

GENTRIFICATION

WHEN DID YOU BECOME GAY?

APPROPRIATION VS. APPRECIATION

WELFARE

WHITE PRIDE

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MODEL MINORITY

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**WHAT I HEAR
WHEN YOU SAY**

VIEWING GUIDE

CULTURAL APPROPRIATION



AN INTRODUCTION TO **WHAT I HEAR WHEN YOU SAY**

Deeply ingrained in human nature is a tendency to organize, classify, and categorize our complex world. Often, this is a good thing. This ability helps us make sense of our environment and navigate unfamiliar landscapes while keeping us from being overwhelmed by the constant stream of new information and experiences.

When we apply this same impulse to social interactions, however, it can be, at best, reductive and, at worst, dangerous. Seeing each other through the lens of labels and stereotypes prevents us from making authentic connections and understanding each other's experiences.

Through the initiative, What I Hear When You Say (WIHWYS), we explore how words can both divide and unite us and learn more about the complex and everchanging ways that language shapes our expectations, opportunities, and social privilege. WIHWYS 's interactive multimedia resources challenge what we think we know about race, class, gender, and identity, and provide a dynamic digital space where we can raise difficult questions, discuss new ideas, and share fresh perspectives.

CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

“ Cultural Appropriation is like taking a test and getting an “A.” And then someone else copies off your test and gets an “A” plus extra credit.

Franchesca Ramsey, Comedian & YouTube Personality



def·i·ni·tion

**CULTURAL
APPROPRIATION**
noun

The unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the customs, practices, ideas, etc. of one people or society by members of another and typically more dominant people or society.

What does it mean to appreciate vs. appropriate culture? Join Comedian and YouTube Personality, Franchesca Ramsey; Video Game Artist and Developer, Jamin Warren; Designer, Alyasha Owerka-Moore as they examine the history and social impact of cultural appropriation and talk about cultivating cultural appreciation through education and dialogue.



View the full Cultural Appropriation episode

<http://pbs.org/what-i-hear/web-series/cultural-appropriation/>

A QUICK LOOK AT THE LANGUAGE OF CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

- Cultural diffusion was coined by cultural anthropologist, Edward Tylor, in the late 19th century and describes the human process of transferring elements of culture between societies. There are three mechanisms through which cultural diffusion occurs:^{1 2 3 4}
 - Direct diffusion: when two cultures are geographically close to each other, resulting in intermarriage, trade, and even conflict.

For example, the exchange of culture, art, music, language, and food between the United States and Mexico.

- Forced Diffusion: when one culture subjugates another and forces its own customs on the conquered people. For example, colonizers forcing indigenous peoples to adopt their religion.
 - Indirect Diffusion: when traits are passed from one culture to another culture, without the first and final cultures being in direct contact. An example could be the presence of pizza in Indonesia, influenced by global media and the market created by tourists and transplants from North America and Europe.
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- Among the earliest references to cultural appropriation can be found in sociologist Dick Hebdige's 1979 book, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. He examines how White subcultures in Great Britain constructed "style" to reinforce communal identity and borrowed cultural or revolutionary symbols from other marginalized groups, particularly groups who have even less social or economic power (for example: punk style borrowed heavily from Rastafarian Culture and working-class apparel).⁵

 - The American historian and cultural theorist, George Lipsitz, coined the umbrella term Strategic Antiessentialism* to define the act of adopting elements of culture outside of your own and using them to define yourself or your group to challenge an imposed cultural identity. Unlike cultural appropriation, strategic anti-essentialism can be practiced by both minority cultures and majority cultures. It only becomes cultural appropriation when an element of culture is adopted from a marginalized group without respect for its cultural meaning or significance or with the purpose of exploiting the culture for economic or social gain. (*Antiessentialism: the idea that there is not a single experience shared by members of an identity group that defines what that group is.)^{6 7 8}

DIG DEEPER | UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

“ Cultural appropriation is when the majority group deems something that’s a cultural artifact or practice of a smaller group as uncivilized or just wrong completely but then find some ways to co-opt it and usually make a profit off of it. ”

- Franchesca Ramsey, Comedian/YouTube Personality

In February 2015, African-American, actor/singer, Zendaya Coleman, wore her hair in dreadlocks at the Academy Awards and was criticized by Fashion Police host, Giuliana Rancic who said, “Like, I feel like she smells like patchouli oil. Or weed.”

