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Bakhita Solenyanu
SUNY Geneseo, bes101@geneseo.edu

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Bakhita Solenyanu
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Adapting Black Culture: without the Black Experience

"I wish America loved Black people as much as they love Black culture." Jalen Rose

From the way we dress, to the music we play to even the way we talk, Black culture is all around us. However, in a world of interconnections yet riddled with racial disparities, this research will dive into the nuances between cultural appropriation of Black culture, emphasizing the jarring contrast between the global desire for its elements while also discrediting and failing to recognize the profound experiences embedded within Black culture. To define cultural appropriation is to look all around you and take note of the influence of Black Americans and how much it has impacted American culture. However, to go by word definition, cultural appropriation is the "unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of customs, practices, ideas, etc. of one person or society by members of another and typically more dominant people of society," with the first known usage of the phrase in 1945 (cultural appropriation, 2023). It is well known, both through our history books and now through the findings of *the 1619 Project* by Nikole Hannah-Jones, that American culture is Black culture.

Moreover, as much as many might try to dispute this, it is an undeniable truth that so much of what we enjoy as culture derives from many distinct aspects of Black American life. From the way we dress, to the music we play to even the way we talk, Black culture is all around us. Nevertheless, in a world of interconnections yet riddled with racial disparities, this research will dive into the nuances between cultural appropriation of Black culture, emphasizing the jarring contrast between the global desire for its elements while also discrediting and failing to recognize the profound experiences embedded within Black culture. Drawing insight

from *The 1619 Project*, we acknowledge how important it is to know where things come from to pay tribute to the people whose creativity informs much of American cultural productions.

Black fishing and racial ambiguity are two concepts that fall under the cultural appropriation umbrella, and modern pop culture is no stranger to either. In 2018, Kim Kardashian rocked Fulani braids, giving the well-known African-originated hairstyle to a white American actress and model, Bo Derek, when she first worked in her film in 1979 (Callender, 2020). In 2015, the Jenner Sisters (Kylie and Kendall) wore faux dreadlocks on a magazine cover; they were seen as "edgy, raw, and beautiful. However, when Zendaya wore the same hairstyle...she looked like she 'smells of patchouli oil or weed" (Finley, 2015). In 2013, American singer Miley Cyrus came out with the song "We Can't Stop," and in her music video, you can see her twerking and acting in a stereotypical caricature of a Black woman. And when Iggy Azalea went from pop to hip-hop mimicking the rap style of Black Americans, she was also black fishing (Helligar, 2023). All these white women were praised for aspects of Black culture that they took, but when a Black person does it, they are met with discrimination, labeled "ghetto," made fun of their style of dress or the way they speak. Historically, Black hairstyles, musical tastes, and ways of dressing have been the subject of ridicule. They say black hairstyles are just hair but never discuss the "experiences of women and girls who add their personal experience to the conversation surrounding hairstyles," which many are discriminated for (Lambert, 2022). Many times, in media, white celebrities can get away with cosplaying as African Americans, from the way we style our hair to our songs.

The earliest form of appropriation came from minstrel shows that dehumanized, glorified, and made fun of African Americans. White Americans ran across stages dressed in blackface where they would "sing, dance, play music, give speeches, and cut up for white audiences,"

which allowed racism towards Black Americans to become normalized (Hannah-Jones 368). These types of shows created harmful stereotypes of African Americans. They were used to push racial stereotypes of them being “lazy, licentious, vulgar, disheveled,” and animalistic, among a plethora of other things (368). The shows allowed white Americans to cosplay as Black Americans and make fun of their experiences without ever living them, which the message is meant to remind them that “*no matter how bad things might be for us, at least we're not them*” (371) and was used “to define the ways they're not Black” (Kubota, 2020). This type of understanding translated to the modern world with concepts like racial ambiguity and black fishing coming to play, which is where non-POCs would do things like tan their skin, wear African American hairstyles, have body modifications to have the stereotypical “Black body,” and talk with a blaccent (which is from of mockery and mimicry of AAVE (African American Vernacular English)). Essentially, they dress up in what they imagine a stereotypical African American looks and acts like. It is essentially “a masquerade that operates as a form of racial fetishism (Karimi, 2021). Many times, this is done by white women, who see the over-sexualization and glorification of Black bodies and pick and choose what would benefit them, and “instead of appropriating Black culture from the sidelines, there's this need to own it, to participate in it without wanting the full experience of Blackness and the systemic discrimination that comes with it” (Karimi, 2021). Throughout history, there has been a considerable disconnect between Black culture and Black experiences. White Americans have the luxury to take aspects of Black culture but never have to deal with the mental and emotional stress that results from the constant threat of white violence and financial insecurity, systemic racism faced in the medical field, school, workplaces, police brutality, and so much more.

Because at the end of the day, they could always lean back into the safety of their whiteness when it benefits them.

I am African and grew up surrounded by white people and went to PWIs for most of my life, so I had little to no knowledge of what African American culture is, where things came from, the concept of cultural appropriation, and just how much of an influence they have in modern society and in exploring the concept of non-POC engagement in the appropriation of Black culture. I believe it is important to understand the reasons and relationships that drive this cultural adaptation and how it disconnects from the lived experiences of the Black community. Appropriation often arises from an array of factors like the history of white adaptation to Black culture, a display of trends in media, and the desire to fit in the so-called "cool crowd." This disconnect underscores a discerning trend of the separation of cultural aesthetics from the social and historical meanings behind aspects of our culture. Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican activist, once said, "A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots." This is what *The 1619 Project* is trying to reconstruct. It demonstrates the crossroads between cultural and historical analysis and serves as a reminder of the deep-rooted impact that both slavery and Black Americans have on American society. *The 1619 Project* taught me a lot about what American culture is. It showed me the beauty of what became Black culture. It has taught me just how important it is to know where things come from, acknowledge their history and pay respect to their origins and the people tied to them.

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