

# The Politics of Cultural Appropriation in the Contemporary USA

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*For my parents whose unwavering support inspires me every day. Special thanks to my supervisors, Nick and Tony, for their valuable advice and constant encouragement. Thanks must also be given to my grandparents who have supported me throughout my education, and to David and Jess for keeping me sane and focused on what matters most.*

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## Introduction: Cultural Appropriation Today

Cultural appropriation, the use of one culture's symbols or products by members of another culture, has roots as old as the existence of culture itself. Fascination with and fear of the 'other' have shaped society, politics and group identification for centuries, particularly in the USA where demographic diversity and a fraught racial history make identity and cultural interaction especially complex. While "white' appropriations of African-American culture, sentimentalized images of 'disappearing' Native Americans, condescending caricatures of 'inscrutable' Asians or 'hot-blooded' Mexicans have a long and disreputable history in the U.S.A.",<sup>1</sup> the concept of cultural appropriation is currently in a critical moment. A surge in media and academic interest in it has generated important but volatile discussions which often take centre stage in contemporary analyses of cultural politics. There is a widespread element of divisiveness in the current debate about cultural appropriation, largely due to conflicting notions of what the term infers and an unsettled history regarding its use in academia and popular discourse. This, however, has provoked impassioned responses both in favour of and in opposition to the concept, even though participation in the discussion transcends issues of class and race.

It is this cultural flashpoint that will be examined in this thesis. The underlying principles of contemporary cultural appropriation and the wider significance of the response to it will form the basis of the work. Focus is exclusively on debates concerning the appropriation of African American culture

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<sup>1</sup> George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism and the Poetics of Place*, (London: Verso, 1994), 53.

in the USA, partially because concentrating attention on only one ethnicity allows for a deeper examination of issues (especially within the limitations of length in this thesis). Another reason for the focus on appropriations of African-American culture is the resurgence of Black civil rights movements, such as Black Lives Matter and #SayHerName, which has occurred alongside the climax in the appropriation debate. These parallel timeframes are significant as cultural appropriation is undeniably tied to sociocultural politics. Analysing the politics of Black culture at a time of heightened racial tensions and sensitivities is therefore imperative for understanding the wider social implications and the dynamic forces acting upon ideas about cultural appropriation. This is a driving factor behind my research which seeks to link race, identity, culture and politics to understand appropriation's significance in the contemporary American race narrative.

The key themes of cultural appropriation have remained relatively constant, even with increased contemporary attention to the concept. It is usually understood as the utilisation of racial difference for personal advantage or enjoyment without the appropriated culture receiving equal benefit. Thus, appropriation is assumed to be predominantly a case of members of dominant cultures taking from marginalised ones – in the case of thesis, mainstream white culture taking from Black culture. As such, “cultural politics, specifically the power relations among cultures, are highlighted and become a primary basis for categorizing acts of cultural appropriation”.<sup>2</sup> There is also a frequent view among

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<sup>2</sup> Richard A. Rogers, “From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation: A Review and Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation”, *Communication Theory* 16, no.4 (2006): 476.

critics of the practice that appropriation is a manifestation of white America's "pathological need to control, contain, and even take credit for Black culture",<sup>3</sup> or that it represents little more than cultural theft. Yet not all scholars view the concept in such specific and political terms. Rogers, for instance, does "not limit cultural appropriation to instances where those engaged in appropriation do so . . . in a way that necessarily serves their own interest".<sup>4</sup> These different interpretations of the term are further complicated by the issue that, although appropriation is often cited in cultural commentary, "the concept is frequently used without significant discussion or explicit theorizing".<sup>5</sup> Thus, implicit meanings are attributed to the term without universally accepted understandings of its meaning. This has led to confusion regarding the definition of appropriation, which some have taken to include cultural exchange and appreciation, even as many of its underlying principles continue to prevail in public and academic discourse.

I define cultural appropriation as the unmerited practice, imitation or reproduction of one culture's symbolic products, idiosyncrasies, customs, history and other forms by members of another cultural group. The significance of the appropriated form to the original culture is crucial in this interpretation as I do not necessarily define the reproduction of insignificant forms, which may only be associated with a particular culture by chance, as an act of appropriation (common examples of this include technological advancements and 'ethnic' foods, although specific instances of these can of course hold cultural

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<sup>3</sup> Lipsitz, 54.

