

WHAT IS CULTURAL APPROPRIATION?

For Teachers, Students, and All of Us

Sue O'Halloran

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People will wonder whether a certain action is a cultural exchange or cultural appropriation. Are we misusing people's cultures?

The simplest way I know to tell whether I might be misusing a culture is to remember that cultural appropriation is about power over – not power with; in other words, all people involved feel honored, respected, and empowered.

Those in power aren't always aware or feel like they have power. However, if you are considered and accepted as part of the dominant culture, you have power, and you most likely have ignorance about other cultures.

And, if you are *not* a part of the dominant culture, you, too, can be unaware of other communities of color. You can easily be receiving the same misinformation that Whites are.

Any of us can be unaware of how the objects and customs from communities of color - which were used as symbols and gestures of pride, solidarity, and survival from continual trauma – have been turned into currency, fashion, or jokes that do not benefit the groups from which they were taken.

What can seem perfectly “normal” because they've been misused for so long can actually be demeaning and dehumanizing to the people from whom the symbols were taken.

Since cultural appropriation is about power, the starting point is always an awareness of one's privilege. Anyone who is part of Western culture – people of all colors - needs to know that they have been raised with the assumption that transplanting Western culture onto others and taking whatever we want in return is part of the colonial mindset.

We proudly tout how American culture has spread worldwide—and we do have amazing artists—but we can forget that American culture is worldwide precisely because we've had the POWER to disseminate it.

There are also amazing artists and trends in other countries that we may not have heard of. Why? Because they didn't have the power to disseminate their culture the way we have ours.

There is always an uneven exchange between Western cultures and marginalized communities. I can feel quite generous in offering my gifts to you because I have some power and control over them and plenty more where that came from, but that doesn't mean I get to come into your house and take your family's antiques and keepsakes.

And, yes, U.S. culture is a blend of many cultures, but we have to be honest that some of what we call U.S. culture came from stealing from people without power. At this point in history, we need to ask ourselves: Is that a pattern we want to continue?

And, yes, you can always find one person from a community who will say they don't find something offensive. The Redskins football team and The Washington Post continually take surveys to say there are plenty of First Nations who are FOR the team's name.

However, one or a few people cannot represent their whole culture. When a great majority of people feel a certain way, give pushback, and even organize around something such as mascot-ing, they are sending us a message about their history and their experiences.

If you are looking for a cultural gatekeeper who agrees with you and will give you permission to use some culture's stuff, you might want to check your true motivation. Are you looking for loopholes, or do you really mean to respect, appreciate, and support another culture?

One of the guidelines you and your students can follow is to ask themselves: Is using this cultural object or custom mostly TAKING?

When there is a true exchange, it is mutual and consensual. There is equality between the parties. There is no undertone of "better than" or mocking or treating something as "weird" or "exotic" or trying something for a while because it's part of the newest trend and then discarding it.

U.S. musicians, for example, who make a lifelong study of another culture's music are showing respect and are involved with that culture as humble guests. I have a friend who is Jewish who has studied Irish music for decades and has traveled to Ireland extensively. He respects and has the respect of Irish musicians. He doesn't treat his hosting culture as if they owe it to him to give them their stuff or educate him.

I was invited to a friend's Bangladeshi wedding a few years ago. The groom's mother gave me a sari to wear. At one of the pre-wedding parties, I was invited to get my hands henna-ed. I was invited to join my friend's family's culture.

If you wish to wear a certain tattoo, hairstyle, or clothing, do you know how that culture feels about it? How does it impact them? Do they see you as honoring or exploiting them?

If you can't even begin to answer these questions, you probably don't have much contact with that group, which means you don't have much understanding about them. You are in the danger zone when using the icons of a culture you know little about. It takes critical thinking to decide whether you are misusing a culture.

At least, we can adopt an attitude of knowing that we live in an unequal world, so we can't couch surf through different cultures as if our choices have no repercussions. Caring to know if something is cultural appropriation isn't a matter of telling people what they can and can't do but of recognizing that we don't live in a vacuum.

When you know you live in a world of current colonized cultures and post-colonized cultures, you understand that your choices have an impact.

Here are seven categories that may help you become more responsible with your choices. It's most likely appropriation when...

ONE, WHEN WHAT YOU'RE DOING REDUCES A PEOPLE TO CARICATURE and REINFORCES NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES

RESPECT means honoring the fullness of each human being. To treat an entire ethnic group as a costume is to reduce the people in that culture to caricatures. Every ethnic group has a diverse and broad culture with great variety within it.

