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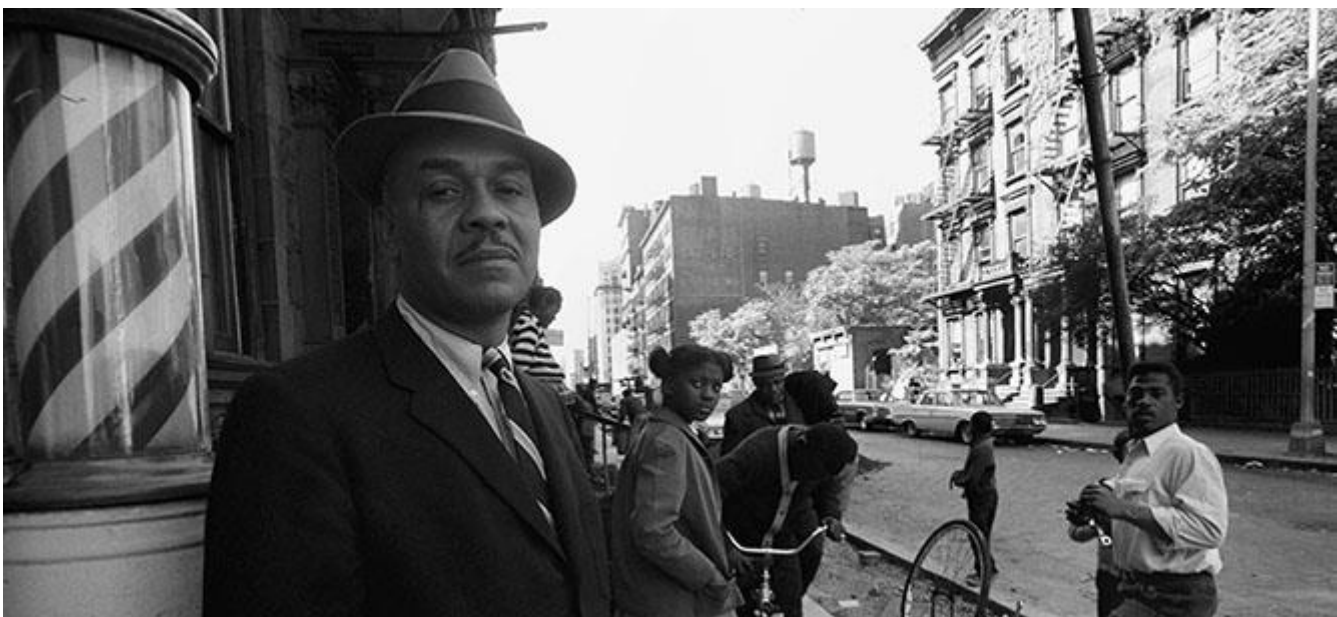
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All Shook Up: The Politics of Cultural Appropriation

In the era of global capitalism, imagining the lives of others is a crucial form of solidarity.

Brian Morton • Fall 2020



Novelist Ralph Ellison poses for a portrait in Harlem in 1966. (David Attie/Getty Images)

I first heard the phrase “Stay in your lane” a few years ago, in a writing workshop I was teaching. We were talking about a story that a student in the group, an Asian–American man, had written about an African–American family.

There was a lot to criticize about the story, including an abundance of clichés about the lives of Black Americans. I had expected the class to offer suggestions for improvement. What I hadn’t expected was that some students would tell the writer that he shouldn’t have written the story at all. As one of them put it, if a member of a relatively privileged group writes a story about a member of a marginalized group, this is an act of cultural appropriation and therefore does harm.

Arguments about cultural appropriation make the news every month or two. Two women from Portland, after enjoying the food during a trip to Mexico, open a burrito cart when they return home but, assailed by online activists, close their business within months. A yoga class at a university in Canada is shut down by student protests. The author of a young–adult novel, criticized for writing about characters from backgrounds different from his own, apologizes and withdraws his book from circulation. Such a wide variety of acts and practices is condemned as cultural appropriation that it can be hard to tell what cultural appropriation *is*.

Much of the literature on cultural appropriation is spectacularly unhelpful on this score. LeRhonda S. Manigault–Bryant, a professor of Africana studies at Williams College, says that the term “refers to taking someone else’s culture—intellectual property, artifacts, style, art form, etc.—without permission.” Similarly, Susan Scafidi, a professor of law at Fordham and the author of *Who Owns Culture? Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law*, defines it as “Taking intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artifacts from someone else’s culture without permission. This can include unauthorized use of another culture’s dance, dress, music, language, folklore, cuisine, traditional medicine, religious symbols, etc.”

