What Does 'Cultural Appropriation' Actually Mean?

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An *Atlantic* writer and a Cato Institute scholar debate the value and limits of the term.

By [Conor Friedersdorf](#)

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Last month, the long-running debate about cultural appropriation was rekindled when several protests over a painting at the Whitney Museum made national headlines. "Open Casket" depicted the body of Emmett Till, whose 1955 lynching helped galvanize the Civil Rights Movement. The artist, Dana Schutz, says the inspiration for the painting of the murdered 14-year-old came from listening to interviews with his mother, who displayed her late son's body during his funeral to "let the people see." Detractors argued that a white woman ought not render such a subject. And a petition called for the painting to be removed from the exhibit and destroyed.

As debate raged, I asked Jonathan Blanks, a researcher at the Cato Institute's Project on Criminal Justice, if he would correspond with me about what constitutes cultural appropriation, whether

engaging in it is wrong, and his frustration with the way some on the right exploit the backlash against cultural-appropriation claims.

This is a lightly edited transcript of our conversation.

Conor Friedersdorf: As soon as I read about [the protests at the Whitney Museum](link) my heart sank, not because I'd deny Parker Bright the ability to stand near a painting of Emmett Till while wearing a "Black Death Spectacle" t-shirt, or cast him as a villain, but because of the objection, articulated by fellow protester Hannah Black, a black artist from Britain, that a white artist has no right to paint a lynching victim.

You and I share a professional interest in policing abuses, as well as civil liberties abrogations that affect Muslim Americans and Hispanics. A typical article of mine might highlight that innocent black people were routinely stopped and frisked on the streets of New York City; that innocent Muslim American students had their private gatherings spied upon by undercover agents; or that people born in this country were coerced to "show their papers" like second-class citizens as they went about their daily lives.

In my experience, one obstacle to stopping those injustices is the unfortunate human tendency to conceive of even sympathetic victims from a different racial or ethnic group as "bad stuff happening to them," not "bad stuff happening to us." Even folks who don't want bad stuff to happen to *anyone* react with less focus and urgency when an "other" is the victim. No one wants any child to be kidnapped, but the little blond girl leads the local news; her black analog might not make the newscast.

The artist who painted *Open Casket* was trying to bridge the gulf between "us" and "them." She began with the general attitude that bygone travesties against a racial group to which she doesn't belong were properly of concern to her. And in this particular, she achieved a measure of empathy. "I don't know what it is like to be black in America, but I do know what it is like to be a mother," she said, explaining her desire to engage with the loss of Emmett Till's mother. "In her sorrow and rage," she wrote, "she wanted her son's death not just to be her pain but America's pain."

I have no opinion about the quality of her painting. But I want *more* Americans to undertake the sorts of efforts that she did.

When I lived in New York, I got to know Richard Rabinowitz, who curated *Slavery in New York*, the New-York Historical Society exhibit that exposed ties between enslaved African labor and New York City's wealth. Its narrative surprised many patrons, who conceived of slavery as a Southern sin and never imagined their city, more than many others, was built with wealth from that "peculiar institution." Prior to its opening, Rabinowitz thought the show might be controversial, whether for that reason or because of something he experienced while doing a project on a related topic in Charleston, South Carolina. An African American man, upset by the idea of a white man rendering painful moments in black history, told Rabinowitz, "It's a violation of my human rights to have someone like you telling this story."

The New York exhibit wasn't ultimately controversial. African American attendees raved. One delighted Rabinowitz by saying that when she next stood on Wall Street she'd know her ancestors built a lot more of the city than she'd imagined. But the curator said he would have stood by his material even if someone had reacted differently. "These aren't genetic issues, they're cultural issues, so I don't feel ashamed for any of it," he said. "I wasn't there. You weren't either. And we're

all obligated to use our talents for the good of others, whether our great-grandfather was a Russian immigrant, a slave, or a Southern plantation owner with 5,000 slaves."

I think he had it right.

Slavery and white supremacy are parts of American history, and white people are no less obligated than black people to engage with them as best they can. To call such engagement cultural appropriation implies a racial essentialism that is the enemy of empathy. And do we really want to risk discouraging a white musician from writing the next "Hurricane," a white radio producer from reporting the next "Serial," or a white screenwriter from creating the next *The Wire*? The wrong incentive structure risks nixing work that could draw attention to an injustice or dramatize systemic racism or get an incarcerated man a new trial for fear of "cultural appropriation."

All that is to say that I had a negative reaction to the critique. On Twitter, you reacted differently. You expressed disagreement with the activists who are targeting "Open Casket." But you seemed as frustrated by the way right-leaning folks in digital journalism and social media tend to cover cultural appropriation charges.