Caricatures paint people as one-dimensional "cute," "exotic," or "dangerous" non-human objects. When people are not seen as human, equal to you, *like* you, it is a license for mistreatment, discrimination, and worse.

When you and your cultural group can be reduced to a caricature, it means that someone has the power to reduce you. It means that your humanity is not seen and is also always a painful reminder of the long history of your group being treated as non-human.

What does it say when a store can sell an orange jumpsuit and a mask and call it an "illegal alien" costume? What does it signify when white college students dress in blackface for Halloween?

These and many other examples mean the depicted people aren't seen as equal. They are a source of humor – not of inclusive humor; I'm all for that – but humor that looks down on someone or a group and gets to say, "Look how weird or pitiful they are."

When you add dressing up as a "thug" or some kind of criminal to that "black face" or see costumes of "dirty Mexicans" with "brown face," the message is: "I get to degrade you just because I can. And because I have little to no contact with actual black or Latino people, Asian or First Nation people, I don't see the hurt I'm causing.:"

When we don't know the history of communities of color, we can use people's cultural symbols and objects without context, which is what gives any object meaning.

Through these caricatures, negative stereotypes are reinforced. These same folks aren't thinking of dressing up for Halloween as President Barack Obama or Sonia Sotomayor. Rather than dressing up as a "Muslim Terrorist," why not dress as one of the many Muslim scientists who invented breakthroughs in medicine, surgery, physics, algebra, geometry, astrology, and chemistry?

There are so many positive examples from each group, but that wouldn't be as edgy or funny, would it? That kind of thinking is a tip-off that appropriation is at work—negative stereotypes are being reinforced. Encourage your students to be more creative rather than sinking to the lowest common denominator.

In any solid relationship, we need to trust that someone is not out to hurt us. A sense of humor is important, but we'd like to trust that our friends and colleagues will not use humor at our expense. We want to trust that someone is not finding fun in our suffering.

For example, years ago, some college students dressed up as National Football League star Ray Rice, dragging a female dummy behind them. What stereotypes are being reinforced about black men? Why is it funny to see a woman abused?

We build trust by using humor that includes everyone.

TWO, WHEN AN OBJECT OR CUSTOM IS BLATANTLY MISUSED

A replica is not the same as an authentic object. When we engage with a culture more deeply, we start to experience its complexity, which is to say, we experience its humanity. When we hear a culture's stories, we feel the human emotions as they relive memories and understand their pride in all they've endured, survived, and contributed.

If you are a member of one of the 566 First Nations groups, for example, and you know the unique patterns used in your blankets or dress have special meaning and a long history, and then you see it commodified along with other Native and non-Native patterns to represent some general Native American "look" or hear it mistakenly called "Navajo"—how does that make you feel?

When even one's speech is treated as less than and becomes the punchline to jokes. For example, when you hear people imitating African American Vernacular English to be cool (all the while misusing the way African Americans might use this vernacular — there is, after all, a grammatical structure to Black English), is someone to feel complimented that you chose to mock them and screw up their language?

When a White pop star does a performance in a Japanese “geisha costume” and doesn’t even use authentic dress, it shows how superficial her or her team’s research is and how unaware she is of perpetuating stereotypes.

THREE, WHEN A CULTURE'S OBJECTS AND CUSTOMS ARE MISUSED FOR MONEY

Of course, money is often involved. If a fashion designer sees something in another culture and strips it of its cultural meaning for profit, is that showing appreciation? Can you use anything you want just because you want to?

FOUR, WHEN YOU MISUSE A CULTURE'S SACRED SYMBOLS

South Asian women wear Bindis to represent the third eye. It symbolizes the seat of wisdom and spiritual focus, not fashion.

Some may see a feathered headdress as a “costume” or a fashion statement, but for many Indigenous Nations, it symbolizes a call to strength, freedom, and spiritual enlightenment. Adrienne Keene of the Cherokee Nation writes, "Eagle feathers are presented as symbols of honor and respect and have to be earned." Feathers have diverse meanings within different tribes but are often symbols of connection to the Divine, not used for decoration. To receive an eagle feather is a momentous occasion, transcending individual use and celebrating a culture’s stories, values, and way of life.

Today, teenage girls in a sports bra and cutoffs run around at music festivals with eagle feather headdresses. Is that not disrespectful to a symbol a group has cherished for centuries?

