

# What is (the wrong of) cultural appropriation?

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## Abstract

Social media is full of accusations and counter-accusations of a wrong called ‘cultural appropriation’. Our goal in this article is to sift through these deliberations and identify what cultural appropriation is, what it is not, and what, if anything might be wrong with it. We begin by explaining why public discourse about cultural appropriation should matter to political theorists of multiculturalism, especially in the anti-immigrant mood that has engulfed many immigrant-receiving countries. We then place cultural appropriation under the umbrella of cultural engagement, before identifying two forms of problematic cultural engagement – cultural offence and cultural misrepresentation – that are often conflated with cultural appropriation. In the next section, we define cultural appropriation as the appropriation of something of cultural value, usually a symbol or a practice, to others. We go on to explain that two additional conditions must be present to define an act of cultural appropriation: the presence of significant contestation around the act of appropriation, and the presence of knowledge (or negligent culpability) in the act of appropriation. Although this account of cultural appropriation is normative, cultural appropriation is often wrong only in a trivial sense. One of the ways it can become more serious is through the presence of what we term ‘amplifiers’. The contextual conditions that can render acts of cultural appropriation more egregious include: the existence of a power imbalance between the cultural appropriator and those from whom the practice or symbol is appropriated; the absence of consent; and the presence of profit that accrues to the appropriator.

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Ultimately, we find that there are very few instances of seriously wrongful cultural appropriation, and that many of the actions decried as cultural appropriation may be wrongful, but not because they appropriate.

### Keywords

Amplifier, cultural appropriation, cultural harm, cultural wrong, misrepresentation, multiculturalism

## Introduction

Social media is full of accusations and counter-accusations of a wrong called ‘cultural appropriation’. These are directed at those who appear to be using the cultural practices of groups in which they are not members. All kinds of actions have been labelled as cultural appropriation: the teaching of yoga by people who cannot trace their descent to the Indian sub-continent; the wearing of corn rows by people who cannot trace their background to the African continent; Lady Gaga’s wearing of a burqa in a music video, in which the burqa itself appears sheer and she is dancing suggestively; the wearing of a Chinese-style dress by an American teenager to her school prom; the use of blackface; and the use of the *ka Mate* Haka in several commercial advertising campaigns, to name a few. The anger on both sides of these debates is substantial, even if the clarity of what they are claiming is not. Many important questions remain unsatisfactorily answered: What is it to culturally appropriate? How, if at all, might it be wrong? And how is it different from other forms of cultural engagement? Our goal in this article is to sift through these deliberations and identify what cultural appropriation is, what it is not, and what, if anything might be wrong with it.

We proceed as follows. We begin by explaining why public discourse about cultural appropriation should matter to political theorists of cultural diversity, especially in the anti-immigrant mood that has engulfed many immigrant-receiving countries. We then place cultural appropriation under the umbrella of cultural engagement, before identifying two forms of problematic cultural engagement – cultural offence and cultural misrepresentation – that are often conflated with cultural appropriation. In the next section, we define cultural appropriation as the appropriation of something of cultural value, usually a symbol or a practice, to others. We go on to explain that two additional conditions must be present to define an act of cultural appropriation: the presence of significant contestation around the act of appropriation, and the presence of knowledge (or culpable ignorance) in the act of appropriation. Although this account of cultural appropriation is normative, cultural appropriation is often wrong only in a trivial sense. One of the ways it can become more serious is through the presence of what we term ‘amplifiers’. The contextual conditions that can render acts of cultural

appropriation more egregious include: the existence of a power imbalance between the cultural appropriator and those from whom the practice or symbol is appropriated; and the presence of profit that accrues to the appropriator. We conclude by offering some thoughts about the impact of our analysis on the larger deliberations around the issues of contemporary cultural diversity in an anti-immigrant era.

Our contribution here is mainly conceptual. We aim to give an account of what cultural appropriation is, and correspondingly what it is not, so that we can better understand the claims and counter-claims of those who defend and object to cultural appropriation or related forms of cultural engagement. Ultimately, we find that there are very few instances of seriously wrongful cultural appropriation, and that many of the actions decried as cultural appropriation may be wrongful, but not because they appropriate.

## **Cultural appropriation and multiculturalism**

Why should political theorists be attentive to disputes about cultural appropriation? One reason to examine these controversial cases, rather than dismiss them as the stuff of twitter wars and of no relevance to serious political deliberations is that this is where much of the political multicultural heat is now. Indeed, somewhat ironically, many people across the world express hostility toward immigrants and immigrant cultures, as well as toward indigenous groups, while at the same time engaging and appropriating from these other cultures. This engagement and appropriation is not lost on members of these cultures and their allies who hotly contest and condemn such actions. Yet these debates on the morality of cultural engagement in diverse multicultural democracies are surprisingly under-theorized.

What we might call ‘first-wave multiculturalism’ focused on the nature of minority rights in liberal democratic states, and correspondingly the institutional accommodations that best respect these rights across a range of public spheres, including schools, courts, hospitals and government buildings and services (Gutmann, 2003; Kymlicka, 1996; Taylor, 1994). ‘Second-wave’ multicultural theory has emphasized how best to sustain inter-citizen trust and social cohesion across difference, including whether the presence of accommodation policies supports or hinders social cohesion (Banting and Kymlicka, 2006; Barry, 2001; Fraser and Honneth, 2003; Lenard, 2012; Reitz et al., 2009). But neither of these now significant literatures has focused directly on the acceptable and unacceptable ways of engaging in cultural exchange, i.e., the ways in which cultures take from each other, and adopt and adapt cultural practices of all kinds as their own. It is this gap in multicultural political theory that we aim to address, and in the process use theory to make sense of our current politics.

