

# CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

## GUIDING QUESTIONS TO ASK

### SOURCE

- Does the source group or culture have a history of exploitation, slavery, or genocide?  
*If so, there is already a social power dynamic at play regarding the use of their culture.*
- Are the people/the culture from whom this imagery, item, or custom comes benefitting?  
*Are you buying this directly from the community? Does your participation in it benefit the community?*
- Has the source community invited you to share in this?  
*This could look like you being invited/requested to dress in traditional attire for a friend's celebration or event.*
- Is it about commodification or making a profit?

### SIGNIFICANCE

- Is it an everyday object, or is it sacred?
- Is it be used to make something or someone feel more sacred or meaningful?
- What is its original meaning? Is it represented here? Is it lost, demeaned, or made fun of?
- Is the source's significance filling a hunger (for "sacredness," for meaning)? Is this facilitating or participating in "shopping" from cultures?

### SIMILARITY

- How similar is this to the original?
- Is it portraying the original in a cartoonish or "cute" way? Is it demeaning or degrading?
- Is it taking just a piece of an image, custom, or practice out of context?

### NOTES

- People and companies most often do not have bad intentions. This is good, because it means this is an opportunity for education and communication.
- It can be hard for people to define "culture" here (in the USA).
- The more invisible a culture is to the dominant culture, the easier it is to be appropriated (and/or the harder it is to catch).

\* Source, significance, and similarity are based on writings by Susan Scafidi, author of *Who Owns Culture? Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law*

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## QUOTES AND DEFINITIONS TO DISCUSS AND PONDER

“I benefit when feeling connected to something ancient, like when I read old Germanic fairytales and feel somehow related to them. I will continue exploring my ethnicity as I move forward, searching for fragments of a culture long lost to my family— For the truth is that my cultural connection is lost; I am not German. That culture is too disconnected. My Germanness was traded in long ago for the benefits available in this country for European immigrants able to fit into the white group. Feeling connected with my ancestry is essential, but I cannot kid myself into believing that I share the same culture as contemporary Germans. I do not....

White people who cannot fully recapture a lost cultural heritage, like myself, often experience a real sense of loss. Sure, there might be subcultures of whites that feel attached to what they see as a particularly American culture, like those who would claim a “Southern” culture. However, many of us find ourselves looking at other groups and longing for the connection we imagine they feel with their roots, their homeland, their culture. Many white people can be heard saying, “We don’t have culture. They have culture.”...

The more we understand ourselves, the reasons for our actions, and how our cultural explorations might be perceived in relationship to an oppressive history, the more we are able to navigate our way through challenging conversations, build authentic relationships and break down the wounds built up over years of injury. Perhaps even more important, we might be able to avoid enacting a disrespectful form of appropriation.”

Shelly Tochluk  
author of *Witnessing Whiteness*

“Cultural appropriation is taking a symbol or cultural practice out of its original context and then plunking it down somewhere else. And it becomes devoid of its original meaning. The people who are doing the extraction often are benefiting, whether through personal gain, financial gain, or entertainment.”

nisha ahuja  
actor, physical theatre creator, writer, singer/songwriter, and arts educator:  
[www.nishaahuja.com](http://www.nishaahuja.com)

“There is always an inherent power imbalance — it is the dominant group taking from a marginalized group. With cultural appropriation, this also often plays out in the realities of colonization: It is the colonizer taking from the colonized.”

Adrienne Keene  
author of blog Native Appropriations: [www.nativeappropriations.com](http://www.nativeappropriations.com)

"Taking intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artifacts from someone else's culture without permission. This can include unauthorized use of another culture's dance, dress, music, language, folklore, cuisine, traditional medicine, religious

symbols, etc. It's most likely to be harmful when the source community is a minority group that has been oppressed or exploited in other ways or when the object of appropriation is particularly sensitive, e.g. sacred objects.”

Susan Scafidi

author of *Who Owns Culture? Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law*

“Within current debates about race and difference, mass culture is the contemporary location that both publicly declares and perpetuates the idea that there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgement and enjoyment of racial difference. The commodification of otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than other ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture.”

bell hooks

from her essay *Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance*, in her book *Black Looks: Race and Representation*

\* Quotes sourced from *Witnessing Whiteness* curriculum ([www.witnessingwhiteness.com](http://www.witnessingwhiteness.com)) and from *Cultural Appropriation in Spirituality: how deepening our understandings of settler colonialism, race, and privilege can help us reland our practices with humility, accountability, and reciprocity*, which can be found at: [witchesunionhall.wordpress.com](http://witchesunionhall.wordpress.com)

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## MOVIE LIST

Yellow Apparel: When the Coolie Becomes Cool  
available on youtube

White Shamans and Plastic Medicine Men  
available on youtube