to know what affects us, what is bothering us, what we feel is unfair to us. You shouldn’t *not* want to know that.” In Avins’ article, the author also states that one should not forget that appropriation is not equal to diversity. She used the example of Paris Fashion Week and the Valentino collection that credited African influence, but lacked models of color. Cultural appropriation should instead be a cultural exchange, where profits and royalties are involved. A key thing to avoid is blackface when one is thinking of appropriating a culture, but other things include asking, “Why do I find this (insert: physical feature/hairstyle/dance/fashion/etc.) cool,” and “Is my ‘discovery’ or ‘muse’ directly related to its source,” (Blagrove)? Understanding why cultural appropriation is an issue and how it affects those appropriated are the starting elements to moving past the issue, but acknowledging these ways to avoid it and in turn doing them can help to. It is time to put a stop to something that does not have to be. It is time to not allow black accomplishments and contributions to receive the short hand of the stick, or even worse be credited to a white individual. It is time to eliminate an issue that prolongs racism and stereotypes and contaminates our society.

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