The comment was quickly followed by a social media backlash, and Zendaya posted a public response explaining why Rancic’s statement was so provocative and this issue is so significant:

“ There is already harsh criticism of African-American hair in society without the help of ignorant people who choose to judge others based on the curl of their hair. 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. ”⁹

Although Rancic issued a series of apologies, commentators pointed out that she and other media outlets had praised White reality-television celebrity, Kylie Jenner, as “edgy”, “raw”, and “boundary pushing” for wearing dreadlock extensions in her first Teen Vogue cover-shoot.¹⁰

UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

The concept of cultural appropriation has been discussed and debated in some form for over a century, but the term cultural appropriation, and our contemporary examination of the issues related to it, came to

prominence in the late 20th century, along with conversations about globalism, multiculturalism, and Intersectional perspectives on race, class, and gender. The Oxford Dictionary defines cultural appropriation as:

“ The unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the customs, practices, ideas, etc. of one people or society by members of another and typically more dominant people or society.”¹¹

There is considerable criticism about the concept of “cultural appropriation” and it often focuses around two arguments:

1. Sharing culture across communities and even continents is an inherently human process. The concept of “cultural appropriation” runs contrary to this fact and could inhibit future cultural exchange.¹²
2. Not everyone is held equally accountable for “appropriating” culture.¹³ For example: “Why is it cultural appropriation when a White woman wears dreadlocks, but not when a Black woman to straightens her hair?”

The key to understanding what cultural appropriation is (and is not), and why it matters lies not in the fact that traditions are transferred across cultures but in the social context in which this exchange is happening.¹⁴

CULTURAL EXCHANGE VS. CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

It is important that customs, beliefs, art, and culture are shared across and between communities, but there is a long history of socially dominant societies seizing aspects of minority cultures and profiting from them. The artifacts, traditions, or practices are often modified to make them more acceptable to the new marketplace, and in the process, they are disconnected from the artists/communities that

originated them and the cultural significance they once held.^{15 16}

An example of this is the adoption of blues and rock-n-roll by White musicians in the 1930s-1970s. In taking on these musical traditions, White artists made these once taboo, Black music forms accessible to White audiences--especially in a still-segregated America--and many became rich and famous in the process.¹⁷ While Black artists were eventually able to gain a level of success as well, White producers, executives, and artists still disproportionately benefited from this “cultural exchange.”

Today, rock-n-roll has become disproportionately identified with White culture.¹⁸ In 2017, African-American Actor and Comedian, Jessica Williams, was criticized on social media for “appropriating” White culture when wearing a Led Zeppelin t-shirt in a promotional photo for her podcast *2 Dope Queens*.¹⁹ As Williams and her co-host Phoebe Robinson pointed out, in addition to the fact that these criticisms disregarded the African-American roots of rock-n-roll, they also ignored the fact that Led Zeppelin themselves cite African-American blues artists such as Muddy Waters, Skip James, and Howlin’ Wolf as their primary musical influences.

CULTURAL ASSIMILATION VS. CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

Aesthetics, fashions, and aspects of culture associated with dominant groups will often be adopted and absorbed by minority cultures either by choice or by force. One version of this is cultural assimilation, which—like cultural appropriation—is an exchange that occurs in an unequal social context.

The Oxford Dictionary defines cultural assimilation as:
The incorporation of a culture into the general host society...The acceptance of the host culture may result in the loss of cultural identity of an ethnic group. In reality, cultural assimilation can range along a continuum from complete isolation, or segregation (see apartheid), to complete assimilation.²⁰

With this in mind, why might we define a White person wearing dreadlocks as cultural appropriation but not a Black person straightening their hair?

