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Marisa E. Balanda  
*Gettysburg College*

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# Bodies without the Burden: White Appropriation and Exploitation of Black Appearance and Culture

## Abstract

Critiques of cultural appropriation in regards to inappropriate Halloween costumes and the phenomenon of Instagram models “black-fishing” their followers are more prevalent now than ever before, but white exploitation of black culture and appearance is nothing new. In academia, the term “cultural appropriation” describes how aspects of a marginalized group’s culture are taken by those in a dominant group without regard to their cultural significance. In her chapter, “Black Culture Without Black People,” Imani Kai Johnson refers to appropriation as “colonialism at the scale of the dancing body or the sacred ritual object, its life and dynamism reduced to a thing for consumption or a costume for play” (Kai Johnson, 2020). This paper will explore how American society’s general illusion of color-blind ideology perpetuates an environment of justified cultural appropriation that is often tied to economic exploitation. Through an examination of both historical and modern instances of appropriation in music, dance, fashion and appearance, and academia, it becomes evident that the “whitewashing” of black cultural practices disregards and erases the history of struggle and cultural nuances present in their original forms.

## Keywords

cultural appropriation, whitewashing, black-fishing

## Disciplines

African American Studies | Race and Ethnicity

## Comments

Written for AFS 250: Black Feminism in Film & Hip Hop

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“Bodies without the Burden”: White Appropriation and Exploitation of Black Appearance and Culture

Marisa Balanda

Department of Africana Studies, Gettysburg College

AFS 250: Black Feminism in Film and Hip Hop

Dr. Tyeshia Redden

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Critiques of cultural appropriation in regards to inappropriate Halloween costumes and the phenomenon of Instagram models “black-fishing” their followers are more prevalent now than ever before, but white exploitation of black culture and appearance is nothing new. In academia, the term “cultural appropriation” describes how aspects of a marginalized group’s culture are taken by those in a dominant group without regard to their cultural significance. In her chapter, “Black Culture Without Black People,” Imani Kai Johnson refers to appropriation as “colonialism at the scale of the dancing body or the sacred ritual object, its life and dynamism reduced to a thing for consumption or a costume for play” (Kai Johnson, 2020). This paper will explore how American society’s general illusion of color-blind ideology perpetuates an environment of justified cultural appropriation that is often tied to economic exploitation. Through an examination of both historical and modern instances of appropriation in music, dance, fashion and appearance, and academia, it becomes evident that the “whitewashing” of black cultural practices disregards and erases the history of struggle and cultural nuances present in their original forms.

While formal discussions about cultural appropriation are more commonplace today, the practice has been prevalent in the United States since the early 1800s. Blackface minstrelsy is cited as “the first formal public acknowledgement by whites of black culture” and served to reinforce the racial and social hierarchy in America (qtd. in Kopano, 2014). The first established minstrel troupe was created in 1843 and foreshadowed decades of performances that blatantly mocked the black caricature. In the early stages of this practice, white performers (usually former circus performers) would dress up in blackface and exaggerated costumes and sing, dance, play music, and give speeches to white audiences. White minstrels “undoubtedly incorporated actual

elements of black dance, stance, gesture in their performances, for there is abundant evidence that they observed black recreational activity..." (qtd. in Kopano, 2014); however, the minstrels often incorporated elements from mainstream white popular culture to make the performances more appealing to white audiences. Blackface minstrelsy was the primary method in which white people could observe black culture without engaging with it authentically. Abolitionist Frederick Douglass condemned whites who performed in blackface, writing in his *North Star* newspaper that blackface minstrels were "the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow citizens" (qtd. in Kopano, 2014). Because of this practice's profitability and disregard for cultural authenticity it was a blatant form of appropriation, even if it was not labeled as such at the time.

