

Understanding Cultural Appropriation

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1 Introduction

In the Spring of 2004 I was a part of a group of students working to challenge the rampant cultural appropriation at Hampshire College. We took as the object of our critique the many appropriative items for sale in the campus store: from kitschy hula dolls to journals featuring all your favorite icons from eastern religions; from do-it-yourself Buddhist altars to flags emblazoned with the likeness of Che Guevara. Our target however was more than just the store – by challenging the appropriative practices of the store we hoped to bring up the issues surrounding cultural appropriation to the rest of the campus. For on our left-leaning, liberal, mostly-white campus, appropriation is *de rigueur* – it appears to be the primary way that white students express not only their interest in other cultures and people but themselves as well.

We challenged appropriation on our campus because we felt it didn't deal with the meanings of these objects to the people who created them. We challenged it because we saw in the dreadlocks and the love of Buddhism white people's desire for knowledge and contact with other cultures that did nothing to challenge the systems of power that privilege white people over all other races and ethnicities. And we challenged it because we knew it was connected to so many other issues, that appropriation was more than a simple stylistic choice (as if stylistic choices are ever simple); that it was symptomatic of the systems that perpetuate inequality based on race and ethnicity in our society.

This paper has evolved out of a question raised by this last issue. What does cultural appropriation tell us about larger systems of power and privilege and the positions of the appropriator and the appropriated within these systems? However, my work is not primarily an analysis of the politics of appropriation. Though deeply embedded in the power invested in

appropriation, this paper is a structural and theoretical analysis of what cultural appropriation can tell us about whites and white culture. In doing so, I hope to provide an understanding of the various investments that whites have in appropriation with an eye towards creating more productive and useful challenges to both appropriation and other symptoms and systems of racial inequality.

Cultural appropriation has been defined as “the taking – from a culture that is not one’s own – of intellectual property, cultural expressions or artifacts, history and ways of knowledge” (Ziff and Rao 1). Cultural appropriation can take many forms – religions, artistic styles, stories, and any other elements of culture can all be appropriated. This paper is an examination of contemporary white U.S. cultural appropriation with a focus on white youth use of hip-hop culture. I am after some sense of the various investments that whites have in appropriation – what drives people to appropriate and the structures that influence appropriation.

Appropriation is a particularly compelling area because of the vast disconnect between the visibility of cultures of color in the U.S. and the power accorded people of color; despite the contemporary fascination with difference – different cultures, different people – the power structures in this country are still dominated by white men. The physical separation of whites from other people and cultures is also a key factor in appropriation. That is to say, cultures of color are present, even central, in spaces where people of color have never set foot. It is no secret that a black presence is central to U.S. culture – this has been true since the antebellum period when minstrel shows were the most popular form of entertainment (Lott 4). In the current moment, however, this presence is more visible than ever before. White people openly express cross-racial desire to such a degree that it is not uncommon to find white people wishing they

were of another race or ethnicity.

In this context, appropriation can be seen as a primary way that whites express their racial identity. To borrow a sentence from Eric Lott, “for an index of popular white racial feeling in the United States, one could do worse” (5) than cultural appropriation. It is one of the arguments of this paper, however, that appropriation is not solely a negotiation of race. Whites appropriate for many reasons, choosing specific cultures and taking specific elements from those cultures to respond to any number of anxieties, needs, and desires, be they economic, cultural, or racial. Of course appropriation is a highly racialized act – though economic factors may drive certain acts of appropriation, for instance, the race and ethnicity of the appropriator and appropriated cannot be ignored. Through examining appropriation, I am trying to get at how whites live their whiteness in the contemporary moment, with the understanding that whiteness in this context is not simply a matter of racial identity but one of economic, locational, and cultural identity.

This paper is a first step to uncovering the many and varied investments white people have in cultural appropriation. Rather than embarking on an in-depth analysis of a particular form of appropriation, I have instead chosen to identify themes which run through many different acts of appropriation. In doing so, I lay out a broad social framework which structures white appropriation; a framework which will hopefully serve as a starting point for future scholarly work on appropriation and a model for activists interested in understanding what motivates white appropriation.

This paper, then, is largely theoretical in intent. It is imperative, however, that we do not ignore the political questions surrounding appropriation. If we don’t start with a political understanding of appropriation we run the risk of imagining that the various investments whites have in appropriation exist outside of the power dynamics that make critiques of appropriation

necessary. In order to maintain the centrality of the politics of appropriation we must re-examine what we mean by the term ‘cultural appropriation’ itself.

The term cultural appropriation implies a definition similar to the one quoted above, used by the Writer’s Union of Canada: “the taking – from a culture that is not one’s own – of intellectual property, cultural expressions or artifacts, history and ways of knowledge.” This definition, however, suggests that all acts of cross-cultural taking are fundamentally similar – that we can somehow extract an act of taking from its context and evaluate it on its own or in relation to other similarly decontextualized acts. This definition, then, denies the reason that cultural appropriation is ever identified in the first place; naming certain acts cultural appropriation (and not, say, cultural emulation) is a strategic act designed “rais[e] questions about who controls and benefits from cultural resources” (Fung 18). Challenges to appropriation and other cultural acts are fundamentally attempts at problematizing the activities of dominant groups by locating them within structures of power; any discussion or critique of appropriation must begin with an acknowledgment of this aim. A formal definition of appropriation leaves out the central problematic of appropriation – the power dynamics that invest acts of cross-cultural taking – and treats appropriation “as if the act itself had some existence prior to its manifestations in a world that remains, despite globalism, the information highway, and civil rights movements, pitifully undemocratic in the distribution of . . . wealth” (Fusco 77).

A strategic definition of appropriation must also take into account the context which makes challenging appropriation a priority for people of color, namely inequality throughout the social, political, and economic spheres. Without this root inequality, acts of cross-cultural taking would be invested with very different meanings for all parties involved. As Fung writes, “If there were huge numbers of prospering . . . non-white artists producing culture in their own terms, a white

person's [appropriation] would be insignificant" (22). Critiques of appropriation must be very clear that the issue, though present in appropriation, is not appropriation itself but the larger structures of power and inequality of which appropriation is one articulation.

Without clarity of definition and intent, critiques of appropriation are likely to suffer the same fate as the issue of affirmative action. Affirmative action policies were developed initially as a way to address historically established inequities by giving those without the privileges of the dominant group a leg up. The contemporary popular understanding of the benefits of affirmative action policies, however, is cast in terms of 'diversity' – advocates of affirmative action promote racial and ethnic diversity as the positive result of the policies. In the shift from a power-driven discussion to a diversity-driven discussion, the critical issues that affirmative action policies were meant to address are left behind. Similarly, if power is not central to discussions of cultural appropriation the formal aspects of appropriation quickly become the center of focus.

Returning to the definition forwarded by the Writer's Union of Canada, we can see how the terms in which discussions of appropriation take place are largely determined by this definition. "The taking – from a culture that is not one's own – of intellectual property, cultural expressions or artifacts, history and ways of knowledge," as Ziff and Rao write, "bristles with uncertainty" (1). What do we mean by culture? What does it mean to take? Who defines what culture belongs to whom? Though interesting, these questions do not lead to the issues of power that are central to cultural appropriation. In order to take these issues into account, cultural appropriation must be discussed not as merely an "act of taking from a culture that is not one's own," but as an act by a person of a dominant group of using a culture that is not his or her own and which expresses and perpetuates inequality. Both of these definitions beg many questions, but the questions

brought up by the second strike at the core of the problematic of appropriation. Who is part of a dominant group? What inequality? How does the use of other cultures express and perpetuate this inequality? These are the critical questions that challenges to appropriation are meant to raise.

This paper is rooted in this definition of appropriation. I examine white U.S. appropriation of non-white and/or non-U.S. cultures not simply because white people hold a particular fascination for me, but because it is whites who are the dominant groups, whites who hold the most power, and whites who are largely responsible for the perpetuation of inequality. The character of my analysis is similarly rooted in power. In chapter three I discuss the ways in which whites imagine other cultures such that they are desirable – these images would take drastically different forms were the power relations in the country not what they are today.

Additionally, the power invested in simply being white has created the situation within which I can discuss whites as a group sharing common experiences, ideologies, and anxieties. George Lipsitz documents in *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* the many ways in which whites have actively fought to maintain the connection between whiteness and privilege. Through such means as housing policies and inconsistency in enforcement of desegregation, whites have continually assured that they will share similar experiences. And due to the economic privilege accorded whites, late-capitalist culture and economics have disproportionately benefited whites. This has led to a condition of physical and historical dislocation that, as I will discuss in chapter two, is central to understanding cultural appropriation.

My exploration of the implications of appropriation is split into three chapters, each having

its own goal and methodological approach. The questions posed by the three chapters are, respectively, what does appropriation reveal about white culture, what does appropriation reveal about how whites see other cultures, and what does appropriation reveal about how whites see culture itself? This tripartite approach is designed to locate individual investments within particular moments in the process of appropriation. Taken together, the three chapters will hopefully provide a clear model of appropriation on which to build future social and political theories of appropriation.

Though I use many kinds of appropriation as examples and evidence, I focus on the use of hip-hop culture by white youth. I chose hip-hop largely because of how the differences between the appropriation of hip-hop and other appropriations. Over the past twenty years, hip-hop's popularity has risen steadily; in 2002, sales of hip-hop albums were second in the country behind rock albums¹ – and the vast majority of the consumers of hip-hop are white.² The vibrancy of the culture means that the implications of peoples' appropriation of hip-hop is very different from those of the appropriation of other cultures.