<sup>4</sup> Rogers, 476.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 474.

significance). The presence of a dominant-marginalised cultural relationship is also central to my definition, thus making appropriation a political act. An appropriator, however, does not have to be aware of this power relationship in order for their act to qualify as appropriation. In this sense, acts of appropriation are both *shaped by* and *shape* their socio-political contexts. Furthermore, I echo Rogers' understanding of appropriation as "an *active* process . . . mere exposure, for example, to the music or film of another culture does not constitute cultural appropriation".<sup>6</sup> By means of these defining factors, distinctions between cultural appropriation and cultural exchange or appreciation can be made. Exchange would imply a voluntary and reciprocated sharing of cultural elements outside socio-political frameworks of power. Meanwhile, appreciation denotes a passive process of admiration or interest in another culture.

This definition, however, is complicated by issues such as the ambiguous nature of 'culture'. Culture can describe manifestations of collective experience and intellect, such as examples of art and literature, or domains like philosophy. It can also denote the customs, ideas and behaviours of a particular group of people or society. Cultural appropriation has usually been studied in connection to the arts, but it is the latter type of culture which will form the basis of this thesis. None of the given accounts provide completely clear definitions or discernible boundaries of what 'culture' encompasses, particularly as culture is also used to refer to groups of people sharing customs and ideologies. Culture in this sense overlaps with, but differs, from race in so far as culture is based on

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 476 (emphasis in original text).

lifestyle and societal affiliations while race is usually considered to be comprised of objective facts. In the USA the importance of ancestry continues to dominate racial classification. Although the biological account of race has been discredited, emphasis on genetic composition continues to permeate the construction of identity. It is common practise to highlight ancestral origin when describing identity in the USA, for example African American, European American, Japanese American. This can be linked to the multicultural make-up of the American population, but also to the particular prominence of genealogy in the American mindset through the legacy of racialized classification of populations: the one-drop rule, for example, legally defined any person with an African American ancestor as Black. Legal implementations of the one-drop rule (mainly at state level but upheld by the Supreme Court in *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, 1896) are now widely considered some of the most disastrous legislative decisions in US history due to their promotion of racial purity and connection to the maintaining of de facto segregation. However, as a social principle the rule continues to carry weight in racial classification through the continued association of race and ancestry.

These issues need to be situated within the broader socio-political context. Multiculturalism, in which various ethnic groups and cultures exchange customs without having to sacrifice their original identity, has in many ways become the prevalent race-relations ideology of the USA. In a multicultural society appropriation may occur, particularly if it results in advantageous consequences for the appropriating culture. However, in an authentically multicultural society it would not be necessary, as cultural exchange could occur



with ease and without erasing cultural origins. This is a complication of contemporary multiculturalism which, just like cultural appropriation, must be understood within the racial history of the USA. Black identity continues to be dominated by the legacy of chattel slavery, enforced segregation and systematic repression. As such, attempts at appropriation are often perceived as a vehicle for imposing white dominance or a form of exploiting Black communities. This is particularly relevant considering heightened contemporary sensitivities around race relations. Increasing focus on police interaction with minority groups, in particular the pervasiveness of racial profiling and use of physical force, and on general institutionalised racism has generated widespread discussion and public unrest. The violence that is seen to be done to Black bodies, it is argued, is also done to Black culture through co-option of racial expression. The tensions between heightened racial unease and spreading multiculturalism provide a dynamic background to the topics examined in this thesis while also showing how culture is a continuously shifting terrain of contention.

These far-reaching and sometimes conflicting themes will be prominent throughout the following discussion. Consequently, the first chapter of this thesis will provide an outline of the theoretical and conceptual framework for understanding cultural appropriation. This will include tracing of the academic use of the term with regard to African American culture which also serves as a broad literature review. The chapter will then address the factors contributing to the current moment of heightened sensitivity toward cultural appropriation, especially the impact of social media. It aims to contextualise the case studies of appropriation that follow in chapters two and three, thus avoiding unnecessary

repetition of fundamental principles and allowing for a deeper exploration of each example. Chapter two will concentrate on the appropriation of Black hairstyling which has an established history but has recently produced divided discussion of the subject. Chapter three revolves around the Rachel Dolezal affair. Dolezal is a white woman by parentage who had been passing as Black for almost a decade before being 'outed' by her parents in 2015. Her story garnered widespread attention in the media and public discourse, which was largely negative in nature and revolved around her 'appropriation' of Black culture and identity.

