**Cultural Appropriation and Oppression**

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*1. Introduction*

The wrong of cultural appropriation is rooted in imbalances of power. Whether a particular case is most saliently understood as one of silencing, exploitation, misrepresentation, or offense, what ultimately makes particular instances of cultural appropriation wrongful, and thus what grounds objections to them, is the way in which they manifest and/or exacerbate inequality and marginalization. Call this the oppression account of cultural appropriation.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This paper will proceed as follows. I will first present an outline of the oppression account of cultural appropriation and argue that it offers the best explanation for the wrongfulness of the varied and complex cases of appropriation to which people often object. I will then compare the oppression account with the intimacy account defended by C. Thi Nguyen and Matt Strohl. Though I believe that Nguyen and Strohl’s account offers important insight into an essential dimension of the cultural appropriation debate, I will argue that justified objections to cultural appropriation must ultimately be grounded in considerations of oppression as opposed to group intimacy.

*2. The Oppression Account*

For the sake of this discussion, I will treat cultural appropriation as a descriptive term that refers to the use of the stories, styles, motifs, etc. of a particular cultural group by outsiders to that group, and refer to cases that are subject to justified objections as wrongful cultural appropriation (J. O. Young 2008). I will not consider here the circumstances under which individuals might be justified, all things considered, in engaging in otherwise wrongful appropriation, but rather will focus on the normative foundation for justified objections. How to understand who counts as a cultural group member is a central (and fraught) aspect of the cultural appropriation debate (J. O. Young 2005; Ziff and Rao 1997): though I will not be able to resolve that problem here, I will discuss below how it intersects with both the oppression account and the intimacy account.[[2]](#footnote-2)

I have argued elsewhere that some common objections to cultural appropriation can be usefully bolstered through appeal to the concepts employed in the recent literature on epistemic injustice (Matthes 2016). Objections to cultural appropriation, especially from Native communities, have often appealed to the idea that appropriative acts can silence, speak for, and misrepresent Native voices, a function predicated on a history of colonial oppression and its continuing effects and manifestations (Todd 1992, 1990; Keeshig-Tobias 1990; Coombe 1993). Drawing on the work of Miranda Fricker and Kristie Dotson in particular (Fricker 2007; Dotson 2011), I argued that the mechanisms of epistemic injustice—credibility deficits and excesses with sources in systematic prejudices—offer powerful tools for explaining how this silencing occurs, and how it interacts with background conditions of oppression.

One of the key takeaways from that argument is that wrongful cultural appropriation, though a descriptively distinguishable phenomenon, is not normatively unique. There is no *sui generis* wrong that occurs when a cultural outsider appropriates the styles of cultural insiders—rather, such acts can manifest and/or exacerbate underlying inequalities. In other words, what makes cultural appropriation wrong, when it is wrongful, is the way it interacts with the oppression of certain cultural group members. This explanation vindicates the common intuition that that there is nothing morally objectionable about members of marginalized cultural groups using the styles of dominant cultural groups (Ziff and Rao 1997; Hurka 1999; Hladki 1994): indeed, this is why such acts are perhaps best described as assimilation rather than appropriation (though the descriptive definition of cultural appropriation I employ here allows from them to be described as such). Those who question the wrongfulness of cultural appropriation sometimes worry that an explanation of its wrongfulness must be predicated on a “cultural property logic” that entails (absurdly) a set of prerogatives over the use of all cultural products, held by member of rigidly defined cultural groups (Appiah 2006; Mezey 2007). But the oppression account makes no appeal to such notions of cultural property, and does not entail that the members of just any cultural group have grounds for objecting to the appropriation of their cultural products. We don’t need the concept of property to understand the cultural appropriation debate—we need the concept of power.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Because objections to cultural appropriation on the basis of silencing, speaking for, and misrepresenting are ultimately explained by appeal to underlying conditions of oppression, and thus are not morally unique, this account leaves open that there may be other mechanisms (beyond the conceptual tools of epistemic injustice) through which acts of cultural appropriation can link up with the wrongs of oppression. Indeed, as mentioned at the outset of this essay, it appears that wrongful cultural appropriation can have as many faces as oppression (I. M. Young 2011). Another important facet of wrongful appropriation that is often more salient than epistemic injustice is exploitation (Rogers 2006). For instance, consider Brittney Cooper’s incisive objection to Iggy Azaelea’s appropriation of what Cooper refers to as “sonic Blackness”: “Iggy profits from the cultural performativity and forms of survival that Black women have perfected, without having to encounter and deal with the social problem that is the Black female body, with its perceived excesses, unruliness, loudness and lewdness. If she existed in hip hop at a moment when Black women could still get play, where it would take more than one hand to count all the mainstream Black women rap artists, I would have no problem” (Cooper 2015). Cooper’s analysis favors the conceptual tools of theories of exploitation, what Richard Rogers describes (in the context of cultural appropriation) as “the appropriation of elements of a subordinated culture by a dominant culture without substantive reciprocity, permission, and/or compensation” (Rogers 2006) and which recent philosophical theories of exploitation more generally characterize as the extraction of excessive benefits from vulnerable individuals (Valdman 2009; Liberto 2014). Notice that Cooper’s objection makes no reference to a concept of cultural *property*, but appeals rather to the background conditions of oppression facing Black women.