These definitions seem enlightening, until you think about them. For one thing, the idea of “taking” something from another culture is so broad as to be incoherent: there’s nothing in these definitions that would prevent us from condemning someone for learning another language. For another, they rely on an idea—“permission”—that doesn’t, in this context, have any meaning.

Permission to use another group's cultural expressions isn't something that it's possible to receive, because ethnicities, gender identities, and other such groups don't have representatives authorized to grant it. When novelists, for example, write outside their own experience, publishing houses now routinely enlist "sensitivity readers" to make sure they say nothing that will offend—but once the books are published, novelists are on their own. There's nothing they can do to rebut the accusation that the products of their imagination were "unauthorized," nothing they can do to ward off the charge that they've caused harm by straying outside their lanes.

Something like the admonition to stay in one's lane lay behind the protests that arose when Dana Schutz's portrait of Emmett Till in his casket was displayed in an exhibit at the Whitney Museum in 2017—probably the most acrimonious chapter of the cultural appropriation discussion in recent memory. The artist Hannah Black wrote an open letter to the Whitney "with the urgent recommendation that the painting be destroyed." Black continued: "Through his mother's courage, Till was made available to Black people as an inspiration and warning. Non-Black people must accept that they will never embody and cannot understand this gesture. . . ."

Schutz's response identified the problem with the idea of staying in one's lane. "I don't know what it is like to be black in America," she said, but I do know what it is like to be a mother. Emmett was Mamie Till's only son. The thought of anything happening to your child is beyond comprehension. Their pain is your pain. My engagement with this image was through empathy with his mother. . . . Art can be a space for empathy, a vehicle for connection. I don't believe that people can ever really know what it is like to be someone else (I will never know the fear that black parents may have) but neither are we all completely unknowable. She was saying that the lane that she shared with Mamie Till-Mobley by virtue of being a mother was just as salient as the lane of race.

A similar point was made by the political scientist Adolph Reed, in an article that highlighted the many ways in which the history of Black Americans and white Americans have been intertwined. Reed remarked that "one might argue that Schutz, as an American, has a stronger claim than [the British-born] Black to interpret the Till story. After all, the segregationist Southern order and the struggle against that order, which gave Till's fate its broader social and political significance, were historically specific moments of a distinctively American experience."

When Till–Mobley defied the authorities by displaying her son’s mutilated body in an open coffin, it was not with the aim of making his image available only for Black people. Till–Mobley said that “They had to see what I had seen. The whole nation had to bear witness to this.” The author Christopher Benson, who co-authored *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime that Changed America* with Till–Mobley, wrote that “She welcomed the megaphone effect of a wider audience reached by multiple storytellers, irrespective of race: Bob Dylan’s song ‘Ballad of Emmett Till’ ; Gwendolyn Brooks’ s poem ‘The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till’ ; James Baldwin’s play *Blues for Mister Charlie*; Bebe Moore Campbell’s novel *Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine*; and Rod Serling’s numerous interpretations in his TV shows, including *The Twilight Zone*.”

In writing about cultural appropriation in art, then, the point isn’t that artists should be permitted to imagine the experiences of others as long as they can establish that they share a lane. There are no two people on the planet who don’t share a few lanes. The point is that artists imagine the experiences of others by virtue of a common humanity.

A common humanity: the phrase seems quaint, anachronistic, even as I type it. But I think the restoration of the dignity and prestige of the idea is one of the tasks of the contemporary left.

In the world of fiction—the area of artistic endeavor that I know best—imagining other lives is part of the job.

The philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch wrote, “We judge the great novelists by the quality of their awareness of others.” If Tolstoy is considered by many to be the greatest novelist who ever lived, this isn’t because of the beauty of his sentences or the shapeliness of his plots. It’s because he could bring to life so many wildly different characters, from the young girl preparing eagerly for her first ball to the old man dying in his bed, from the aristocrat on a foxhunt to the serf watching the aristocrat ride by. Tolstoy’s intense responsiveness to life jolts us into an awareness of how much more deeply we could be living; his intense responsiveness, in particular, to other people, jolts us into an awareness of how much more keenly we could be entering into the experiences of the people around us.

One of Tolstoy's contemporaries, George Eliot, wrote explicitly about the effort to imagine the minds of others as a sort of moral necessity. In *Middlemarch*, Eliot introduces us to a vibrant young woman, Dorothea Brooke, who is about to marry a desiccated scholar named Casaubon. Dorothea naively believes that Casaubon is a man of great intellect and great humanity; everyone else who knows them sees what she can't see: that she's about to marry a cold, humorless, ungenerous man.