As blackface minstrelsy became more popular and its producers saw more opportunity for economic gain, black performers were invited to join the acts. William Henry Lane, more often recognized by his stage name of Master Juba, was considered the "King of All Dancers." Lane's reputation attracted P.T. Barnum into recruiting him for his minstrel show; however, Barnum refused to make the audience aware that he was black and "disguised" his already black complexion under makeup and wigs. This practice dismantled the credibility that Lane had as a black performer and exploited him under a false pretense. In an article for the *New York Times Magazine*, Wesley Morris writes that, "As Juba, Lane was persuasive enough that Barnum could pass him off as a white person in blackface. He ceased being a real black boy in order to become Barnum's minstrel Pinocchio" (Morris, 2019). Because of the blatant racial imbalance between white and black people in Antebellum society, Lane was not in a position of power and thus

could not defend himself from this injustice. Ultimately, the widespread acceptance and acclamation for the practice of blackface minstrelsy was not unparalleled; this type of performance was merely a forerunner for continued adoption of the black experience by white society.

Popular culture became more accessible with the advent of television in the 1950s, and television shows disseminated mainstream music and dance. Similarly to how Lane “Juba’s” authentic black appearance was disguised with a ludicrous blackface costume, black music was adapted for white audiences: “White teenagers became fascinated with what disc jockey Alan Freed would brand rock ‘n’ roll, or black dance music. As this music steadily permeated popular culture in the 1950s, black songs often were altered from the original production and sung by whites to make them more acceptable to the growing audience” (Brown, 2014). This black erasure was prevalent on the teenage television program *American Bandstand*, which created an implicitly racial dress code of a coat and tie for participants — which aimed to exclude black dancers from the show (Brown, 2014). Despite its distaste for black dancers, *Bandstand* frequently showcased black music, with many black artists making their television debut on the show; however, these performers were restricted from associating with the show’s white dancers. As many originally black dances such as “the strand” were popularized on the show by white dancers, the dancers were barred from disclosing that the choreography was created by their black classmates. Former *Bandstand* dancer Jimmy Peatross recalled that, “young America watched and danced with enthusiasm, oblivious to the debt of gratitude owed to the black community” (Brown, 2014). The whitewashing and lack of credit that black creators received on

*Bandstand* and through the rock ‘n’ roll era further illustrated how whites tend to appropriate and strip black culture of its essence to reinforce the prevailing social hierarchy under a white guise.

History has repeated itself with the advent of hip hop music, and white society continues to erase the cultural significance of the art form as it is thrust further into mainstream culture. While hip hop is often understood to be a music and dance style, hip hop has influenced fashion, language, and attitude. Hip hop is “an almost 30-year old [now 40] cultural institution that evolved from rap music, breakdancing, deejaying, and graffiti art, a culture born in the ‘hood (short for neighborhood) of the inner city in the US, and characterized by an expressive improvisatory style that often takes on a defiant attitude” (Xie et al., 2007). Hip hop has since transformed from a strictly artistic style to an economic commodity. As of 2002, it was estimated that hip hop contributed \$5 billion to the US economy (Xie et al., 2007). More notable, however, is that despite its origin among the black community, 70% of hip hop records were purchased by white buyers (Xie et al., 2007). Because of its widespread globalization and economic gain, Xie classifies hip hop as a form of tourism. He qualifies this entity to include “the images collected from the mass media or the snapshots taken from the hip hop attractions that are sustained through a variety of non-tourist practices, such as film, television, literature, magazines, records, and videos” (Xie et al., 2007). Hip hop’s evolution from a colloquial practice to a prominent facet in popular culture has made its consumption heavily analyzed. White society views hip hop from a mass gaze, in which the viewer has a desire to be fully immersed in an environment but is physically distanced from the actual scene. This positioning creates a comfortable viewing situation for the consumer (Xie et al., 2007). In layman’s terms, white hip hop consumers experience the culture without having any physical claim to the lifestyle that influenced its

creation. Because of their viewpoint from an outside environment, Xie classifies white hip hop consumers as “cultural tourists” — or viewing a glamorized virtual ghetto life that many black people do not wish to be a part of themselves (Xie et al., 2007). This mass gaze has thrust hip hop into the “mass culture,” which is even more prominent than “popular culture” and in which there is a “distinct separation between those who produce the cultural commodity and those consume it” (Xie et al., 2007). When a commodity enters into the mass culture, it becomes a capitalist structure in which those in a position of power profit off the creative influence of those in a more marginalized position (i.e. a white and upper-class business person earning money from the sales of a rapper’s designer sneakers). As hip hop stars found ways to brand themselves through merchandise, public appearances, and television cameos, white business moguls began to infiltrate the enterprise.