A quick scan of public deliberations around acts of (alleged) cultural appropriation reveal two clusters of responses. The first adopts a sceptical attitude towards claims of cultural appropriation. One strand of this cluster rejects these accusations as entirely unwarranted, on the grounds that cultures are always interacting with

and borrowing from each other. Attempting to police who can engage in and with cultural practices and traditions unnaturally halts cultural interactions. Frank Furedi, for example, writes ‘the charge of cultural appropriation has become a means to police people’s taste, their choice of clothes, the food they consume, even the way they dance or sing’ (Furedi, 2016). Another, related, strand emphasises the benefits of cultural appropriation. This is exemplified by statements like ‘I can’t imagine my life without the music of Dylan, The Stones, and Led Zep’ (Sumner, 2017), or ‘[cultural appropriation is] not only what makes American culture so rich, but it is also a big part of the reason America is so successful’ (Weiss, 2017).

And finally, an increasingly vocal sceptical strand argues, additionally, claims of cultural appropriation should be dismissed as the worst form of political correctness. Those making these kinds of claims propose that ‘identity’ politics – the so-called tendency among members of minority groups to form alliances among themselves rather than to seek cross-cutting alliances – has taken over our political space in harmful ways, and in particular that its doing so is a sign that multiculturalism as such has failed. Multiculturalism was meant to be about accommodating minorities in the public space – adopting policies that permitted their political participation on their own terms – but in fact it produced a harmful and fragmentary politics with which we must now contend (Bertossi, 2010; Joppke, 2014). The best expression of this view proposes that too much focus on avoiding offense of minorities, and of ensuring that their identities are recognized and respected in the public space, has taken attention away from the economic inequalities, or ongoing human rights violations, that require our attention: ‘How absurd and wasteful, then, is the United Nation’s [sic] opposition to cultural appropriation, as if it had nothing more important to do!’ (DeGroot, 2018; see also Barry, 2001). Many expressions of this view propose that minorities’ skins are too thin, that they should be amenable and tolerant of ridicule, and that they should be focused on acculturating into dominant cultural norms rather than on feeling slighted by inaccurate and belittling representations of their cherished traditions and markers in public spaces. This willingness to dismiss the claims made by minorities is consistent with the wave of anti-immigrant and anti-multicultural sentiment that is sweeping many democratic countries.

The second cluster of responses is, on the other hand, generally sympathetic to the claim that there is something morally troubling about cultural appropriation. Typically, this cluster of responses treats cultural appropriation as theft or something akin to it, i.e., as the taking of something valuable that belongs to others, usually others who are or have been the victim of social marginalization, by more privileged individuals, and for their own advantage. ‘Cultural appropriation is about power’, says one critic, ‘that empowers white people to take whatever they want’ (Anyangwe, 2018). Accusations of cultural appropriation from this camp typically treat the problematic act as part of a long-standing history in which privileged individuals treat those with less power with contempt and disdain. Demands to return or desist in appropriation are consistent with advocating on behalf of marginalized groups. More generally, this cluster of responses accepts,

more or less unchallenged, the claim that any act of appropriation is morally wrong, and correspondingly must be halted.

This cluster of responses finds support from two additional voices in the cultural appropriation debates. One voice expresses a reluctance to engage in cultural practices that ‘belong’ to others, because doing so feels weird or uncomfortable in some way (Serrell, 2016).<sup>1</sup> A second and related voice worries that engaging in the cultural practices of others is somehow inauthentic and so objectionable; to engage in a particular cultural practice one must be *from* the culture in some objective way. This is the kind of claim made by those who object to the spread of yoga across western countries – the people who wander into a yoga class seeking a good workout are practicing yoga inauthentically. It is also launched at those who wear Native American headdresses without having earned the right to do so and at fashion models who wear turbans for reasons of style rather than religious practice (*Al Jazeera News*, 2018; Furedi, 2016; *Indians.org*, 2018).

Neither of these sides seems to have it quite right, however, and in what follows we take issue with both. On the one hand, feeling weird about an act in which we are engaging can sometimes be a clue that we are doing something morally wrong. But equating the feeling of ‘weirdness’ with moral wrongness, without additional justification, is inherently conservative. Lots of things can feel ‘weird’ simply because they go against existing social norms – for example, overcoming unconscious biases with respect to racial and gender difference – but that does not make them wrong. And equally, it is important to avoid equating an aesthetic judgement with a normative judgement. Some cases of cultural exchange may seem aesthetically wrong – many Italians decry the drinking of cappuccino after lunch or the mere existence of New York style pizza – but these phenomena are not themselves morally objectionable in any obvious way. On the other hand, while it is true that some acts of appropriation generate goods for everyone, many great things we now enjoy – living in colonised countries, unlimited energy, medical breakthroughs derived from imprisoned, tortured, and non-consenting subjects – came about through acts which we now think were morally wrong. We do not deny that cultural interaction is a normal part of human life, nor that without it we would certainly be poorer. Nor are we claiming that acts of cultural appropriation are always wrong in an all-things-considered sense, just that simply pointing to its benefits is far from sufficient to argue against those who think cultural appropriation is wrong.