I'm eager to hear your thoughts and concerns.

Jonathan Blanks: Too often, I think what a cultural-appropriation argument boils down to is a misapplication of voice and representation. What I mean is that some person or group of people—here, a handful of black artists and activists—is made to represent a much broader spectrum of people; black people, or black liberals perhaps. I am not in any way keyed-into the art world or familiar with any of the artists involved on either side of this debate, but I'm not aware of many black people in my social networks feeling strongly about the painting one way or the other.

The first I heard of this particular issue was when our mutual friend Michael Moynihan shared Ms. Black's facebook post:
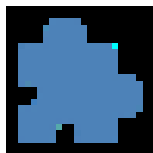
> This is complete lunacy. A petition by an artist, signed by artists demanding the Whitney *destroy* a painting https://t.co/aWOB1chUX4
>
> — Michael C Moynihan (@mcmoynihan) March 20, 2017

I agreed that for an artist to call for a museum to destroy a piece of art was over-the-top, even preposterous. Whatever the merits of her criticisms of the piece, the artist, or the Whitney for displaying it, calling for the destruction of art would be akin to you, me, or Michael calling for books we find offensive to be burned. As writers, book burning is anathema to the values we hold dear, namely free thought and expression.

I didn't share the tweet because I was not aware Ms. Black was a voice that needed to (or, in this case, *should*) be amplified. Until the *New York Times* piece about the protest, I just assumed this was a small group of people on the Internet making much ado about nothing. Now that a few more prominent liberals have taken up the cause, it has gained more traction; but that people are arguing

about art is not something I can get worked up about. Indeed, isn't that half the point of subjective works?

But my white, right-of-center social media feeds are regularly choked with blithe dismissals of cultural appropriation, as if there is never cause for a reasonable person to be upset when aspects of a culture—or perceived aspects of a culture—are adopted, co-opted, bastardized, or lampooned by white Americans, collectively or individually.

Perhaps the quintessential example of the appropriative phenomenon is non-black people donning blackface. *Slate*'s Jamelle Bouie and others call October "Blackface Advent," the annual ritual of non-black people making fools of themselves for a laugh at a costume party at black people's expense. Whether it's [cooning minstrelsy](#) and [making fun of Black Lives Matter](#) or white kids dressing up like Kanye and Beyonce, it's offensive to a large swath of people, and to many black people particularly.

This isn't about a white artist trying to contribute to the understanding and pain of a long national history of crime and violence. This is a cultural diss that is a common and vivid reminder that our humanity is not respected on a very deep level by a large number of people in this country. It's not always so blatant, of course. White people switching to an exaggerated black vernacular to say "Whazzup my brotha?" or some other imitative nonsense is something I've encountered countless times in my life. There's nothing wrong with adopting terms like "whazzup?" as they come into (white) pop culture through various media, but there's a difference between the natural assimilation of language and black imitation as some sort of caricature.

As far as artists are concerned, whether it's Ms. Schutz's *Open Casket* or Mr. Rabinowitz's slavery exhibit, risk is inherent to what they do. There will always be critics and there will always be unfair criticism. I cannot make that go away, and there isn't a way to make it go away. Slavery is America's Original Sin, and the racism that evolved to perpetuate it is an inextricable part of our social fabric. Whenever any artist tries to confront that, they inherently invite expressions of the often chaotic, almost inarticulable pain that exists as a part of black experience in America. I think the artist must deal with the resulting legitimate criticism and dismiss the illegitimate criticism as they come. The key is knowing enough about your subject in the first place to distinguish between the two. Too many people on the right seem to dismiss all cultural appropriation claims as a matter of course, and then seize on stories like this one to reaffirm their belief that appropriation is a non-issue. Consequently, this diminishes the pain members of a culture feel while signaling to one another that they have disproved yet another minority/liberal shibboleth. It's a bad look.

Conor Friedersdorf: You're right that every year, there are new stories of young white people (some ignorant, others malign) donning blackface or otherwise caricaturing black people (or Mexicans or Asian Americans). That sort of behavior is a dehumanizing cultural diss, and there is a strain of commentary on the ideological right that blithely dismisses even the most staid complaints about such incidents. Precisely because black face and its analogs are so often a sign that someone's humanity is being disrespected, I agree with the liberal consensus against it.

But it seems to me that blackface isn't the quintessential example of the appropriative phenomenon. It is wrongheaded and worthy of stigma—but it isn't cultural appropriation.