In fact, hip hop’s evolution from a music and dance style into a profitable good has only reinforced the boundaries between white and black and consumer and producer (Xie et al., 2007). This has resulted in a moral and economic debate about “who owns Black cool” (Schur, 2020). Schur’s research explores “how American law and business practice have ignored the ownership rights of African Americans in Black cultural practices and consistently found ways to ‘propertize’ and then transfer ‘ownership’ of these practices and products to white people and companies” (Schur, 2020). In more theoretical terms, this process can be defined as a type of “cultural colonialism” in which the dominant white society has exploited a black cultural practice for profit.

As stated previously, white consumers make up the majority of hip hop’s patrons. This paradox arises from white society’s long standing fascination with black bodies and culture. For

whites, participating in black cultural production gives them a degree of “cool” that they would not have had from their own culture. This cultural adoption has not resulted in an equal footing between blacks and whites: “Just because white Americans gravitate toward products marked as cool by African American culture, that consumption has not necessarily translated into either improved cross-cultural communication or enhanced status or wealth for many African Americans” (Schur, 2020). White fascination/popularization of black production has resulted in many white artists trying to imitate black identities for clout. For example, the Australian rapper Iggy Azalea has been accused of using a “blackcent” and being ignorant of the music style’s history. When called out on Twitter for appropriating hip hop, Azalea decided that she was creating a new style that was not associated with the original culture. Twitter critics were upset that she was trying to mimic a culture of struggle and oppression that she has never experienced as a white woman (Hess, 2018). Ultimately, Azalea may be able to recreate the sound, but that does not mean she has any stake in the culture that created it. Eminem, who is arguably the most famous white rapper in history, has — unlike Azalea — admitted to his appropriation in his lyrics. In his song entitled “The Anthem,” Eminem writes that “I am the worst thing since Elvis Presley / to do black music so selfishly / and used it to get myself wealthy / Hey, there’s a concept that works” (qtd. in Kopano, 2014). Though brash, Eminem at least realizes his complicitness in appropriating black culture for profit. And by referencing Elvis Presley, he acknowledges that others have been guilty of this practice during the rock ‘n’ roll era.

Hip hop music was not the only aspect of hip hop culture to be whitewashed. Hip hop dance, originally performed on the streets of the Bronx and Brooklyn, has been distorted for mass consumption. In its purest form, hip hop dance was comprised of B-Boys and B-Girls

(Break Boys or Girls) who would breakdance to the beats of the DJ in dance circles called cyphers. Nazgol Ghandnoosh warns about how this style is not the norm in today's adaptation of hip hop dance: "While breakdancing is a free-form movement involving frequent drops and spins, hip hop dancers' hands rarely touch the floor, and dancers in hip-hop classes follow fully choreographed routines" (Ghandnoosh, 2010). As music artists began to incorporate hip hop dance into their live performances and music videos, dance studies began to offer classes in the discipline. Currently, hip hop dance has become an explicitly choreographed and highly commercialized art form that is openly embraced by white dancers. Cross-cultural practices, while often subject to scrutiny, can also lead to cultural appreciation and recognition. Jonathan Lee, who is an Asian-American choreographer for Alvin Ailey Dance Theatre and has been a professional dancer for artists such as Gloria Estefan, Mariah Carey, and Madonna, makes a point to acknowledge the origins of hip hop in all of his dance classes. He commented, "I pay tribute to the origins of hip hop by ending my class in a cypher [dance circle] because hip hop did not start in a dance studio with beautiful mirrors, lights, and Marley flooring but rather in the streets in The Bronx and Brooklyn on concrete and cardboard" (J. Lee, personal communication, May 5, 2020). By forcing his mostly affluent studio dancers to acknowledge the genesis of the style, Lee, who is not African American, and has no ties to the creation of hip hop, makes an effort to acknowledge the privilege he and the dancers have to be trained in an actual studio space.

