

The Difference Between Cultural Exchange and Cultural Appropriation

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September 30, 2013

Cultural appropriation is a term that isn't often heard in daily conversation, which means it's inevitably misunderstood by those who feel attacked by feminists, sociologically-informed bloggers, and others who use the term.

Many a white person sporting dreadlocks or a bindi online has taken cultural appropriation to mean the policing of what white people [can or can't wear](#) and enjoy.

Having considered their fashion choices a form of personal expression, some may feel unfairly targeted for simply dressing and acting in a way that feels comfortable for them.

The same can be said for those who find criticisms of the [Harlem Shake meme](#) and whatever it is [Miley Cyrus](#) did last month to be an obnoxious form of hipsterdom – just because something has [origins in black culture](#), they say, doesn't mean white artists can't emulate and enjoy it.

And then there are people who believe that *everything* is cultural



A person wearing a fake headdress with text reading "I'm just honoring your culture!" Source: [UCSD](#)

appropriation – from the passing around of gun powder to the worldwide popularity of tea.

They're tired of certain forms of cultural appropriation – *like models in Native American headdresses* – being labeled as problematic while many of us are gorging on Chipotle burritos, doing yoga, and popping sushi into our mouths with chopsticks.

They have a point.

Where do we draw the line between “appropriate” forms of cultural exchange and more damaging patterns of cultural appropriation?

To be honest, I don't know that there is a thin, straight line between them.

But even if the line between exchange and appropriation bends, twists, and loop-de-loops in ways it would take decades of academic thought to unpack, it has a definite starting point: *Respect*.

What Cultural Exchange Is *Not*

One of the reasons that cultural appropriation is a hard concept to grasp for so many is that **Westerners are used to pressing their own culture onto others and taking what they want in return.**

We tend to think of this as cultural exchange when really, it's no more an exchange than pressuring your neighbors to adopt your ideals while stealing their family heirlooms.

True cultural exchange is not the process of “*Here's my culture, I'll have some of yours*” that we sometimes think it is. **It's something that should be mutual.**

Just because Indian Americans wear business suits doesn't mean all Americans own [bindis and saris](#). Just because some black Americans straighten their hair doesn't mean all Americans [own dreadlocks](#).

The fact is, Western culture invites and, at times, [demands assimilation](#). Not every culture has chosen to open itself up to being adopted by outsiders in the same way.

And there's good reason for that.

[“Ethnic”](#) clothes and hairstyles are still [stigmatized as unprofessional](#), [“cultural”](#) foods are treated [as exotic past times](#), and the vernacular of people of color is ridiculed and demeaned.

So there is an unequal exchange between Western culture – *an all-consuming mishmash of over-simplified and sellable foreign influences with a dash each of Coke and Pepsi* – and marginalized cultures.

People of all cultures wear business suits and collared shirts to survive. But when one is of [the dominant culture](#), adopting the clothing, food, or slang of other cultures has nothing to do with survival.

So as free as people should be to wear whatever hair and clothing they enjoy, **using someone else's cultural symbols to satisfy a personal need for self-expression is an exercise in privilege.**

Because for those of us who have felt forced and pressured to change the way we look, behave, and speak just to earn enough respect to stay employed and safe, our modes of self-expression are still limited.

African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is consistently treated as lesser than [Standard English](#), but people whitewash black slang and use expressions they barely understand as punch lines, or to make themselves seem cool.

People shirk “*ethnic*” clothes in corporate culture, but wear bastardized versions of them [on Halloween](#).

There is no exchange, understanding, or respect in such cases – *only taking*.

What Cultural Exchange *Can* Look Like

That doesn’t mean that cultural exchange never happens, or that we can never partake in one another’s cultures. But **there needs to be some element of mutual understanding, equality, and respect for it to be a true exchange.**

I remember that at my sister’s wedding, the groom – *who happened to be white* – changed midway through the ceremony along with my sister into modern, but fairly traditional, Nigerian clothes.



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Even though some family members found it amusing, there was never any undertone of the clothes being treated as a costume or “*experience*” for a white person to enjoy for a little bit and discard later. He was invited – *both*

as a new family member and a guest – to engage our culture in this way.

If he had been obnoxious about it – *treated it as exotic or weird or pretended he now understood what it means to be Nigerian and refused to wear Western clothes ever again* – the experience would have been more appropriative.

But instead, he wore them from a place of respect.

That's what cultural exchange can look like – engaging with a culture as a respectful and humble guest, invitation only.

Don't overstay your welcome. Don't pretend to be a part of the household. Don't make yourself out to be an honored guest whom the householders should be grateful to entertain and educate for hours on end.

Don't ask a bunch of personal questions or make light of something that's clearly a sore spot. Just act like any polite house guest would by being attentive and knowing your boundaries.

If, instead, you try to approach another culture as a mooch, busybody, or interloper, you will be shown the door. It's that simple.

Well, maybe not as simple when you move beyond the metaphor and into the real world. If you're from a so-called [melting pot nation](#), you know what it's like to be a perpetual couch surfer moving through the domains of many cultures.

Where Defining Cultural Appropriation Gets Messy

Is the Asian fusion takeout I order every week culturally appropriative? Even though I'm Black, is wearing dreadlocks appropriating forms of religious

expression that really don't belong to me?

Is meditating cultural appropriation? Is [Western yoga](#) appropriation? Is eating a burrito, cosplaying, being truly fascinated by another culture, decorating with Shoji screens, or wearing a headscarf cultural appropriation?

There are so many things that have been chopped up, recolored, and tossed together to make up Western culture that even when we know things are appropriative in some way, we find them hard to let go of.

And then there are the things that have been freely shared by other cultures – [Buddhism for example](#) – that have been both respected and bastardized at different turns in the process of exchange.

At times, well-meaning people who struggle with their own appropriative behavior turn to textbooks, online comment boards, Google, and Tumblr ask boxes in search of a clear cut answer to the question, “Is *this* [insert pop culture thing, hairstyle, tattoo, or personal behavior here] cultural appropriation?”

That's a question we have to educate ourselves enough to, if not answer, [think critically about](#).

We have a responsibility to listen to people of marginalized cultures, understand as much as possible the blatant and subtle ways in which their cultures have been appropriated and exploited, and educate ourselves enough to make informed choices when it comes to engaging with people of other cultures.

So if you're reading this and you're tired of people giving white women wearing bindis crap for appropriating because “*freedom of speech*,” recognize

that pointing out cultural appropriation is not personal.

This isn't a matter of telling people what to wear. **It's a matter of telling people that they don't wear things in a vacuum and there are many social and historical implications to treating marginalized cultures like costumes.**

It's also not a matter of ignoring "real" issues in favor of criticizing the missteps of a few hipsters, fashion magazines, or baseball teams.

Cultural appropriation is itself a real issue because it demonstrates the imbalance of power that still remains between cultures that have been colonized and the ex-colonizers.

Regardless, this is not an article asking you to over-analyze everything you do and wrack yourself with guilt.

Because honestly, no one cares about your guilt, no one cares about your hurt feelings, and no one cares about your clothes or hair when they're pointing out cultural appropriation.

When someone's behavior is labeled culturally appropriative, it's usually not about that specific person being horrible and evil.

It's about a centuries' old pattern of taking, stealing, exploiting, and misunderstanding the history and symbols that are meaningful to people of marginalized cultures.

The intentions of the inadvertent appropriator are irrelevant in this context.

Therefore, what this article is asking you to do is educate yourself, listen, and

be open to reexamining the symbols you use without thinking, the cultures you engage with without understanding, and the historical and social climate we all need to be seeing.

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