Campus Activism: Cultural Appropriation

As I write this blog, I am wearing a shirt that I bought probably in middle school that sports a design that has been often described to me as “tribal print.” At my middle school, it was very popular, especially in leggings. The phrase “tribal print” didn’t mean anything to me then; it was just a term to describe a certain design my friends found at Target. Now it weighs much heavier on me and evokes a lot of what I have since discovered about cultural appropriation and what the term “tribe” means in America. I don’t remember where I got the shirt--probably Forever 21 or H&M. I don’t know who made this design, but I am reminded of the phrase “tribal print”--and how offensive, dismissive, and cringy it is--every time I wear it. The design is beautiful--and, as an artist, I love it. It reminds me vaguely of design-based artists like Lina Iris Viktor. I’m not sure the answer is to throw it away or stop wearing it. That seems very over simplistic. But I can’t educate myself on a mass produced design. I don’t even know if it qualifies as cultural appropriation. I’m just trying to make a point that “tribal print” should not be a trend.
Lina Iris Viktor is actually very relevant to this conversation right now. Viktor, a rising British/Liberian artist, sued Kendrick Lamar recently for appropriating her art in his music video for “All the Stars.” She didn’t want compensation, but filed the lawsuit on principle. She said, “Cultural appropriation is something that continually happens to African-American artists, and I want to make a stand.”

I’m just using the shirt to explain a larger phenomenon that I see a lot in college and have had extensive debates about. I was thrown off guard when I saw a white guy in the dining hall with cornrows. On Halloween, me and my friends ran into a group of white guys with “Bob Marley wigs” on. It’s one thing to dress up as Bob Marley and respect him as an incredible person, it’s another to do it in a way that mocks dreads (because you think it’s fun to sway them around and act stoned) and dismisses Rastafarian culture and Bob Marley himself by only dressing up because you associate Marley with weed.

Dreads, braids: What is cultural appropriation? Miley Cyrus? Post Malone? Katy Perry? I have a friend who is Barbadian who got in a heated dispute with a white girl who wore dreads. My friend said that that was cultural appropriation, the other girl made a claim that dreads were rooted in “goth culture.” I have a friend who is Nepalese, and she was explaining to me how frustrating it is to see people adopting the “Om” sign with no knowledge of what it means or where it comes from. She said it’s one thing to really respect it and agree with what it stands for, but a lot of people just think that it looks cool, Google what it means, and then get it tattooed or wear earrings with the sign of it. It’s similar to people who travel to countries with a large Buddhist presence and buy sculptures of the Buddha with no knowledge of who he was or what he stands for. I went to Thailand and Cambodia last summer with friends from Cambodia, and driving around Thailand you see signs that say “the Buddha is not decoration.” People coming from non-Buddhist backgrounds fail to realize how disrespectful it is to wear the Buddha on a shirt, get a tattoo of him, or put a Buddha statue on a coffee table as a centerpiece.
What does this mean on a college campus? A lot of people without exposure to other cultures don’t notice actions that take for granted, oversimplify, offend, or appropriate someone else’s culture. America in general has a problem with respecting and understanding other cultures and countries. One friend told me that she will never understand why people pronounce “Muslim” with a z in the middle—shows how little our country knows about Islam (which also does not have a z in it) if we routinely mispronounce it even though remains the center of topical debates. The same goes for a lot of mispronounced countries in the Middle East, such as Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq. We've been in Iraq since 2003 and our leaders still say “eye-rack” instead of “ee-rock.” It is so important that college students (and anyone) learn these things, so they change the trend of insensitivity and ignorance.

That being said, there are correct ways to support other cultures, such as buying art, like jewelry, directly from an artist supports them. There’s a difference between people mass producing souvenirs in Thailand and an individual producing meaningful, intentional art. The merging of cultures is a beautiful thing—that’s a huge part of America today, and totally where America is headed. America is a blend of cultures. One example of cultural celebration is how Rihanna wore a gorgeous dress to the Met Gala that was hand designed with cultural significance by Chinese fashion designer Guo Pei, and Rihanna used it to highlight the artist's talent so that this became a huge milestone in Pei's career. There are a lot of people that misunderstand cultural appropriation, and I’ve read plenty of angry rants (two of which I put below as counter arguments). Appropriating is taking something for your own use without the artists' permission. I come from two parents who are artists, and I am fully aware that imitation is often the greatest form of flattery--but not when the original artist is mocked, disregarded or ignored. Add violent historical contexts of oppression, imperialism, slavery and (with Native Americans) genocide in America, as well as contemporary disparities, and you begin to see why cultural appropriation is so important to talk about.

Further Reading:

- Counter arguments that I disagree with, but I think you have to read them to refute them:
  - https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/08/21/to-the-new-
• “What Does Cultural Appropriation Actually Mean?”
  ◦ A conversation between a writer for *The Atlantic* and a Cato Institute scholar

• “The Dos and Don'ts of Cultural Appropriation”
  ◦ An interesting article

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