Let's say your students have trouble understanding why so many American Indians get hurt, angry, and insulted about teams and mascots named after Native American tribes. Have your students substitute the Atlanta Braves, for example, with their religious group. For example, say there was a team named The Cincinnati Catholics, and their mascot danced around dressed as a Pope with chalices in hand, clanging them together, spraying holy water, and throwing hosts into the air. The half-time show has a mock crucifixion while rock stars chant Catholic prayers, mispronouncing the words - nothing authentic or sacred about their use of Catholic symbols and customs.

For people raised Catholic, just hearing about this imagined scene can make their skin crawl.

Catholics would feel disrespected and misrepresented no matter how much people told them they should feel "complimented" that others want to imitate Catholics. When you

reverse the situation and substitute something *you* care about, you start to understand how many Indigenous Nations feel when they see their spiritual symbols being misused.

Some people see no harm in digging up Indian sites, taking the objects found there, and putting them in museums. However, they might object to an American Indian tribe taking a painting such as the Mona Lisa out of the Louvre Museum and burying it in an American Indian burial ground.

Just think about this: We would never tolerate a team named the New Jersey N-word, but the “Washington Redskins” team name remained until 2020. It’s a term that came from white men being paid for scalping American Indians. Naming a team a derogatory, genocidal name sent a very strong signal to First Nations that they are the underdogs with no power, i.e., you can’t control how a term that represents and even celebrates the murder of your people. Finally, in 2022, the team became the Washington Commanders – just two years ago!

FIVE, WHEN PEOPLE USE SEXUALIZED CARICATURES

One of the terrors of being dominated by and/or conquered by another group is to be treated as a sexual object. It is no surprise that Halloween costumes appear for the sexy, exotic “other” because racism and patriarchy go hand in hand. I’m hoping you are educating your students on how dehumanizing it is to treat any human being as an object, let alone a sexual object.

Over-sexualizing people is one of the ultimate “power-overs.” It says, “I get to see you as only one thing, and you don’t count. You are here for my pleasure.”

Your students want to feel attractive. The media is constantly telling them that they need to be “sexy” and “hot.” So, of course, some of these costumes can be tempting for them. Help them separate healthy sexual expression from classifying a whole group and gender as being there for someone else’s pleasure, to exist to be of sexual service to someone else.

Showing respect means understanding that people’s bodies are *for them* – for their decisions and their control.

SIX, WHEN YOU USE A CULTURE’S OBJECTS OR CUSTOMS WITH NO CONNECTION TO THEIR STRUGGLES AND DON’T KNOW OR FORGET THEIR ORIGINS

Black women have been wearing cornrows and box braids for generations, but according to the media, it’s a “trend” because it started with this or that White celebrity.

The same hairstyles that splash across the covers of teen and fashion magazines when White models wear them are the very hairstyles that have been banned from schools or the cause of a lost job when women of color wear them.

Many of the objects and rituals that marginalized communities have created have been the balm for their culture's deep traumas. When someone else takes those things without having been through the struggles and oppression themselves, how can it NOT feel demeaning, disrespectful, and trivializing?

Are you wearing a culture's symbol because it's "trendy" or "edgy"? Ask your students: Does that mean you're willing to get involved with that culture's actions for justice?

Because of internalized oppression, many students of color have had to consciously work to love themselves and their cultures. Then, along comes cultural icons that they have struggled to embrace, and now they are being worn or used by White students, and suddenly, these fashions or acts are cool and chic. The White students didn't experience the struggle to accept their identity.

Students of color can feel bitter as they see White students get to be a little bit Asian, Black, Latino, or Native American and then watch them go back to being fully assimilated White Americans whenever they want. At the same time, the students of color that the White students are imitating are barred from assimilating.

People of color don't have the luxury of handpicking what's easy or fashionable about being part of their culture. They can't just exhibit the trendy part of being African American or whatever. They get the stereotypes and discrimination as well, which the White students don't have to take on.

SEVEN, WHEN SOMEONE ELSE REPRESENTS YOU

One day, two friends were walking along together, one named James, who identified as White, and the other, Yoshi, who identified as Asian American. James told Yoshi that he had heard that some Asian actors were upset because an Asian role in a Broadway theater production went to a White male.

"That's just plain stupid," James remarked, "because the whole point of theater is that people get to play someone else."

