

When is Cultural Appropriation Wrong?

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ABSTRACT

Cultural Appropriation is when cultural outsiders appropriate properties from a culture, and it is often considered morally objectionable particularly when the member of the majority group appropriates properties from the minority culture. In the first section of this paper, it will examine the view that any cultural appropriation is morally objectionable as long as the majority-minority relation is present. Next, it will consider the argument made by James Young that not all cultural appropriation are morally objectionable, at least in the field of art. Young points out the existence of the “Aesthetic Handicap Thesis” (AHT), or the biases held toward cultural outsiders that lead to the view that their creation involving cultural properties must be inferior to that of the cultural insiders. Young argues against the validity of AHT and justifies cultural appropriation in the case of “innovative appropriation”, or appropriation done in the way that creates new artistic value, by saying that the inappropriateness of the act could be counterbalanced by the new value created. While this argument can justify the works of great artists like Picasso and Shakespeare that involved cultural appropriation, the absence in clear definition of ‘innovative’ could allow any artwork in the future involving cultural appropriation to justify itself by arguing that its appropriation is an ‘innovative’ one. Finally, the paper will attempt to suggest a view that could complement such weakness in Young’s argument.

Keywords: aesthetics; bias; globalization impacts; nationality; stereotypes