

## HAMPSHIRE COLLEGE

### DIVISION III EXAMINATION EVALUATION

Name: **Andrew Beck**

Year of Entry: **Fall 1999**

School: **Humanities, Arts, and Cultural Studies**

Date Passed: **December 10, 2003**

Title: **Understanding Cultural Appropriation**

Chairperson: **Eric Schocket, Associate Professor of American Literature**

Committee Members: **Bethany Odgon, Assistant Professor of Media and Cultural Studies**

### Evaluative Comments:

The central activity of a Hampshire Student's final year of study is the Division III examination. This examination comprises a major independent study in the form of a written thesis or creative project which demonstrates a student's ability to handle complex questions, sophisticated concepts, and skills pertaining to his or her area of concentration. A committee chosen by the student and chairperson supervises and evaluates the entire project.

For his Division III independent project, Drew researched and wrote a scholarly essay of some 55 pages examining the structure, function, and politics of cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation, as Drew defines it, is the process through which members of a dominant cultural formation (here, white Americans) adopt the real or imagined cultural products of minority culture in order to respond to a feeling of lack, a desire for connection, or a rebellion against the dominant order. "What does cultural appropriation tell us," Drew asks, "about larger systems of power and privilege and the positions of the appropriator and appropriated within these systems?" Although the essay seeks to develop a structural analysis that could, in theory, apply to all acts of appropriation, Drew's focus is on the way in which contemporary white culture in the US appropriates the culture of people of color. Thus his three main chapters—"Lack," "The Appropriation of Imagined Cultures," and "Cultural Fetishism"—deal, respectively, with these three historically specific questions: "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?"

As Drew recounts in the essay's introduction, this study emerged out of debates Drew and other students initiated during the Spring of 2004 about "the rampant cultural appropriation at Hampshire College." This group of students were particularly concerned with the many appropriative items for sale at the college bookstore: "from kitschy hula dolls to journals featuring all your favorite icons from eastern religions; from do-it-yourself Buddhist alters to flags emblazoned with the likeness of Che Guevara." Yet their goals were broader than just changing the consumer patterns of Hampshire students; they wanted to challenge appropriation as a major mode of cross-cultural exchange. Appropriation, they concluded, was never a simplistic "stylistic choice." Rather, "it was symptomatic of the systems that perpetuate inequality based on race and ethnicity in our society."

During the two semesters Drew devoted to writing this essay, he read widely in critical theory, cultural studies, media theory, and critical race theory. He also struggled considerably with how to best represent his thinking about the problem of cultural appropriation. Early on, for instance, he planned to write a historical analysis comparing nineteenth-century blackface minstrelsy with contemporary white consumers of hip-hop. He also considered writing a less scholarly essay that could serve as something of a source book for activists working to stop appropriation in their communities. Ultimately, however, he chose a more analytical and structural analysis of appropriation itself. After having read and digested many specific accounts of appropriation, Drew found value in redacting the structural principals that allow appropriation to do its cultural work.

Drew's conclusions are dense and multi-layered. He finds that a sense of lack serves as a prompt for the appropriative act. Whites, in particular, often feel that they lack traditions, roots, access to the means of cultural production, and a language through which to express dissent. Thus they find in the imagined culture of the Other, a sense of authenticity, groundedness, and resistance that they feel they lack. Drew smartly modifies this claim somewhat by specifying several attributes that the imagined culture must have: it must be imagined to be a culture of victims, to be outside dominant culture, and to be consumable. Finally, in his brilliant analysis of "cultural fetishism," Drew examines what sort of presumptions cultural appropriation makes about the nature of culture itself. Using Marx and Lukacs, he demonstrates how appropriators must understand culture in as a static and reified set of objects in order to appropriate it. What is needed, Drew concludes in contrast, is a better way of understanding one's relationship to culture and one's obligations to the culture of others. We need, in other words, to take the desire for connection embedded in the act of appropriation and to find other, more politically progressive ways of forging unity.

The Division III Examination Committee felt that Drew's essay was uncommonly sophisticated, theoretically acute, and politically intelligent. It managed to do a number of very difficult things: It was complex without being dry or obtuse. It was radical without being doctrinaire or self-evident. And most of all, it rose to the challenge posed by its own structuring questions. Though it would have been quite possible to write a historical study of some form of cultural appropriation, such a study would, because of its very specificity, pass over very difficult questions of definition, structure, and function. This essay probes deeply into the most problematic conceptual and political problems entailed in the study of appropriation—and it produces from this examination a set of articulate and useful conclusions. The committee felt that the final chapter on cultural fetishism was particularly wonderful. Here Drew pushed himself to another level of conceptual thinking and showed that he could, even as an undergraduate student, produce a significant breakthrough in cultural theory. It (and the essay as a whole) stands as a testimony to the deep thought and hard work Drew accomplished this last year. The committee wholeheartedly recommends the granting of the degree of Bachelor of Arts.