## Two cultural wrongs that are not cultural appropriation

Cultural engagement is inevitable in human society. And while most of it is good or at least morally neutral, there are times when it is problematic. Our focus here is on these latter cases, that is, when things go wrong. One way it can go wrong is in the form of cultural appropriation. But there are at least two other potentially negative forms of cultural exchange that are sometimes mistakenly called ‘cultural appropriation’. One form in which cultural engagement can go wrong is in the

form of 'cultural offence'. Offence is difficult to define, since whether an act or statement is offensive appears in part to depend on whether someone is claiming offence in the first place. Typically, an offensive act or statement is one that causes others to be upset or hurt; they will typically be acts or statements that attack or insult others, often but not always, by negatively characterizing them in some way. A specifically *cultural* offence is one that causes others to be upset or hurt, by acting in a way that attacks or insults others' cultural practices or beliefs, or by acting in a way that attacks or insults people based on their cultural practices or beliefs.

Some acts of cultural offence appear relatively trivial, as for example the offence caused by Italian fashion brand Miu Miu, which offered a dress featuring a five-pointed yellow star with the name 'John' through the centre (Braun, 2017). Though never clear whether the offence was intentional, many Jews and allies objected to this design, accusing it of being reminiscent of the six-pointed yellow star (with the word 'Jude' written through the centre) that the Nazis ordered Jews to wear for identification purposes during the Third Reich. Others are more egregious, such as the donning of blackface by Caucasian individuals to depict blacks in a caricatured fashion. While some, if not most, acts of cultural appropriation generate cultural offence, not all cultural offence is cultural appropriation. Cultural offence is not defined by the *taking* or *using* another's cultural practices or symbols. This is to say nothing more than that one can do some culturally based wrong without appropriating.

A second form of problematic cultural engagement is usefully termed 'cultural misrepresentation'. Misrepresentation is generally an act or statement that gives a false or misleading account of something; correspondingly, cultural misrepresentation refers to acts or statements that provide a false or misleading depiction of practices or beliefs. Perhaps the most common form of cultural misrepresentation is stereotyping. To engage in cultural stereotyping is to present an oversimplified version of a culture in ways that treat cultural groups as homogenous. Doing so can present cultures in (comparatively) positive ways, as in the stereotype that 'all Asians are good at math', or in negative ways, as in the stereotype that 'all Roma are thieves'.

Cultural misrepresentation manifests in other ways, for example, in humiliating or insulting portrayals of cultural practices, or those who hail from a particular culture. When in 2016 Lionel Shriver responded publicly to criticisms of her portrayal of an African American woman in her novel, she did so by wearing a sombrero, and in doing so she engaged in cultural misrepresentation; she was poking fun at a stereotype of Mexicans as sombrero-wearing. Similarly, criticisms of contemporary celebrations of Cinco de Mayo describe the cultural misrepresentation at their core: 'Mexican culture cannot be reduced to tacos, oversized sombreros and piñatas' (Mascareñaz, 2017).

The point of describing these two prevalent forms of potentially wrongful cultural engagement is to distinguish them from their more famous cousin, 'cultural appropriation'. Before we offer our account of cultural appropriation, it is worth noting that the lines between these categories will sometimes be difficult to parse.

One reason for this is that a particular cultural wrong may share elements of misrepresentation and offence. Yet, the central wrong done by each of these actions is located in different places: cultural misrepresentation requires the problematic representation of cultural actions and those who practice them, often in false and misleading ways. Cultural offences are acts or statements that insult or humiliate others on the basis of their cultural membership.

## The parameters of cultural appropriation

One of the most sustained philosophical attempts to offer an account of cultural appropriation comes from James O Young (2010). Young's general objective is to give a comprehensive account of the various aspects of culture that can, more or less literally, be appropriated, and in the process defend most cases of cultural appropriation in the arts. He distinguishes three types of cultural appropriation: subject appropriation, object appropriation, and content appropriation. Subject appropriation involves using characters or stories from another culture. This is common in the arts, and examples include Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, and Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*. Object appropriation involves the taking of physical cultural objects such as the Parthenon Marbles and Benin Bronzes, now housed at the British Museum. Finally, content appropriation takes reusable or non-exhaustible content, perhaps a style of dress or music, or a story.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, we will focus on 'content appropriation' as cultural appropriation, as Young's expansive understanding of actions that count as cultural appropriation seems over inclusive. In relation to 'subject appropriation', while the portrayal of characters outside one's culture can be morally problematic – think, for example of the depiction of both African-Americans and Native Americans in 20th century Hollywood films – the wrong here seems to stem from the wrongs associated with stereotyping and presenting caricatured versions of cultural minority practices. These are the wrongs we described above as misrepresentation and offensiveness. This means that some standard examples of cultural appropriation, such as the American Football Team 'The Washington Redskins' (Riley and Carpenter, 2016; Strong, 2014) are best understood with terms other than cultural appropriation. The team name seems much better described as an example of cultural offensiveness, with secondary misrepresentation effects – for example, the way fans of the team dress as 'redskins'. Although this example seems morally worse than many cases of cultural appropriation, nothing meaningful is being appropriated.<sup>3</sup>

The problem of over-inclusivity also faces Young's 'object appropriation', which seems more like a case of theft where cultural significance amplifies an already existing wrong. If someone or some group has an object taken from them, the main question is whether or not this was done legitimately. In these cases, there is a clear exclusion of use and the object is literally *taken*.<sup>4</sup> It can no longer be used by the original group members. If, for example, a western tourist in

India takes a statue from a Hindu temple, the question seems more straightforwardly one of theft, rather than cultural appropriation.

