
I have faced racism — it is a fact of my life as a woman of colour. But I refuse to be on the cultural appropriation bandwagon — I find it nearly insulting that while I deal with people’s harsh judgment for the colour of my skin, that while I have faced actual physical violence for it — there are people who care so goddamn much about who gets to wear henna on their hands and who doesn’t. How about making this world a safer place for me? How about not deciding on my behalf what could offend me?...

...I am asking you to look at the concept of cultural appropriation with a critical lens. Ask yourself if the censorship and banning of words/arts/crafts/food by people in power is something that provides a viable solution to the problem of structural racism and inequality here. For instance, when black people are mocked for wearing dreadlocks, while white people wearing dreadlocks are seen as cool and edgy — that is absofuckinglutely racism. But is the solution then to instruct white people (or non-black people of colour) to not wear dreadlocks? Will white people or non-black PoC stopping to wear dreadlocks stop the discrimination and mockery that black people get for wearing dreadlocks? The censorship of freedom of expression lies at the core of this concept, and the parallels it has with the blasphemy laws of the country I come from are really rather striking.

Warzone Distro
WARZONEDISTRO.NOBLOGS.ORG
warzone_distro@riseup.net
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Cultural Appropriation is a Toxic Concept



Farah Shah

If the title of my article alone makes you wanna write me off right off the bat, and makes you decide not to read my article then that is your right, but you lose any right to argue or attack me unless you have listened to what I am gonna say here and considered all my points.

Yes, cultural appropriation is a very toxic concept, with definitions so ambiguous and so different, depending on the person they come from, that it might make sense to do away with it altogether. When you google the word, here is what Wikipedia has to say about it:

“Cultural appropriation is the adoption or use of elements of one culture by members of another culture. Cultural appropriation is seen by some as controversial, notably when elements of a minority culture are used by members of the cultural majority; this is seen as wrongfully oppressing the minority culture or stripping it of its group identity and intellectual property rights.”

With a definition as broad as the one given above, it’s no wonder the conversation about cultural appropriation has devolved into dog-fights over whose ancestors “own” what. You look at the definition above and you wonder where to really draw the line? And then mostly, you see no lines being drawn. There is a streak of nationalism and cultural superiority here that is often hard to ignore. I mean to say, we are always borrowing elements from other cultures, and that kind of thing has been more beneficial than harmful. Cultural organicity is not a thing that truly exists. No culture exists without borrowing things from the other.

Maybe you assume that my position on cultural appropriation is coming from some place of privilege, of never having dealt with racism for what I wore, what I ate, what I did. for the colour of my skin. But what you don’t know is that I was rather big on this issue of cultural appropriation — I still think there are facets of this discussion that hold some real validity. Wearing headdresses as costumes is wrong, wearing shalwar kameez as costume to a Halloween party is wrong, there is something really fucked up about the way that often times all the books all people of colour end up finding on their culture happen to be written by white people.

However, this discussion of cultural appropriation *often* does not focus on very tangible concrete issues of injustices and racism — the discussion of cultural appropriation, by default, lends itself to become a war about what truly belonged to whose ancestors, who owns this part of history and who owns another. It lends itself to becoming a completely pointless conversation about whether the use of “spirit animal” (if you’re not NDN) or the use of the phrase “on-point” (if you’re not black) or if the use of the word “daddy” (if you’re not queer) are “right” or “wrong” to use. And the word **wrong** here sounds a lot more like moral judgment rather than an actually well-crafted argument.