Economics plays a central role in this paper; I repeatedly stress the economic factors which influence and create the motivation for appropriation. This is critical as it both situates my analysis of appropriation in the current moment and affirms the structural causes behind appropriation. Additionally, hip-hop's meteoric rise in popularity among whites has paralleled the expansion of globalization and neoliberalist policies in the U.S. and abroad. As the global economy has rapidly changed, it has drastically remapped the cultural landscape of the U.S. Hip-hop's popularity, as I demonstrate in chapter three, derives largely from the economic

1 RIAA 2002 consumer profile. Online at <http://www.riaa.com/news/marketingdata/pdf/2002consumerprofile.pdf>

2 I wasn't able to track down specific statistics – anecdotal evidence places the number of white consumers of hip-hop at anywhere from 70-85% of the total.

connection between blacks and whites. An examination of the appropriation of hip-hop has the potential to reveal much about how whites deal with and are affected by recent economic changes.

In the first chapter, I discuss the motor of appropriation – that is, what in white culture or the white imaginary drives whites to appropriate? I frame this discussion within the notion of lack – that is, a deficiency – perceived or actual – within white culture that appropriation is a response to. I discuss four areas of lack. The first is a felt lack of an authentic life experience – that is, many people feel that their experiences are not valid or ‘real.’ I suggest that there are many things that can lead to this feeling and I outline five factors that contribute to a sense of authenticity or inauthenticity: traditions and history, location, artistic production, narratives of success, and struggle. A deficiency in any one of these areas, I argue, can lead to a sense of inauthenticity. Appropriation, then, is often a way to fill in for a lack in one of these areas. The second lack I present is the lack of ways to express resistance or opposition to the dominant culture. I argue that people often appropriate either to express opposition – where appropriation itself acts as the signifier – or to gain access to a language within which to express opposition. The third lack I discuss is the lack of visible and viable alternatives to mass culture. The rapid incorporation of oppositional styles into mass culture leaves few alternative options. Having no alternatives within his or her experience, a person will turn to other cultures for a way out.

The final lack I present is a more structural lack within the system of mass culture, namely the lack of an active relationship to one’s culture. By active relationship I mean a relationship wherein the individual can feel he or she has agency within the institutions or activities that, with the rest of the people, constitute a culture. Mass culture, I argue, does not allow for this sort of

agency as the means of production are far removed from the individual. To explain this further I describe a number of cultures that exist in the U.S. that people create or join in order to have a productive relationship with culture, including hobby, fraternity, and fan cultures. People appropriate to imagine themselves part of an individually productive culture, that is, a culture in which everybody is or can be culturally productive.

In the second chapter I ask “How is an appropriated culture imagined?” Having established a sense of why people look beyond their own culture, I shift to examining why people appropriate particular cultures. Since appropriation is based on the lack of a personal connection to the culture, the way in which we imagine that culture is of primary importance to why we appropriate it. I begin my discussion of imagined cultures by unpacking the apparently unambivalent desire for people and cultures of color that is manifested in appropriation. Through comparing the current moment of rampant appropriation to the representation of black people and culture in antebellum blackface minstrelsy, I show that there has been a marked shift in the way cultures of color are presented. The ambivalence that largely defined the minstrel show, as demonstrated by David Roediger and Eric Lott, seems to be lacking in appropriation, where whites openly express their desire to be a part of the other culture. This desire largely defines how we imagine cultures that we appropriate from.

However, the negative qualities that created the ambivalence in minstrelsy are not entirely missing, but are confined to representations of people of color as distinct from cultures of color. In contemporary mass culture, I argue, there are two separate but overlapping spheres of representations of people of color – the culture sphere and the bodily sphere. This separation allows for seemingly contradictory ideas about a people and their culture to exist in the media and the popular imagination. The separation of a people from their culture is crucial to

understanding appropriation; I discuss this at length in chapter four.

I then present three qualities that construct a culture as desirable, and hence able to be appropriated. First, a culture must be perceived as, in some way, a culture of victim or of the oppressed. I present Deborah Root's compelling reading of Native American representations and appropriation to demonstrate one of the many ways that people from appropriated cultures are necessarily imagined as victims. I then discuss a number of different reasons appropriators would want to identify with a subaltern or victimized culture. Second, a culture must be imagined as fundamentally outside the appropriator's culture and context. This is constructed largely through imagining the culture as existing beyond the physical and temporal space of contemporary white culture. Additionally, what I call 'outside-ness' is constructed through the idea that the other culture has possibilities that are beyond the constraints of the daily life of the appropriator. Third, and finally, a culture must be imagined in a way that makes it consumable – that is, able to be appropriated without guilt or fear that you are doing something wrong. I then examine the various manifestations of these constructions at length.

In the third chapter, I embark on a structural analysis of the impact of mass culture on how people in late-capitalist society understand culture itself such that appropriation is possible. That is to say, appropriation relies on a conception of culture that is vastly different from a contemporary cultural studies understanding of culture as an entire way of life, a “social material process” (Williams, *Marxism* 140) that is constitutive of the human practice of living. The act of appropriation relies on the perception of culture as merely the products of this practice and not the practice itself. I present a theory of cultural fetishism to account for this, whereby people in late-capitalist society imagine that culture is something independent and removed from the process of its creation. I base this model on Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, and argue

that there is a parallel system of cultural production and fetishism at play in late-capitalist societies that comes from the separation of the practice and products of culture through the economics of mass culture. It is the fetishism of culture that separates a culture from a people in a way that allows appropriation to happen.

In the concluding chapter, I discuss some of the implications of my analysis of appropriation. I lay out the political limits of appropriation, stressing both the dislocation of identity inherent in appropriation and the problematic relationship between appropriation and the cultural system appropriators are ostensibly expressing dissatisfaction with or opposition to. I then present, somewhat hesitantly, my hopes for appropriation. Not that appropriation itself can become something positive, but that appropriation can, perhaps, be mined for its relatively genuine desire for contact free of domination.

2 Lack

To understand cultural appropriation, it is first necessary to answer the question, “What drives appropriation?” The answer to this lies in the culture of the appropriator, white culture. I begin my analysis of white culture with the idea that there is lack – perceived or actual – within white culture that the appropriation of other cultures is a response to. To some, this is evident. Whether defined as a lack of morals, a lack of communal values, or a lack of connection to the earth, there is no shortage of people looking to expound on what is missing in US culture. Lack is evidently perceived. I suggest that there is a cultural lack in the white U.S. That is not to say that white people in the U.S. have no culture, but that there are critical holes within their culture which individuals fill or compensate for by appropriating from other cultures.

My focus on lack comes from a critical analysis of my own experience as an appropriator, though I am sure that my story is not unique. As Simon Jones writes, white youth in Britain in the 50s turned to rock ‘n’ roll music “for its rebellious edge and its ability to express a particular kind of hedonistic ‘freedom’ unavailable in the dominant white culture” (xxiii). I present my narrative here as a starting point for a discussion of lack, but I will draw on it throughout this essay to illuminate and ground my analysis.

My two main appropriations were in the areas of graffiti and country music. My second year of college I began to get into the art and culture of graffiti. This was something I had no prior experience with save through a few white college friends who had been big into it in high school. My engagement with the practice was limited to drawings in a sketch book and the occasional fooling around with spray-cans in the back yard of my house. I bought a number of books and

magazines on graffiti and graffiti culture and read many forums and web pages on-line – I read up on can technique, ways to make different kinds of pens, and looked at photos of hundreds of different pieces and drawings. In graffiti I found many things that appealed to me. As an art form it appealed to the graphic designer in me because of its use of letter-forms. As political practice it was appealing because of its seemingly anti-capitalist nature – I was beginning to explore theories of anarchism and graffiti fit into a certain anarchistic anti-property ethos. As a culture it appealed to me because of its history, its apparent vibrancy, and its potential for crossing boundaries.

During my third year I began to listen to country music. This was similar to my appropriation of graffiti in that my relationship to country music was relatively limited: though I championed the cause of all country music, I actually listened to a very small number of country artists. Country music sparked my imagination for two reasons. One was that, due to my burgeoning political and racial consciousness, I had begun to find my appropriation of graffiti somewhat problematic. I was looking for a 'safe' (i.e. white) culture to ally myself with. The other was that country music is something that many people – including myself earlier in life – claim is the one kind of music they don't like. I saw my appreciation of it as a somewhat radical act against intolerance (of music).

My story has culminated this year with a move into a contemporary white youth culture based around 'indie' music. The culture is ostensibly based around the music of independent recording artists (hence 'indie') but has much farther-reaching implications including political leanings and aesthetic tastes. What struck me about my move into the culture was that it felt very similar to my involvement in both graffiti and country. I was initially as self-conscious about my musical choices and my clothes and about representing a culture I didn't feel was my own. What

finally made me consider the links to my other appropriations was when my involvement in the culture finally clicked; when I felt a legitimate part of the culture. The way I articulated this feeling was that I finally felt authentic, valid, 'real'. I felt (and feel to this day) that my life fit somewhere, belonged – not just in that I had found a community of like-minded individuals, but in a greater, even metaphysical, sense. Upon reflection, I realized that this sense of authenticity was so powerful because authenticity was what I had always felt I lacked, though I never articulated it as such, and that both graffiti culture and the culture associated with country music were appealing to me because I perceived them – and the people that lived them – as authentic.

Authenticity, then, is the first cultural lack I suggest is a motivating force behind cultural appropriation. I speak of authenticity not in terms of an authentic object – a real Picasso, a tribal mask that was used in a ritual, etc. – but the idea of an authentic lived experience. I am not suggesting there is a true authenticity of experience – the idea that there is some essential, unadulterated experience out there has, in cultural theory, been thoroughly debunked. Despite this, the notion of an authentic lived experience generally carries a lot of weight. In the arts, for instance, the lone genius is valued for his or her authentic, deep connection to reality – the inner psyche, universal truths, etc. I suggest that many examples of cultural appropriation can be read as an attempt to gain a sense of personal authenticity, to feel that one's own experience is valid and 'real'.

