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Jaja Grays

CUNY Graduate School of Journalism

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The Blurred Lines of Cultural Appropriation

By: Jaja Grays

In Victoria's Secret's 2016 fall fashion show, in Paris, the models weren't exactly the main attraction of the night. This year, the fashion store giant debuted several pieces featuring Chinese and Mexican inspired lingerie. From Chinese dragons wrapped around Victoria's Secret model, Elsa Hosk's body, to a massive sombrero worn on the back of Victoria's Secret bombshell Devon Windsor, these girls strutted down the catwalk to the beat of cultural appropriation.

But Victoria's Secret is no stranger to the cultural appropriation scene—in 2012, models wore Native American headdresses and the company subsequently apologized for its insensitivity. Despite the company's track record, there was still major controversy surrounding this year's show. Women's magazine, Cosmopolitan published a piece from Helin Jung who criticized the "racist" brand for cultural appropriation by calling it "a sexist, patriarchal, mostly white corporation [which] continues to take what it wants for its own gain."

Cultural appropriation refers to a privileged culture borrowing or stealing from a marginalized culture and strips elements of the culture to use it as a prop or for profit. In her op-ed piece, "Why Can't Victoria's Secret Stop Designing Racist Lingerie?" Jung blasted the company asserting "What condescension, for Victoria's Secret to think that by wrapping a model in a dragon, it could connect directly with a new consumer in China."

Despite the countless companies and celebrities who have been accused guilty of cultural identity theft, many would argue that cultural appropriation is inevitable in a melting pot like the United States. America is the symbol of inclusion, so as part of the American culture we embrace foreign influences in our society. That borrowing and exchanging of cultural elements is what makes America the melting pot of the world. But there is a thin and often blurred line between "cultural appreciation" and "cultural appropriation." After all, where would I be without my favorite Native American statement chain, or my Chinese decorative slippers, and my favorite dangling native Mexican earrings?

By understanding what Cultural Appropriation is, we can begin to avoid insulting other cultures and learn to appreciate them and eventually participate in cultural exchange. During this culturally sensitive time, it is necessary to distinguish what

is sacred and what is a trend, recognize how appropriation hurts the cause for diversity, and lastly, to pay homage to the creators of those appropriated styles.

What is Cultural Appropriation?

Perhaps the main reason people continue to exploit and appropriate cultures is that there are so many different definitions and explanations for what might constitute the stealthy beast. In fact the word “appropriation” is open-ended and multifaceted. According to Bruce Ziff and Pratima Rao, law professors who are the authors of “Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation,” it is “the taking—from a culture that is not one’s own—of intellectual property, cultural expression or artifacts, history and ways of knowledge.”

However, in order for cultural appropriation to happen, a dominant group must assert its superiority/entitlement by appropriating from a subordinate group. Ziff and Rao state that appropriation occurs when a privileged group—a group that has economic, political, and institutional power—borrows or steals from an oppressed or marginalized group.

My Culture is not the latest trend

In the 2000s, braids were a revival style of the 1960s, which was a symbol of black pride. Braids hold such significance to black culture. Dating back centuries to tribes in Africa, braids are undeniably identified with black and female. Braids are not only the style almost every black girl wears growing up—because it’s was the easiest way to tame the ‘fro—but it’s also a representation of who we are , exclusively.

Young Willow Smith almost broke her neck as she swung and whipped her braided hair back and forth in her music video called “I whipped my hair,” and Queen Bey reminded us of the power braids still hold in her “Formation” video, which featured over a dozen black women embracing their identities. So it’s no surprise that certain some people from the black community feel slighted or offended when white people wear braids as a trend.

In the summer of 2016, the youngest of the Kardashian/Jenner clan, Kylie Jenner, almost broke the Internet when she posted a selfie on Instagram featuring a head full of slicked back cornrows with the caption “I woke up like disss.” Many people

insisted that her braids were exploitative—she was wearing a hairstyle that originated in black culture as an accessory—while others asserted that it was just another braided hairstyle available to anyone.