Depending on how we ought to understand the nature of exploitation, there will be different details to work out in thinking about wrongful cultural appropriation as a form of exploitation. For the purposes of this discussion, I want to emphasize that the oppression account will be friendly to many possible explanations of wrongful appropriation in terms of exploitation. For instance, though there may be disagreement about how precisely to understand the “vulnerability clause” of exploitation theories, background conditions of oppression will tend to be a plausible candidate for rendering cultural group members vulnerable in a way that leaves them open to exploitation. Importantly, if we think that cultural appropriation requires that one be exploited specifically *qua* member of a given cultural group, rather than the exploitation being predicated on an idiosyncratic individual vulnerability, then it will be fitting that the explanation of cultural group vulnerability be systematic in nature. Social vulnerability requires a social explanation.

So far, I have argued that the oppression account offers a compelling explanation of wrongful cultural appropriation. This is because various explanations of the different kinds of objections typically lodged against acts of cultural appropriation are rooted in background conditions of oppression. Moreover, those cases where a potential instance of appropriation is intuitively unobjectionable seem to resist criticism precisely because there is a lack of relevant oppressive conditions (for instance, when a member of an oppressed group appropriates from a dominant group, or when un-oppressed cultural groups appropriate from each other).

However, even on the oppression account, the problem of how to understand cultural group membership persists. In particular, the logic of cultural appropriation, predicated as it is on notions of cultural insiders and outsiders, risks embracing forms of cultural essentialism that can exclude individuals on the margins of cultural groups. I have previously argued that this is an especially significant concern because the harms of cultural essentialism are similar in kind to the harms of wrongful cultural appropriation—by excluding marginalized group members on the basis of dominant understandings of cultural group membership, appeals to cultural essentialism can have the same kind of silencing function as wrongful cultural appropriation (Matthes 2016). More broadly, cultural essentialism can reproduce the same oppressive power dynamics that are at the root of objections to cultural appropriation (Killmister 2011; Shelby 2002). This is not to say that we ought not, all things considered, make claims about who is and who is not a cultural group member: indeed, it seems that certain participatory goods require such understandings. There is a straightforward descriptive sense in which we self-identify as members or non-members of particular cultural groups, and many cases of cultural appropriation do not seem to risk the exclusion of marginalized group members (for instance, when a purported appropriator self-identifies as a cultural outsider). However, constructing a robust theory of cultural group membership that preserves these goods while avoiding the harms of cultural exclusion (what Alan Patten calls the “dilemma of cultural essentialism” (Patten 2014)) is a problem that remains to be solved. Following Nguyen and Strohl, let’s call this “the boundary problem.”

A further advantage of the oppression account is that it provides some pretext for dodging the boundary problem. Because wrongful cultural appropriation is ultimately explained by oppressive background conditions, what is often most salient is the way a purported appropriator navigates the power dynamics in a given cultural context, rather than their cultural identity. In other words, it is possible for a cultural outsider (even a self-identified one) to avoid wrongful cultural appropriation by working to prevent their actions from manifesting or exacerbating the oppression of cultural insiders. The oppression account does not suggest that appropriation by outsiders *entails* furthering the oppression of insiders: this is one of the ways it rejects the rigid logic of bounded cultural property claims to which critics of the very idea of cultural appropriation often object. Rather, the contextual features of cultural appropriation are ripe for such oppression, and often do end up involving silencing, misrepresentation, exploitation, etc. This aspect of the account thus speaks to the common claim that cultural appropriation is wrongful when it is engaged in without relevant permission from cultural group members (a matter we will return to below) (Rogers 2006). Permission is a mechanism through which otherwise oppressive actions can potentially be rendered permissible. To be sure, the oppression account does not render the boundary problem unimportant, and there will be contexts in which contestation over who counts as a cultural group member will be central to understanding a particular charge of cultural appropriation (Matthes 2016). However, I believe the account offers the tools to explain wrongful cultural appropriation without over-investing in the question of cultural group membership.

