

Extract from " Ethics of appropriation" by Jens Blazer (2022)

If culture is essentially appropriation, the question is not whether the assimilation of foreign cultural motifs is legitimate, but which forms of cultural appropriation are acceptable as respectful and which are not due to exploitation.

Historically, all cultures have built on forms of appropriation from other cultures, creation and evolution are simply inconceivable without appropriations. One of the most striking examples of "créolisation" is the profound and far-reaching African influence on the evolution of music composition worldwide, which has shaped countless genres and musical traditions. Africa's diverse rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic traditions have traveled across the globe through the transatlantic slave trade, colonialism, migration, and cultural exchange. Today's digital media and internet offer a 24/7 global library of images, sounds, and cultural artifacts available to anyone seeking creative inspiration, and paving the way for ever-new forms of artistic hybridity to emerge.

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Culture is appropriation, especially in a world characterized by the globalization of communication and cultural production. Since mass electronic media, and especially the internet, allow for the availability of every image, sound, and form of self-representation produced in the world, one can always seek inspirations, stimuli, or challenges in any "cultural artifact" (Susan Scafidi) from any tradition. This situation, above all, increases individual, artistic, and existential possibilities and freedom.

Appropriation is a creative force capable of generating culture. But at the same time, it presupposes power regimes and implies situations of exploitation. One could argue that this can be said of all forms of culture. However, these power regimes and exploitation situations become particularly clear in certain forms of appropriation, such as those that occurred

during the violent history of colonialism. The postcolonial theorist Paul Gilroy described in his book "Black Atlantic" how colonizers usurped and exploited.

The essence of the dialectical nature of appropriation—its creative force capable of generating culture, and its involvement in power regimes and exploitation situations—can only be fully understood through an ethical approach.

The historical experience of decentering and uprooting leads to the knowledge that all cultures have always been heterogeneous. In contrast, the belief in cultural homogeneity and purity only develops in cultures that, based on their political and economic power and their colonialist and imperialist domination, consider themselves the origin and measure of all things. The idea that non-appropriation could be possible or desirable is typical of a colonialism that is unaware of itself. If we understand it this way, hip hop is a prototype of postmodern art. It takes advantage of everything at its disposal, appropriating various cultural traditions to create a new, borderless cultural language with which representatives of marginalized groups can mutually empower each other. A borderless cultural language that allows the end of the idea of an unmodifiable collective identity.

Glissant also calls this concept of culture "rhizomatic," a term he borrows from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, important sources of inspiration in "Caribbean Discourse." A rhizome is a horizontal and underground network-like stem. For Deleuze and Guattari, the rhizome symbolizes a type of thinking no longer based on an ideal of unity and homogeneity, but rather celebrates heterogeneity, plurality, and the connection of everything with everything. "Some general characteristics of the rhizome. 1st and 2nd. Principles of connection and heterogeneity: any point of the rhizome can be connected with any other, and must be," write Deleuze and Guattari in the introductory chapter of their book "A Thousand Plateaus," published in 1980.

The constant and continually reiterated appropriation of diverse traditions and cultures indicates that all identity is constructed and composed, and that any notion of an immutably stable identity only reproduces the ideological elements of the power that must be combated.

Thus, if we ask what the ethical difference is between legitimate and illegitimate appropriations, according to Édouard Glissant, we could respond: an appropriation is legitimate when it is inventive, when it expands the play of cultural possibilities. It is also legitimate when it shows us that identity does not arise from a "single root," but from the

"rhizome [...] that root that extends in search of other roots." Identity is always hybrid, always constructed, always in a state of becoming and change. An appropriation practice that makes visible such hybridization and the ambivalent constitution of all cultural identity will be ethically legitimate. Conversely, an illegitimate appropriation is one that assumes and consolidates identities that seem to be already established beforehand, one that aesthetically exploits and thereby politically consolidates the prevailing power regime. From the position of a hegemonic social majority, illegitimate appropriation exploits the aesthetic creations of marginalized people while keeping those people trapped in their marginalized situation.