Around seventy-five pages into the novel, Eliot does a remarkable thing. She stops the action and says, in effect, we've heard what everyone else thinks of Casaubon, but what does Casaubon think about himself?

Suppose we turn from outside estimates of a man, to wonder, with keener interest, what is the report of his own consciousness about his doings or capacity: with what hindrances he is carrying on his daily labours; what fading of hopes, or what deeper fixity of self-delusion the years are marking off within him; and with what spirit he wrestles against universal pressure, which will one day be too heavy for him, and bring his heart to its final pause. Doubtless his lot is important in his own eyes; and the chief reason that we think he asks too large a place in our consideration must be our want of room for him. . . . Mr. Casaubon, too, was the centre of his own world. . . .

This little passage is one of the most beautiful statements of the novelist's creed that I know. Everyone is the center of a world. The novelist's work is to honor this truth, and one of the ways in which a novelist does so is to imagine what it is to live in other people's skin.

A common objection to sentiments like this holds that the freedom to imagine other lives has long been held almost exclusively by white writers, who have abused the freedom by creating inaccurate and demeaning images of others, and that it's therefore especially important for white writers to stay in their lane. In this account, silence is recommended as a form of collective penance.

The novelist Kamila Shamsie has answered this argument thoughtfully. She writes that there is

something deeply damaging in the idea that writers couldn't take on stories about the Other. As a South Asian who has encountered more than her fair share of awful stereotypes about South Asians in the British empire novels of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I'm certainly not about to disagree with the charge that writers who are implicated in certain power structures have been guilty of writing fiction which supports, justifies and props up those power structures. I understand the

concerns of people who feel that for too long stories have been told about them rather than by them. But it should be clear that the response to this is for writers to write differently, to write better. . . .

The moment you say, a male American writer can't write about a female Pakistani, you are saying, Don't tell those stories. Worse, you're saying, as an American male you can't understand a Pakistani woman. She is enigmatic, inscrutable, unknowable. She's other. Leave her and her nation to its Otherness.

Although it's not uncommon to hear people say that writing from the point of view of someone outside one's "identity group" is never permissible, critics and reviewers seem to have reached a softer consensus about the subject. They tend to say that fiction writers should of course claim the freedom to imagine the interior lives of others, but they must do so "responsibly."

On one level, this is obviously reasonable. If someone wrote a story about a devout Muslim with a scene in which the main character came home from work and made himself a pork chop, it would be reasonable to tell the writer that he needed to find out a little more about Islamic customs and beliefs, and it would be reasonable to tell him to approach the subject more responsibly.

But if we think about it, this notion of responsibility has disquieting implications.

Isaac Babel, the great Russian-Jewish short story writer, published most of his work before the Stalin regime came to power. After Stalin began to imprison and execute writers and intellectuals, Babel tried to stay alive by staying silent. But even while he tried to display his allegiance to the regime, he couldn't suppress his independence of mind. At a writers' conference in Moscow in 1934, Babel said that "the party and government have given us everything and have taken from us only one right—that of writing badly. Comrades, let's be honest, this was a very important right and not a little is being taken from us."

Babel was saying that Stalin had taken away everything. Without the freedom to write badly, the writer has no freedom at all.

Just as writers need the freedom to write badly, they need the freedom to write irresponsibly. The best fiction is deeply moral—George Eliot's creed of empathy is the

highest ethical idea I can conceive of—and yet fiction couldn't be written at all if it lost its connection to the world of irresponsible play.

After the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini proclaimed a fatwa against Salman Rushdie for publishing *The Satanic Verses*, some writers and intellectuals expressed their solidarity with Rushdie, while others murmured that he should have written more responsibly. Without admitting it to themselves, they were standing with his persecutors, implying that he brought the fatwa down upon himself through his provocative literary behavior. The right to offend, the right to satirize, even the right to get things wrong—all of these are precious, and anyone who believes oneself a friend of art and literature needs to defend them without qualification.

I should make it clear that I'm not saying that people who grouse about cultural appropriation are as bad as Stalin or the Ayatollah. I'm saying they don't respect the anarchic energies of art.

When Diaghilev commissioned Jean Cocteau to write the libretto for one of his ballets, his only words of instruction were, "Astonish me!" What young artists today are being told is something more along the lines of "Watch your step!"

Just as the critics of cultural appropriation have a puritanical view of art, they have a puritanical view of culture as well. Let's look again at Susan Scafidi's definition: "Taking intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artifacts from someone else's culture without permission. This can include unauthorized use of another culture's dance, dress, music, language, folklore, cuisine, traditional medicine, religious symbols, etc."