I chose to focus on these case studies as they are both prominent in the contemporary cultural appropriation debate. Furthermore, they are representative of a wide variety of issues that are central to the concept of cultural appropriation. The subject of hairstyling is strongly connected to factors that shaped the construction of Black identity such as the Eurocentric definition of beauty standards in American culture and the consequent devaluation of Black cultural forms. It also shows how "culture and communal self-expression are . . . important sites of resistance, the signs in everyday life of an ongoing political struggle".<sup>7</sup> Dolezal, on the other hand, represents a complex co-option of Black identity which highlights the complexity of matters regarding race and the power of so-called 'white privilege'. Both examples are intertwined with issues of commodification, fetishization and the benefits of potential cultural capital. While the problems that arise from appropriating will be examined in these

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<sup>7</sup> Coco Fusco, "Passionate Irreverence: Cultural Politics of Identity", in *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, ed. Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems and Philip Yenawine, (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 71.

chapters, the response to instances of perceived appropriation, and the wider significance of such response, forms a large aspect of this thesis. The reactions to hairstyle appropriation and the Dolezal narrative are telling of US attitudes regarding the importance of race as well as broader socio-political anxieties.

To study the response to contemporary cultural appropriation, channels that represent social discourse must be included in the research methodology. Inevitably, then, a large volume of media sources have been utilised throughout the thesis, including newspaper articles, social media platforms and web forums. These have been approached in a variety of ways, with some being used as interpretations of social critique while others are viewed as primary source material that needs to be critically analysed. In addition, peer-reviewed articles and topic-specific academic books are studied, particularly when considering broader theoretical or conceptual principles. The abundance of media sources is also a by-product of the extremely contemporary focus of this work which concerns itself mainly with case studies from 2015 onwards. Furthermore, many of these operate largely in the realm of popular culture. This is intentional as popular culture, so frequently dismissed as “banal, trashy, and not worthy of serious attention”,<sup>8</sup> reveals the fundamental philosophical and moral constructs of society at the time. As a medium it can be used to study what is at the forefront of current social consciousness and the construction of current power structures which trickle down into mainstream culture and society.

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<sup>8</sup> Douglas Kellner, “Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism, and Media Culture”, in *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Critical Reader*, ed. Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2011), 9.

The methodology and focus of the thesis allow for an analysis of the importance of appropriation as a cultural phenomenon. Public and media responses to specific examples of appropriation are analysed to determine the significance of the prominence of ideas about cultural appropriation in contemporary popular discourse and to explore their relationship to the wider social context. What emerges is that the cultural appropriation debate highlights the particularly *American* concern with race and otherness and the intrinsic *American-ness* of appropriation itself. By studying appropriation from the perspective of a micro cultural form (hairstyling) and a macro one (identity), the complex nature of culture as a contested terrain becomes evident. My discussion aims to show that the subject of contemporary cultural appropriation is equally complex and extremely polarising. It also seeks to problematise the various notions of identity and cultural politics that are put into play by those who engage in the cultural appropriation wars. The bitter nature of these wars reflects one factor above all: the impact that the exaggerated focus on race in the USA has on notions of culture and identity.

## Love and Theft in the Modern Age

*Ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish of mainstream white culture.<sup>1</sup>*

The concept of cultural appropriation has been so frequently interpreted that its perceived definitions and associated practices tend to vary dramatically. The subsequent confusion over what the term actually means has been the cause of many heated debates and resulted in it being applied to situations which do not necessarily constitute appropriation. As outlined in my introduction, I define appropriation as the unmerited reproduction or practice of symbolic cultural customs, idiosyncrasies or products (these may hereafter be referred to as 'cultural forms'). As this definition encompasses, but does not intend to describe, the in itself desirable exchange and fusing of cultures, it can be useful to highlight that appropriation is typically done in order to reap personal benefits such as economic remuneration or to be perceived as 'hip'. There can also be indirect advancements, such when appropriation enforces desired social structures or devalues the appropriated custom to the original cultural group, which can occur without the appropriator knowingly doing so. Additionally, in cultural appropriation there is usually the presumption that the appropriator belongs to a dominant social group and has little or no engagement with the appropriated culture and thus cannot have an adequate appreciation of the practice they are

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<sup>1</sup> bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 21.

participating in. Acts of appropriation can, therefore, be described as political ones, even if the drivers of appropriation may not be aware of it.

