

TOPIC GUIDE: CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

"CULTURAL APPROPRIATION SHOULD BE WELCOMED NOT FEARED"**PUBLISHED: 19 FEB 2018****AUTHOR: SAM BURT**

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**INTRODUCTION**

In September 2016, the novelist Lionel Shriver sparked a heated debate when she attacked the concept of “cultural appropriation.” [Re: [Guardian](#)]. Shriver cited a definition of cultural appropriation as the act of “taking intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artifacts from someone else’s culture without permission.” Instances of appropriation have hit the headlines in recent years, with university campuses especially active in banning or protesting perceived infractions, including yoga clubs [Ref: [Independent](#)], theatre productions [Ref: [Telegraph](#)], and themed cultural events [Ref: [Economist](#)]. But the same debate is occurring in fields ranging from fashion design to music videos and literary fiction to ‘cultural’ cuisine. These arguments centre on who has the right to use cultural symbols, and what forms the basis of this right. To Shriver and her supporters, accusations of cultural appropriation are a growing threat to freedom of speech and expression, ultimately inhibiting mutually enriching exchanges between people from different backgrounds. They contend that ‘using social pressure and even shaming to enforce codes about what is OK and not OK, it becomes fundamentally oppressive.’ [Ref: [Observer](#)]. However, commentators criticised Shriver’s speech for failing to recognise what they see as a crucial difference between cultural *exchange* and *appropriation*: ‘the difference is power. In particular, the power of the privileged to borrow and normalise a cultural element of another group, while the appropriated group is often demonised and excluded because of that very element.’ [Ref: [AlterNet](#)]. Cultural appropriation, on this view, represents and reinforces the exploitation of marginalised cultures. Far from limiting freedom, would taking the idea of appropriation seriously give a voice to underrepresented cultural groups? Does the injunction to seek permission for cultural borrowing limit our cultural horizons? Or can it teach us to negotiate our differences on a basis of equality and respect?

For further reading use the menu bar on the right hand side.

DEBATE IN CONTEXT

This section provides a summary of the key issues in the debate, set in the context of recent discussions and the competing positions that have been adopted.

Cultural borrowing or appropriation?

For many commentators, the question remains: where to draw the line between legitimate cultural borrowing and illegitimate appropriation? Specific instances of appropriation seem to be open to multiple interpretations. Pop star Beyoncé, for instance, was criticised for wearing a traditional Indian headpiece out of context in her video [Ref: **Medium**]. yet some black activists claimed her video acknowledged black contributions to Indian cultures [Ref: **Time**]. How, then, are we to use the concept in public judgment if one person's 'appropriation' is another's 'recognition'? To some, the discourse of appropriation prioritises 'identity politics' and subjective experience over 'universal values', endangering key Enlightenment concepts of truth and knowledge that underpin modern pluralist, tolerant societies. [Ref: **spiked**] For writers such as Nick Cohen, talk of 'cultural appropriation' vastly oversimplifies a messy history of continuous cultural interaction and change, instead presenting cultures as separate, homogenous entities. In this way, anti-racism campaigners targeting cultural appropriation have unwittingly reproduced racist ideas: 'Not everyone in an ethnicity shares the same identity, and it is a rank prejudice to treat them as if they do.' [Ref: **Standpoint**] On the other side, campaigners accept that it is not always easy to disentangle the different influencers of cultural artifacts whilst maintaining that this complexity is not sufficient grounds to ditch the concept of appropriation altogether. Rather, the language of appropriation is a necessary starting point for protecting marginalised cultural identities in our increasingly interconnected, globalised and multicultural societies. Moreover, they argue, the championing of cultural diversity and individualism obscures the way that a collective cultural identity can be empowering for minorities. Rebutting Shriver, Yen-Rong notes 'it's easy to say that "Asian isn't an identity" when you haven't experienced what it's like to have to confront racism in your everyday life.' [Ref: **Inexorablist**] Jawun Urujaren argues that the idea of cultural appropriation as mutually beneficial elides power differentials that shape the outcome in one side's favour. In short, marginalised cultures are required to assimilate into dominant cultures while the reverse is not true. Cultural appropriation is a supreme exercise in privilege, 'using someone else's cultural symbols to satisfy a personal need for self-expression.' [Ref: **Everyday Feminism**] Is the fight against cultural appropriation bringing political conflict into everyday life? Or is this an overdue recognition of everyday domination and exploitation?