Even today, African-American children are ostracized, punished, and in extreme cases, barred from attending school for wearing traditionally “Black” hairstyles.^{21 22} Black adults experience bias, stereotyping, and racial profiling for wearing hairstyles that have cultural and historic roots in the African diaspora.²³

However, when White people--particularly people in positions of privilege--adopt Black hairstyles, they are able to do so as a fashion choice, an act of rebellion, or to establish their “otherness” without facing the risks or the social stakes of those whose “otherness” was imposed on them.^{24 25}

On the other hand, because the dominant American culture favors straight or “European” styles of hair, African-Americans are consistently given messages that to succeed, to belong, to be accepted, or to be taken seriously, their hair needs to conform to White standards; they need to assimilate. This does not mean that all Black women with straight hair have adopted that style under duress, or that assimilation is always negative, but the reality is that there are still many arenas in American society where African-American hair is strictly policed.^{26 27} In these circumstances, participation is only possible through assimilation.

Other examples of both forced and voluntary assimilation throughout history, include Native Americans being forbidden to speak their traditional languages, Indonesian indigenous communities adopting Islam from the ruling class, Catholic and Jewish immigrants assimilating into American protestant culture, and the global spread of the English language through American media.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

The concept of cultural appropriation may seem, at first glance, like yet another way we are constructing barriers between people at a time when we desperately need to be building bridges. But, as we look more closely at the entrenched inequality in the history of cultural exchange, it becomes clear that the term “cultural appropriation” is simply giving a name to the exploitation that has always existed and continues to this day.

Cultural appropriation allows people to be rewarded for the heritage and labor of oppressed and marginalized communities, disregards the origins and significance of what is being taken, and embraces the products of a culture while reinforcing or ignoring the prejudice experienced by the people who originated it. When we dismiss the history and impact of cultural appropriation, we are continuing to prioritize the feelings and desires of privileged communities over the rights of minorities.

Today, it is more important than ever that we have the opportunity to share knowledge, experiences, stories, beliefs, and creativity across cultures and countries. However, it is also essential that we understand and recognize the context in which these exchanges occur and consider our role in perpetuating or dismantling a long history of cultural inequality.

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

- How would you explain cultural appropriation to someone who has not heard the term before?
- What do you think the difference is between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation? Is there a danger of stigmatizing cultural exchange?
- The debate about cultural appropriation is often centered around the arts and fashion. Do you think that artists, authors, and makers should be free to borrow symbols, styles, and objects from cultures other than their own without being criticised? Why or why not?
- Who should decide when culture can and cannot be adopted or borrowed?
- What are some examples of cultural appropriation? What strategies could be used to transform those exchanges from cultural appropriation to cultural appreciation?
- Dive Deeper: What is considered cultural appropriation in this example: A White woman wearing dreadlocks. A Black woman who straightens her hair. Why?



Hear different perspectives on the Topic of Cultural Appropriation
<https://pbs.org/what-i-hear/topics/cultural-appropriation/>

LEARN MORE

ONSTAGE IN AMERICA: HONKY

<http://www.pbs.org/show/onstage-america/>

A stage comedy about race, culture and identity in America that combines comedy, satire, and social commentary to examine and challenge contemporary attitudes.

EMPIRE

<http://www.pbs.org/pov/empire/>

An immersive documentary project that examines the still-unfolding legacy of Dutch colonialism and the contemporary aftershocks of the world's first brush with global capitalism.

PBS BLACK CULTURE CONNECTION

<http://www.pbs.org/black-culture/home/>

is your resource and guide to films, stories and voices across public television centered around Black history and culture.

SLAVERY AND THE MAKING OF AMERICA

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/index.html>

A four-part series documenting the history of American slavery from its beginnings in the British colonies to its end in the Southern states and the years of post-Civil War Reconstruction.

VOICES FROM THE EPISODE | CULTURAL APPROPRIATION



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Host of MTV News web series Decoded
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Founder of Alphanumeric and Fiberops Brand

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