In contrast, cultural content, as distinct from cultural subjects and cultural objects, can be used and reused by appropriators and by those from whom the content has been appropriated. As Coleman (2005: 17) writes, 'content is shared between a representation and reproductions of the representation'. Cultural *content* includes symbols and practices, as well as forms of especially traditional dress and physical presentation. On our understanding, then, only what Young terms 'content appropriation' is well-described as cultural appropriation.<sup>5</sup> At issue in cases of controversial cultural appropriation is whether appropriators are committing a wrong by adopting cultural content as their own, and whether the original 'users' of the cultural content can be justified in demanding that appropriators cease engaging in the practice in question or that they do so in a more respectful fashion.

Cultural appropriation can be defined as the taking of a valuable, yet reusable or non-exhaustible aspect, of another individual's culture (usually a symbol or a practice), for one's own use, where the taker knows what she is doing (or reasonably should know), and where the context of this taking is contested. In other words, in order for an act to be cultural appropriation, it must meet four conditions: (1) a taking condition, (2) a value condition, (3) a knowledge, or culpable ignorance condition, and (4) a contested context condition.

While others such as Young (2010) and Matthes (2016) have offered a descriptive definition, the account we offer is normative. This is for two reasons. First, claims of cultural appropriation are usually normative: accusing someone of culturally appropriating is, on most understandings, accusing them of doing something wrong (Heyd, 2003); and this is in spite of the attempts to reclaim the phrase or defend the practice. Second, the conditions we set out in our definition imply a degree of wrongness. In fact, they imply a presumptive degree of moral blameworthiness: someone who, despite the protestations of those appropriated from, knowingly or culpably takes and uses something valuable from their culture, has – at least without extenuating circumstances – done something wrong.<sup>6</sup> This does not mean that all cultural appropriation is seriously wrong, or even something that should be avoided or stopped. In the cases where we say there is cultural appropriation we are not claiming the wrong is big or small, or making the case that the act should not be undertaken. All we are saying is this wrong is sufficient for the case to be called cultural appropriation. On the all-things-considered judgements of whether these acts should be undertaken, or perhaps subject to social sanction, the authors disagree.<sup>7</sup> Our point is simply that in these cases there are legitimate claims to a degree of moral wrongness; whether these are strong enough to justify the demand that appropriators cease appropriating is another consideration altogether.

### *The taking condition*

In all cases of cultural appropriation there is something, usually a practice or symbol that is being appropriated, where the thing being taken and used is

not exhausted, even if its meaning may feel diminished to its original users. As mentioned above, the ‘taking’ is not in the most literal exclusionary sense – as is the case in ‘object appropriation’ – but simply that the idea, style or practice did not originate with the appropriator. So, for example, when Beyoncé wore henna and a sari in a 2018 music video shot in Mumbai, itself portraying Indian festivals and cultural symbols, the practices and symbols she was accused of appropriating were not originally hers, nor certainly not exhausted by her actions, even if they may have felt diminished to her accusers.

### *The value condition*

The thing being taken needs be of value to those it is taken from, and this value needs to be claimed in some way. The appropriator must know or foresee both this value and the claim from those the thing has been taken from. To claim that a practice has value to an individual, or to a group of individuals, is fraught with difficulties associated with how to determine whether a practice has value and whether that value is sufficiently strong. No attempt to capture the key elements of a valuable practice will be able to independently resolve a conflict over whether a practice has been problematically appropriated, and contextual factors will inevitably play a role in determining whether a cultural practice has value in the *right* way.

Yet, we can identify five criteria with which to begin the conversation, and which serve to delineate some parameters within which the value can be said to be significant enough to be considered a case of cultural appropriation. These five criteria are intended to explain why neither one person cannot alone can declare a practice to be of sufficient value, nor can it require *all* members of a culture to share a collectively declared valuable practice.

First, a valuable cultural symbol or practice is ordinarily *central* to the culture’s collective life in some way.<sup>8</sup> In some cases, its value is contested by members. For example, during the lead up to the Swiss referendum on banning minarets from newly constructed mosques, many commentators observed that whether minarets are an essential element of mosques was disputed among Muslims (Miller, 2016). Yet, even in this case, the centrality of minarets among Muslims was not itself in dispute. Second, a valuable cultural symbol or practice is ordinarily *recognizable* as such by its membership, or a large number of its members. Again, there may be internal contestation about whether the symbol *should* be central, but its recognisability is not in dispute. Jews around the world recognize the six-pointed star as the star of David; in the Third Reich, the Nazi party recognized the centrality of this symbol in its use of the yellow six-pointed star to identify Jews. Third, a valuable cultural symbol or practice has value to a significant number of its members. This criterion is tricky, since it lends itself to speculation about how many members must recognize a symbol or practice’s value, and then additional problems of measurement: what if a small number of people value a practice significantly but

a larger number of people value it a small amount? Whose voice should be prioritized in assessing whether a practice or symbol has value?

To further specify here, we can turn to the fourth and fifth criteria for identifying a valuable cultural practice or symbol. The fourth criterion recommends amplifying the voices of those who are most affected within the culture over those who may have more relative power. For example, in cases of dispute over the centrality or value of the niqab, the hijab or the burqa, to Muslim cultural and religious practice, the voice of authority here should be the women who may or may not value these forms of dress. They are both the most affected, and have relatively less power. The fifth criterion pertains to whether the practice or symbol has only historical or also contemporary use. Practices and symbols that are *presently* in use by cultures are more likely to be valuable than those that are exclusively, or even mainly, historic.