Not all dancers are as gracious as Lee when it comes to giving credit to the creators of a commodity. The TikTok sensation "Renegade" that blew up in late 2019 became more than a trendy dance; it transformed into a lesson to teenagers on appropriation. Jaliah Harmon, a

fourteen year old African American dancer from Atlanta, is the original choreographer of the Renegade dance. In collaboration with another dancer, Harmon filmed and posted the original dance to Funimate (a music video creation app) and to Instagram. After being altered slightly from its original choreography, the Renegade was posted on TikTok in October, 2019. The “reigning queen of TikTok,” sixteen year old Charli D’Amelio subsequently posted her own version of the Renegade, without crediting Harmon, and it went viral. D’Amelio has earned sponsorships and money from her rendition of the dance, even though she had nothing to do with its creation. Since then, celebrities such as Lizzo, Kourtney Kardashian, David Dobrik, and members of the K-pop band Stray Kids have performed their own versions of the Renegade, and D’Amelio was given the credit for popularizing it (Lorenz, 2020). When Harmon began to see her dance disseminated on TikTok and other Internet platforms, she commented on videos asking the influencers to tag her. She also created her own TikTok account in an attempt to publicize her creation of the dance. She was either ignored or ridiculed — in one case even being called a “clout-chaser” (Green, 2020). Fortunately, the New York Times eventually picked up Harmon’s story and she was able to receive credit for her creation. D’Amelio and Harmon have since collaborated in a video performing the Renegade, and Harmon says she has no hard feelings toward D’Amelio (Lorenz, 2020). Regarding the Renegade situation, columnist Leigh Green laments, “This is a pattern we see over and over, especially when it comes to black artists and performers. Black creators have their work stolen all the time by white individuals who profit from the work solely because they are deemed more palatable by a wider audience. Read: \*whiter audience” (Green, 2020). Since, TikTok influencers such as D’Amelio and Addison Rae

Easterling make a concerted effort to give the creators credit in the captions of the dances they post on TikTok.

The platform of TikTok in itself perpetuates the culture of appropriation that was exemplified in the Renegade situation. Many times, the dances that go viral on TikTok originate on the video sharing app Dubsmash. Polow da Don, a producer for Usher and Missy Elliott believes that, “Dubsmash catches things at the roots when they’re culturally relevant. TikTok is the suburban kids that take things on when it’s already the style and bring it to their community” (Lorenz, 2020). In essence, the demographic of teens who are posting and profiting off of these dance creations on TikTok is not the same demographic of teens who created them and received little to no recognition on apps such as Dubsmash and Funimate. While the Renegade instance was a slight to Harmon, it served to teach TikTok influencers that they risk being held accountable when replicating content without giving credit to the creators.

In a similar regard to both music and dance, many African American fashion designers have had their work stolen and reproduced under a white label. European fascination with black bodies and appearance has been commonplace since ancient times, and many white people manifest this obsession by trying to appear as black. In the earliest writings about Africans, Europeans described females as “black and beautiful... Women... looked upon by the sun ... A black woman who is beautiful for in her is the image of God...” (Lewis-Mhoo, 2014). While white society found black people a source of attraction, they had no desire to equally integrate them into dominant society. In the modern day, white business owners would often exploit the talents of African American designers, who received no attribution for their work; “Many African American dressmakers were given garments to design and sew. Yet when the garment

was finished, the shop owner inserted the store's or his or her private label and took the credit. The African American women were not hailed as the makers of the new piece; they were simply regarded, or disregarded as 'seamstresses'" (Lewis-Mhoon, 2014). As was the case with music and dance, artistic creations made by African American people were reproduced under white names.

Even though whites have systematically oppressed African American society, they view their appearance and culture as a source of "cool" and thus try to imitate them on white bodies. Rachel Dolezal, whose story went viral in 2015, is arguably the epitome of racial appropriation. Dolezal served as a chapter president of the NAACP in Spokane, Washington until the public became aware that she was "passing" as a black person while having no African ancestry. After her claimed heritage was proven to be false (and her white parents outed her as being white), Dolezal claimed that she still "self-identified" as black. Unlike gender, which is assigned and thus can be changed based on personal feeling, race is rooted in ancestry (VERVE Team, 2019). By choosing to identify as "transracial," Dolezal and others like her insult members of marginalized groups who cannot "choose" to be white and be privy to the privileges that come with whiteness. Dolezal's story and the media coverage surrounding it served to bring the concept of cultural appropriation into mainstream dialogue, as many of her critics (both white and black) shamed her for co-opting an identity that was not hers.