The feminist and Hunger Games starlet Amandla Stenberg took the reality star to task, posting:

“When u appropriate black features and culture but fail to use ur position of power to help black Americans by directing attention towards ur wigs instead of police brutality or racism #whitegirlsdoitbetter”

The issue is not necessarily Jenner’s hair. The problem is her image. She has a look and style rooted in black culture, but fails to recognize its underlying influences and has never acknowledged the struggles of the culture she continues to emulate. Stenberg explained the historical context to elements of black culture in her “Don’t Cash Crop my Cornrows” YouTube video.

“The line between cultural appropriation and cultural exchanges is always going to be blurred but here is the thing. Appropriation occurs when a style leads to racist generalizations or stereotypes where it originated but is deemed as high fashion, cool, or funny when the privileged take it for themselves.” Stenberg said. “Appropriation occurs when the appropriator is not aware of the deep significance of the culture they are partaking in. Hip hop stems from a black struggle, it stems from jazz and blues, styles of music which African-Americans created to retain humanity in the face of adversity, which itself stems from songs used during slavery and to communicate and survive.” Sacred or traditional garb should not be thrown on for simple decoration

In the 2013 American Music Awards, Katy Perry performed her ballad “Unconditionally” using a Japanese geisha themed set and dancers who simply twirled their decorative umbrellas. The performance was not only distasteful but also stereotyped Asian women as timid—The dancers were mostly white with powdered faces and eye makeup to make them appear Asian.

But the biggest insult was in Perry’s garb. Though she attempted to emulate or maybe even honor Japanese culture, the pop singer’s ‘kimono’ was actually part Chinese. In carelessly lumping two cultures together that have extremely different traditions, Perry perpetuated the thoughtlessness of cultural appropriators—reducing all Asians to one culture.

Perry wasn't the only pop star to steal the cultural appropriation stage. During the MTV Awards, Selena Gomez performed her hit "Come & Get It"—which references Bollywood culture—dancing barefoot to classic Indian dance styles. Gomez may have thought she was in the clear by performing with Indian backup dancers, but wearing a bindi and using the Hindu religion for her convenience demeans the value of the culture. In the Hindu tradition, the bindi symbolizes the third eye and the flame—not the latest fashion accessory

Culture for \$ale

In September 2016, Marc Jacobs debuted his Spring-Summer 2017 fashion show but the main event wasn't exactly the clothes. The designer sparked major controversy online when he sent white models down his runway with colorful faux dreads. When he was criticized on social media for appropriating Caribbean culture, Jacobs fought back on his social media account.

"All who cry 'cultural appropriation' or whatever nonsense about any race or skin color wearing their hair in any particular style or manner—funny how you don't criticize women of color for straightening their hair."

Not only did Jacobs' deflect from his offensive remarks and fail to take any accountability or attribute the source of it, his insensitive and ignorant response overlooked the obvious reason women of color wear weaves or straighten their hair—though certain black women have naturally straight hair. For centuries, black women were told their natural hair was unkempt, unprofessional, or unattractive.

Marginalized people conform to standards set by dominant groups not only to get ahead but also to survive in America. When your culture is frowned upon, you tend to hide certain aspects of your culture in order to be accepted by the majority culture—this is essentially cultural assimilation.

When a subjugated group assimilates to a dominant culture to gain access to privileges it enjoys, it is by no means exploiting that culture. So when someone asserts that classical music should only be reserved for white people because if a black person plays it they're appropriating white culture, it is simply false. As long

as the dominant culture holds the power, a person of color cannot be guilty of appropriating its culture.

The larger issue with Jacobs wasn't necessarily failing to attribute the dreads to the ethnic group that created it; it was using the hair as a prop to boost his profits. Jacobs' goal was not to start a dialogue about the history of dreadlocks or bring light to the fact that the hairstyle threatens a persons' job security. He did not use his platform to enlighten anyone. He only used the dreads to draw attention to his clothing line to expand his own profits.

The idea of calling out cultural appropriation is not to show up to every show or celebrity post with another explanation as to why something is offensive or exploitative, but to respect cultures.

Many people argue that cultural appropriation is necessary in order to preserve ancient cultural styles. Susan Scafidi, an attorney who is the author of "Who Owns Culture?: Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law," stated that cultural appropriation can sometimes be the savior of a cultural product or practice that faded away—like learning the history of ancient Buddhists and implementing their practices respectfully in your yoga class. But that's just not true—there is no right way to culturally appropriate. Cultural appropriation is offensive but cultural appreciation is the appropriate (no pun intended) resolution.