### *The contested condition*

It is not just the use of something of value that defines cultural appropriation. If it were, then new migrants taking on and incorporating new national symbols and practices might be accused of culturally appropriating. The symbol or practice being used needs to be claimed and its use contested by those from whom it is being appropriated. A sufficient and meaningful degree of contestation matters. By contestation, we mean that there are members of the culture (and in some cases, their allies) from whom a practice or symbol is appropriated who dispute the appropriation of a practice. Contestation is meaningful if it is sustained over time, by multiple members of the culture from whom the symbol or practice is being appropriated, and if culturally specific justifications or explanations are at the heart of the dispute. A single tweet does not amount to meaningful contestation, nor does a 'twitter storm'. While these loud, angry, and often self-serving, ways of accusing others of 'cultural appropriation' may relay some truth, there must be some statement of value and contestation from those who are being appropriated from. This means that the 2018 accusations of cultural appropriation launched at an American teenager for sporting a Chinese pattern prom dress (Furedi, 2018) do not amount to meaningful contestation by themselves. Significant contestation occurs over the course of months or even years, in multiple forums, accompanied by publicly accessible justifications or explanations.

As a result, on our understanding, one cannot culturally appropriate from ancient and extinct civilizations – there are no members left who could contest such actions. Hosting a toga party does not amount to an invitation to participate in cultural appropriation. This still allows the possibility of more complicated cases, where symbols or practices that are effectively extinct are still closely connected to existing cultures. Equally, one cannot culturally appropriate from a group who wills you to take and use aspects or all of their culture, at least if you do so in the way they recognize as legitimate – proselytising religions would seem a good example here.

This is also why those claiming ‘cultural appropriation’ on behalf of others can be problematic. Of course, those being appropriated from, especially if marginalised, should not need to constantly make public protestations, and having broader allies can be important to ensure that contestation is heard. But this does not mean that third parties can simply claim ‘cultural appropriation’ on behalf of others; it is not their claim to make. Much public controversy over the practice of yoga in western states illustrates his point well. For example, when the University of Ottawa, in Canada, cancelled a long-running yoga class, citing worries about cultural appropriation, most of the protests had come from non-Indian, non-Hindu students. And while some Hindu organizations object to the commercialization of yoga (‘Yoga Hindu Origins’, 2016), other local Hindu Ottawans rejected the claim that the teaching of yoga by people of non-Hindu origin was problematic, saying instead that it is good for people to practice yoga (Foote, 2015).

It may seem that what matters here is consent, and certainly there are possible cases where consent nullifies any charge of cultural appropriation. For example, early in Eminem’s hip-hop career, he was accused of appropriating a traditionally black art form. And yet over time, his skill in and dedication to hip-hop, as well as his public acknowledgement of the privilege he benefits from for being white – his song ‘White America’ contains the line ‘if I was black I would’ve sold half [the records]’ – have led many to defend him from charges of appropriation. There is a strong sense in which his performance of hip-hop is consensual.

Of course, the giving or taking of consent to use cultural symbols and practices is a vexed question. Who has the authority to consent in such cases? If we take a liberal view that cultural appropriation involves appropriating something important to an individual, then having your cultural leader say it is okay, does not necessarily make it okay. For example, the 2018 MET Gala Ball had a Catholic theme, and guests were asked to dress in thematically appropriate ways. Apparently, the organisers had the consent of The Vatican, which may mean this is not a case of cultural appropriation. But for many Catholics, seeing celebrities such as Rhianna in a revealing Pope dress involved seeing something very valuable appropriated, without their felt consent, and they levelled charges of appropriation at the organisers and those involved (Griffen, 2018).

Using consent as a proxy for contestation is not quite right. Most forms of cultural engagement involve the transfer of cultural knowledge and experience, and that transfer is often done in a non-consensual way. It would be ridiculous to claim that someone requires the consent of another country or culture to learn its language, for example, or to partake of its cuisine. If consent does a play a role in contestation, what matters is the public *withdrawal* of consent. In the kinds of cases that are at the centre of our discussion, there is often a moment at which those who value a cultural symbol or practice make public claims about the value of it to them and aim to use the public space to *reclaim* the symbol or practice.

We are not, however, claiming that *any* reclaiming of valuable symbols or practices will suffice. On the one hand, there are many cases where members of a group were too busy fighting brutal oppression to reclaim cultural practices – the

history of Indigenous art in Australia where non-Indigenous manufacturers mass produced 'Aboriginal artefacts' is one such case (Coleman, 2005). On the other hand, though, cultures are not static and can expand. Once people have been accepted by a community, as is arguably now the case with white and European Jazz musicians, there is no longer any cultural appropriation to meaningfully object to – it is now their culture too.

To summarize where we have arrived, so far: in order for an act to be cultural appropriation, the appropriated symbol or practice must be valuable, *and* its use by other parties must be challenged by those from whom it is taken.

### *The knowledge, or culpable ignorance, condition*

There is a final condition that must apply in order for an act to be one of cultural appropriation, and this is the knowledge of the appropriator. Accidental, or unforeseen use of something important from another's culture may therefore not be wrongful on our account. When those from whom something valuable in their culture is being used speak up, and the appropriator persists, the moral wrong committed by the appropriator may be more severe. So, to complete our definition, cultural appropriation is an act knowingly conducted by an appropriator, i.e., it is the deliberate use of a cultural practice or symbol from others and adopting it as one's own, where this use is contested, and where one *knows* that the practice or symbol is central to the culture of others.