Authenticity doesn't get at the heart of the issue, however. Why is authenticity valued? And if authenticity is an imagined quality, what was I actually searching for? The desire for an authentic life experience is a stand-in for any number of things that people feel are lacking in their own culture. We can identify some of these by contrasting those cultures that I saw as authentic with the culture in which I was brought up. There are five main areas I can identify that

attracted me to these other cultures. First is tradition and history. Both graffiti and country music have identifiable histories with associated traditions. My own life, on the other hand, seemed cut off from any identifiable history – my family has roots in Denmark and Russia but no historical information has been passed on and we have very few traditions that stretch back beyond my parent's generation. Second is artistic production. While there are people with experiences similar to mine who make art, graffiti and country music both seemed to me to be embedded in cultures that thrive and rely on these artistic practices – cultures that have a holistic understanding of the place of art in life. Third is location – closely tied to the idea of history is a location in which histories are created. The culture in which I was raised was only loosely identified with the city I lived in, whereas graffiti seemed closely tied to “The City” and country music to “The South”³. Fourth is the presence of narratives of success, either individually or collectively defined. Within graffiti culture, success is defined by the notion of fame – the recognition of your work by a large number of fellow graffiti artists. Both the quality and the quantity of your work must be very high for fame to be achieved. The narrative of success within country music was, somewhat paradoxically, that of no success at all. To me, country music embraced the lack of possibilities for progress, individual or collective, and instead held that the highest form of expression came through playing the most beautiful articulation of pain to a bunch of drunks in some nameless bar.⁴ When I felt there were no possibilities for my future, country music’s narrative of ‘success,’ instead of providing possibilities, allowed me to cast the felt lack of possibilities in a positive – or at least ‘authentic’ – light. Fifth are struggle and

3 These are abstract concepts of location that I unpack later in the next chapter.

4 This was largely imagined, based on romantic ideas of the South and artistic expression. But I believe there is some truth to this perception of country music (or at least the country music that I listened to). The narratives within country music are largely about human-scale tragedy. The great stars die not in a flash of light, not for some purpose, but in slow and tragic ways. Elvis is the ultimate country music icon because he died fat and lonely on the toilet.

oppression. One of the main features of the cultures of both graffiti and country music, and many other oft-appropriated cultures, is their position as cultures of marginalized and oppressed groups: racially in the case of graffiti and economically in both graffiti and country music.

It is important to note here that these qualities which we see in other cultures are based in an image of the culture and are not the culture itself. In the next chapter I explore in depth both the ways in which other cultures are imagined and the division between imagined cultures and real cultures. For now it is enough to recognize that there is a perceived lack within white culture.

These five categories (history and tradition, artistic production, location, narratives of success, and struggle) are ones to which I will return as important factors in cultural appropriation. For now I'd like to focus on the way in which these lived experiences translate into a sense of authenticity or inauthenticity. Taken together, these lived experiences translate culturally into ways of understanding one's identity. Traditions, a shared history, and a sense of location together construct a context within which to understand oneself. The experience of struggle translates culturally into methods of rendering pain understandable. Feeling inauthentic is a function of a lack of methods for understanding the world and one's place within it; a deficiency in one of these categories can lead to a sense of inauthenticity.

My experience with pain bears this out. As a 'troubled' adolescent, I was always looking for artists (especially musicians) who expressed and dealt with the pain I was feeling. While there was something validating about Adam Duritz of the Counting Crows (a 90's band that started in my home town) singing "in beds in little rooms/in buildings in the middle of these lives which are completely meaningless," the southern drawl of Whiskeytown front man Ryan Adams singing "I was born with an abundance of inherited sadness" was much more affirming. The second validated my personal pain by placing it within a context of tradition and lending to it a

sense of inevitability – a sense, in other words, that the pain was not my fault, that it came from somewhere identifiable. Though I would have a hard time arguing that I was born into “inherited sadness” – my family has been very well off for a couple generations, we have no history of maladies such as alcoholism or disease, etc. – I could imagine myself within such a narrative which lent a sense of authenticity to my struggles and to my life more generally.

Two other lacks that are important motivating factors behind cultural appropriation are a lack of ways to express resistance or opposition to one's parent culture and a lack of visible and viable alternatives to that culture. We are given no codes with which to express opposition. The languages of resistance in our past have been either incorporated, as in the case of the 60s counter-culture, or largely forgotten, as in the case of the culture of unions and socialism in the 1930s. Contemporary resistance is often expressed through the appropriation of other cultures. People appropriate either to express opposition – where the appropriation itself is the articulation – or to gain access to a language within which to express opposition.

Deborah Root, in her essay “‘White Indians’: Appropriation and the Politics of Display” writes of her own experience as a hippie appropriating Native American symbols and culture. “Many of us appropriated the most superficial and hackneyed marks of [Native culture] – beads, feathers, fringe – as a means of displaying our opposition to our own cultural background and the flatness and hideous pastels of suburbia” (226). For Root, the mere display of these cultural artifacts was enough to communicate her feelings of opposition. This is evident in contemporary lefty-liberal activist circles, where such things as wearing dreadlocks or displaying Che Guevara-emblazoned paraphernalia functions as a signifier of a person's opposition to mass culture and capitalism.

Other people take this further, appropriating whole systems of signification to express their

opposition. Norman Mailer's "White Negro," or hipster, is a prime example of this. For Mailer, the hipster is the "American existentialist" (339), born out of the 20th century dangers of nuclear death on the one hand and conformity on the other. For the hipster, then, the only option is to "accept the terms of death, to live with death as immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society" (339). According to Mailer, the hipster finds his "source of Hip," his language and his inspiration, in "the Negro" because "[a]ny Negro who wishes to live must live with danger from his first day" (340). What Mailer's article suggests, beyond his argument that there is a fundamental, essential parallel between the hipster and "the Negro," is that in "the Negro" the hipster finds a way of living, a particularly apt articulation of his alienation.

The lack of viable and visible alternatives to mass culture is another important lack. The rapid incorporation of oppositional styles into mass culture makes alternative cultures fleeting at best. Having no alternatives within his or her experience, a person will turn to other cultures for a way out. If I had grown up in the 60s (as I had often wished in my youth) and had been exposed to a vibrant and visible oppositional culture, I would have quickly latched on. And if my close friends had been involved with 'indie' culture earlier, it is likely that I would have been as well. Instead, I looked to cultures that were outside my experience – to cultures that seemed beyond the reach and outside the experience of mass culture. This 'outside-ness' is, as I will argue in the next chapter, key to how appropriated cultures are imagined.

All the lacks I have brought up so far, though important to recognize on their own, have at their core the lack of an active relationship to culture. In the United States, culture is increasingly created and controlled by dislocated corporations. I am talking about not only artistic production, but about the traditions and ways of living we use to construct our understanding of the world –

all of it is presented to us through media. Our subjectivity is constructed through media. In this context, then, the consumer of mass culture has very little ability to produce his or her own culture. Access to the tools of mass-cultural creation is severely restricted. While there are local elements in any community, the bulk of raw material is defined and created by mass media. I don't mean to suggest a Frankfurt-school model of the function of mass media; I don't believe mass culture is designed to deaden our senses or distract us from a political reality; nor do I believe that mass culture is an entity that is entirely separate from its audience and that somehow determines that audience's entire world-view. However, if you identify with mass culture, your ability to assume an active relationship to that culture is severely limited.

Mass cultural forms have responded to the desire for an active role in the creation of culture by attempting to democratize – actually or in the popular imagination – access to the tools of cultural production. Examples of this abound – game shows, live audiences at tapings of sitcoms, home-video shows, and reality shows are all meant to suggest an active relationship to the production of the media that the viewer could potentially assume. Similarly, the current rise in visibility of independent movies can be read as a way of allowing for an imagined access to the productive tools of movies.

Beyond mass media, what does it mean to have an active relationship to one's culture? It means having cultural agency, being able to do something that carries cultural weight or meaning. In mass media, this is wholly contained within dislocated and inaccessible media. In other cultures, this can be anything from writing a piece of music to participating in an online forum. In fact, many cultural formations can be read as means to create a productive relationship to culture as a response to the lack of agency within mass culture. Each of these forms are different, work in different ways, and none is necessarily better than the other. Cultural

appropriation is such a form, though, as I will show, it has particular limitations that other productive forms do not.

The most obvious response to this lack of agency is the creation of a distinct alternate culture or subculture. Within a subculture everything from the fashion, music, language, and dance moves are constitutive of that culture – engaging in any of these is producing the culture of that subculture. There are more popular forms of cultural production, however, and it is these that I think are more interesting for my analysis.

One of the most widely practiced form of cultural production is the pursuit of hobbies. On the surface, a hobby is something fun to do that fills up spare time. However hobbyists are often connected through various means into a community of like-minded people. It is this community that becomes the culture of the hobby and within this culture any individual hobbyist has access to the full set of tools to actively participate in the culture. For instance, someone who collects stamps is likely subscribed to any number of magazines on stamp collecting and takes an active interest in the discussions around specific topics s/he finds compelling. This person is as interested in finding an especially rare stamp as anybody in the international community of stamp collectors and, were s/he to come across a particularly exciting find, might write to the magazines to tell others about it. Any field has a specialized language associated with it, and this stamp collector uses this language and continually updates his/her vocabulary accordingly. Being actively involved in this community is a form of cultural production.