Identity politics

To its critics, cultural appropriation reflects histories of injustice and their legacy of entrenched inequality. Appropriation, on this view, cannot be praised or condemned in isolation. In unequal societies, dominant cultural groups use their superior status to use, and profit from, marginalised cultures. Some commentators see it as a logical extension of the imperial plundering of subject peoples, with culture itself now being turned into an 'extractable' commodity [Ref: **OpenDemocracy**]. For Yasmin Abdel-Magied, 'in demanding that the right to identity should be given up, Shriver epitomised the kind of attitude that led to the normalisation of imperialist rule...It's the kind of attitude that lays the foundation for prejudice, for hate, for genocide.' [Ref: **Guardian**]. Others counter that the definition of 'appropriation' is being stretched beyond credibility. More importantly, the term can be a distraction from more substantive offences, such as intellectual property theft. For journalist Christine Emba, this conceptual vagueness 'obscures offences that might actually deserve more censure, exaggerates some that don't deserve much at all, and weakens the power of the concept.' [Ref: **Washington Post**] Reported instances include students protesting 'inappropriately prepared' ethnic foods [Ref: **New Republic**] to 'blackface' [Ref: **Huffington Post**]

and the appropriation of cultural artifacts by colonial powers [Ref: [Guardian](#)] Is it right to suggest these are somehow morally equivalent? Even if cultural appropriation is acknowledged as a problem, surely it is a distraction from more important 'real world' issues - poverty, war, the environment? However, cultural appropriation isn't just seen as a reflection of historic injustices. It is also blamed for harming members of marginalised cultures, by continually reminding them of their subaltern status. Consequently, campaigning against cultural appropriation could be regarded an effective way to draw public attention to underlying social problems. Is the prioritising of some cultures over others an unavoidable consequence of cultural appropriation?

Telling other people's stories: Who owns culture?

In her Brisbane speech, Lionel Shriver suggested that anxieties about cultural appropriation were having a chilling effect on artistic expression, discouraging writers from exploring characters with lives different to their own. 'Taken to their logical conclusion', this idea 'challenges our right to write fiction at all.' [Re: [Guardian](#)] Others have expressed concern about problematising the act of empathising with people from different cultures. The result may be an impoverished and even less representative cultural landscape, in which, for example, respected white authors have been advised not to write about black characters [Ref: [Telegraph](#)] Against this policing of the imagination, writes Izzy Lyons, 'we should be revelling in the exchange of stories between one another - not policing who can tell them.' [Ref: [spiked](#)] Those on the other side of the debate insist that appeals to freedoms of speech and expression ring hollow when these freedoms are unequally distributed amongst different cultural groups. For example, in Western societies, the business suit is widely accepted as 'appropriate' work attire for all, yet minority hairstyles such as dreadlocks or cornrows would be considered 'unprofessional' in many of the same workplaces. Therefore, argues Kat Blaque, cultural appropriation affords members of a dominant culture the right to experiment and play with cultural symbols, which is denied to the cultures to which those symbols belong [Ref: [YouTube](#)]. The same arguments apply to the publishing industry, which remains demographically unrepresentative. Moreover, white writers can more easily find success writing about marginal subjects than those subjects themselves writing about their cultures. In any case, cultural appropriation is framed as 'A question of civility, of recognising that maybe you want to ask before you take something that belongs to others. Especially if you intend to profit from it.' [Ref: [Financial Times](#)] Doesn't appropriation, however well-intentioned, remove an opportunity from marginal subjects to represent their culture themselves? In a crowded marketplace, is there only so much room for different voices to be heard?

ESSENTIAL READING

It is crucial for debaters to have read the articles in this section, which provide essential information and arguments for and against the debate motion. Students will be expected to have additional evidence and examples derived from independent research, but they can expect to be criticised if they lack a basic familiarity with the issues raised in the essential reading.

FOR

In defence of cultural appropriation [🔗](#)

Kenan Malik *New York Times* 14 June 2017

The left's misguided obsession with cultural appropriation [🔗](#)

George F Will *Washington Post* 12 May 2017

The mad, bad crusade against 'cultural appropriation' [🔗](#)

Mary Wakefield *Spectator* 1 April 2017

In defence of cultural appropriation [🔗](#)

Yo Zushi *New Statesman* 12 October 2015

AGAINST

Cultural appropriation suppresses minority voices [↗](#)

Navneet Alang *The Star* 17 May 2017

What is cultural appropriation and why is it wrong? [↗](#)

Nadra Kareem Nittle *ThoughtCo.* 7 February 2017

As Lionel Shriver made light of identity, I had no choice but to walk out on her [↗](#)

Yassmin Abdel-Magied *Guardian* 10 September 2016

What's Wrong with Cultural Appropriation? These 9 Answers Reveal Its Harm [↗](#)

Maisha Z Johnson *Everyday Feminism* 14 June 2015

IN DEPTH

Full speech: 'I hope the concept of cultural appropriation is a passing fad' [↗](#)

Lionel Shriver *Guardian* 13 September 2016

A Point of View: When does borrowing from other cultures become 'appropriation'? [↗](#)

Adam Gopnik *BBC News* 11 March 2016

The Dos and Don'ts of Cultural Appropriation [↗](#)

Jenni Avins *Atlantic* 20 October 2015

KEY TERMS

Definitions of key concepts that are crucial for understanding the topic. Students should be familiar with these terms and the different ways in which they are used and interpreted and should be prepared to explain their significance.