The rest of her article on guardian regarding this topic can be read here [3]

The next time you hear someone accusing someone of cultural appropriation, remember the things I said here, and try and look at this concept more critically. Be critical of anything that you see attacking freedom of expression — from blasphemy laws to the concept of cultural appropriation. That is all I really ask of anyone. And thank you for reading. :)

[1] <https://medium.com/@varathas/connecting-the-disconnected-when-south-asians-accuse-east-africans-of-cultural-appropriation-76527a872484#.s1pl62kvj>

[2] <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/04/bane-cultural-appropriation-160414080237198.html>

[3] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/13/lionel-shrivers-full-speech-i-hope-the-concept-of-cultural-appropriation-is-a-passing-fad?CMP=fb_gu

By default, the discussion of cultural appropriation lends itself to ridiculous discussions where Indian and Pakistani women claim that henna is only theirs to wear and Egyptian women come in to say that because henna was invented by Egyptians, it is only theirs to wear. It lends itself to conversation about banning yoga in schools (that did happen by the way — yoga did get banned in University of Ottawa for a semester — and it was a class for disabled people). It lends itself to talks about who can learn what language, and who is allowed to profit off their language learning skills. Oh and, it also lends itself to conversations about whether or not doing Kama Sutra is appropriation (lolz). Just google: “Is kama sutra cultural appropriation tumblr” and you will find these discussions. Do that on your own risk though.

Because no lines are drawn, because cultural appropriation is never clearly defined and seems to have entirely different definitions for different people — — the discussion of it is almost always guaranteed to turn into something that seems like children fighting over who which food belongs to whom. And of course it does lend itself to white anti-racist men telling me to stay in my goddamn lane because I don’t get to have an opinion about whether or not I find it ridiculous that people are making a big deal of others using the word ‘spirit animal’ (Yup, that happened). Such stances kind of do remind me of when I would have grades taken off my exams because I forgot to use the capital G for god. It reminds of of debates where people bled each other to death about whether writing ‘God’ was more acceptable or the word ‘Allah’.

And don’t tell me that this is a stance I have due to coming from a place of privilege — the reality is that because I was once rather big on this whole cultural appropriation thing, I know exactly where the other side is coming from. I was on that side. Did I tell you how years ago in High School these white girls made fun of this long-shirt type of dress (called kurti) I wore with my tights often. It’s traditional and modern at the same time. So anyway, these white girls made fun of that. And then I saw years later that some white actress had made it a fashion and now it was cool and awesome. And I found it fucked up.

I hated these white fashion models for wearing it but now I realize I was feeling this way because of *racism* I had faced, because it made me feel so powerless and helpless to see what I was mocked for was considered cool for someone else, I wanted that thing back for myself. I was mocked for it, so it should be all mine, right? But then I realized I did not want this thing back so much as I wanted to just have NOT faced racism. That, in some ways, I was being at least a little petty by making it about a thing, a piece of clothing, when it was about racism. I was thinking owning said thing would give me some semblance of control back, but it wouldn’t, it never does.

Racism is at the core of it all — and some random white woman I saw on the street wearing that piece of clothing was not among the ones who made fun of me, even if she decided never to wear said piece of clothing, that racism is

gonna be there to stay. The scars from racism I still have would continue to be there. A racism that takes various forms — things about one's culture being mocked is one of them. Racism is the issue here, not someone wearing said piece of clothing. In fact, in some ways, to use the word cultural appropriation complicates the discussion of racism. I might as well just call it straight up *racism* rather than *cultural appropriation*.

The anger I felt then for seeing white women in that outfit was not really an anger at the action of wearing something — that is completely harmless to be very honest. Anger was poisoning in this instance because, when I think about it, I would rather speak against the white women that were racist to me than hurl accusations of being a racist at any white woman who might enjoy wearing said thing. It seemed borderline fascistic to do so. But you see what I mean? I feel cultural appropriation issue markets itself as fighting social injustice that is racism — but it entirely detracts from the issue of racism.

It's no longer about the racism you faced. It's about someone wearing a thing/saying a thing/eating a thing/blissfully enjoying a thing. It's about this whole fight about whose ancestors owned what. (By the way, still entirely failing here to see the connection between saying spirit animal and oppression that indigenous people face). Besides, nationalism is often at the core of all this — just search up on the movement to ban yoga, and you will have proof of that. And yoga, that is an interesting one.