*3. Objections to the Intimacy Account*

Nguyen and Strohl’s intimacy account offers a thoughtful contribution to the cultural appropriation debate. In particular, it centers the importance of group agency, and offers novel tools for thinking about the many cases where cultural group insiders disagree about whether an act of cultural appropriation is wrongful. According to Nguyen and Strohl, justified objections to cultural appropriation stem from a prerogative of group intimacy. Their account thus offers a different normative foundation from the oppression account.

In the remainder of this paper, I will argue that despite its attractions and important contributions to the cultural appropriation debate, group intimacy is the wrong normative foundation upon which to build a comprehensive account of wrongful appropriation. Rather, I will suggest that we can layer Nguyen and Strohl’s arguments about the importance of group intimacy on top of the normative foundation provided by the oppression account. After very briefly introducing Nguyen and Strohl’s account, I will lodge three primary objections. First, I suggest that in its effort to explain expressive appropriation claims (those that purportedly lack an independent ground), the intimacy account doubles down on the boundary problem. Second, I will question whether group intimacy possess the kind of bare normativity that Nguyen and Strohl claim for it. Finally, I argue that these objections give us reason to accept the importance of group intimacy to the cultural appropriation debate, but question the source of its significance identified by Nguyen and Strohl.

*3.1. Doubling Down on the Boundary Problem*

Nguyen and Strohl argue that there are two types of appropriation claims: those that are independently grounded and those that are expressive. Their primary focus is providing the correct normative foundation for expressive claims. Their main example of an explanation for expressive appropriation claims is one that appeals to “claim-deference,” the idea that, “at least in the case of oppressed groups” the mere fact that group members object to the appropriation of a cultural style should provide sufficient reason for outsiders to refrain from such appropriation (other things being equal): they do not need to provide some further, “independent” reason, such as an identifiable harm caused by the appropriation. Nguyen and Strohl ultimately reject claim-deference because it grants too much power to discrete individuals within a group and can undermine the agency of other group members who disagree with their objection. As an alternative, they introduce the *intimacy account*, “the view that considerations of intimacy ground the normative importance of expressive appropriation claims.”

Now, on Nguyen and Strohl’s intimacy account, a person making an expressive appropriation claim needs to be a member of the cultural group being appropriated from in order for the claim to have normative force. So who counts as a group member, and thus has standing to make an expressive claim? Nguyen and Strohl are sensitive to the difficulty of answering this question in a non-circular way: it presents the now familiar boundary problem. As I’ve argued above, I agree with Nguyen and Strohl that this is a significant problem for any account of cultural appropriation, and requires further philosophical attention: I am not criticizing their account for not offering a clear solution to this problem. However, I do want to register a concern about the *weight* that the intimacy account places on finding a solution to this problem. A major selling point of the intimacy account is that it “explains how group-members can have the standing to issue appropriation claims without incurring an obligation to litigate questions of justification.” But this feature comes at a cost: it takes the worries about justification required by an independently grounded claim and shifts them back to justifying one’s status as a group member. Above, I argued that the oppression account has some resources for *avoiding* the boundary problem because it is based primarily on appeal to facts about oppression and power (though as I acknowledged, there is more work to be done on this score). In contrast, on the intimacy account, appropriation claims are *essentially* concerned with boundary policing: as Nguyen and Strohl put it, they “express the desire to protect the boundaries surrounding their intimate practices” and “If the boundaries of intimacy are set expressively, then only the relevant group can set them.” The intimacy account thus doubles down on the boundary problem. As I’ve explained above, because the harms of cultural exclusion and marginalization are similar in kind to the harms of appropriation, this is particularly worrisome. Moreover, as Suzy Killmister has persuasively argued, the kinds of “participatory goods” that prerogatives of intimacy are meant to protect seems to favor a group-endorsement model of determining group membership, and that’s precisely the kind of model that generates worries about exclusion (Killmister 2011). If the boundary problem proves intractable, then the intimacy account is sunk. In contrast, I suggest that the oppression account could still float on.