While none may be as infamous as Dolezal when it comes to "passing" as black, there is a new practice, called "blackfishing" — "the phenomena of white female influencers pretending to be black through a combination of makeup and traditionally black hairstyles and fashion" (Gawronski, 2019). These women only imitate what they think are the most ideal parts of black

beauty and do not replicate dark skin, kinky hair, or full waistlines, said Alisha Gaines, the author of “Black for a Day: Fantasies of Race and Empathy” (Gawronski, 2019). By trying to appear as black, these women who have innate racial privilege are taking up spaces for black influencers.

The Kardashian family, most notably Kim, has been complicit in appropriating a black appearance. Because of Kim and her family’s ubiquity in American popular culture and media, they set a precedent for other white women that this behavior is acceptable. Kim, who has faced backlash for wearing her hair in Fulani braids (originating in West Africa), has responded to critics by saying that she knows the origins of the braids and she only wore them to match her daughter (Ritshel, 2020). It seems that Kim thinks she can get a “pass” in appropriating traditionally-black appearances because she has a black husband and children, but that argument is akin to the “I have a black friend and thus cannot be racist” argument that has been perpetuated by insensitive whites for decades. Most recently, Kim has been critiqued for a video she posted of herself applying lip gloss on Instagram, which she captions “don’t judge me for my pale hand” (Watson, 2020). This comment incited people on social media to call her out for her ignorant remark, one saying “Love that Kim Kardashian’s new narrative is that she’s brown all over but, her hands are very pale!!” (Watson, 2020). Clearly, any of Kim’s skin that is dark is unnatural — and she has never acknowledged that her appearance is artificial. Influencers and celebrities like Kardashian who have a large platform to publicize their appearances (which are appropriated) subvert the authentic appearances of African American women. Additionally, the white influencers and celebrities who choose to manufacture an identity are not subject to the systematic oppression that actual women of color face on a daily basis.

Much of this “cross-cultural” activity is justifiable in the eyes of the dominant white society because of the prevalent racial ideology of “color-blindness.” This theory claims that because there are no explicit legal practices that segregate white and black communities, race does not exist thus should not play a factor in who “owns” cultural practices. Idealistic at best, this mindset, which has been adopted by much of white society, does not acknowledge the continued oppression that plagues people of color and subsequently deprives them of the ownership of the cultural practices that they have fostered.

In American history, appropriation and exploitation of African Americans have been prominent in entertainment and appearance; however, they also occur more inconspicuously in other areas, such as academia and language. As white professors teach courses on hip hop theory (Hess, 2018) and courses on African American Women’s studies continue to serve the needs of a white power base (Vaz, 1995), even the “progressive” entity of higher education is guilty of representing diversity and multicultural perspectives unethically. Ultimately, education (whether by oneself or through an institution) of the past and present struggles of the African American community is the primary way to combat the tendency to want to co-opt their appearance and culture. While young people are often regarded as being more progressive, a culturally-sensitive mindset is not guaranteed for everyone just because they are a part of Generation Z. Because institutions of higher education still have a ways to go in terms of hiring diverse faculty and incorporating curriculum that promotes cultural literacy, the most foolproof way to combat public figures appropriating marginalized cultures is to cite their ignorance on social media. For instance, public backlash forced Kim Kardashian to change the name of her shapewear line from “Kimono” to “SKIMS.” After Twitter users in addition to the mayor of Kyoto, Japan asked her

to reconsider the name because of the cultural significance of the word “kimono,” Kardashian thanked her fans and followers for being the “inspiration” for the name change. (Ifeyani, 2019). When profit and their social reputation are on the line, celebrities may be more willing to listen to critics and refrain from participating in culturally insensitive practices. Those in positions of power must be made aware of their inherent privilege and be held accountable for adopting the products and appearances of marginalized cultures in order to institute a culture of respect and acknowledgement toward the African American (and other disenfranchised) communities.

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Appendix:



An advertisement for a blackface comedy show from 1900.



Rachel Dolezal as a child (left) and in 2015 (right).