The nature of cultural appropriation is complicated and frequently misinterpreted. This is partially due to the processes associated with cultural exchange, diffusion and appreciation often being remarkably difficult to differentiate from appropriation. The recent interest in the concept has also aided in an unclear definition: while a long history of white appropriation of marginalised groups exists, it has only been within the past two to three decades that the term was popularised. During this period, academic interest usually focused on appropriations of artefacts or artistic cultural forms. Within the past five to ten years, however, there has been a notable surge in interest within broader public discourse regarding the subject. This has contributed to confusion about the term as well as continuously evolving moral interpretations of the concept. As such, when endeavouring to understand the complexity of contemporary cultural appropriation, it is critical to examine the various operational processes and interpretations at work. To do so, this chapter will be split into three, consisting first of a historical tracing of the term: in a sense, a genealogy of the phrase and its development. This largely descriptive exercise will be followed by a detailed examination of the impact of social media in creating this particular cultural moment and then a summary of the main theories and issues surrounding the concept. This exploration of the most prevalent debates will debunk some of the misconceptions regarding what cultural appropriation implies as well as lay the groundwork for the issues and concerns that are at play in the following thematic chapters.

### *The Evolution of Cultural Appropriation*

Cultural appropriation as a contemporary concept emerged “in academia in the late 1970s and 1980s as part of the scholarly critique of colonialism”, thoroughly solidifying its place in academic discourse by the mid-1990s.<sup>2</sup> The term’s conception is influenced by postmodern thought and correlates loosely with the cultural turn in academia in the early 1970s, as well as the ever-increasing focus on identity politics. Discussions tended to centre on instances regarding indigenous cultures such as in Canada and Australia, but long-standing debates on issues such as blackface minstrelsy and the historic co-optation of African American music also received a renewed interest. There was, however, little investigation of the appropriation of culturally Black characteristics or lifestyle choices which form the backbone of this thesis. As such, literature prior to 1990 is largely excluded from this thesis as it tends to explore the idea of appropriation that differs to our understanding of the term now.

Two influential twentieth century scholars who helped lay the groundwork for our contemporary perception are noted American Studies professors bell hooks and George Lipsitz. In 1992, hooks wrote a scathing report, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, on contemporary Black representation in popular culture. She questions how the focus on racial difference and ‘otherness’ in mass media influences intrinsic American beliefs of race, arguing that the

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<sup>2</sup> Cathy Young, “To the New Culture Cops, Everything is Appropriation”, *The Washington Post*, 21 Aug 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/08/21/to-the-new-culture-cops-everything-is-appropriation/>, (10 Jan 2017).

depictions in popular culture extend to the mindset of the wider public. Lipsitz, in his 1994 book *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism and the Poetics of Place*, echoes these sentiments, examining how fascination with the 'other' impacts social identity in its function as a vehicle of escapism. Their writings are a response to white utilisation of racial difference as something that is enjoyed on a mass scale and can therefore be commodified for either economic capital or psychological pleasures. hooks identifies this as an issue that is particularly significant in contemporary popular culture:

Within current debates about race and difference, mass culture is the contemporary location that both publically 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 normal ways of doing and feeling.<sup>3</sup>

Lipsitz, on the other hand, traces this further back. He draws attention to the historically "pervasive presence" of white appropriation of Black culture that offers an "innocuous outlet for suppressed desire"<sup>4</sup> by allowing identification with social transgressions while simultaneously distancing oneself through connecting these to an alien minority group.

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<sup>3</sup> hooks, 21.

<sup>4</sup> George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism and the Poetics of Place*, (London: Verso, 1994), 53-54.



Both Lipsitz and hooks focus strongly on the escapist opportunity that cultural appropriation can present. hooks talks of a generation of dissatisfied young Americans “afflicted by postmodern malaise of alienation” who are therefore seduced “by cultural strategies that offer Otherness as appeasement”.<sup>5</sup> She describes this appropriation as a mechanism for replacing pleasures missing elsewhere but also as a process which reveals desires to escape white guilt through a public denunciation of white cultural imperialism.<sup>6</sup> hooks connects this escapism strongly to white supremacist structures, describing it as a “defiant gesture where one denies accountability and historical connection” making “black culture and black life [a] backdrop, scenery for narratives that essentially focus on white people”.<sup>7</sup> Lipsitz approaches this from a somewhat softer angle in his examination of why some minority groups appropriate from others. He gives the example of Willa Cather assuming the identity of Midwestern, middle-class, Anglo-Saxon Jim Burden in her novel, *My Antonia*, which he argues is used to express homosexual desires through Jim’s dalliances with ethnic working-class women.<sup>8</sup> Lipsitz states that “transgressions of class, ethnic, and gender boundaries stand as surrogates for the unnamed crossings of sexual boundaries”.<sup>9</sup> He identifies this disguise as a method to “express indirectly parts of [one’s] identity that might be too threatening to express directly”.<sup>10</sup> In a nod to Gayatri Spivak’s concept of strategic essentialism – which theorises that,

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<sup>5</sup> hooks, 25.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 23-26.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 25 and 32.