Many of the people taking offense because yoga has become so mainstream give you this idea that yoga somehow belongs to everyone in India — it does not, it only belongs to the privileged rich ones, it belongs to the upper castes. It does not belong to Dalits — and I feel making it more accessible to them is a far more worthy cause than trying to ban it in the West. But hey that's just me. I urge everyone to just really question the notion of any said thing belonging to an entire culture — question whether or not it really belongs to everyone in that culture — question whether or not the person telling you this speaks for *everyone* in their culture. Also, like India exports yoga willfully, consensually. Are you gonna tell me they suffer from internalized racism?

Brown people accusing black people of appropriating their culture is my favourite. To quote S. Varatharajah:

“When South Asians accuse East Africans of cultural appropriation, it is less about cultural relations or power dynamics at play. It's about brownness and blackness. It boils down to a question of race-relations and border demarcations. Such accusations stem from both widespread ignorance, but also plain old racism. A few months ago, I started my own tweet conversation on the topic, and here's an elaboration.

The sight of a Somali woman wearing a multi-coloured dirac wrapped around her body, or that of an Ethiopian woman with

intricate musical instruments.

But really, to me, those are all the things that the actual misery and pain of my culture hides behind. My culture is better off being seen as one that comprises of justified and rationalized and institutionalized violence towards women, rampant homophobia and transphobia and biphobia, measuring all of a woman's worth by the state of her hymen, broken dreams, justified parental abuse, religious persecution, lack of autonomy for anyone, toxic ideas of honour and modesty....

The concept of cultural appropriation holds my culture in a higher regard than it deserves, looking only at its most superficial aspects. My culture deserves no respect at all, and I am not ashamed to say that I have 0 respect for it.

I also do have a particular gripe with the way writers of fiction are accused of cultural appropriation. One example that comes to mind is J.K. Rowling being accused of it because of using Native American mythology in her stories. Which struck me as quite ridiculous — so even mythology and fiction itself cannot be used in fiction? To quote the awesome Lionel Shriver:

“The author of Who Owns Culture? Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law, Susan Scafidi, a law professor at Fordham University who for the record is white, defines cultural appropriation as “taking intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artifacts from someone else's culture without permission. This can include unauthorised use of another culture's dance, dress, music, language, folklore, cuisine, traditional medicine, religious symbols, etc.”

What strikes me about that definition is that “without permission” bit. However are we fiction writers to seek “permission” to use a character from another race or culture, or to employ the vernacular of a group to which we don't belong? Do we set up a stand on the corner and approach passers-by with a clipboard, getting signatures that grant limited rights to employ an Indonesian character in Chapter Twelve, the way political volunteers get a candidate on the ballot?

I am hopeful that the concept of “cultural appropriation” is a passing fad: people with different backgrounds rubbing up against each other and exchanging ideas and practices is self-evidently one of the most productive, fascinating aspects of modern urban life.

But this latest and little absurd no-no is part of a larger climate of super-sensitivity, giving rise to proliferating prohibitions supposedly in the interest of social justice that constrain fiction writers and prospectively makes our work impossible.”

does to his hair. Inevitably, the gatekeepers are those who are outraged by Bieber's locks.

The very fact of being outraged makes one the arbiter of what is outrageous. The gatekeepers, in other words, define themselves, because they are ones who want to put up the gates.

The debates around Justin Bieber's hair or Beyonce's Bollywood outfit are relatively trivial. But, in other contexts, the creation of gatekeepers has proved highly problematic.

In many European nations, minority groups have come to be seen as distinct communities, each with their own interests, needs and desires, and each with certain so-called "community leaders" acting as their representatives.

Such leaders are frequently religious, often conservative, and rarely representative of their communities. But they wield great power as mediators between their communities and wider society. In effect, they act as gatekeepers to those communities.