A Korean food truck owner who puts beef bulgogi in a burrito is appropriating Mexican culinary culture. A Malaysian housewife who rents a kimono while on holiday in Kyoto is appropriating traditional Japanese dress. A Canadian who writes a novel inspired by Cervantes is appropriating

Spanish literary culture. An Irish American who sings opera for a living benefits from the world's appropriation of an Italian art.

But a white college student who dons blackface is … not engaging at all with African American culture. He or she is just caricaturing the physical features of another race. The act is offensive partly because it is reducing people to the color of their skin.

Imagine a black woman who invites her white boyfriend to travel to her hometown to meet her family. "I want to show you the culture where I came from," she says. That might mean any number of things. She might introduce her white boyfriend to old family recipes, or a service at a historically black church, or the jazz instruments her grandpa played, or stories about an aunt's role in the Civil Rights movement. There's no scenario where she says, "We're going to put this dark makeup on you now."

You rightly complained about social media feeds where right-of-center white folks act like "there is never cause for a reasonable person to be upset when aspects of a culture—or perceived aspects of a culture—are adopted, co-opted, bastardized, or lampooned." I think it is often reasonable to be upset at one's culture being lampooned.

What I am averse to are claims that merely having one's culture adopted is inherently objectionable, especially when there is no underlying animus, or diss, or dehumanization. It isn't that I dismiss any umbrage taken by those who say they are angry about cultural appropriation. It's just that nearly every time I concur that something wrongheaded happened, I perceive that the culprit is a distinct transgression.

If I'm right—I trust you'll push back if you think I've got anything wrong—using "cultural appropriation" as shorthand for all these controversies produces two pernicious trends.

1. Some people correctly perceive something like a frat party full of blackface as wrongheaded, file it under "cultural appropriation," and adopt the erroneous heuristic that any appropriation of a culture is wrongheaded. When the chef who staffs the dining hall at their college serves sushi, they see injustice where there is none.

2. Conversely, other folks see a protest over sushi, perceive that it is absurd, see it filed under cultural appropriation, and adopt the bad heuristic that any grievance lodged under that heading is bullshit. Later, when their Facebook stream unearths a story about blackface headlined, "These Frat Boys Are Guilty of Cultural Appropriation," they erroneously conclude that nothing wrongheaded occurred. Perhaps they even ignorantly add a dismissive comment, exacerbating the canard that racial animus or dehumanization is a nonissue.

I think both errors impose costs worth avoiding.

And while I am not ready to say that *nothing* objectionable is *ever* accurately described as "cultural appropriation," I suspect that, on the whole, abandoning that shorthand would enhance clarity, lead to better critiques, and minimize category errors.

Now, there are writers and digital journalism outlets that seek out the least persuasive complaints about cultural appropriation, mock them with animus, proceed as if they've proved that no complaint so characterized is ever legitimate, and thereby portray minority communities with legitimate grievances as malign cry-bullies or race-baiters. It's a cynical, ugly, and profitable model. Despite the distinctions I've drawn—and again, I trust you'll parse them and push back or

add nuance or take exception wherever you think I've gone wrong—I too grow frustrated by the iterations of that model that I see on various right-leaning social media feeds.

For folks loath to fuel that ecosystem, but convinced that wrongheaded ideas about cultural appropriation are doing harm (and growing in influence, even if they are not yet mainstream), what pitfalls would you urge taking care to avoid when contesting them?

Jonathan Blanks: In your last email, you said that my blackface example wasn't appropriation, but I think there are larger issues involved and, from that broader vantage point, I think both your sushi counter protests and my offensive costumes intersect.

I understand a frustration with the language in these debates and conversations. I'm not a linguist, but it seems to me that terms like "cultural appropriation," "white privilege," "microaggressions," and many others have been attempts to improve upon the language that we use to discuss the manifestations of cultural conflict on both collective and individual levels. For years, the mainstream recognized "racism," a concept seemingly basic and straightforward. But racism is, in fact, an over-broad term that can describe a clutched purse on an elevator, a lynching, segregation, obstacles to employment, and countless other examples in between.

The more nuanced terms, associated with "Social Justice Warriors"—"SJW" having become a pejorative among many on the right—are tools to specify wrongs or perceived wrongs, but those terms also frequently turn-off "anti-SJW" types that you and I find often in our social media and professional circles. The result is both SJWs and anti-SJWs talking past one another before they retreat to their respective echo chambers to kvetch about their opposites until the next controversy gets picked up in the media. The words they use may change, but the underlying conflicts endure.

The terms are less important to me than what they attempt to describe. At bottom, stripped of particular circumstances, what these arguments tend to come down to is a given grievance on a semi-collective level (cultural, ethnic, racial, or other minority) and whether that grievance is justified, right? The key to the argument, then, is determining how legitimate the complaints are and how might they be reflective of broader problems in the dominant society—and what, if anything, to do with or about that reflection. A lot of that has to do with the competence and the authenticity of the person who is alleged to be intruding upon another's traditional cultural space.