Cultural production can also take the form of involvement in an institution and attendant traditions, as in the case of college fraternity culture. When you join a fraternity you become part of a tradition that is located both historically and geographically. You become responsible for upholding certain traditions and will undoubtedly be involved in the production of new traditions

and stories that get passed down after you leave. In many cases fraternities have an extensive alumni network that crosses both generations and universities – in this case joining a fraternity will give you a voice within this national network.

Fan culture is an interesting case of cultural production because it creates a productive relationship out of mass culture. United around a particular mass-cultural commodity (a TV show, a celebrity, a band), fans create extensive communities to discuss their obsession. The cultural production in this case can take the form of participating in online chats or going to themed conventions. Some fan cultures take this even further, producing complex systems of productive involvement in the culture, creating not just community but products. The most impressive of these cultures is fan fiction writing in which fans of particular TV shows write inventive stories that place the characters in new situations.

An active relationship to culture can even take the form of consumption itself. For instance, I consider listening to 'indie' music a culturally productive act. Since being independent is an important part of the culture, listening to the music places me as an agent helping to prove the viability of independent labels. Certain Western appreciation of tribal music takes a similar form. Most listeners of the music don't wish to actually become a full part of the culture being 'appreciated' – agency within the culture is usually impossible, even if the listener wanted it. Instead, the appreciation of the culture is itself the culturally productive act: listening to tribal music can be (imagined as) a way of taking part in the traditions of the tribe. Listening to the music can also be viewed as a productive act of recovery – the listener's active engagement with the culture serves to prevent the disappearance of its history.

Returning to authenticity for a moment, we can see that cultural production is a key quality in those cultures that are seen as authentic. Tradition, history, and artistic production, three of the

qualities I suggested help construct authenticity, all contribute to a group's cultural production. Certain forms of cultural appropriation are then methods of, in some way, becoming a part of this productive culture. This is especially true with hip-hop appropriation. Hip-hop is seen as a 'real' culture because of the perceived agency within the culture of members of the culture⁵. The white appropriator of hip-hop wears the clothes, listens to the music, and speaks the language to become a part of a culture which is highly productive.

What is notable here is that the sense of cultural agency is usually imagined. We can see this in hip-hop appropriation: the ability of white suburban youth to become active participants in the culture of inner-city black youth is highly questionable. The fact that there have been so few successful white rappers would seem to demonstrate the limits of white agency within the culture. Additionally, the production of hip-hop culture is very strongly located in a place that is definitely not suburban US. Despite all this, the sense of agency prevails (due in no small part to the accessibility of the means of production of rap music), suggesting that this imagined relationship to the culture can be as strong as any of the more concretely productive relationships detailed above. In this context, Eminem's success can be read as a reflection of the desire by white listeners of hip-hop to make the leap from an imagined to a real relationship with the production of hip-hop culture. Eminem's crossing of the race line in hip-hop removes a major barrier preventing whites from feeling full agency within hip-hop. The dynamics of this incomplete relationship and the implications for the limits of appropriation will be worked out further in chapter five.

The imagined agency within appropriated cultures is compounded by the fact that our

5 The fact that this is a perceived quality is very important. The imagined hip-hopper will be discussed at length in chapter three.

understanding of these cultures is based on an image of that culture constructed in accordance with dominant ideologies of race. The way in which appropriated cultures are understood and imagined is the topic of the next chapter.

3 The Appropriation of Imagined Cultures

Having established a sense of what drives cultural appropriation within the appropriator's culture, it remains to turn to the culture appropriated itself and ask, "Why this culture?" This seems a relatively straightforward question – the lacks I outlined in the previous section would appear to provide an easy answer to this question: people appropriate because the other cultures have tradition, location, a connection to cultural production, etc., which are lacking in the dominant culture. In some sense this is a valid answer – we can argue that the dominant white culture does not have a language with which to express opposition to either itself or broader social issues and that appropriated cultures do – and there are a great number of people concerned with analysing other cultures to understand the attraction. However there is much more at stake in the question "Why this culture?" because our conceptions of other cultures are not developed through intimate contact with the people of the cultures but are rather constructed through ideas about that culture in our society. What we appropriate are elements of cultures that are both real and imagined – that both exist in time and place and are constructs of our dominant culture. Answering the question "Why this culture?" then requires that we ask "How is this culture imagined?"

I must qualify this focus on the imagined culture so as not to evacuate questions of power from the discussion. This chapter is concerned with the relationship between white people and their perceptions of other cultures. It would be possible to imagine that this relationship exists solely on the plane of culture and as such does not derive from or affect power relations. As I pointed out in the introduction, however, the way in which other cultures are perceived by whites

would be drastically different were whites not the dominant group. Further more, because of the power that whites have, the characteristics that we ascribe to other groups have far-reaching implications. Everything from foreign policy to personal relationships are shaped by the assumptions that we have about others. Examining these assumptions is crucial for identifying the political implications of appropriation and other cultural acts.

The imagined appropriated culture is important because of the separation of, and lack of intimate contact between, the appropriator and appropriated's culture. As Simon Jones's *Black Culture, White Youth* suggests, intimate, regular contact with the appropriated culture leads to a very different articulation of the culture than the type seen in contemporary U.S. In studying white British youths' involvement in the black West Indian reggae culture in Birmingham⁶, Jones finds that the sort of stylistic emulation that is endemic to hip-hop appropriation was almost always an early, short-lived phase. "Most of the young whites to whom I spoke admitted to having passed through a 'phase' of overt affectation of black styles of dress and appearance in their earlier youth and adolescence" (143). However, "[s]uch appropriations tended to be part of a 'naïve' adolescent phase of affiliation" (146). Jones's subjects' relationship to West Indian culture was a negotiated one, born out of close contact with the black youth in question. After the white youth's initial identification period, most signs of stylistic influence were dropped (146).⁷ The fact that most white appropriators of hip-hop do not display a "highly selective appropriation" of the style is itself an indicator that intimate contact is not taking place. And the fact that Eminem does *not* dress in a characteristically black hip-hop style is an indication of the extent of his connection to a lived hip-hop culture.

6 Birmingham, U.K. The national context within which people appropriate is important. Comparing U.K. and U.S. white appropriation would reveal much about the differences between the popular perceptions of race in two countries.

7 Much white appropriation of hip-hop style seems to be stuck in the 'naïve' phase that Jones identifies. This is an interesting thread to follow, but one that may be better suited to psychoanalytic examination.

The extent to which the appropriator and appropriated's cultures are separate vary, but generally the type of intimate relationship Jones discusses does not happen in the U.S. and, in many cases, is not even possible. Jones's subjects negotiate their involvement in the West Indian scene through interactions with a large number of black friends (143). In U.S. white appropriation of Rastafari, however, the community of black youth engaged in that culture is usually not present for these sorts of friendships to form. This is even more so in the appropriation of traditional Native American culture – most whites in the U.S. have little or no contact with people who are of Native American descent, let alone the possibility of extensive engagement with the people and culture. Indeed, in many cases, due to the extent the oppression and marginalization visited upon Native Americans by the United States, Native Americans themselves may not have contact with what many would consider ‘their’ culture. Though a close relationship between white youth and blacks engaged in hip-hop is generally more possible than a close relationship between whites and Native Americans, even in situations where the possibility exists, the kind of intimacy required for a negotiated relationship with the culture doesn't usually happen.

Even in situations where there is some connection between whites and the people who live the culture the whites appropriate, understanding how the culture is imagined is critical. From the troubled history of race relations in the U.S., it should be evident that no matter the extent of contact between cultures, the myths and ideas we have are so embedded, so prevalent, as to require an interrogation of them. Understanding these myths means unpacking the ways in which other cultures have been represented in our society.

Other cultures have been made to carry the burden of explaining their own oppression and

have been imbued with any number of qualities. Through various media, other cultures have been represented in ways that ultimately serve the needs of the dominant culture. This is not a new process – it has been occurring for centuries – but I suggest that there is a new articulation of this process in most forms of cultural appropriation, an articulation that is liberal on the surface but reflects and perpetuates racist ideologies and that promises escape but ultimately leads nowhere.

This new articulation presents other cultures as wholly desirable. This is readily apparent in white people’s appropriation of hip-hop and Rastafari. People don the styles and speak the language of inner city black youth because there is something eminently desirable in the culture, not as an expression of contempt. Likewise, white kids lock their hair and listen to Reggae not because they feel some deep ambivalence about Rastafari, but because they have a genuine attraction to the styles and the music. This desire is taken to the extreme when whites identify as not-white – Root writes of her encounters with a number of whites who claimed to be “Native on the inside” (225), and countless white hip-hoppers consider themselves, or wish to be considered, ‘black on the inside.’ This desire is also evident in the various lacks I presented in the previous section: other cultures are desirable because they are perceived as holding the antidote to what is missing in white culture. The presentation and understanding of other cultures as desirable is markedly different from past constructions which have stressed undesirable qualities or qualities to be feared⁸.