*3.2. The Normativity of Group Intimacy*

The intimacy account is premised on the idea that group intimacy has a kind of bare normativity, analogous to the bare normativity of interpersonal intimacy. To be clear, prerogatives of intimacy only generate *pro tanto­* normative reasons according to Nguyen and Strohl, but their account seems to entail that any group can have a prerogative of intimacy that grounds such claims. This is the next aspect of their account that I want to challenge. I am skeptical of the idea that there is any bare normativity to the purported prerogatives of group intimacy. Nguyen and Strohl’s examples of intimate groups, which range from Christians to Star Wars fans, seem to entail that all groups have prerogatives of group intimacy. Because the reasons generated by prerogatives of intimacy are *pro tanto*, it will often be the case that these reasons (such as reasons not to appropriate from the group) are easily overridden by competing considerations. But they remain reasons nonetheless.

However, I can’t see any reason to accept such a claim. It seems more plausible to me that there are no such reasons, because group intimacy lacks bare normativity. I think we can see why by attending to the function played by expressive appropriation claims on the intimacy account. As discussed above, such claims essentially concern the desire to protect group boundaries, and I don’t think such desires generate reasons, even weak ones, absent some further considerations pertaining to the nature of the group. This becomes particularly apparent when we consider groups that are less benign than Star Wars fans. It’s not at all clear to me, for example, that the KKK generates any prerogatives of intimacy through its group-identity-affirming practices. KKK members might find meaning in their relation to each other and want to protect their group boundaries, but accepting that such groups generate any reasons for others to respect their group preferences is a tough pill to swallow.

Luckily, I think we can take on board Nguyen and Strohl’s important observations about group intimacy without accepting that group intimacy has the kind of bare normativity that they claim for it. We can thus reject any prerogatives of intimacy for the KKK (or for Star Wars fans, for that matter, which I think is a salutary point given the recent behavior of some such fans and their boundary-protecting efforts). Specifically, I think Nguyen and Strohl’s discussion of intimacy and oppression gets the order of explanation backwards. What grounds expressive appropriation claims is the historical and ongoing oppression faced by certain groups, independently of considerations of intimacy, and intimacy can be a feature that shapes the character and intensity of certain such appropriative claims.

*3.3. Oppression and Group Agency*

Recall that a central motivation for the introduction of the intimacy account was the worry that claim-deference “does not appropriately respect the agency of group members who disagree with appropriation claimants.” Nguyen and Strohl’s considerations here are compelling, and the dispute over the “Kimono Wednesdays” display at the MFA is effective. Their concern also captures a common understanding of wrongful cultural appropriation invoked in popular discourse: that it involves using cultural styles without permission. Nguyen and Strohl rightly note that the ideas of group permission and respect for group agency introduce a series of further problems: in addition to the boundary problem already discussed, there is the problem of how we understand the wishes of a group. As they explain, many groups relevant to cultural appropriation lack a formal structure or decision procedure: they are what Nguyen and Strohl call “sub-agential groups.” I don’t want to press on how we should understand the wishes of sub-agential groups, a question Nguyen and Strohl acknowledge is a question for future research. Rather, I want to pursue why respecting the autonomy of such groups matters.

I think Nguyen and Strohl are right that sub-agential groups matter, that their ability to authorize acts of appropriation is important: moreover, I greatly appreciate how their paper helps to bring out the centrality of respecting group wishes to the real and messy public debates about cultural appropriation. But it’s not because of the bare normativity of group intimacy. It’s because these are exercises of autonomy; they are ways of pushing back against the very oppression that appropriation often trades on. It’s precisely because oppression is the enabling condition of wrongful appropriation that the idea of group permission is so important. In other words, I believe Nguyen and Strohl have identified an important aspect of the appropriation story, but misidentified the source of its significance.