There is, however, one exception: culpable ignorance. Take the example of an unwitting Canadian parent who dresses her child in an Aboriginal Headdress for Halloween. Perhaps she does not know the meaning of a headdress, and so it may seem that she is not engaging in cultural appropriation. In our view, this conclusion is mistaken, since while it may be an accurate account of the parent that she dressed her child in a headdress without knowingly engaging in appropriation, the parent ought to have known the meaning of the headdress. A Canadian parent can reasonably be expected to have knowledge of Aboriginal practices – Aboriginals are fellow citizens and Canadians learn Aboriginal history and practice as part of their general education – her ignorance in this case does not seem adequate to shield her from the claim that she has engaged in appropriation. On the contrary, a newly arrived immigrant to Canada cannot be accused of doing the same; her legitimate claim to ignorance can (briefly) shield her from accusations of cultural appropriation.

### **Amplifiers**

Above we have offered an account of the key features of cultural appropriation. On our view, to repeat, cultural appropriation requires that the thing being appropriated is of value; that the appropriation is contested by those from whom the appropriation occurs; and that it is done with knowledge of its value (and often, but not necessarily, of the existing contestation), or at least culpable ignorance. These necessary features admit of degrees: an act of appropriation can make use of

a cultural symbol or practice that is more or less valuable, with more or less knowledge, and under conditions of more or less contestation.

Those familiar with public disputes about cultural appropriation will know that often there are complicating factors present. The most familiar of these complicating factors is the presence of power inequalities between the appropriator and the appropriated; in particular, the appropriator is often in a more powerful or privileged position, with respect to the person or group from whom a symbol or practice is appropriated. However, it is essential to distinguish between the wrong of appropriation itself, and what we term *amplifiers*, that is, factors that may render an act of appropriation especially problematic. In this section, we make the case that cultural appropriation can be made *worse* under certain contextual conditions, i.e., in the presence of certain key amplifiers. These amplifiers do not define the wrong itself, but rather serve to worsen (or in some cases mitigate) the wrong in question. The two amplifiers we explore are: the presence of power dynamics and the presence of profit. Noticing the key amplifiers helps to explain why a particular act of cultural appropriation is properly treated as worse in some contexts than in others; in some contexts, an amplifier may hold more resonance than in others. It is worth noting that these amplifiers seem to also apply to other forms of wrongful cultural exchange, but our focus here will be on their role in cultural appropriation.

### *Unequal power*

Recall that in the case of cultural appropriation, the wrong is in the using of a cultural practice that, in some sense, belongs to others. For many commentators and scholars, cultural appropriation appears to be additionally defined by the existence of underlying power structures which support or permit those with more power to take from those with less. On this view, ultimately the wrongness of cultural appropriation is located in these underlying power structures (Matthes, 2016; Van Leeuwen, 2015), rather than in the appropriation itself. In our view, however, while the existence of underlying power structures can render some cases of appropriation more egregious than others, it is not at all central to the definition of cultural appropriation. Rather, the presence of power inequalities between the appropriator and the individual or culture from whom the symbol or practice is being appropriated should be understood to amplify the wrong of appropriation. In other words, in the context of unequal power, the *using* is made worse when those with more power take from those with less.

Consider Kylie Jenner's 2015 Instagram photo of herself in cornrows, a hair style worn predominantly by black women. The normative policing of black women's hair is well known. As one commentator explains, cornrows are part of a long history of black women responding to 'heavy scrutiny all the time about their hair'; she continues,

Natural hair is condemned by our racist societies, and forces women to go through strenuous and expensive procedures such as ‘relaxing’ hair, straightening, wigs and additional methods all to appease the white employers or community members who condemn this particularly black feature (quoted in McKay, 2015).

The wearing of cornrows by non-black women appears problematic because of the context of unequal power dynamics, in which (among other things) black women are forced to conform to white models of physical presentation in order to be successful.

The reason the wrong of cultural appropriation is not reducible to power imbalance or marginalisation is that it can take place, and appear wrongful when there is *no* power imbalance, or the imbalance runs the other way. Take the example of the commercial appropriation of the ANZAC mythology, in which the exploits of the Australian military, particularly in the First World War, are valorised. This is seen as something central and a sacred part of Australian national identity. Australian companies, both big and small, have been strongly critiqued for incorporating the word ANAZC or ‘lest we forget’ into their products and marketing.<sup>9</sup> Here something of significant cultural value has been knowingly used and its use widely contested, yet it would be hard to argue the wrong has anything to do with power imbalance or marginalisation. Of course, in situations where there is power imbalance the situation is worse, but that is because this amplifies something that is already wrong.

Unequal power relations are often the result of historical injustices which have not been satisfactorily resolved. Take the example of a British Raj-themed birthday party, which was described as an act of cultural appropriation:

A large part of Indian identity [...] is the painful experience of colonialism. South Asians everywhere are still negatively affected by colonial rule and its legacy; white people continue to benefit from it. . . Colonial holdovers have paved the way for structural racism. This was not a respectful exchange of culture but a shameless glorification of British colonial rule (Rana-Deshmukh and Talib, 2018).

A history of unequal power relations seems relevant to the cornrows example too. Here, the wrong stems not simply from the ongoing structural injustice to which blacks are subject, especially in the United States, but also from the ways in which American blacks have been subject to injustice for all of their history in the United States.

There is one significant benefit of treating power inequalities as an amplifier rather than at the core of the definition of cultural appropriation. Notice that if much of the wrong of cultural appropriation appears rooted in unjust social circumstances, the wrong done to the appropriated is committed not simply by the appropriator. It is misleading to place all the moral blame for the wrong on the appropriator, and in so doing it helps the rest of us avoid culpability for sustaining

the unjust circumstances that permit appropriation, among other wrongs, to continue to take place.

