

Cultural Appropriation and Shaming

Dreads & Mohawks: To Whom Do They Belong?

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2017

On college campuses, in urban squats, at hip city venues, and at anarchist events, one often sees young white people sporting dreadlocks or Mohawk haircuts. However, there has been an increasingly aggressive push-back by those who designate this as cultural appropriation and are confronting and shaming those they deem guilty of the practice.

One famous shaming incident, captured in a viral video shot earlier this year and viewed by over four million people, shows Cory Goldstein, a white student at San Francisco State University, being berated for wearing dreads by an African-American undergraduate, Bonita Tindle.

Tindle tells Goldstein that he cannot wear dreads because, "It's my culture." In a separate interview, Goldstein responds that he shares the criticism of cultural appropriation, but that dreadlocks have appeared in many cultures and do not belong to any one group.

This is the irony of cultural appropriation shaming; that it is often directed at people sympathetic to those doing the confronting. Anticipating potential confrontations, in one such example, some of the organizers of this year's Montreal Anarchist Bookfair issued a statement saying that while they do not condone bullying, that participants should be self-policing of their "clothing and headgear...keeping in mind that these choices can act as oppressive forces toward other people. Cultural appropriation is harmful." So, people shamed are presumably asking for it.

Cultural Appropriation

Such appropriation occurs when elements of a minority culture are adopted by members of the majority, often without an understanding or appreciation for its traditions. It is argued this is an act of colonialism that destroys unique cultures. The use of cultural elements, outside of their usual context, is seen as disrespectful. Something with spiritual significance or with reserved use (such as a Native headdress) might be used by anyone for any purpose including merely fashion.

There are a number of problems with the arguments against cultural appropriation. First, cultures are amalgams. Even African-American and Native cultures are not pristine, but have been shaped by and include elements from many cultures (and their members continue to appropriate from other cultures).

The African-American musical form known as blues is a case in point. While certain rhythms, and call and response aspects of the blues primarily come from Africa, the pentatonic scale that is used—at least how blues is played in America—comes from the tens of thousands of indentured Celts shipped to the West Indies by Oliver Cromwell's England in the 17th century.

They lived on the same plantations and shared a culture with black slaves. So-called cultural appropriation can only occur when culture is conceived of as fixed, denying its obvious fluidity (current African-American culture is not slave culture, for example).

Trying to declare ownership of a culture is to assume that there is individual authorship of cultural practices. It is the same assumption behind copyright and art as commodity, and fundamental to capitalism. For opponents of cultural appropriation, all cultural elements come to be seen as objects with value and subject to theft; even hairstyles. The fact that cultural traditions undergo constant transformation belies the notion of individual authorship.

The arguments against cultural appropriation imply that we are inevitably separate, that there can be no rapprochement, and that whites, in particular, must be artistically and socially censored because they cannot comprehend or use things respectfully. It suggests that white people are bound to be oppressors by virtue of their birth. The depressing implication here is that community is not possible.

Colonialism devastated traditional cultures. Native people were defined in negative ways—as savages, ignorant, heathens—supporting ideas of racial division, superiority, and hierarchy. With the notion of development, Natives became poor in European terms, needing to consume more schooling, religion, policing, and other aspects of white culture. This is a common description of colonialism.

In *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, Situationist Raoul Vaneigem argued that discourses about colonialism tied to race are no longer valid and redefined colonialism as a form of humiliation. As such, we are all now subject to colonial humiliation as consumers. We consume to avoid the humiliation of not having the requisite commodities. We become incomplete, in need, dependent, and infantilized. According to Vaneigem, “The problems of race and colour become about as important as crossword puzzles...Yesterday’s anti-colonialists are trying to humanize today’s generalized colonialism. They become its watchdogs in the cleverest way: by barking at all the after-effects of past inhumanity.”

Shaming with pots and pans

Shaming, by those lacking power, has a long history in reversing authoritarian humiliation by turning it on its head and shaming the shamers. In “Rough Music Reconsidered,” Historian E.P. Thompson describes how communities came together in 19th century Britain to humiliate scabs, blacklegs, sadistic judges, and those who violated community morality by parading the offender through town to a serenade of banging pots and pans.

These rough music events, known as charivari or casserole, were also used in peasant revolts and to maintain local autonomy against the expansion of class, wage labor, and state power associated with the industrial revolution. These were new forms of humiliation that destroyed communities and peasant autonomy. Charivaris are that period of inversion, where communities use humiliation to rule themselves.

It must be noted that shaming is not necessarily done to foster autonomy. It can be used by those in authority to enhance their rule (think of the Nazi parades of Jews). It is only when charivari reflects an entire community, insists on morality and does not institute a new authority that it functions to protect personal and community autonomy.

Thompson recognized that charivaris worked because those shamed were members of the same community, so felt the humiliation. It is difficult to imagine humiliating someone sitting in an off-shore gated community, but even without its ability to shame, charivari still matters as that form of action where communities come together against imposed authority and to challenge violators of their shared values. The usual relationship of people to authority is stood on its head as they seize the streets and refuse to install new leaders.

The 2011 Occupy movement was a moment of charivari. So were the 2012 Montreal casseroles. With the Quebec government’s passage of a bill to limit protests amid widespread student strikes, huge casseroles occurred to resist the curtailment of civil liberties. These drew a large number of people from all parts of society who set aside typical divisions. The banging of pots and pans was a signal of community power. Non-marchers, including children and the elderly, went out on their steps and balconies to hammer pots and pans in solidarity with the marchers.

Argentina’s massive pot-banging cacerolazos of 2001–2 belied the seemingly ephemeral nature of charivari. The *cacerolazos* went beyond being protests to initiate autonomous alternatives. Several successive governments were disposed of, a barter network of millions was developed and many businesses went on to become worker owned

and managed. This prolongation of inversion was the logical extension of communities uniting without regard to race, gender, class, or religion, and began with people occupying the streets and displaying that unity.

What overcomes colonial humiliation begins with the desire for close relationships and personal autonomy. “I see in the historical experience of workers’ councils...and in the pathetic search for friendship and love, a single and inspiring reason not to despair over present ‘reality,’” writes Vaneigem.

The attempt to insist on racial divides, borders, social separations, identity politics, to claim cultural ownership and authority, and to shame and police people for acts or styles which defy these confines, runs counter to an anti-authoritarian project.

Rod Dubey writes on cultural theory. His latest work is the Introduction to Donal McGraith's *Leaving No Mark: Prolegomena to an Evanescent Art* (Charivari Press), an attack on the commodification of creativity.

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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/397-winter-2017/cultural-appropriation-and-shaming>
Fifth Estate #397, Winter, 2017

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net