Yoshi said, "Okay, James, imagine this: everything's reversed. America is seventy-five percent Asian American. You, a White male, are only four percent of the population. You are dying to be an actor. It's been your lifelong dream. You've been putting on plays for the family since you were three years old. After school, you took every acting class available. Most weekends, instead of playing sports, going to movies, and hanging out with your friends, you worked backstage in theaters as the prop guy or the curtain

puller, anything to get experience. Now, you've graduated from college with honors in theater. You want to make your living through full-time acting. But every time you apply for a job, they say they aren't looking for White males. The White audience is just too small. It's not profitable to do plays with White males in them. 'Sorry, son,' they say, 'but people just don't care about White families or White people's struggles that much. They can't relate.'

"Everywhere you look, your Asian friends who graduated with you are getting jobs galore. They're popping up in sitcoms, commercials, and New York plays. You know you're as good or better than them. Finally, a play comes into town with a few parts needing White actors. The script calls for a White male. This is a big Broadway play, a chance for you to be seen and make a name for yourself. You're in the running. You know you could bring depth and deeper understanding to the role. People wouldn't see the White characters in this play as one-dimensional. You get called back for several auditions. But then you're told the part of the one White male is going to an Asian actor. You complain to the director, and he says, 'Hey, this is theater. An Asian can play a White male. They've been doing it for years.' I ask you, James, how would you feel?"

James said straight up, "I'd be mad." James finally understood the importance of cultural and historical context.

Use the reversal game with your students to help them understand other's points of view and even what the term "context" means.

This doesn't mean we have to slide into either/or thinking:

This doesn't mean White people should *never* play other ethnic groups, tell their stories, sing their songs, etc. This isn't about making a rule. This is about understanding the historical and social context and, therefore, understanding what some people might be upset about and discovering solutions to inequalities together.

If our country had plenty of opportunities for Asian actors, it wouldn't matter who played which part. Unfortunately, that's not our world.

I hope these seven categories or ways of thinking about cultural appropriation help you think through your decisions and become a guide for your students as well. There's one other topic I want to discuss:

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ASSIMILATION and APPROPRIATION

You might get some pushback from your students because, yes, women of color straighten their hair, and immigrants wear jeans and eat cheeseburgers. But there is a big difference between someone trying to go along with the dominant culture to be accepted at school or to get that job or promotion or stay safe from violence and those with privilege who are taking marginalized communities' stuff.

I remember working for an airline that was discussing the dress code for flight attendants at a meeting. The woman in charge, who was White, declared quite confidently that she didn't think African American braids were "professional." I had to keep myself from laughing because this woman was standing before us, making this declaration with her hair in a French braid. Why was her European-style braid appropriate, but African American braids were not?

We want to consider the impact when considering whether something is assimilation, not appropriation. People of color wearing straightened hair, for example, doesn't leave White people feeling demeaned and mocked.

For people of color, living in the dominant culture means you will HAVE TO adopt many of the White culture's ways to survive and be safe. So, it is not the same thing that marginalized people may wear jeans, speak English, or go to football games.

It will be so important that your students are taught the history of all the groups in America. Our students need to be SENSITIVE to history and the power imbalance between Whites and people of color to truly understand and work with this concept of cultural appropriation.

For example, as I just mentioned, younger people might not understand the history of blackface – that throughout history, White people imitated black people in demeaning ways. Those stereotypes and degradations would be bad enough, but the way White people saw black people had real-world implications. These dehumanizing practices translated into where you could live, whether you could work and support your family, whether a sick loved one could get medical help, and whether you would live.

Demeaning depictions of all kinds – in costumes, in film, on TV, in cartoons, etc. – means that someone has the power to humiliate you, define you, and use your cultural markers any way they want without understanding your culture or suffering the challenges your group faces.

I understand the innocent impulse for many of your students—they see something different and think, "That's cool!" We need to educate them to think beyond their first impulses and consider the impact of their actions. Isn't that the very definition of maturity?

I also understand that human beings influence each other. Our arts are a blend of people picking up on each other's cultural expressions. However, you can help your students understand that if a group's "stuff" has been misused over the centuries, if a group has had so little power to feel that anything is theirs, seeing people from the dominant group use the "stuff" and call it their own and, often, reap monetary rewards people of color group never did or could, *is* going to cause resentment.

It's easy to talk about and blame *others* who we think are responsible for the racial tensions we experience today. But something as simple (and complex!) as choosing a costume can add to or diminish our country's racial divides.

WHY WE SHOULD CARE

Cultural appropriation hurts and has profound impacts on people's lives. If you allow it in your school, I can promise you many of your students of color will feel invisible, powerless, and uncared for. You'll likely see students disconnected from school or expressing frustration and anger.