Their role as gatekeepers is particularly problematic when it comes to policing not fashion styles or cuisine but ideas. Community leaders often help define what is acceptable to say about particular communities, and what is "offensive".

And notions of "offence" are often used to police not just what outsiders may say about a particular community, but to shut down debate within those communities — think of the fatwa against Salman Rushdie or the shutting down by Sikh activists of Sikh playwright Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's play Behzti, which explored the role of women within Sikh communities.

The campaign against cultural appropriation is, in other words, part of the broader attempt to police communities and cultures. Those who most suffer from such policing are minority communities themselves, and in particular progressive voices within those communities.

The real fight against injustice begins with ridding ourselves of our self-appointed gatekeepers."

I highly recommend reading Kenan Malik's article in its entirety here [2] If you liked my previous article, you are going to like his that much more.

I also fundamentally disagree with the the way appropriation-obsessed types tend to define my culture or decide that said things somehow belong to everyone in the culture. When they may only be accessible to many people.

They see my culture as: Henna tattoos, brightly coloured awesome styles of clothing with intricate designs, big grand happy weddings, tasty food, and

henna painted on her hands irritates many South Asians because it challenges centuries-old myths about their place in this world and racial hierarchy. It's a sharp reminder that there are understudied connections between these two parts of the world and many of its diverse communities. But, many South Asians would rather want to sweep those under the rug and pretend they didn't exist."

You can read the rest of his awesome article here [1]

What's telling to me is that a lot of my fellow South Asians made a bigger fuss about Beyonce "appropriating" South Asian culture in one of her videos than they did about her being an actual sweat-shop owner. I mean, are people's priorities so messed that symbols and microaggressions matter to them much more than serious issues?

Here is another thing you probably do not realize: What you often see as cultural appropriation and "problematic" is something a lot of PoC's livelihoods depend on. There are people whose livelihoods depend on selling cultural clothing, cultural crafts, etc in festivals for instance. And they seem nothing but happy about the fact that their work gets the recognition and appreciation it deserved. I know a single brown mom whose livelihood (at least, some part of it) depends on applying henna on people's hands. Her work is very much appreciated, she is incredibly proud of it. You are told you make a big goddamn difference by not being a consumer of henna tattoos, but you are making just about as much of a fucking difference as you do when you consume "fair-trade" coffee which isn't actually fair-trade (yup, read up on that too).

I do care about social justice. I do care about racism and when I do see that racism, I refuse to let it go. I have faced racism — it is a fact of my life as a woman of colour. But I refuse to be on the cultural appropriation bandwagon — I find it nearly insulting that while I deal with people's harsh judgment for the colour of my skin, that while I have faced actual physical violence for it — there are people who care so goddamn much about who gets to wear henna on their hands and who doesn't. How about making this world a safer place for me? How about not deciding on my behalf what could offend me?

The conversation about cultural appropriation has become increasingly hard for me to take seriously. I feel that a lot of what drives it is the feeling of utter powerlessness to control anything other than mere symbols. I get that, I do. But I refuse to be part of this conversation.

Cultural appropriation is largely no longer about racism, but about taking ownership of every simple mundane thing in order to feel a sense of control in a world that constantly deprives people of colour of it.

P.S. There is a second piece I just wrote on this topic which is in response to some of the very valid criticism I received, and the very valid concerns some people brought to the table. I have considered your points, and here is my response to you...

Cultural appropriation needs more nuance: A response to your responses.

Let me just start by saying that I am overwhelmed by the amount of traction and response my article on cultural appropriation got. I am also pleasantly surprised by the fact that the response has been largely positive, when you consider just how ridiculous and defensive people can get about this topic. I was pleased to see that my article resonated with so many people.

I also greatly appreciate the people who, while disagreeing with me, were able to do so in a constructive, civil manner. The interwebz definitely needs more of that. So, thank you everyone.

People have shared some valid criticism and concerns and I would like to acknowledge those in this article.