### *Profit*

It is possible to wrongly culturally appropriate without publicly profiting, such as by wearing Native American headdress to the family holiday party. But profit makes appropriation much more morally problematic. It is not just that something of relative value is being used, but that it is used to make new value that goes directly to the appropriator. When (predominantly white) models for Marc Jacobs wore wigs that looked like dreadlocks; when (again predominantly white) Valentino's 2016 collection was 'Africa-inspired', full of clothing and accessories that borrowed heavily from African tribal styles; when Victoria Secret models walked down the runway wearing Native American headdresses, they were all accused of appropriating styles for the purpose of generating profit for their companies (Matera, 2017; Qureshi, 2016; Rice, 2015; Stansfield, 2015).

One objection here is that the appropriation itself adds value, and that without it no profit would be realised. This could be in two ways. First, it might be that members of the appropriated culture may not have decided to use elements of their culture for profit or may have lacked the necessary skills to realise the profitability of their cultural symbols and practices. This is the case where medical and agricultural corporations profit from Indigenous knowledges to develop new commercial drugs or crops (Young, 2010: 94).

The second is that (unjust) social circumstances may deny the appropriated the chance to profit from their own cultural symbols and practices. Here the Chuck Berry versus Elvis Presley case is paradigmatic. While Presley profited greatly, and Berry much less so, it is not the case that Berry would have profited more if Presley had not profited. Racism in the US meant regardless of what Presley did – and for that matter, regardless of what other early white rock n' roll musicians did – black musicians would likely not have prospered greatly from the music they pioneered in that era. The objection, then, is that profiting is only wrong if those that were taken from could have profited instead.

Yet, the question of profit is very often tied into the issue of marginalisation and unequal power that we described just above. For example, when Iggy Azalea, a white rapper, rocketed to success in the United States, she was criticized not simply for profiting in a field that was, historically, pioneered by African Americans, she was criticized equally for having adopted a 'blaccent' that was so sophisticated that she was accused by fellow (black) rapper Jean Grae of committing the harm of 'verbal blackface' by selling a 'black sound'. According to critics, 'white musicians [like Azalea] are rewarded for their ability to imitate their black counterparts, and decades of black achievement and musical genius are swept under the rug, forgotten and ignored' (Zimmerman, 2014). The objection is that predominant power dynamics are such that Azalea's success – her ability to profit – stems from her ability to appropriate a black accent.

Here we can make two points. The first is that as mentioned above, the wrong here may not be symmetrical. The blameworthiness of an act of cultural appropriation need not lie solely with the appropriator, but may well lie with all of us who allow such unjust circumstances to persist. That is, while those appropriated from may be wronged, all of us may share in the blame. Second, in situations of social inequality where some groups are better able to profit from cultural symbols and practices than others, there is at least one way in which the harm generated by profit can be mitigated. An appropriator could meaningfully return some of their profit to those who were not able to profit themselves from their cultural symbols and practices. For example, when the French fashion label Chanel designed and sold a boomerang for US\$1500, one critic said 'I sincerely hope that @CHANEL is donating all the profits to underprivileged aboriginal communities', and doing so might have eased the harm generated by the appropriation in the first place (Roberts, 2017).

Both of these amplifiers admit of degree, and correspondingly the moral wrongness of acts of appropriation varies considerably, from the very serious to the trivially wrong. Our objective here is conceptual, i.e., to disentangle the specific claims made with respect to specific acts of appropriation, so that political theorists can better understand and respond to public discourse directed at those who commit (or who are accused of committing) cultural appropriation. We are not making any claim about what action should follow from taking the complaint seriously. In the cases where we say there is potentially a moral wrong, we are not claiming the wrong is big or small, or making the case that the act should not be undertaken; rather we are saying only that it is appropriate to refer to the case as one of cultural appropriation. The question of on the all-things-considered judgements of whether these acts should be undertaken, or perhaps subject to social sanction, is entirely separate. Our point is simply that in these cases there are legitimate claims to moral wrongness, whether these are strong enough and whether competing considerations to partake in such acts are insufficient is another consideration altogether.

## **Conclusion**

The nature of discussions around possible cases of appropriation are often angry, often heartfelt, and generally do represent real rifts between individuals in diverse societies. In this article, we have aimed to take them seriously. Our goal was mainly conceptual, that is, to clarify the nature of cultural appropriation and to distinguish its key features from amplifiers and from other forms of cultural engagement that are often confused with it. But this may not seem fully satisfying for readers who are seeking some normative guidance about how to respond to these cases. So, let us make four additional observations by way of conclusion.

One observation is that many cases of claimed appropriation are directed at individuals who have selected a mode of dress (a prom dress), or a hairstyle (cornrows, dreadlocks), and denying their right to make choices about how to

dress, or style their hair, even if doing so appropriates from others, would in most cases mean undermining rights that we think are central to individual freedom more generally. For those who recognize these acts as problematic, the normatively appropriate response in cases that are viewed as more serious is engagement with those who have appropriated, and in ways that serve to articulate the wrong being done, rather than to score points. Most people do not intend, or desire, to upset others with their choice of hairstyle or dress.