A sushi bar by itself isn't worth protesting, but [serving fried chicken and watermelon to celebrate MLK Day](#) is probably worth raising a voice of dissent. Many people look at the Cleveland Indians' Chief Wahoo mascot and [see a racist caricature](#), which I assume you would not consider appropriative, but is that so different from the obnoxious "Tomahawk Chop" at Atlanta Braves games that is an [imitation of a Native American war chant](#)? And it seems like once every few months a white person is put "in yellow face" [in a photo shoot](#) or a [major motion picture,](#) effectively erasing Asians from popular expressions of their art and cultures. Most of the people who perpetrate or participate in these spectacles presumably hold no animus toward the cultures and traditions they use in their business, art, or sport, yet I think the people who feel affronted by these decisions have good reason to speak out against them. Whether or not these are considered appropriations, they are demeaning expressions of other cultures or ethnicities that are fair targets of criticism.

But putting the complainants of appropriation aside for a moment, we should also consider the flip-side to the interactions. The fear you mentioned about the white man creating the slavery exhibit in New York touches on an underappreciated aspect of the debate: white fear and defensiveness about

what they can or cannot say and do for fear of race-related stress. Professor Robin DiAngelo has dubbed this "white fragility"—the difficulty many whites have with minority critiques or criticism of themselves or the dominant white American culture.

Not too long ago, a public policy writer came to me worried about potential black backlash to her writing. She was earnest in her efforts to explain race-related epiphenomena in some data she had, but lamented potential negative reactions by black people that would make the piece "not worth it" because she feared for her career. What she wanted to write was not at all racist (or anything that a person would think would reflect poorly on black people), but she was so terrified of even touching race as a subject matter that she considered scrapping the piece of writing entirely.

I don't think her professional worries were well-founded, but I think she was right to be careful when she talks about racial issues from her particular perspective. Too often, commentators get caught up in their ideological priors or personal life experiences and apply them as if everyone approaches a given problem from a similar perspective.

A rather tame example: when Governor Mitt Romney was on the 2012 campaign trail he encouraged students to "take risks" and "borrow money if you have to from your parents" to start a business. More than a few Americans grew up as or knowing kids working in high school who 'had to' give money to help out their parents. The idea that one can just hit up parents for $10,000 to start a new business is a blindness to circumstance that is amplified when race and culture come into play. What strikes the speaker as rational or taken for granted can come off as ignorant, out of touch, or even bigoted.

In the broadest sense, these conflicts represent the "marketplace of ideas" that free speech advocates, especially those friendly to free markets, use to support their cause. The Internet is the most democratizing force introduced in my lifetime, giving a voice to hundreds of millions of Americans, and billions of others around the globe, making that marketplace almost unfathomably vast. No one said that marketplace was going to be pretty, organized, or done in accordance to *Robert's Rules of Order*. Yet, when these conflicts come up, members of the dominant culture tend to blame the language and divisiveness on the critics, rather than engage with the criticisms as they come. (e.g., "Black Lives Matter" vs. "All Lives Matter.")

College campuses, overflowing with self-righteous 20-somethings of clashing backgrounds, and the internet, overflowing with people confident in their own avatars to say what's really on their minds, are home to the worst purveyors of the conflicts we've been discussing. Thankfully, most real world sushi counters are not overrun with protestors and entire cities like San Francisco are home to some of the best fusion food available. We still buy products from all over the world and many aspects of other cultures are at our fingertips and in our pockets for us to explore. That's a good thing.

Cultural conflicts are going to continue as demographics shift and old ways of doing and speaking change. Thus has our country always been and, one hopes, it will continue to be.

Conor Friedersdorf: The counsel to value rather than lament these conflicts is wise. What's more, you're absolutely right that "demeaning expressions of other cultures or ethnicities" are fair targets of criticism; and that terms like "white privilege," "microaggressions," and "cultural appropriation" began as attempts to better describe real inequities. Indeed, the earliest incarnations and smartest invocations of them often strike me as straightforwardly valuable. For example, if designing a college curriculum, I would enthusiastically include Peggy McIntosh's insightful 1989 essay,

"[White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack](#)," as well as Jamelle Bouie's widely and justly praised blog post "[What Does It Mean to Be Privileged](#)."