Older methods of constructing other cultures and people have been predicated on ambivalent representations – people are presented as having both desirable and negative

8 I don’t mean to relegate negative representations of other cultures to the past. I suggest, however, that desire for other cultures is the primary determinant in representations of people of color in contemporary popular culture whereas ambivalent representations were previously the norm. My usage of ‘older’ and ‘newer’ to refer to these two forms of representation is meant to recognize this shift.

qualities. Throughout U.S. history, Native Americans have been represented as noble and athletic on the one hand and savage and dangerous on the other. Throughout the West, colonized native males are represented as having sexual prowess that is superior to Europeans' – a quality that is desired on the one hand (We want what he has. . .) and feared on the other (. . .as long as he doesn't come near our women). Native people are also represented as having a deeper, more 'real' connection to the earth than Westerners, yet with this raw connection comes animalistic, 'untamed' traits.⁹

When projected onto other cultures, these seemingly contradictory qualities have served a number of functions for whites. The various caricatures of blacks that were popular in the U.S. from the antebellum period up through the early 20th century each served a particular role and functioned largely to naturalize slavery. The Sambo character – simple, happy, endlessly dancing and playing music – suggested that blacks were perfectly happy as slaves or servants, not having the wits to do much else. Zip Coon – the northern dandy who wore ill-fitting finery and talked in a bastardized upper-class language – showed how silly the idea of a 'civilized' black person was, suggesting that their minds were not suited for freedom. And the Mammy character – the large black woman that happily took care of the house for the Master – painted black women as highly desexualized, quelling fears about miscegenation and cross-racial desire.¹⁰

The use of other cultures becomes much more complicated, however, as whites' own desires and needs become more complex and conflicting. A particularly instructive example of this can be found in the popular theater of blackface minstrelsy. Blackface performances were incredibly

9 “The primitive nobility of the aging tribesman or chief, and the native’s rhythmic grace, always contain both a nostalgia for an innocence lost forever to the civilised, and the threat of civilization being over-run or undermined by the recurrence of savagery, which is always lurking just below the surface; or by an untutored sexuality, threatening to ‘break out’” (Hall 22).

10 This rather simplified analysis of the caricatures comes from Marlon Riggs’s 1986 video *Ethnic Notions*. The function of these images was, like blackface, not nearly so straightforward and changed drastically over time.

popular throughout the antebellum period and up through the end of the 19th century. The shows usually consisted of a troupe of white performers dressed in rags and black makeup performing skits and songs ostensibly collected from the experiences of real slaves. These performances were not simply a replication and presentation of racist contempt. As Eric Lott writes in *Love and Theft*, “the minstrel show was less the incarnation of an age-old racism than an emergent social semantic figure highly responsive to the emotional demands and troubled fantasies of its audiences” (6). Though the minstrel show did serve explicitly racist purposes – blacks were presented as buffoons, simple and unfit for 'civilized' society, all the things that were present in caricatures of blacks – it was also used to negotiate whites' position in a rapidly changing U.S. As the country was becoming industrialized, whites were forced to relocate to the cities and conform to jobs that were highly structured and hierarchical. David Roediger argues that the minstrel show allowed white viewers to negotiate their desires for the freedom of a “preindustrial permissiveness” (107) and the pressures of industrialization. Blackface characters were often portrayed enjoying preindustrial pastimes such as hunting, eating corn, and fishing. Projecting this desire onto blacks allowed white viewers to both experience – through viewing – and condemn – through the projection onto an 'inferior' group – the desire at the same time. This ultimately served to naturalize industrialization – whites ended up strongly identifying as not-black and hence not-preindustrial (116-119).

The way in which restrictions are placed on whites is an important factor that helps define the function of minstrelsy and many other representations and uses of other cultures and people in white society. At any particular moment, desires that are taboo are invariably projected onto other cultures precisely because that desire is not allowed within white culture. Both of the authors who's work on minstrelsy I cited stress this ambivalent and conflicting nature of the

representations.

In contemporary appropriation however, this ambivalence appears to be absent. Cultures we appropriate from are imagined as more 'real', more spiritual, and more expressive than our own. While these are definitely projected qualities, the condemnation of the people onto whom we project has gone missing. I don't mean to suggest that the attribution of these qualities to people of color is a neutral process. The characterization of people in these ways is fundamentally objectifying and leaves no room for complex, realistic identities. Additionally, any conception of other cultures that suggests an 'authentic' connection to deep human abilities or emotions is rooted in notions of the 'primitive' (the dominant culture lacks this connection because of the 'constraints' of civilization), hardly a neutral concept (Desmond 39; Lipsitz 118-123). However, in white society, most of the qualities that are attributed to people of color are cast in a positive light. Qualities imputed to other cultures such as spirituality, expressiveness, and athletic ability have become more visible than explicitly negative qualities.

Despite the apparent primacy of “positive” representations of other cultures in popular media, positive representations of people of color themselves are not the most prevalent. There is an important distinction to be made between how a culture is imagined and how a group of people is represented; I suggest that in contemporary culture, the old ambivalence is still present, but has been separated into two spheres – the cultural and what you might call the bodily.

In my discussion of blackface I conflated representations of a people and their culture with the way in which that culture is imagined. This seems like an acceptable slip – don't we, after all, construct our image of a people and their culture through representation? The key difference is that contemporary representations construct an imagined culture as a location that is mostly separate, or that can be separated, from the actual people who live that culture. The culture and

people who live that culture occupy two separate but overlapping imagined spheres, both of which are constructed somewhat autonomously. In the imagined hip-hop, for instance, these two spheres are hip-hop culture and black people. In the popular media, hip-hop consists of, among other things, its artistic formations, fashion, language, and traditions and is lived by black hip-hopppers. The category “black people”, on the other hand, consists of all black bodies. The two spheres are often constructed through different media forms. On TV, for instance, the category “hip-hop” is represented in music videos and music-related shows¹¹, while the category of “black people” is represented in news programming, dramatic fiction, and sitcoms – forms that in some way are meant to represent ‘everyday’ black people. This separation allows for seemingly contradictory ideas about hip-hop and black people to exist in the media and the popular imagination: “black people” can be seen as undeserving of social welfare programs while we bemoan the hardship that rappers go through growing up.¹² To put it another way, the ‘black people’ we appropriate from are not the black people we see on the street.

An imagined appropriated culture must be fundamentally desirable. Someone who appropriates a culture must in some way want to enter into that culture's imagined narrative. I have already established one facet of the desirability of a culture: anything that the appropriator's culture is seen to lack is easily imagined in another. The “positive” qualities imagined in people of color is a perfect example of this – rhythm, expressiveness, and athleticism are all desirable qualities that, when projected onto a culture make that culture desirable. But constructing desirability is more complex. I suggest that, at the current moment, there are three qualities

11 Such as MTV's “Cribs,” a show that tours celebrities' houses.

12 The process of separating a culture from a people is heavily influenced by late capitalism's emphasis on commodities, something that I take up in depth in the next chapter.

which are present in appropriated cultures that together construct desirability. The culture must be perceived as a victim, must be in some fundamental way outside of the appropriator's culture, and must be easily consumed.

I have yet to find an oft-appropriated culture that is not imagined as or is actually the victim of some form of oppression. This marginalized position of a culture sets up the people of that culture as victims. Rastafari, hip-hop, and Native American culture are all understood in the popular imagination as victims of various forms of oppression such as poverty and colonization.¹³ Hip-hop is presented as firmly embedded in economic struggle. Victims of failed economic policies, blacks in the South Bronx created new art forms which became hip-hop. And today, the authenticity of a rapper is sealed by a tough-luck story of growing up in the inner city. Deborah Root provides a compelling insight into the victimization trope present in representations of Native Americans. She writes that Native Americans are continually represented “as those who are by definition victims of an inevitable historical fate, executed and enforced by the American government, the army, and the swarms of settlers” (227). Native Americans are presented as heroic in the face of progress precisely because of the inevitability of their fate – their bravery and sacrifice for survival is akin to martyrdom. Similarly, the appreciation of “world music,” with its focus on primitive or tribal music has at its core an understanding of the cultures as victims – perhaps potential victims – of 'progress' or 'civilization'. The ‘original’ or ‘authentic’ (before the influence of the West) sound is prized because of its inevitable disappearance. Indeed any culture that is imagined as wholly in the past or in some way pre-modern has the potential to be used for the victimization trope. The appropriation of Zen Buddhism, with its imagined monastic simplicity, leans heavily on this

¹³ I don't mean to suggest that these people and cultures aren't *actually* oppressed, but again the stress here is on how they are imagined.

concept as does the appreciation of tribal music.

Victimhood is a desirable quality because it is a way of displacing one's own pain, locating the source of the pain in an outside and knowable force. In so far as white and mass culture do not provide adequate frameworks within which to understand personal pain, identifying with a culture that is seen as victimized by a particular force – be it economics, racism, progress, etc. – is a way to understand this pain by locating the cause of it. It is interesting to note that contemporary white U.S. culture is the inheritor of the legacies of the people, nations, and cultures responsible for much of the oppression that these cultures suffered. Identifying with the cultures can be a way of both assuaging the guilt of the past and declaring one's distance from that past.¹⁴

For an appropriated culture to be desirable it must be imagined as wholly outside the appropriator's culture – beyond what is possible for and available to the appropriator. Identifying this quality seems somewhat redundant at first. An outside-ness seems to be a prerequisite for the act of appropriation – we don't call it cultural appropriation if someone uses their own culture. The particular ways in which this quality is constructed prove crucial, however, to understanding why a particular culture is appropriated.

A primary way cultures are constructed as outside of the constraints of white culture and life is through dislocation in time, space, or both. In other words, other cultures are often imagined as existing beyond the physical and temporal space of contemporary white culture. As Root points out, this is a primary motivating factor behind Native American appropriation – people appropriate *because* Native American culture is seen as destroyed, not-present. The culture of

14 This trope is described by Renato Rosaldo as “imperial nostalgia”: “nostalgia, often found under imperialism, where people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed” (qtd. in hooks 25)

Rastafari is imagined as firmly located in Jamaica and it could be argued that Rastafari is imagined as occupying a specific cultural moment based around the rise in fame and death of Bob Marley. Hip-hop's location is the imagined inner-city – less a specific place than a mythic and ever expanding 'urban' space, entirely foreign to the appropriator's experience. Even appropriators who live in major cities may rely on this construction – there is always some place white people 'just don't go', someplace that is outside, beyond the experience of white people in general.