<sup>8</sup> Cather’s sexual identity continues to be a highly contested subject. For opposing views cf. Marilee Lindemann, *Willa Cather: Queering America*, and Janet Sharistanian’s introduction to *My Antonia*.

<sup>9</sup> Lipsitz, 52.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 62.

under some circumstances, it may be beneficial for members of minority groups to 'essentialise' themselves through an emphasis on common identity – Lipsitz terms this particular appropriation of identity 'strategic anti-essentialism'.

Lipsitz, however, is not condoning cultural appropriation. In fact, he argues that those who appropriate are often too preoccupied with what cross-cultural contact means to them to recognise what it might mean for others. He also draws distinct lines between appropriating in order to escape one's own repression and the "power and privilege [that gives] whites the luxury to image themselves as 'others'".<sup>11</sup> Lipsitz points to the history of white America benefitting from Black culture throughout his book, which hooks echoes in her account of how cultural appropriation is not necessarily "linked to unlearning racism" but in fact often carries "the desire to enhance one's status in the context of 'whiteness' even as one appropriates black culture".<sup>12</sup> Both authors also relate the consumption of minority culture to the deep-rooted racial history of the USA, rather than to cross-cultural interactions born out of altruistic interest in the other.

These two early 1990s books set out many of the theoretical foundations that continue to define contemporary debates of cultural appropriation: its potential for exploration and expression of identity; the intrinsic attraction to 'otherness'; the morality of adorning oneself with others' cultures; appropriation's role in upholding white supremacist structures; and the idea of unwitting repression. In keeping with the postcolonial, postmodern interest in

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>12</sup> hooks, 17.

culture and identity, both authors criticise the effect appropriation can have on the appropriated culture, with hooks raising the worry that “the Other will be eaten, consumed, and forgotten”.<sup>13</sup> Although neither hooks nor Lipsitz were focusing primarily on the concept of cultural appropriation, they encourage further study in order to find the balance between “which kinds of cross-cultural identification advance emancipatory ends and which ones reinforce existing structures of power and domination”.<sup>14</sup>

In many ways, the moment that brought the concept of cultural appropriation into a spotlight of its own was the publication of a variety of works in one collection titled *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation* (1997). Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao’s compilation of appropriation focused research represented a turning point for the concept as it brought together numerous aspects and issues that had not been summarised under the same terminology before. As the editors state in the introduction: “this book is, in effect, a colloquium about the various facets of the appropriation of culture . . . [which] can be found in a number of domains”.<sup>15</sup> Until the release of *Borrowed Power*, there had been little conversation between the disciplines concerning themselves with appropriation – anthropology, history, sociology, cultural studies and so on – which inspired Ziff and Rao to define and refine the term across these disciplines by endeavouring to “locate common themes” and

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<sup>13</sup> hooks, 39.

<sup>14</sup> Lipsitz, 56.

<sup>15</sup> Bruce H. Ziff and Pratima V. Rao, “Introduction to Cultural Appropriation: A Framework for Analysis”, in *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation*, eds. Bruce H. Ziff and Pratima V. Rao, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 20.

“explore diversity” in an array of “differently situated thinkers”.<sup>16</sup> To do this the collection is split into six clusters that include music and musical forms, colonial and postcolonial discourse, and popular culture. These represent the areas in which cultural appropriation has been most studied and contested, focusing on “those instances that have political significance in contemporary society”.<sup>17</sup> The collection examines literature that vary dramatically in their experiences of appropriation, allowing a dissection of appropriation that had not been attempted before.

The introduction serves as a general guidebook to cultural appropriation before subsequent essays examine specific instances. Immediately the uncertain definition of appropriation is addressed which Ziff and Rao attribute to indeterminate ideas of ‘culture’ itself. They argue ‘culture’ is too vague to “set clear limits as to where the concept . . . begins and ends”.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the vocabulary of ‘appropriation’ is also critiqued as too open-ended to set a clear parameter. While the introduction does not give definite answers regarding its definition, key complicating elements are discussed. This develops into an examination of other subjects such as the difficulty of defining the parameters of a cultural group, the complication of establishing connections between communities and cultural products due to issues of intertextuality, and the difference between the appropriation of tangible and intangible objects. Ziff and Rao, who describe appropriation as a multidirectional phenomenon, discuss how it differs from other forms of cultural borrowing through a comparison to

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 2.

assimilation. The relationships of power are argued to be departing points of difference between appropriation and assimilation: “the transmission of culture can be constructed and implicated differentially depending on whether the subjectivity of the receiver of culture is identified as being from a dominant or subordinate group”.<sup>19</sup> Although an important differentiation to make, other terminology, such as cultural exchange, diffusion or admiration, are not explicitly mentioned therefore failing to take into account the processes of cultural exchange which are less entangled in racial politics and rather represent a natural mixing of cultures. Perhaps a reflection of the postcolonial focus of the 1990s, these omitted forms go on to build the focal point of contemporary appropriation debates.