Alas, the smartest, most precise invocations of a term don't determine its overall effect. And I worry that, on balance, importing obscure academic concepts into mass conversations about identity make them much less accessible and more alienating to the vast majority of America. Even at selective colleges, where social justice jargon is taught in the curriculum and used in residential life, I can't tell you how many times I've talked to students who use the same term... but [assume very different meanings](#). If the choice were really between, e.g., "that costume is racist" and "that costume is cultural appropriation," I would agree with you that the latter conveys some additional information. But isn't "that costume draws on pernicious stereotypes" better still?

I agree that getting to the bottom of things is what's most important. And you're right to see a risk of pedantry that puts unreasonable burdens on those protesting the status quo.

Even your example is apt.

Anyone who doesn't see that the Black Lives Matter movement is saying, "black lives matter, too," is either playing dumb or so uncharitable it verges on animus. At the same time, to treat anti-racism and other efforts to oppose bigotry or injustice as truly important is to strive for precision in thought and language. To tweak your words, the terms are important to me insofar as they obscure or clarify the matter at hand.

Orwell warned, "the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts."

To quote a bit more:

> If you use ready-made phrases, you not only don't have to hunt about for the words... you save much mental effort, at the cost of leaving your meaning vague, not only for your reader but for yourself... They will construct your sentences for you — even think your thoughts for you, to a certain extent — and at need they will perform the important service of partially concealing your meaning even from yourself. It is at this point that the special connection between politics and the debasement of language becomes clear.

I think at bottom we're mostly in agreement. We both perceive a responsibility to listen to grievances that are expressed and to understand their core as fully as possible.

And we agree that there is no shortcut around the hard work of "determining how legitimate the complaints are and how might they be reflective of broader problems in the dominant society and what, if anything, to do about that reflection." When critiques of "social justice" frameworks or jargon are marshaled to evade that hard work, or used as a pretext to reflexively discredit or dismiss a grievance or group, I join you in calling foul. I only wish it were easier to agree on when that is happening. But perhaps I've erred, or you want to add something? The last word is all yours.

Jonathan Blanks: While I think that we do agree at the end of the day on the responsibility to address grievances as they come, there is probably a significant amount of distance between where each of us would draw the line between reasonable and unreasonable complaints. Going further, though, I think we have a fundamental disagreement about the responsibility of commentators and activists to cater to the feelings of the people who offend them. You wrote, "I worry that, on balance, importing obscure academic concepts into mass media conversations about identity make them much less accessible and more alienating to the vast majority of America." This statement assumes a lot that I don't think is necessarily true. In addition, and somewhat related, the statement

has distinct echoes of anti-backlash messages that have little resonance with activists and more militant commentators.

First, your statement assumes at least two questionable premises:

1) That the purpose of a complaint is persuasion and

2) That the target of that persuasion is the (presumably somewhat hostile or otherwise unconvinced) white majority. Particularly when dealing with issues of personal, ethnic, or cultural offense that do not rise to the level of legal or other governmental intervention, the complaint may just be a sincere acknowledgment of a cultural trespass.

Like, if you step on my foot on the subway, I don't need to bring the police into the situation or convince everyone in the subway car that you wronged me. A simple "my bad" will probably suffice. If you accidentally swing your backpack and hit my elderly grandmother in the face, an apology somewhat more than a perfunctory *mea culpa* is probably in order. If you get robbed by a black guy and yell "fucking nigger!" as he jumps off the car with your wallet, then you probably need to make a more public apology, even in spite of your own legitimate grievance. Acknowledgment is the key, and the appropriate response depends on the underlying offense.

To the backlash point, it is a perspective that is hard to take seriously from a minority point of view, particularly for black Americans, because it's been around as long as black people have complained about maltreatment on this continent. Tempering complaints, pacifying language, or modifying attitudes in order to better sate the worries, fears, or general feelings of the white majority is a cousin of "be patient and it will get better."

If activists just waited it out, nothing would change. As Frederick Douglass said, "Power concedes nothing without a demand." Thus, the anti-backlash argument is unlikely to go very far with anyone not already in the business of soft persuasion.

Like any group working toward a goal, different people play different roles. While I can't say "never," I'm not usually out in the streets, chanting and holding signs in protest. My work and commentary tend to be more along what you're asking for: less aggressive, bordering on the dispassionate, policy-focused arguments. That's my role.

But there's also a role for the activists, who galvanize people to build support and coalitions within their communities, and many of them don't care what the "vast majority of America" thinks. It's neither their job nor their desire. They understand that politics is not about unanimity and that disruption without consensus can still bring social change. Cultural change is messy, and there is not much we can do about that. But the next time someone complains about appropriation or some other perceived slight, perhaps the best response is just, "Oh, I didn't mean to offend. I'm sorry."

Thank you so much for hosting this exchange. It was a pleasure.