Beyond a specific outside location – the 'inner-city,' Jamaica – location itself is, in many ways seen as outside contemporary white culture. The disconnection of whites from a particular place – through homogenized suburbs, the rapid movement of families across the nation, etc. – has led to a desire for identification with a bounded location. This is very similar to one of the functions of blackface discussed above. Whereas antebellum audiences were frustrated with their relocation to the cities, we are frustrated with our relocation to nowhere in particular; whereas blackface was used to express a desire for the rural, appropriation is often used to express the desire for anything bounded and located.

The roots of the desire for an 'outside' culture lie in the economics and culture of late-capitalism. Homogenization and the expansion of corporations prove all-consuming and their affects are in plain view: increased sprawl, cookie-cutter malls, and centralized media. While people do their best to make spaces of meaning, there is a deep sense that white, late-capitalist culture has nowhere to go. The increasing powerlessness to affect one's own culture is paralleled by a powerlessness to halt the progress of both the cultural and economic affects of this system. People appropriate cultures imagined outside of this system because they see no options within it; other people and cultures are imagined having qualities that seem to be *unable* to exist within

the system. An appropriated culture *must* be outside because if it is seen as a part of the system it would be homogenized, incorporated, and spit out.

Hip-hop's popularity as a lifestyle appropriation is paradoxically due to both this 'outsideness' and a sort of 'inside-ness'. While culturally outside of the realm of possibility for the appropriator, and beyond the reaches of certain elements of the system – homogenization, mass culture – hip-hop is connected to the lives of white appropriators in certain ways. The imagined 'inner city' is far far away from the strip malls and 8-lane roads of suburban U.S., but it is in the U.S., and is understood as located somewhere accessible. Los Angeles and New York contain the imagined inner-city, but are locatable in a way that Native American land and Jamaica in the 70s are not.

The inside-outside duality in hip-hop is based largely in economics. Hip-hop is imagined as existing at two the extremes of wealth, very poor and extremely wealthy. As I mentioned above, the mythology of hip-hop is based in narratives of poverty, yet the image of contemporary hip-hop is laden with million-dollar jewelry and tricked-out SUVs. Both of these extremes are outside of the experience of most whites yet are connected to whites through the (imagined) class mobility allowed within the U.S. economic system. This means that a white middle-class appropriator can imagine both attaining wealth and falling into poverty, and can in fact play out the prototypical hip-hop narrative – from nothing to everything – albeit on a much narrower band of the economic spectrum. Hip-hop is then imagined as a way of avoiding the shortcomings and pitfalls of the economic and cultural system that most whites live while still acknowledging the reality of that system.

Another key factor in constructing a sense of 'outside' is the way in which a culture is

imagined as having possibilities that are beyond the constraints of daily life as defined by the late-capitalist system. For instance, the culture of 'eastern religion and spirituality' that is present in Buddhist appropriation is imagined as at peace with itself in a way that late-capitalism could never be. Similarly Native American culture is valued for its (imagined or real) holistic approach to living. In both of these cases, people imagine that these cultures are defined in relation to spirituality, as opposed to the money-based culture of late-capitalism. The freedoms of hip-hop culture are constructed through music videos and the images of black youth at play. Hip-hop as an imagined way of life includes rapping, partying, and playing basketball. Rarely are black youth shown doing such mundane activities as working, studying, or going to movies.

This is where the attraction to the success narratives that I mentioned in the previous chapter comes from. All appropriated cultures have narratives of success. Some of these are straightforward and are somewhat legitimately part of the culture: success in hip-hop is achieved through wealth; in Buddhism, enlightenment is the goal. There are also collective success narratives, such as in Reggae, where a somewhat abstract notion of 'liberation' is what the appropriator has to look forward to or work for. Other narratives are less apparent, but no less powerful to the appropriator. The narrative in something like Native American appropriation is based on the position of Native Americans as inherently opposed to capitalist progress – 'success' is imagined as the creation of a society in which the spiritual and ecological values of Native American culture are of primary importance. These narratives are highly contingent and are thus very limited. I explore these limits further in chapter five.

Finally, a culture must be imagined in a way that makes it consumable. The culture must be stripped of anything that would make appropriating it too conflicting. 'Outside-ness' is a big

factor: if the culture is not connected to us at all, we can imagine that restrictions don't apply to us and feel comfortable negotiating or ignoring contradictions at will. For instance, hip-hop culture relies heavily on the notion of individual authenticity – that is, a rapper gains a lot of credibility if he or she is from the streets. As a white rapper, Eminem had to work a lot harder to authenticate himself – authenticity was achieved through continuous press on his background, the presence of his crew of all black men, and his close ties to rapper/producer Dr. Dre. This focus on authenticity seems to be a way for the hip-hop community to draw boundaries around who can and can't speak for it and within it. Because of this boundary, whites have to re-imagine the issue of authenticity to allow for their involvement with the culture. This is similar to the re-imagining of economic themes in hip-hop to match the appropriator's own economic situation – authenticity becomes a relative term to distinguish between the 'real' appropriators and the 'wannabes.' This is possible only because of the imagined disconnect between the white appropriator's context and hip-hop. If these cultures were seen as connected, authenticity within hip-hop would be understood as excluding whites. Instead, the authentic/not authentic question is seen as merely a trope to be applied to the appropriator's context at will.

Ultimately, the consumability of a culture is dependent on the separation of that culture from the people who create or created it. That is, the idea of culture itself needs to be imagined in a way that makes appropriation possible – culture needs to be seen as fundamentally an objective quality and not a contextually bound subjective quality or process. The process by which contemporary late-capitalism constructs this particular notion of culture is the topic of the next chapter.

4 Cultural Fetishism

In this chapter I present a particular conception of culture that is constructed through the economics of late-capitalism and that is fundamental to understanding contemporary cultural appropriation. I base this analysis on Marx's idea of commodity fetishism, suggesting that there is a parallel process, which I call cultural fetishism, through which culture is seen as only a product of human practice and not as the practice itself.

This model came from my desire to understand one of the primary responses white people have to challenges to appropriation from people of color. In general, I have found that white folks' responses demonstrate a deep-seated inability to understand people of color's relationship to their culture. This is partially a matter of power inequality – cultures of marginalized people are often formed as necessary responses to the lack of power that the people have whereas white people's cultures are generally not. Because of this, whites' investment in their culture is categorically different than marginalized groups'. There are, however, important structural difference between the way most whites and other groups are able to relate to culture. I suggest that culture itself is structured through mass media and late-capitalism in such a way that whites see culture as something external to themselves, and as such cannot understand the position of people for whom culture is not external but is a fundamental part of their lives and identity.

The idea of commodity fetishism, as I will demonstrate, has many similarities to the way late-capitalist societies view the idea of culture. These similarities between commodities and culture begin with Marx's definition of the commodity, which is useful to present here in full:

The commodity is, first of all, an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind. The nature of these needs, whether they arise, for example, from the stomach, or the imagination, makes no difference. Nor does it matter here how the thing satisfies man's need, whether directly as a means of subsistence, i.e. an object of consumption, or indirectly as a means of production. (125)

Already there are obvious parallels to the appropriator's idea of culture. As I have shown in the previous chapters, other cultures are (a) seen as external, and (b) seen to have qualities that are used to "satisfy human needs of whatever kind." This idea of culture is, however, far different from current theories of culture which place emphasis on culture as an entire process of living. To unpack the specifics of the appropriator's view of culture, I will first present Marx's theory of commodity fetishism and then draw parallels to the structure of culture in contemporary late-capitalist society.

Marx begins his discussion of commodity fetishism by noting what he calls the "mysterious character of the commodity-form" (164). He then uncovers the process by which the commodity takes on this 'mysterious character,' the process by which commodities come to be valued not as products of labor, but as objects possessing inherent value beyond their value as useful things. This extra value comes from the particular way in which commodities are brought into a system of exchange whereby all commodities are valued in relation to each other.

The first step of this process is the abstraction of labor. In order for all commodities to take on a universal, exchangeable value, the disparate forms of labor that it take to create each commodity are valued in relation to each other. This is achieved by the abstraction of actual labor into labor-power – the aggregate of all human labor in a society, composed of "innumerable individual units of labor-power" (129). By relating individual labor to an abstract valuation of the sum total of *all* labor, individual labor can be valued in relation to all other

labor. It is this abstract valuation of labor that determines the value of a commodity: “What exclusively determines the magnitude of the value of any article is therefore the amount of labour socially necessary, or the labour-time socially necessary for its production” (129).

However, it is only in exchange – as commodities – that this abstraction becomes meaningful. As Marx writes, “Since the producers do not come into social contact until they exchange the products of their labour, the specific social characteristics of their private labours appear only within this exchange” (165). It is here that the ‘mysterious character’ of commodities becomes manifest. Because the value of labor appears only in commodities, and that value is in fact an abstract valuation of labor, we misrecognize the value as something inherent to the commodity itself. Value, what we see as “objective characteristics of products of labour themselves,” is actually a reflection of “the social characteristics of men’s own labour” (164-165). This is what Marx calls commodity fetishism – the viewing, by people, of commodities, “products of [people’s] hands,” as autonomous objects “endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race” (165).

To begin a parallel analysis of the perception of culture in late-capitalist society, it is first necessary to establish an understanding of culture itself. Raymond Williams usefully defines culture as a (or perhaps the) “human constitutive process” (1977 20). That is, the process by which and through which human identity and social order is produced and communicated. This definition combines two elements which have been traditionally separated in the academic and popular understanding of culture, and which, as I will demonstrate, are actually separated in late-capitalist society. These two elements are, roughly, the process of culture and the products of culture. Process is understood as the creation and nature of social relations in a society;

economic factors and the influence of various institutions on social relations both play a role. The products of a culture are understood as the specific forms that a society takes or produces, for instance rituals and artistic formations – the physical manifestations of a culture.