It is indeed true that often times, people with structural power (in this case white people) will profit of our works — and will get a lot more credit for it than us people of colour do. But I do not think the solution to that is so much to tell people to stop consuming something — because it puts responsibility and blame on individuals — when we should be fighting the powers that be — doing things to change the structure that makes it such that the work of people of colour is invalidated unless white people validate it. I am not asking for that particular aspect of the conversation to stop. But I am saying there needs to be more nuance here.

I am asking you to look at the concept of cultural appropriation with a critical lens. Ask yourself if the censorship and banning of words/arts/crafts/food by people in power is something that provides a viable solution to the problem of structural racism and inequality here. For instance, when black people are mocked for wearing dreadlocks, while white people wearing dreadlocks are seen as cool and edgy — that is absofuckinglutely racism. But is the solution then to instruct white people (or non-black people of colour) to not wear dreadlocks? Will white people or non-black PoC stopping to wear dreadlocks stop the discrimination and mockery that black people get for wearing dreadlocks? The censorship of freedom of expression lies at the core of this concept, and the parallels it has with the blasphemy laws of the country I come from are really rather striking. Especially so when people dictate against the usage of an innocent, harmless metaphor like Spirit Animal.

Is it true that there are racist white people, who while being racist to said culture, use the forms of said culture with no regard to the culture? Absofuckinglutely. But that is a whole another topic altogether. And, for me, personally, it makes more sense to discuss it as *racism* rather than as *cultural appropriation*. Because it seems more to the point when I do refer to it as *racism*.

I am saying, let's turn this conversation in the direction of structural inequalities

that make it okay to mock marginalized cultures until a white person validates those said cultures. Let's make it less about being the arbiters of who gets to use which cultural forms. I want to see no more of that garbage flying around the interwebz about who stole hummus from who, or furious rants that take offense if non-arab women want to learn how to bellydance. Less of that ridiculousness, please. I am not okay with any concept that tries to shun learning between cultures.

I do not see it as a point of contention if a white woman learns how to apply henna well, and makes use of that skill — the issue here is not that, the issue occurs when her work gains recognition at the expense of a brown woman's work. The solution then is to change things in a direction that the brown woman's work isn't undermined, and not that a white woman not profit of her skills. You know what I am saying? Henna is an amazing art that should be accessible for everyone to learn — regardless of race or class. As someone who is a huge arts enthusiast, I cannot be okay with people trying to ban its consumption/selling/learning in the name of anti-racism.

For now, I am gonna focus more on the fact that henna was largely such a class thing in my home country Pakistan — and good henna designs were so not for you if you were poor. I care about making these kind of things more accessible, and hopefully one day henna becomes an art that is enthusiastically learned by people around the world. And becomes more and more accessible for everyone.

Remember also, that power dynamics are different in every given society in the world — and in many of these contexts it isn't always white people who are the most powerful. In the context of Pakistan, it's Punjabi sunnis who have the most privilege — so how do we decide who gets to what and who doesn't? Remember also that cultures even within a country and region vary greatly. Different regions and provinces in my country had styles of clothing, music, cuisine, history and art and crafts that were specific to them. Who, then, gets to decide who is the most oppressed and most powerful and what rightfully *belongs* to who? What defines privilege in such a context? There is far too much essentialism that the concept of cultural appropriation leads to that I am simply not okay with. For the lack of a better term, it seems rather *totalitarian* to me.

Besides, who draws the line for who is allowed to consume and sell what? Who gets to be the authority on that? I am wary of people who try to be the gatekeepers for that kind of thing — almost as though they speak for everyone in their culture and decide what belongs to whom. Also, often times, the concept of cultural appropriation is used to monitor and police minority communities. An issue that is covered very well in this article by Kenan Malik, to quote him:

“...who does the policing? Who gives permission for people of other cultures to use particular cultural forms? Who acts as the gatekeepers to gated cultures?”

Most black people could probably not care less what Justin Beiber