We imagine the arbiter of cultural appropriation as a kindergarten teacher, sternly telling the children not to use one another's toys without asking. But this isn't the way culture develops. There is no product of culture that isn't the result of mixing—that isn't the result of taking things without permission—from the meals we make to the music we enjoy to the language that I'm using to write this essay.

Much of the mixing has been on horribly unequal terms. But not all of it. In our current way of looking at it, cultural appropriation is always pictured as a vampire-like dominant culture draining the blood of a minority culture too weak to defend itself. A more confident social justice movement might see some of these borrowings as evidence of the strength of popular creativity. Ralph Ellison, in a review of a book

about music and race in America, was getting at this idea when he wrote of the origins of the blues as “enslaved and politically weak men successfully imposing their values upon a powerful society through song. . . .”

In many of his essays, written as far back as sixty years ago, Ellison turns out to be one of the surest guides to the controversies around cultural appropriation that we have. Here he is in his essay “The Little Man at Chehaw Station”:

It is here, on the level of culture . . . that elements of the many available tastes, traditions, ways of life, and values that make up the total culture have been ceaselessly appropriated and made their own—consciously, unselfconsciously, or imperialistically—by groups and individuals to whose own backgrounds and traditions they are historically alien. Indeed, it was through this process of cultural appropriation (and misappropriation) that Englishmen, Europeans, Africans, and Asians *became* Americans.

The Pilgrims began by appropriating the agricultural, military and meteorological lore of the Indians, including much of their terminology. The Africans, thrown together from numerous ravaged tribes, took up the English language and the biblical legends of the ancient Hebrews and were “Americanizing” themselves long before the American Revolution. . . .

Everyone played the appropriation game. . . . Americans seem to have sensed intuitively that the possibility of enriching the individual self by such pragmatic and opportunistic appropriations has constituted one of the most precious of their many freedoms. . . . [I]n this country things are always all shook up, so that people are constantly moving around and rubbing off on one another culturally.

Ellison’s friend and comrade-in-arms Albert Murray had a similar perspective. “American culture,” he wrote, “even in its most rigidly segregated precincts, is patently and irrevocably composite. . . . Indeed, for all their traditional antagonisms and obvious differences, the so-called black and so-called white people of the United States resemble nobody else in the world so much as they resemble each other.”

After you spend time reading Ellison and Murray, critics of cultural appropriation begin to seem like members of a weird purity cult, issuing edicts and prohibitions against the kinds of mixing that are an inevitable part of life.

For an eloquent and lively example of a viewpoint largely opposed to the one I'm expressing here, I'd recommend Lauren Michele Jackson's *White Negroes: When Cornrows Were in Vogue . . . And Other Thoughts on Cultural Appropriation*. Jackson writes with wit and gusto about these issues, at times sounding like an observer in the tradition of Ellison and Murray. "Appropriation is everywhere, and is also inevitable. . . . The idea that any artistic or cultural practice is closed off to outsiders at any point in time is ridiculous, especially in the age of the internet."

But although much of her book celebrates this kind of mingling, when she considers examples of white artists who are influenced by Black culture, she tends to find the consequences malign. "When the powerful appropriate from the oppressed," she writes, "society's imbalances are exacerbated and inequalities prolonged. In America, white people hoard power like Hungry Hungry Hippos. In the history of problematic appropriation in America, we could start with the land and crops commandeered from Native peoples along with the mass expropriation of the labor of the enslaved. The tradition lives on. The things black people make with their hands and minds, for pay and for the hell of it, are exploited by companies and individuals who offer next to nothing in return."

But if the practice of cultural mingling, as Jackson so vividly demonstrates, is as natural and inevitable as breathing, it can't be the practice itself that's the cause of the inequalities she rightly condemns. The causes must lie elsewhere.

Listen to the historian Barbara J. Fields:

Everybody inhabits many [cultures], all simultaneous, all overlapping. It was true for Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley, and it is true for us today, sharing a history beyond our individual experience and therefore sharing the culture that history has produced.

Differences of political standing and economic power ensure that some people can monetize a shared cultural inheritance more than others, just as some enjoy greater wealth and higher incomes, live in better housing, receive better educations, and live longer and healthier lives. But that is because of political and economic exploitation, not cultural appropriation. . . . [P]olitical action, not cultural policing, is needed to tackle it.

It makes little sense to condemn an artist or entertainer for taking something from another population on unequal terms while failing to note that all of us—anyone who might read Lauren Michele Jackson's book, anyone who might read this essay—are

doing the same thing during every moment of our lives. In a globalized capitalist economy, every object we buy or use or wear or touch is likely to have been made by workers without significant labor rights in faraway places.