*Borrowed Power* also addresses the concerns of those who “view the recent attention paid to cultural appropriation with derision”.<sup>20</sup> This traces the movement against focus on cultural appropriation, which has become increasingly vocal, back to the 1990s. In response Rao and Ziff highlight the negative impacts the appropriated community (or object) usually experience, as well as the failure of current legal legislation in recognising cultural goods as property and the moral implications of appropriators wrongly benefitting from commodified materials. The introduction to *Borrowed Power* identifies four major concerns regarding acts of cultural appropriation: cultural degradation, the preservation of cultural elements, deprivation of material advantage, and failure to recognise sovereign claims.<sup>21</sup> The first of these concerns is largely

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>21</sup> See *ibid.*, “Introduction”.

focused on misappropriation: when appropriation “can have corrosive effects on the integrity of an exploited culture because the appropriative conduct can erroneously depict the heritage from which it is drawn”.<sup>22</sup> This usually occurs when an appropriated form has specific social or political connotations that are not being emulated. Cultural misappropriation or degradation can link to two other of Ziff and Rao’s concerns: preservation of cultural elements and the failure to recognise sovereign claims. The first of these is argued to happen best when cultural objects and practices remain in the original culture, thus preserving their integrity in the most organic way. Failure to recognise sovereign claims can relate to the erasure of cultural context or origins, therefore potentially misappropriating the appropriated form. Ziff and Rao, however, mainly examine it in terms of concepts of ownership, particularly in the context of law. This aspect links to the final concern: deprivation of material advantage. This consideration has typically been at the forefront of cultural appropriation debates, especially in domains such as music, visual media, fashion, literature and so forth. However, the focus of contemporary appropriation discourse has been shifting away from tangible cultural forms which can generate direct revenue, concentrating instead on culturally symbolic elements. As this thesis mirrors this change, Ziff and Rao’s concern regarding material deprivation is less applicable to the themes examined.

Following the increasing academic focus of the twentieth century, cultural appropriation became more prominent in public discourse in the early

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 9.

twenty-first century. In 2004, for instance, American singer Gwen Stefani's song, "Harajuku Girls", was controversial for its use of Harajuku culture as background decoration. Asian American comedian Margaret Cho responded with a widely circulated blog post in which she writes "I want to like them [the Harajuku girls], and I want to think they are great, but I am not sure if I can".<sup>23</sup> She explains that "a Japanese schoolgirl uniform is kind of like blackface", but because Asian Americans have so little representation in popular media she is "just in acceptance over it because something is better than nothing".<sup>24</sup> In May 2006 the annual feminist science fiction convention WisCon held a panel on cultural appropriation that was met with criticism online and inspired several lengthy *Livejournal* posts about the subject. Many objected to four out of six of the panellists being white which was reported to have created discussion that was "very apologetic and yet very entitled with regard to cultural appropriation".<sup>25</sup> Additionally, several bloggers reprimanded the manner in which gaining permission for cultural reproduction and the idea of remuneration were discussed. Further criticism was levied against the apparent "assumption that all people from a minority culture are the same and . . . that there even is such [a] thing as a monolithic culture", as well as an absence of acknowledging the power dynamics inherent in compensation.<sup>26</sup> *The Angry Black Woman* blog also commented upon the insufficient distinction made of appropriation in domains

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<sup>23</sup> Margaret Cho, "Harajuku Girls", *Margaret Cho* (blog), 31 Oct 2005, <http://margaretcho.com/2005/10/31/harajuku-girls/>, (14 Jan 2017).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Oyceter, "Wiscon – Cultural Appropriation panel", *Sakura of DOOM* (blog), *Livejournal*, 31 May 2006, <http://oyceter.livejournal.com/441959.html>, (28 Dec 2016).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

such as in academic disciplines compared to in popular culture and media consumption.<sup>27</sup>

Although the 2006 panel was heavily criticised, the responding blog posts, as well as the comments left on said posts, tended not to criticise the concept of cultural appropriation itself but rather a lack of consideration of deeper systems at work. Much of the generated discussion revolved around racial authenticity and the possibility of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ appropriation. Blogger Oyceter published a follow-up post in which she discussed the dangers of placing too much emphasis on an individual’s authenticity as well as the difference between dominant cultures appropriating and minority cultures assimilating.<sup>28</sup> These debates continued to be so prominent on the blog- and forum-spheres that in 2009 *The Angry Black Woman* created a thread with the sole intention of public but moderated discussion regarding the subject.<sup>29</sup> These examples foreshadow the explosion of the cultural appropriation debate on social media during the 2010s, exemplifying how online platforms aided in the amplifying appropriation discussions to its contemporary level.