If we want to outline an ethics of appropriation, we must also focus on the question of what notions of cultural and individual identity lie behind the respective forms of appropriation. Among the different forms of appropriation we have seen so far, two types can be distinguished. The first type is found in the "white" appropriation of "black" culture, which we described in the second chapter. In this type of appropriation, members of a powerful culture appropriate the cultural artifacts of another oppressed culture, while at the same time, from the perspective of the appropriators, the members of this expropriated culture—and this is the crucial point—have something that those in power lack. The oppressed seem more natural, more wild, more authentic than the powerful, and thus they arouse in those who consider themselves more civilized a nostalgia for authenticity and originality that must be appeased through the appropriation of more authentic cultural artifacts and self-representations. Thus, the "white" appropriation of "black" culture attributes to this "black" culture a greater harmony with nature and greater authenticity. This asymmetrical concept of culture is, in itself, racist. But it connotes the idea that there are such things as authentic cultures, cultures that are in a state of pure identity with themselves precisely because they have not yet been contaminated by the civilizing process.

Therefore, the question is this: how can harmful types of appropriation be reflected upon and criticized without resorting to the concepts of identity, property, and prohibition?

I propose understanding as legitimate appropriations those that do not aspire to consolidate ideas of purity, nature, and authenticity, but that seek the crossing of borders, the hybrid, the overcoming of all kinds of cultural reification, while showing at the same time that all identity is, in reality, endlessly transforming and that nostalgia for states of cultural purity is ultimately nothing more than what Jacques Derrida once described as "nostalgia for the origin": the expression of a nostalgia for metaphysics and totality and, therefore, the expression of a false consciousness that seeks in the immeasurable multiplicity of the world

the simple, the pure, and the authentic, which, however, in reality, do not exist. Legitimate appropriation, on the other hand, shows a (true) consciousness of the constitutive openness and hybridization—or, as Derrida would say, the "decentering"—of all culture.

A similar ambivalence, although constituted differently, can be found in the appropriation of "Indian culture," which I want to return to now, since evidently the first thing denoted by the "desire to be an Indian" is the desire to belong to a different culture that seems more original, more connected to nature, and more authentic than one's own.

Legitimate, reflective, and critical appropriation always rethinks and questions the power regime in which we live. That is, it opposes ideological fixations of all kinds, any cultural norm that claims to obey an unquestionable natural state.

Legitimate appropriation represents the antithesis of the illegitimate, doing so by appropriating the illegitimate appropriation and elevating it to a new level, a correct level, in which the idea of appropriation is negated and preserved, but also surpassed.

Only at the end of this disillusionment, of this exit and dismounting of imagination, does it become clear that in human culture nothing is stable or natural. There is only an infinite chain of appropriations of appropriations of appropriations of appropriations of appropriations...

We are only truly authentic when we understand that this endless game of appropriations is our true nature.

The idea that those who make cultural appropriations are guilty of a crime: members of a dominant culture take advantage of the creations of marginalized cultures to boast about them without showing due respect to their true creators. However, we also understand well that a general prohibition of all cultural appropriation provokes spontaneous discomfort, as it is entirely inconceivable for a culture to have been generated without appropriating previous cultural forms. Ultimately, those who declare that appropriation is a crime that must be fundamentally prohibited deprive culture of all dynamism and vitality.

How can one criticize illegitimate forms of appropriation without questioning the very process of appropriation itself, but rather recognizing and celebrating it as the driving force of all cultural development?

From this postmodern notion of appropriation, something can be learned for the debates of our time: it helps us dialectically understand the relationships between the self and the other, as well as the power regime under which all this dialectic develops. The exchange, interpenetration, and hybridization (Glissant and creolization) of all cultures have reached global dimensions. There is also no outside of appropriation; every form of emancipatory culture is necessarily a new diverse and appropriative form.

Successful forms of appropriation are those in which something new emerges from the confluence of diverse influences, where the elements that make up a work of art, a cultural motif, or a self-representation are made visible and reflected upon. They react to exploitative appropriations by making counter-appropriations to continue the "own" tradition, but in such a way that this own tradition continues to be recognized as composed of influences, as intrinsically dynamic and as inauthentic. Only with this critical practice of counter-appropriation can the power regime in which cultures and culture, in general, develop be understood.

An ethics conscious that no cultural regime and no identity regime are original, an ethics that embraces the strange in the own, and that cares more about diversity in the diverse than the struggle of all against all.

References

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