

The Banality of Appropriation (Transcript)

“Evil is a simple thing for simple minds, simple minds being those that don’t think”

Welcome to the Banality of Appropriation: a podcast designed to spur your thoughts on culture its exploitation. I am [introductions of the people talking]. We are a group of white individuals, and with that in mind, we engineered this podcast with the aim of educating other white folk and encouraging them to think about their actions in regard to other cultures.

But first, what is a culture? As one individual we interviewed, Lawrence, said

[Lawrence interview portion, “Culture is essential. It defines who we are, how we act, how we see the world, and how we interact with other cultures and peoples.]

However, there is a large variety of different ways in which people can interact: political scales, geographic, regional, religious, spiritual, ethnical and historical ways. As another interviewee, Tim, states:

[CUT[3:43 Its quite broad and it’s difficult to define
CUT4:14 Before you recognize what culture is, you’re not really conscious of it
CUT4:23 A lot of our behaviours, practices, even thoughts, are shaped by our cultures unconsciously. However I don’t think that because you’re conscious of them, you can change them.
CUT4:42 I think there’s a difference between not having a culture and having a cultured culture
CUT6:02 Obviously that had implications on my identity currently and probably will be as long as I am identified as who I am permanently.
CUT6:13 Culture is part of your identity] -Nov. 1 interview]

Katie elaborates on Tim’s point about how we aren’t always conscious of our culture;

9:30 my family grew up with a bible in the house and it was a cultural experience but it is not a universal experience, (Dec. 1)

There are intersectionalities as well, where one culture can pull and push against another, shaping how a person identifies. Culture plays a key role in how one identifies, and there isn’t one way to identify. As Tim puts it:

[5:35 I could be conscious of my culture but I can’t erase it because it’s always going to be a part of a person’s identity.]

Hannah Arendt. A philosopher. A Jewish-German. A survivor of Auschwitz. She became stateless, without a land, without a people. Without these, she was robbed of her identity. She

was robbed of her culture. After World War II, one Nazi was found and brought to Jerusalem to be tried for his crimes: organizing the trains that brought people to Auschwitz. This man was Adolf Eichmann. Arendt felt compelled to attend his trial in order to come face-to-face with the man responsible for atrocities against humanity, and found him to be utterly normal. She said he “lacked the grandeur of Satan.” His greatest crime, according to Arendt, was bypassing the safeguard of conscience by obeying orders; simply not thinking. This is the banality of evil.

This is the banality of appropriation. People are not thinking, they’re not educating themselves. They take a cultural phenomenon, leaving pieces of it behind, such is the case with dream catchers: People have taken this part of Native American culture as a “cool keepsake”, dismissing its original intent and meaning. They haven’t educated themselves, and by doing so, have stripped it of all meaning.

Without thinking we are unable to create ourselves - our own essence - this search for identity, for belonging, can lead to the dangerous trap of taking from others in order to fill this void. Katie spoke of this in their interview”

[white people’s (lack of) culture]

Many white people cling to the history of their being, saying things such as “I’m was born in Canada, but my family is from Scotland”, or “I’m 1/16th Cherokee” not with it being part of their identity in mind, but wearing it like a sticker. White people are often seen staging their cultural history like that. Perhaps this clinging to their roots is something that gives rise to white fragility, and why white people tend to be so defensive about cultural appropriation. Perhaps some view appropriation as this elaborate thing, with the grandeur of Satan, not realizing that small, seemingly benign acts are just as at fault.

Once a culture is taken, it no longer retains its original meaning, it becomes a cliché. As a cliché it dies - we take the life from the culture. Once a culture—or portion of a culture—has become cliché, those part of that culture, their being, becomes cliché as well, through stereotypes. Stereotypes, which tend to be hurtful, reduce a person to a simple concept: they are no longer a person, but a stagnant idea. They have been robbed of their essence and their existence has been trivialized, or made little value and importance.