There were, however, also important advances made in academic literature during the early twenty-first century. In 2003, Greg Tate published a collection of works in his book *Everything but the Burden: What White People Are Taking from Black Culture*, which he called “an interrogation of [the] myths

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<sup>27</sup> The Angry Black Woman, “WisCon 31 – Cultural Appropriation”, *The Angry Black Woman* (blog), 31 May 2007, <http://theangryblackwoman.com/2007/05/31/wiscon-31-cultural-appropriation/>, (28 Dec 2016).

<sup>28</sup> Oyceter, “Cultural Appropriation, pt. 2”, *Sakura of DOOM* (blog), *Dreamwidth*, 1 Jun 2006, <http://oyceter.dreamwidth.org/330487.html>, (28 Dec 2016).

<sup>29</sup> See The Angry Black Woman, “What is Cultural Appropriation?”, *The Angry Black Woman* (blog), 15 Jan 2009, <http://theangryblackwoman.com/2009/01/15/what-is-cultural-appropriation/>, (28 Dec 2016).



[surrounding Black people] and the ways they have become intertwined with the popular culture of the country”.<sup>30</sup> The eighteen pieces featured are by writers who examine the “need by white Americans to acquire Blackness by any means necessary”,<sup>31</sup> as well as expressing how cultural appropriation impacts them. The essays, poems and conversations are characterised by resentment and discontent, but also a sense of irony regarding “America[‘s] fiending for Blackness when it once debated whether Africans even had souls”.<sup>32</sup>

While the chapters differ in subject matter, there is a continuity in the common emphasis on the history of cultural depiction and appropriation. The “ceaseless parade of troublesome Black stereotypes still proffered and preferred by Hollywood . . . [and] the American music industry’s never-ending quest for a white artist who can competently perform Black musical impersonations”<sup>33</sup> are reoccurring topics throughout the book. Carl Hancock Rux, who explores the success of the Eminem phenomenon, argues that a constant and consistent history of cultural appropriation has resulted in Blackness being one of the most valuable commodities for both white and Black Americans. Several other contributors agree with the claim that Black identity has been transformed from a hindrance to an opportunity by creating a caricature that borrowed “from a relevant history of slavery, reconstruction, ghetto realism, black civil rights, arts and radical movements”, and that this character had to be “race-inclusive, race-

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<sup>30</sup> Greg Tate, “Introduction: Nigs R Us, or How Blackfolk Became Fetish Objects”, in *Everything but the Burden: What White People Are Taking from Black Culture*, ed. Greg Tate, (New York: Harlem Moon/Broadway Books, 2003), 4.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

accessible, and dangerous enough to pose an idealistic threat to conservative society” to succeed economically.<sup>34</sup> However, the commodification of Blackness in popular culture is also described as its “final incarnation”<sup>35</sup> as it is seen to cooperate with white capitalist structures by becoming “something to be possessed and something to be erased . . . [used] to do away with the bodily reminders of the Black origins of American pop pleasure”.<sup>36</sup> The most successful appropriators, argues Rux, are those who maintain an overt whiteness throughout their racial play therefore combining the excitement of Blackness with the comforting reassurance of being white.

Following *Everything but the Burden*, several other academic works were published. Susan Scafidi’s *Who Owns Culture?: Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law* (2005) explores the legal implications of appropriation. It addresses the issue of appropriation versus appreciation by differentiating between them in the same manner as private property and public domain. Scafidi concentrates repeatedly on racial authenticity and examines issues such as the destruction of cultural elements’ value. In 2008, James O. Young published *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts*, a thorough investigation of the moral and aesthetic issues regarding cultural appropriation. In it he examines philosophical issues regarding appropriation in the arts such as its moral position and cultural misrepresentation. Nevertheless, the majority of academic writing is seen in the 2010s alongside a general increase in public interest in the concept. For instance,

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<sup>34</sup> Carl Hancock Rux, “Eminem: The New White Negro”, in *Everything but the Burden: What White People Are Taking from Black Culture*, ed. Greg Tate, (New York: Harlem Moon/Broadway Books, 2003), 23.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Tate, “Introduction”, 4.

in 2012, Pascal Nicklas and Oliver Linder published *Adaptation and Appropriation* containing works focused on intertextuality and appropriation in literature, film and the arts; while James O. Young and Conrad G. Brunk assembled a collection of essays in *The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation*. In 2014, editors Tamara Lizette Brown and Baruti N. Kopano published *Soul Thieves: The Appropriation and Misrepresentation of African American Popular Culture* which examines misappropriation of African American popular culture as a form of exploitation for commercial benefits and the maintaining of white hegemony. One year later, in 2015, Matthias Krings studies the ways in which Africans respond to the overwhelming dominance of global Western culture in *African Appropriations: Cultural Difference, Mimesis, and Media*.