An important tradition in the cultural appropriation literature is the idea that cultural appropriation is an extension of colonialism: that it is wrongful because of the ways that it infringes on group autonomy (Todd 1990). The oppression account is friendly to this view. Recall that on the oppression account, cultural appropriation can be wrongful because of any number of ways that it manifests and/or exacerbates the oppression of cultural groups. Respect for cultural autonomy may require outsiders refraining from appropriation, but it also requires that groups have the power to authorize appropriate use of their cultural heritage. It would be an ironic (and tragic) deprivation of cultural autonomy if groups had no power to authorize acts of appropriation, if the very concern about the relationship between appropriation and oppression froze marginalized people into cultural categories of permanent victimhood where any use of their culture by outsiders *must* by that very fact be impermissible. Respect for group autonomy, including that of sub-agential groups, can be a way of combating cultural oppression, whether through authorization or objection. Thus, on this view, the normative foundation for expressive appropriation claims is the fact that they come from oppressed groups.

This explanation preserves a distinction between expressive claims and independently grounded ones. It is still the case that no further, independent, empirical evidence is required for such claims to have normative weight on this account, and I don’t believe it introduces any new problems. It thus accommodates the view that there is something significant about the wishes of group members to authorize otherwise wrongful acts of appropriation, but it grounds this significance in the importance of exercising group autonomy to resist oppression rather than in the normativity of group intimacy. Notice that this view also explains the asymmetry noted by Nguyen and Strohl: the reason that the appropriation claims of Christians against secular choral group don’t have weight is that the members of that community are not oppressed (at least not *qua* members of that community in the US). Rather than thinking that their claims generate weak reasons that are easily overridden, on this view, their claims generate no reasons at all. This explains the asymmetry without attributing weight to the claims of groups like Star Wars fans or the KKK. I think it’s highly plausible that group intimacy has value in many cases, and could moreover have normative implications, but it does not on its own ground prerogatives to exclude or make justified expressive appropriation claims.

One might counter that if group autonomy matters, it should matter in all cases, and thus grounding expressive claims in considerations of autonomy should also ground such claims for dominant (or neutral) groups. However, I think this inference is mistaken. Even if we want to grant that autonomy is an important value for any sub-agential group (and I’m not sure that we do) this does not entail that cultural appropriation will infringe on autonomy for any sub-agential group. Consider an analogy with individual autonomy. Norms of civility might be thought to apply uniformly to all, but we know that in fact they don’t. Because we live in a patriarchal society, men can act uncivilly with impunity (cf. the current President of the United States), whereas norms of civility are routinely used to police women’s behavior. Such norms infringe on women’s autonomy due to background conditions of oppression, but don’t infringe on men’s autonomy.[[4]](#footnote-4) Similarly, the appropriation of culture from dominant groups does not affect group autonomy: because of their power, such groups can carry on just as they please.[[5]](#footnote-5) In contrast, as we have seen, appropriation can affect oppressed cultural groups in a number of ways. Moreover, even in expressive cases where no independent ground is readily available or thought to be required, the mere fact that the group is oppressed provides a normative foundation for their expressive claim as an exercise of group autonomy.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Finally, I think the explanation offered by the oppression account is more parsimonious. The intimacy account ends up offering a disjointed theory of wrongful appropriation because its explanation of expressive appropriation claims bears no normative relation to the reasons supporting independently grounded appropriation claims. While Nguyen and Strohl argue that considerations of oppression heighten the significance of group intimacy, the normative foundation of expressive claims is ultimately distinct from that of independently grounded ones on the intimacy account. In contrast, the oppression account offers a single, unified explanation of both independently grounded and expressive appropriation claims: they are both ultimately rooted in group oppression.

Nguyen and Strohl’s paper is a welcome contribution to the cultural appropriation debate. It offers a nuanced and compelling picture of the important role that intimacy plays in the lives of cultural groups, and proposes promising directions for future research. While I ultimately think that considerations of intimacy do not provide the proper normative ground for expressive appropriation claims, I look forward to this important aspect of the debate receiving future attention in the literature thanks to Nguyen and Strohl’s thoughtful work.

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   I follow I. M. Young (2011) in adopting a pluralistic understanding of oppression. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a more detail overview of these and other issues related to cultural appropriation, please see (Matthes 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Though it is worth noting that the idea of cultural property itself need not (and, I’ve argued, ought not) be understood in a depoliticized, universalist sense either (Matthes 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For a broader discussion of gendered behavioral control, see Manne (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For an interesting example of appropriation used as a tool to combat oppression, see Walsh and Lopes (2012). Even in this case, though, it’s not clear that the appropriation challenges the dominant group’s autonomy *per se*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Compare with the idea that we should repatriate material culture to former colonies independently of their claim to any particular item, but rather, as an act of recognition and redress for the undermining of their autonomy (Ypi 2013; Matthes 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)