However, cultural appropriation goes beyond hurt feelings. By perpetuating stereotypes such as dressing up as a "Black gangster," a teen is keeping an image alive that has affected who gets jobs or who gets profiled by the police. We can't have a true democracy where every person counts, and every voice is heard when we have negative, cardboard images of each other.

An individual teen is not responsible for the fact that the police are 21 times more likely to shoot and kill a young black man than one of his white peers. Of course not! But because people come across these stereotypes every day – for Halloween, yes, but every day with jokes, films, and advertisements and such – many people can wind up believing those stereotypes and, therefore, that kind of thinking can have life-and-death consequences.

Whites who have been fed a steady diet of negative stereotypes are not likely to demand that the criminal justice system change. We need White Allies to speak up and advocate for people of color's rights. We are either adding to the stereotypes and, therefore, the excluding and discriminating behaviors that result from them or challenging them and changing our system to become one of inclusion.

The amount of present-day power imbalance makes a difference as well. I don't much like – in fact, I hate – that St. Patrick's Day has become synonymous for many with "Let's go out and get drunk." As an Irish American, I hate that stereotype. But it doesn't have much impact on my life. Unlike my grandparents' generation, I am not refused a job or housing or city and government services because of that stereotype of the fighting, drinking Irish. For the most part, White people with Irish heritage are accepted and seen as whole human beings.

However, when Whites and other Americans celebrate Cinco de Mayo with an excuse to get drunk and wear sombreros and fake mustaches, that *does* add to the very real and alive, present-day, impactful stereotypes of Mexican Americans as people you wouldn't want for neighbors or employees or managers. (not to mention, as with most

cultural appropriation, people don't even know what Cinco de Mayo means. Hint: it's not Mexican Independence Day.)

When you advocate for respect, you may get called "Thought police" or hear, "You're trying to tell me what to do" and "What? Because I'm White, I'm racist?" That's why it's so important to educate your students on the larger context. We keep returning to this: historical context and present-day impact make a difference.

Remember, too, that different groups of color can participate in the appropriation of other countries and cultures as well. This isn't a "blame the White person" game. It's about *all of us* who say we want to respect others, taking the time to become more aware, make respectful changes, and learn to effectively communicate to others why their actions may be hurtful and even dangerous.

HOW DO WE CREATE CHANGE

If you are discussing cultural appropriation with students, help them understand that, again, this isn't about them being good or bad people. Our guilt doesn't help anyone. This is about understanding the centuries of power imbalance, the centuries of stealing and exploiting other cultures.

Encourage your students to read books about other cultures, take cooking classes, and travel to different communities in your city and abroad. Of course, they can enjoy other cultures and should, but the key is to do it with respect and humility.

Remind your students that creating justice is not always comfortable. We don't always get to do what we want to do. We discover that we are ignorant of other groups. We discover sometimes that our intentions are selfish and less than lofty. It's all part of creating true justice in our world.

You and your students are not responsible for other people's feelings, but we are responsible for our own actions. You are teaching your students to be open to different perspectives and not to impose *their* meanings on other people's experiences. Maybe in their culture, hair is just hair, or to them, a certain holiday doesn't mean anything, but that doesn't mean it doesn't have tremendous meaning to someone else.

You are teaching your students the Platinum Principle: Do unto others as *they* would have you do unto them. Teaching your students about appropriation is also a great time to discuss consumerism. What is the difference between buying a blouse from a Columbian artist while traveling in Columbia and buying a replica of Columbian art on a blouse from Urban Outfitters?

Teach your students to ask questions such as: How was this article of clothing produced? Were people from that culture involved? Did they have any degree of control

over the look, production, distribution, or compensation? Were all the supply chains practicing fair trade?

Help your students develop critical thinking. Yes, it's wonderful that certain sections of your town are diverse – you can eat different ethnic foods every night of the week, but is there social equality as well as a variety of cuisines?

Do people from that culture own the restaurants? Is the décor authentic or an "inspired by ___" fill-in-the-blank ethnic group, a kind of kitschy facsimile of the real thing? Are these restaurants able to cater to people from within those cultures with different economic incomes? What's the difference between learning about and experiencing a culture vs. consuming it?

Ask your students, "What power do you feel you have as consumers to insist that companies stop irresponsibly mass-producing people's cultures?" Let them know that they have the courage and smarts to listen to and to re-examine their choices when using other people's symbols and customs.

Teach them to focus on the impact, not their intent.

You will know you are successful when you hear your students asking, "Is what I'm doing adding to this culture's oppression or helping to eliminate it? Am I giving more than taking?"