A second observation is that the acknowledgement that cultural appropriation is real, and not always trivially wrong, does not translate into any straightforward claim that law is the right place to engage in the interruption described just above. It will rarely be the case that even seriously wrongful cultural appropriation will merit legislative or policy responses to combat it. This does not mean that public policy has no role to play. For example, the dangers of cultural appropriation are perhaps strongest in the arts. One possible response here is the one considered by the Canada Council, a major Canadian government-funded agency that offers grants to artists. The Canada Council considered adopting guidelines in the early 1990s to guide its allocation of grants; these guidelines would have asked adjudicators to ask whether any project's resultant artistic products engage in cultural appropriation.<sup>10</sup> This sort of policy could combat some cases of cultural appropriation by not positively supporting artists whose proposed projects entail problematic appropriation of culture, although as the debate at the time demonstrated, there would need to be care taken to avoid unintended consequences.

A third observation is that often the objection is not to the appropriation itself, but rather to the extenuating circumstances surrounding the appropriation, which we have described as 'amplifiers'. The value of our conceptual disentangling here is that it permits us to see that so often anger about cultural appropriation is, rather, anger about power inequalities, or persistent historical injustices, or the personal profit that people gain at the apparent expense of others' cultural practices. In these kinds of cases, it is worthwhile to ask deliberators to find common ground in fighting unjust power inequalities. As we described above, when Eminem recognized the ways in which his white privilege contributed to his success, he was recognizing the ways in which power structures enabled his success and disabled the success of others. His public acknowledgement of the underlying power dynamics served to mitigate claims that he was engaged in wrongful cultural appropriation. One imagines that in many cases when this amplifier is removed, or at least reduced, any cultural appropriation may become trivial.

As a final observation, notice that the anti-migrant environment that dominates most democratic states renders them ripe for cases of cultural offence and cultural misrepresentation, and we see many examples of these negative forms of cultural engagement directed at new migrants. But what about cultural appropriation? It may seem that given our definition of cultural appropriation, anti-migrant nationalists could actually charge new migrants with taking their culture. But as we have argued, such a charge requires several conditions to be met. And even if they were met – which is itself doubtful – the claim would likely be trivial, and the primary

amplifiers would not be in play. It would seem, then, that anti-migrant nationalists would have at best a trivial claim of wrongfulness that would be quickly dismissed (although it should, at least, be heard), and at worst, no claim at all.

Our objective in this article has been to identify the key defining features of cultural appropriation, as well as to articulate a series of contextual factors that exacerbate its wrongness; in this sense, it is a ground-clearing exercise intended to render our conversations about cultural exchange, and especially cultural appropriation, more sophisticated. Our motivation stems from a concern about the way in which quite heated dialogue across cultural difference has been taking place in diverse, immigrant-receiving, democratic states. Claims about the appropriation of culture, often but not always in the context of unequal power dynamics, appear to be rising in number, intensity and stridency. We hope that a more careful account of what cultural appropriation is, and is not, when it is most problematic, and when it is only trivially so, can assist those trying to navigate the complexities of cultural exchange.

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### **Notes**

1. Serrell (2016), for example, asks music festival goers dressed in outfits from other cultures whether they feel 'weird'. One bindi-wearing festival goer, asked if she felt weird, responded, 'Honestly, I was a little skeptical at first because, you know, this is somebody else's culture. Projecting that and them not being comfortable with it is kind of strange'.

2. Young (2010: 6), uses the term 'intangible' but this does not seem as accurate as 'reusable or non-exhaustible' which we have preferred. 'Intangible' connotes something that cannot be held or touched, and this does not seem true of many cases of content appropriation.
3. In fact, Young also notes that subject appropriation is not a good fit under the umbrella of 'cultural appropriation' for much the same reasons we note here. Nevertheless, Young keeps subject appropriation as a category of cultural appropriation because 'it is often discussed in the context [of] cultural appropriation', and it 'can still be suspect from an aesthetic or moral perspective' (Young, 2010: 8–9). But as we argue, there are better descriptive and evaluative ways to capture 'subject appropriation' (see also (Young and Haley, 2009).
4. See Coleman (2005: 17) who also includes 'object appropriation' as cultural appropriation.
5. For other examples of the broader understanding of cultural appropriation see Matthes (2016); Tsosie (2002); Ziff and Rao (1997).
6. There are those who may object to using a deeply or doubly moralised definition. Yet these types of concepts are not unusual. Take, for example, 'murder' or 'theft'. Both of which are wrong by definition and presumptively blameworthy.
7. We are assuming, though, that the wrong of cultural appropriation is outweighed and not overridden in any final all-things-considered judgement.
8. Careful readers will notice that we are refraining from getting into philosophical deliberations around what does and does not constitute a culture, and who constitutes a cultural insider versus a cultural outsider (for this characterisation see Young, 2010). For the purposes of this article, all that matters is that a community of individuals claim a cultural practice as their own in some way. This understanding allows both what some might call 'intra-cultural' appropriation, and for cultural membership to be contested. We are not alone in rejecting the insider/outsider language to describe who adopts cultural practices as their own (see Matthes, 2016).
9. For example, on the 100th anniversary of the ANZAC Gallipoli landing, supermarket chain Woolworths created a website called 'Fresh In Our Memories' (now taken down), which was accompanied by an image of a soldier and the words: 'LEST WE FORGET. ANZAC 1915–2015'. At the bottom of the image, the words 'FRESH IN OUR MEMORIES' and the Woolworths logo are what seemed to cause the most concern. This issue is not only commercial either. Showing an even greater reverse power imbalance, Yassmin Abdel-Magied, a brown-skinned Muslim woman (hardly a majority in Australia), was virulently accused of appropriating 'Lest we forget' in an infamous 2017 twitter post.
10. For a defence of these guidelines see Rowell (1995). For a critique see Young, who instead supports minority artists having their own grants and recognised systems to show authenticity (Young, 2010: 154–155).

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