Identifying culture as a ‘human constitutive process’ embeds both of these elements within each other, recognizing that the products of culture are inherent to the process of culture, and vice versa. This goes beyond a simple productive relationship from the one to the other. Cultural products are not simply necessary creations of the cultural process, nor are they simply reflections of it. That is, “‘cultural production’ . . . [is] not simply derived from an otherwise constituted social order but [is itself a] major elemen[t] in its constitution” (Williams, *Culture* 12).

The term ‘product’ is therefore somewhat misleading in this definition, as it implies a simple producer-product relationship, when in fact the positions of producer and product are mutually constitutive: the product is actively producing producers and vice versa. Additionally, the word ‘product’ connotes the creation of objects, whereas what we are discussing are both objects and practices (e.g. both the commodities and services that exist in contemporary U.S. society are products of the late-capitalist system, yet we traditionally think of only commodities as products). A more precise and useful articulation of this idea can be found in the idea of a ‘signifying system,’ defined as a set of signs and codes “through which necessarily (though among other means) a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored” (Williams, *Culture* 13). A signifying system is therefore fundamental to the fabric of a culture, and includes the entirety of the formal aspects of that culture.

In contemporary late-capitalist society, these two elements – the process and signifying system of culture – have, as I will show, apparently been disconnected, stretched almost to the

breaking point between the local and the mass. In our society, the signifying systems which individuals and communities use are overdetermined by the economics of late-capitalism manifest in national and multi-national corporations. Through controlling both the means of production and distribution of cultural practices and products, these corporations provide, almost exclusively, the language and methods through which we ‘communicate, reproduce, experience and explore’ our society.

This is readily apparent in the creation and distribution of media, but happens in other, less obvious ways as well. Radio, print, and TV are, thanks to extensive media consolidation, becoming less and less localized and more and more homogenized. The drive to increase profits has resulted in the ‘streamlining’ of media production; radio and TV programming and print content are regularly produced in centralized locations and distributed across the country through local outlets. This is the ‘mass’ in mass culture – a single image, article, or song distributed to millions of people. It is these images and ideas that are the primary determinants of our cultural lexicon – the myths, narratives, and ideologies that we use to make sense of the world.

The objects we use in our daily lives, our cultural process, are almost entirely determined by corporations as well. The styles of clothes we wear, the food we eat, and the way we furnish our homes are determined by what products these corporations choose to sell. In other words, all the things that carry meaning, that are made to signify, are chosen and created elsewhere.

Cultural practices are also circumscribed *en masse* by corporations. As corporate retail and service businesses set up shop in communities, they bring to bear the full power of the corporation to oust local businesses. Because of this, local cultural practices become defined by the not-local corporation. All forms of shopping, eating habits, and entertainment become determined by how individual corporations choose to present the grocery stores, restaurants, and

music stores. Movie theaters are a particularly striking example of the corporate control of images and practices. In many communities, going to the movies is a primary form of communal entertainment. Movie theaters are, more often than not, owned by large corporations, as are the production companies that produce the movies shown. Going to the movies is then an experience the terms of which are entirely determined by dislocated corporations.

If the ‘products’ of culture, the signifying system, exist primarily on a mass level, the process, the daily communal creation of meaning and social relations, takes place on the local level¹⁵. As John Fiske writes, “The vitality of the subordinated groups that . . . constitute the people is to be found in the ways of using, not in what is used” (15). That is to say, locally, people and communities ‘make meaning’ out of what they have, no matter where it comes from. This activity is the process element of culture. Within this local process, however, the signifying system is, as I have shown, largely determined by the not-local. Therefore, the presence of an entire ‘human constitutive process’ on the local level is questionable, if we are to follow the definition of the entire process of culture as including at once both process and product. The signifying system is not created ‘at once’ with the process. To discover the entirety of the relationship between the signifying system and the process of culture, we have to widen our focus to take in both the mass and the local.

This is perhaps the most important condition of late-capitalist, market economy culture: the fact that the entirety of the cultural process is stretched between the local and the mass. This, as I will show, is a precondition for the appropriation of cultures and is an impediment to the development of a culturally and politically located subjectivity in those most heavily affected by

15 This division is much more complicated than I am suggesting here. Local social relations are largely circumscribed by economic factors, determined both locally and by corporations. For instance, the way in which a particular community ‘makes meaning’ with mass-cultural goods will be affected by the class position of the community, the type of labor that most people are engaged in, etc. When I speak of the process of culture, then, I am referring to the agency of the individual and the community within all these imposed structures.

this division – most notably whites. First, however, I wish to develop this concept of cultural fetishism, which requires examining the way in which the local and the mass *are* connected, for the two do not live separate lives, nor does the mass simply determine the boundaries of the local.

The connection between the local and the mass, from the first to the second, takes the form of the flow of capital. Corporations determine what they will create – whether it is a business, a TV show, or a product – based on the promise that they will profit from the decision. This profit can come from many places, though it (usually) begins in the purchasing choices of the consumers, of people on the local level. The basic principle is that if I and enough of my friends buy enough of a particular brand of clothing from the local Wal-Mart, that store will stock more of that brand on the hopes that we will buy more. Similarly, if my friends and I all begin to watch a particular TV show regularly, the network will order more episodes, hoping that we continue watching the show, so that advertising time can be sold to other companies, on the hopes that we will then buy their products. As you can see, the link between the local and the mass is neither simple nor direct. The link is further complicated by the fluidity of markets, international trade, the whims of those who hold the power to create cultural products, and any number of other influences on the corporations involved.

Because of this convoluted process, individuals in local communities do not see how they are involved in the creation of the mass cultural products, and as such do not understand themselves as a constitutive part of the complete cultural process. It is here that the fetishism takes place. We see the cultural products in our system not as part of a complete structure of culture, but instead as somehow meaningful on their own.

Zizek's analysis of commodity fetishism provides a useful way of approaching this. He

writes, “what is really a structural effect, an effect of the network of relations between elements, appears as an immediate property of one of the elements, as if this property also belongs to it outside its relation with other elements” (24). Because we don’t see how we create cultural products, we imagine that cultural products come into being *as* cultural products and not as a result of the “effect of the network of relations between elements.” We therefore imagine that the cultural products have meaning outside that which is constructed through this complex social network. This is what Žižek calls the “fetishistic misrecognition” (25) – the confusion of the relationship between those that live culture (us) and the forms that culture takes (objects and practices), imagining that these forms spring into being already of themselves and not as a result of our own cultural labor.

Because we are not aware of the greater structure of culture, of all the elements, but only of the products of culture, we think that culture is *not* in fact an entire structure at all, but only the forms of it. This is the fundamental property of what I call cultural fetishism. In late-capitalist culture, we see culture itself not as an entire process, but merely as its formal qualities. As Marx writes,

The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves . . . Hence it also reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers. (165)

And so it is with culture. In the cultural form the social character of the entirety of culture appears to us as an objective character of that form. The entirety of the social relation of culture then appears to exist not between people, but between forms. Lukacs comments on this passage from Marx, noting that “what is of central importance here is that because of this situation a man's own activity, his own labour becomes something objective and independent of him,

something that controls him” (86-87). Our cultural process, or labor, becomes “something objective and independent” of us in the form of cultural products. This leads us to misrecognize the forms of culture as culture itself. What we have is the re-emergence of an Arnoldian view of culture but transformed in an important way: ‘the best that has been thought and said’ has been shifted to include *all* that has been thought and said.¹⁶

This process of cultural fetishism is, fundamentally, the reification of culture – the process by which subjective activity becomes objective and independent. In this case, a complete social process becomes a set of objective objects and practices; the entirety of social relations of a people become their clothes, their rituals, their music. Reification requires, as Lukacs writes, “that a society should learn to satisfy all its needs in terms of commodity exchange” (91). As I have shown, through the workings of the mass-cultural system all cultural products and practices have become measured by their potential to create profit. Culture itself has become reified.

It is this view of culture on which cultural appropriation rests. For in order to imagine taking a culture from a people, you have to imagine that culture is itself something separate from the people and from the process of creation in which the people engage – you have to imagine that their culture is merely formal. Cultural appropriation is not the living of the process of another culture, but the adoption of the forms of that process – it would in fact be impossible to live the other culture, embedded as it is in the particular location and community of its creation. Of course we imagine that other cultures are more integral than our own. As I demonstrated in the previous chapters, we appropriate cultures which we imagine are fundamentally more wholly constitutive, cultures which seem to be more integral to people’s lives. However, in

¹⁶ Arnold’s conception of culture “seeks to do away with classes; to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere; to make all men live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light” (qtd. in West 21). Ported over to a cultural fetishism model of culture, Arnold’s intentions with this definition suggest an interesting parallel: in the global spread of late-capitalism, the objects of (fetishized) culture are rapidly becoming “current everywhere.”

appropriating the culture through its forms we are still conflating these forms with the entirety of the culture – its people, practices, social structures, ideologies, etc.

In fact, the act of appropriation is more than a simple misrecognition. Appropriation serves the needs of the process of reification – satisfying all needs in a society in terms of commodity exchange – by imposing our reified conception of culture onto other cultures and people. In our desire to use and know other cultures through their cultural forms, the two become one, culture becomes form, and the commodity-form gains one more articulation. In this context, it is questionable whether any involvement with other cultures can be untainted by reifications, with the possible exception of extended personal, intimate contact with many people of a culture.