Trivializing is an extension of differing meanings, in the most malicious way possible. It’s not as simple as adding or subtracting a belief, it is acknowledging the system from which it came and then denying its significance. When appropriation trivializes, it is a violent recognition that silently strips away meaning. In his interview, Lawrence had a take on appropriation:

[Cultural appropriation I think is defined as a dominant culture taking over the minority culture's language, culture, symbols, religion, and making it into something that is trivialized. Lawrence]

To some appropriation and appreciation are synonymous, but how can you say that something so damaging is merely your way of admiring another culture?

[when part of a culture is beneficial and can be developed by anybody, anybody should be able to pursue it and to appreciate it and transmit it. (L.F.)]

It's in human nature to do something if it benefits you. But where do you draw the line between doing something that is beneficial to you and something that is harmful to others?

[We're talking about a culture assimilating another part of a culture. Bob down the street isn't the dominant culture, he's a member of the culture but he isn't the dominant culture. I think that what we have to address here is that when somebody commodifies parts of culture, and Bob down the street buys it, the issue isn't Bob being a cultural appropriate or culturally appropriating the artifact the issue is that somebody sold it. So the issue isn't necessarily culture versus culture, it's the power that's doing it, which is capitalism. If capitalism can find anything to sell it will. It marginalizes, it trivializes, it makes everything available to anybody that want to buy it. So the powers that be in our system, capitalist system, are the ones that should be addressed and not Bob down the street. If you think commodification is the issue, then the companies should be targeted, not the people doing it. (~7:36-8:38) L.F.]

Who drives the invisible hand? Is it the companies that start the commodification or is it the consumer? Regardless, it is the consumer that perpetuates appropriation by buying into it.

However, Tim has a simple answer to that question of benefit:

[Within my right to adopt something that is beneficial to me (Tim)]

[Exploitation is a kind of right, didn't Marx say that ownership is the right to exploit and use to whatever means you want." (0:17, Nov. 17).]

A right, by definition, is a moral or legal entitlement. In this sense, entitlement is a power struggle, where one individual holds their own personal gain, whether gratification or profit, above the mere recognition of existence of another. Sarah adds:

[Nov. 21 Interview 19:40-19:58] But it's also like, that privilege, that a person has. Like if you're white you have more privilege, more opportunities than someone who isn't. But that's just the shitty way our world works. Can't really be helped. Or it could, I don't know.]

Look at yourself in the mirror and ask "How do I perpetuate colonialism in my day-to-day life?" Colonialism is defined as "the policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically." Cultural appropriation is an extension of colonialism, as we economically exploit cultural practices. And a lot of the cultures that we appropriate *have* been colonized in their history. By wearing moccasins bought from Wal-mart you are perpetuating colonialism. By buying a dreamcatcher from the dollarstore you are perpetuating colonialism.

Fanon states: "**All forms of exploitation are alike.** They all seek to justify their existence by citing some biblical decree. All forms of exploitation are identical, since they apply to the same 'object': man. By considering the structure of such and such an exploitation from an abstract point of view, we are closing our eyes to the fundamentally important problem of restoring man to his rightful place"

We must not abstractly look at exploitation, at appropriation, as Fanon warns. We must look at the concrete evidence of our actions. Sarah gives us an example as evidence.

[Nov. 21 Interview, ~ 35:40- 41:07 Hawaii]

In metaphysics there is a quote "the morning star is the evening star" which points to the fact that both names are referring to the same object: Venus. It draws in the question why do we have two names for one single, numerically indifferent, object? The same goes for the relationship between appreciation and appropriation. What some people view as appreciation is appropriation to others.

Admire other cultures. Admire them all you want. Read about them, experience authentic cuisine, but don't take them as your own. As soon as you try to incorporate other cultures into your identity you are appropriating. You can love something without possessing it. You can experience something without participating in its exploitation.

Intent. It matters. It matters in the sense that you didn't *mean* to be an asshole. But you *were* one. People don't see intent. They see action.

[Tipi quote]

There are two ways to approach recognition: saying yes and saying no. The answer depends on the type of recognition: is it fucked up? When you culturally appropriate are you recognizing another culture based off of stereotypes, misinformation, and ignorance?