The way forward isn't to pursue a dream of staying within our lanes. (Stop wearing clothes! Stop using phones! Stop eating food you didn't grow yourself!) The only way forward is for those of us who are not among the one percent to make common cause in order to put an end to these inequities.

The more one reads about cultural appropriation, the more difficult it is to resist the conclusion that the preoccupation with staying in your lane is a sort of counterfeit politics.

Critics of cultural appropriation believe themselves to be involved in a significant political activity, yet the objects of their criticism are usually people who are relatively powerless—the yoga teacher, the women with the burrito cart, the visual artist, the novelist who dares to venture out of her lane. It would be hard to make the case that the critique of cultural appropriation constitutes an assault on unjust hierarchies in our society, since those who hold real power are rarely the objects of this critique.

Charges of cultural appropriation are also often made against successful artists and celebrities, from Elvis Presley to Kim Kardashian to Jeanine Cummins, the author of *American Dirt*—but it would be fanciful to say that entertainers represent the source of power and unjust hierarchy in our society either.

In 2013, the internet spent a few minutes mulling over the question of whether the band Arcade Fire was guilty of cultural appropriation when it put out the album *Reflektor*, which was heavily influenced by the music of Haiti. It wasn't a major controversy, as internet controversies go, but it was significant enough to make its way to the pages of the *Atlantic*. (Finally, most of the people who discussed this were willing to give the band a pass, since its frontman, Win Butler, had been immersed in the music of Haiti for years, and his wife and bandmate, Régine Chassagne, is of Haitian descent.)

Not too long before this, ordinary Haitians had endured a different form of appropriation, a form that went unremarked upon by those who were pondering the question of how much disapproval to express toward Arcade Fire.

In 2009, Haiti's parliament raised the national minimum wage to 61 cents an hour. Foreign manufacturers, along with the U.S. State Department, immediately pushed back, prevailing on Haiti to lower textile workers' minimum wage to 31 cents an hour. This came to about \$2.50 per day, in a country whose estimated daily cost of living for a family of three was about \$12.50.

Powerful corporations from the most powerful country on earth exerted pressure that intensified the destitution of people in Haiti. Among the corporations were Levi Strauss and Hanes, whose CEO was at that time receiving a compensation package of about \$10 million a year. Yet you could have searched Facebook and Twitter and the rest of the internet for a long time before finding any Americans who cared or even knew about any of this, even after WikiLeaks and the *Nation* brought it to light in 2011.

In 2017, the two Portland women who'd opened a burrito cart closed their business after being assailed by online activists for appropriating the cuisine of Mexico. The following year, when the Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company fired dozens of workers who were trying to launch an independent trade union at its factory in San Luis Potosí, Mexico, few in the world of online outrage took any notice.

Of course, the pressure exerted on working people in Haiti and Mexico is the same pressure that corporate power exerts all over the world, including within this country, where capital's long war against labor rights and social welfare provisions seems to grow more intense every year. This is true appropriation—the stealing of people's life chances, the repression of their opportunity for leisure and health and safety, the bulldozing of any possibility of equitable local development. The malefactors here aren't women running a burrito cart or musicians soaking up influences or white models wearing dreadlocks or writers trying to dream their way into other people's lives, but corporate actors making decisions that degrade us all.

Sometimes I wish we were equipped with an extra sense, a sense that would allow us to perceive how connected we are to one another. When I put on my shirt, I would feel the labor of the garment worker in Nicaragua who pieced it together; when I use my phone, I would be aware of the child laborer in the Democratic Republic of the Congo who mined the cobalt for its battery; when I peel an orange, I would feel the presence of the worker in Florida who picked it.

Lacking such a sense, we need to cultivate the sympathetic imagination. We need to try to imagine the lives of others.

So I'm not finally arguing that when artists try to imagine the lives of others, we should lighten up and see their efforts as basically harmless. I'm arguing that imagining the lives of others is an essential part of the effort to bring into being a more human world.

We can embrace a sort of cultural solipsism that holds that different groups have nothing in common, or we can understand that our lives are inextricably bound up with the lives of people we'll never know. We can deny what we owe to one another, or we can seek to retrieve the vision of a shared humanity. We can choose to believe that it's virtuous to try to stay in our lanes, or we can choose to learn about the idea of solidarity. It's an old idea, but for those of us concerned with freedom and equality, it's still the best idea we have.

Brian Morton's novels include *Starting Out in the Evening* and *Florence Gordon*.