5 Conclusion

In this paper I have explored three locations in the process of appropriation: the appropriator, the (imagined) appropriated, and the structure on which the appropriator stands. Ultimately, these locations cannot be separated – they are by definition articulated through the appropriator. By examining appropriation I have located the appropriator within many structures integral to late-capitalist society – economics, mass media, and mobility. Appropriation, as I have shown, is often as much a response to these structures as an effect of them. But what are the implications for the appropriator him or herself? How does appropriation affect the appropriator? Specifically, if we are to re-situate the appropriator as constituted through power, what are the limits of appropriation, the implications of appropriation for productive political change?

The most obvious limit to cultural appropriation is the inability of the appropriator to actually take part in the culture. Whatever the culture appropriated, the dislocation of that culture, the position of that culture ‘outside’ of the appropriator’s experience, whether temporal, physical, or both, prevents full participation. This inability is compacted by the focus on imagined cultures, as discussed in chapter three. If the appropriated culture does not actually exist in the way the appropriator imagines, participation is completely illusory.

But what of it? What does it matter if the appropriator can or cannot take part in the culture? The useful implications of appropriation lie not in the success or failure of the act, but in how it frames issues of identity, location, and resistance: cultural appropriation is fundamentally a dislocation of these issues. Whatever the degree of the appropriation – complete lifestyle, fashion, musical preference, etc. – the emphasis is on the not-present, the not-local. This has

important implications for the ability of whites to imagine their own agency to affect new cultural and social formations. Appropriation is a fundamentally compensatory act, an act that treats the symptoms of a problem but not the roots. Ultimately, the focus on the cultural as compensation feeds back into the very system that creates the problems – late-capitalist media and economics quickly adapt to new cultural needs, feeding new forms of ‘resistance’ back whites.

As I have shown, appropriation locates any number of desirable qualities outside the appropriator’s culture. This is highly problematic as it relies on essentialized notions of cultures – both the appropriated and the appropriator’s. By relying on the location of these qualities beyond the reach of white culture, appropriation denies the possibility that things like tradition, authenticity, artistic production, etc. can take place within white culture. While there are good reasons to feel this way (late-capitalist economics, dislocated media, etc.), the projection of these qualities onto other cultures reinforces this sense of lack and precludes the possibility of change.¹⁷

Appropriation also dislocates identity and as such complicates the formation of a realistic political identity. By associating one’s identity with an ‘outside’ culture, the appropriator is able to ignore his/her own agency within his/her own locational, racial, class, or gender contexts. A white, upper-class, hip-hopper from an affluent, suburban neighborhood can ignore his/her own race and class position by identifying as part of a lower-class, black urban culture. This can be true even in appropriation that does not imply a high level of identification. A white kid’s appropriation of dreadlocks can complicate his/her formation of a racial identity and a white,

¹⁷ Root writes of her encounter with a new-ager named Karma who appropriated many elements of Native American culture, suggesting that his inability to transform his own cultural context eliminates the possibility for true equality: “[B]ecause Karma thinks white culture is one thing – the dead, shopping-mall culture of our time – appropriation becomes his only escape, and it becomes impossible for him to imagine standing side by side with Native people as equals.”(229)

upper-class adult's appropriation of Zen Buddhism can similarly complicate the formation of a class identity. While these identities are not impossible, the dislocation of certain aspects of identity through appropriation complicates the situation.

As appropriation is a compensation for certain lacks, it deals with symptoms and not root causes. As I pointed out, the various lacks in white society are the result of a number of economic policies and racist histories. The appropriation of other cultures to compensate for these lacks fulfills certain white desires, but does not address the deeper issues. Even in cases where appropriation is used to express opposition to late-capitalist systems, the expression of opposition does nothing to affect change. When the appropriator imagines that s/he can 'find' what s/he lacks 'outside', there is no sense of need to change the things 'inside'. If I can walk into Wal-Mart and feel okay about myself because I am part of the hip-hop nation, I don't feel like I have to work against the roots of my problems, the things that made me search out an alternative culture to begin with. Appropriating is ultimately, to borrow Hebdige's phrase, merely acting out alienation (65): a performance of opposition to or frustration with white culture.

Insofar as appropriation is used to express opposition to the larger cultural and economic system of the U.S., it ends up feeding back into the system that it opposes. When culture is as bound up with economics as it is in contemporary late-capitalist society, anything and everything can be co-opted and sold, even seemingly oppositional cultures. At the local mall, there is a store for hippies, a punk/metal store, multiple skater stores, and multiple hip-hop stores – all national or multi-national chains. There are even stores that cater to the third-world appreciation crowd. Any culture, even – or perhaps especially – an oppositional one, can, and will, be sold. The appropriation of other cultures through commodities feeds back into the system, no matter what

we imagine the commodity means. All that matters is that the culture can be commodified and sold; reification reigns supreme.

As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, even supposedly oppositional appropriation that takes places outside of commodities feeds into the commodity system. Appropriating a culture that has not been incorporated and commodified creates a market for the selling of that culture – co-option is inevitable. Appropriation that seems unable to be commodified, such as the wearing of dreadlocks, still feeds the system – dreadlocks can be marketed, if not sold, and the oppositional content thus incorporated. This system does not apply to only appropriation. Any culture can, and will, be co-opted and sold. What is specific to appropriation is that our fetishization of culture codes opposition as wholly cultural, and hence wholly co-optable. Appropriating other cultures means, fundamentally, separating culture and meaning from context and people – allowing meaning to exist on its own.

Within this cultural and economic system, hip-hop is the perfect culture. It exists within the late-capitalist system but outside of white culture. Hip-hop's escape is purely cultural, encoded in commodities and style, and as such there is no need, as in other cultures, to co-opt the style – it already exists within the system. The economy gains on all sides – selling the culture to 'authentic' hip-hoppers and black, brown, and white appropriators around the globe. 'Resistance' and capital are one.

The question posed at the beginning of this chapter – what are the limits of appropriation – is somewhat misleading. The critical quality of appropriation is not that it has limits but that it itself is *limiting* – not just that an individual appropriator cannot fully participate in culture or cannot form a local identity, but that appropriation itself, offered as an antidote to unhappy whites, stands in the way of radical social change. Appropriation, as a dislocation of identity, a

compensatory act, and an extension of the process of reification, can prevent both individual and collective political action. In this context, challenges to appropriation become much more critical. While still fundamentally strategic actions to fight inequality, challenges to cultural appropriation are also efforts to dismantle what is one of the most visible impediments to collective political action.

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I am not a fan of cultural appropriation. The disconnect between white peoples' appropriations and their awareness of the daily racialized power dynamics that they benefit from pains me. But I am not ready to give up on appropriation entirely. In a lot of white appropriation I see a legitimate desire to work against racism, to live in an equal society. The challenge is to turn that desire – however small it may be – into something more than appropriation.

My hope for whites comes from two theories of contemporary whiteness – white racial dualism and liberal whiteness. Since the 1960s, whiteness has seen unprecedented change. After the Civil Rights movement, the previous dominant racial whiteness became fractured, unable to sustain its discourse of domination and exclusion. In “Behind Blue Eyes: Whiteness and Contemporary U.S. Racial Politics,” Howard Winant suggest that this has created a dualism within whiteness itself. “On the one hand,” Howard Winant writes, “whites inherit the legacy of white supremacy, from which they continue to benefit. But on the other hand, they are subject to the moral and political challenges posed to that inheritance by the partial but real successes of [the civil rights movement]” (41). This division means that a monolithic, invisible whiteness can no longer be assumed – our identities have been “displaced and refigured: they are now contradictory, as well as confused and anxiety-ridden, to an unprecedented extent” (41).

Robyn Wiegman, in “Whiteness Studies and the Paradox of Particularity,” suggests that the

victories of the Civil Rights era have “powerfully suspended the acceptability of the public display of white supremacy” (119) to such an extent that “disaffiliation from white supremacy [now] founds contemporary white identity formation for the majority of Americans” (121). We must be quick to point out that this is no radical anti-racist identity. Indeed, the disaffiliation from public displays of segregationist white supremacy functions largely to hide the subtle – and not-so-subtle – ways that the project of white supremacy has been furthered through such mechanisms as capitalist expansion and liberal ‘color-blindness.’¹⁸ Wiegman argues that in contemporary popular culture the disaffiliation from white supremacy is articulated through a “liberal whiteness,” a “color-blind moral sameness” invested in believing in a “postracist society and a newly innocent whiteness” (121).

Both of these tropes are deeply embedded in contemporary cultural appropriation. In the wholly desirable representations of other cultures, is there not a statement of disaffiliation from white supremacy? And does the dislocation of identity not demonstrate a deep fissure within whiteness – a conflict of identity that sends whites searching for new cultures? This gives me hope not because I think a liberal whiteness is an important first step towards a more just society, but because in appropriation I see a desire, a willingness, to rearticulate whiteness, to imagine different ideas of what it might mean to be white. Of course an anti-racist whiteness (or radical whiteness) is not an assured outcome of this desire – the rearticulation of whiteness since the 60s has taken far-right and conservative forms as well as a liberal form – but the desire means that whiteness is not a closed loop – that it is, in fact, both highly responsive to social conditions and able to be actively reformulated.

It is here that I see potential for using cultural appropriation as a way in to whiteness, both

¹⁸ See Barbara Flagg’s *Was Blind, But Now I See: White Race Consciousness and the Law* for a powerful discussion of how the liberal ideal of color-blindness furthers white supremacy through daily decision-making.

for what appropriation can tell us about whiteness – the project of this paper – making whiteness visible, and, finally, recasting whiteness in radically new and politically productive ways.

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