Cultural appropriation [↗](#)

Social justice warrior (SJW) [↗](#)

BACKGROUNDERS

Useful websites and materials that provide a good starting point for research.

Can cultural appropriation ever be appropriate? [↗](#)

Nilanjana Roy *Financial Times* 11 July 2017

Thank God for cultural appropriation [↗](#)

Richard Cohen *Washington Post* 5 June 2017

Cultural appropriation is a problem. A misguided burrito cart is not part of it [↗](#)

Christine Emba *Washington Post* 2 June 2017

The case against Dana Schultz [↗](#)

Josephine Livingstone and Lovia Gyarkye *New Republic* 22 March 2017

How cultural appropriation becomes trendy – and the real cost of our consumerism [↗](#)

Rachel Kuo *OpenDemocracy* 16 December 2016

Elena Ferrante, Lionel Shriver, and the artist's right to cultural appropriation [↗](#)

Michelle Goldberg *Slate* 4 October 2016

What are white writers for? [↗](#)

Jess Row *New Republic* 30 September 2016

Lionel Shriver puts on a sombrero [↗](#)

Jia Tolentino *New Yorker* 14 September 2016

Cultural appropriation isn't insulting – it makes the world a better place [↗](#)

Naomi Firsht *Telegraph* 16 August 2016

Cultural appropriation: when 'borrowing' becomes exploitation [↗](#)

Olufunmilayo Arewa *The Conversation* 20 June 2016

Dear white people with dreadlocks: some things to consider [↗](#)

Emanuella Grinberg *CNN* 1 April 2016

Theft and Artistry: Coldplay, Beyonce in India spark discussion on appropriation [↗](#)

Eyder Peralta *NPR* 6 February 2016

Oberlin's food isn't 'cultural appropriation.' That doesn't mean the students are wrong [↗](#)

Aaron R Hanlon *New Republic* 23 December 2015

Why progressives are wrong to argue against cultural appropriation [↗](#)

Steve Patterson *Observer (USA)* 20 November 2015

All cultures are mine [↗](#)

David Marcus *Federalist* 26 October 2015

6 Ways you harm me when you appropriate black culture – and how to appreciate it instead [↗](#)

Maisha Z Johnson *Everyday Feminism* 24 August 2015

Fashion's cultural appropriation debate: pointless [↗](#)

Minh-ha T Pham *Atlantic* 15 May 2014

ORGANISATIONS

Links to organisations, campaign groups and official bodies who are referenced within the Topic Guide or which will be of use in providing additional research information.

IN THE NEWS

Relevant recent news stories from a variety of sources, which ensure students have an up to date awareness of the state of the debate.

Indigenous activists call on UN to make cultural appropriation illegal [↗](#)

Christopher Hooton *Independent* 15 June 2017

Katy Perry apologises for cultural appropriation in past music video [↗](#)

Independent 12 June 2017

Emmett Till's coffin, a hangman's scaffold and a debate over cultural appropriation [↗](#)

New York Times 31 May 2017

Canada's war over 'cultural appropriation' [↗](#)

The Economist 25 May 2017

Anthony Horowitz: I was told not to create black characters for my books [↗](#)

21 May 2017

White painter loses art show over cultural appropriation debate [↗](#)

Alexander Nazaryan *Newsweek* 5 May 2017

In court and on campus, US debates cultural appropriation [↗](#)

Times Higher Education 20 March 2017

Vogue, Karlie Kloss blasted for geisha photo spread [↗](#)

CBC News 15 February 2017

Musical 'Aida' cancelled at Bristol University amid race row over 'cultural appropriation' [↗](#)

Telegraph 24 October 2016

Marc Jacobs apologises amid row over using white models with dreadlocks [↗](#)

Guardian 20 September 2016

Students offered counselling over small sombrero hats at tequila-themed birthday party [↗](#)

Independent 6 March 2016

EUSA bans students from dressing as Pocahontas and Caitlyn Jenner in strict costume policy [↗](#)

Independent 21 January 2016

University yoga class suspended due to ‘cultural appropriation’ dispute [🔗](#)

Independent 22 December 2015

University of East Anglia Students’ Union bans ‘racist’ Mexican sombreros from Freshers’ Fair [🔗](#)

Independent 29 September 2015

MFA cancels Kimono Wednesdays after protesters called it racist [🔗](#)

Boston 25 News 8 July 2015

San Francisco Giants considering ban on culturally insensitive attire [🔗](#)

USA Today 9 July 2014

AUDIO/VISUAL

Bieber’s dreadlocks: appropriation or appreciation? [🔗](#)

BBC Newsnight April 2016

Black San Francisco student filmed harassing white student over his dreadlocks in ‘cultural appropri [🔗](#)

Independent 30 March 2016

The problem of cultural appropriation [🔗](#)

ABC (Australia) 17 December 2015

What’s wrong with cultural appropriation [🔗](#)

Kat Blaque *YouTube* October 2015

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