Although academic interest in cultural appropriation was increasing significantly during this time, it is in mass media where the concept becomes most noticeable. Blogs, forums and newspapers increasingly focused on instances of cultural appropriation, fuelled by seemingly never-ending high-profile misappropriations. In 2013, singer Selena Gomez was criticised for her use of the bindi as part of her performance costume, while the global internet craze, “The Harlem Shake”, caused controversy for its appropriation and whitewashing of the Black dance style of the same name. That year’s MTV Video Music Awards (VMA) featured a controversial performance by Miley Cyrus that provoked widespread media coverage concerned with cultural appropriation, with critics drawing comparisons to minstrel shows. 2014 featured no less controversy: there were numerous accusations against white rapper Iggy Azalea, continuous criticisms of singer Katy Perry, and retrospective condemnation of Gwen

Stefani's "Harajuku Girls" (2004) when she released a new album. Furthermore, singer songwriter Taylor Swift caused several controversies, first by using an entourage of 'twerking' Black women in her music video to "Shake It Off", and then again with "Wildest Dreams" which is set on the African continent but failed to feature Black actors. These varied but numerous instances were widely covered by mass media outlets from tabloids to broadsheet newspapers. As discussions intensified, so did their presence on social media, becoming a popular source of debate in comment sections as well as on blogs and in video posts. Misinterpretation regarding what constitutes appropriation frequently led to confusion which in turned acted as a catalyst in creating further public outcry and differing interpretations of the term.<sup>37</sup>

The increasing focus on cultural appropriation signals "a growing awareness of symbolic representation as a key site of political struggle".<sup>38</sup> Evolving out of postmodern thought, the debates of the 1980s and 1990s centred largely on what constitutes racial difference and the inherent links between art, popular culture and politics. These concepts continue to form the backbone of contemporary deliberations, yet there has been a distinct move away from a "more formalist approach to appropriation and pastiche" as focus on the

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<sup>37</sup> See Sieczkowski, "Selena Gomez Bindi"; Brown, "The Obscuring of Black Culture"; Freeman, "Miley Cyrus's twerking routine"; Zimmerman, "The Cultural Crimes of Iggy Azalea"; Callahan, "Katy 'the Queen of Cultural Appropriation' Perry"; Zimmerman, "Can't Shake Off Taylor Swift's Cultural Appropriation?"; Khomami, "Taylor Swift accused of racism" for more information on said incidents and the reaction towards them. Consult bibliography for full bibliographical information.

<sup>38</sup> Coco Fusco, "Passionate Irreverence: Cultural Politics of Identity", in *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, ed. Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems and Philip Yenawine, (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 66.

culturally marginalised begins to “foreground the connection between the political and the symbolic”.<sup>39</sup> This usually takes the form of less overt interest in the impact of postmodern theory on white populations and greater focus on its limitations for African Americans, a core feature of current debates. These changes in academic focus inspired different interpretations and new focal points of the cultural appropriation debate. Lipsitz and hooks wrote their accounts in a style reminiscent of postcolonial narrative, with much focus on the opportunities and constraints placed on appropriators and the appropriated. They tackle motives, white identity and the external shaping of Black culture. Ziff and Rao moved away from this to examine the concept in an almost scientific style, considering the far-reaching influences of appropriation. In the early twenty-first century, after over a decade of prominent white appropriation of hip hop and a shift of government focus from domestic issues to foreign policy following the September 11 attacks, Tate releases a collection of emotional works to dissect the American fascination with Blackness. His more radical investigation of cultural appropriation reflects a growing frustration with the process and is an early example of the capitalisation of Black.

These changes in attitude and focus helped the term evolve, yet it was the role of mass and social media that created the current cultural flashpoint. Although starting in online forums, it is through social media that the term enters public discourse. When analysing Google’s statistics for the search interest in cultural appropriation (see Figure 1), it can be seen to be slowly increasing from

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

the end of 2012 onwards, with the first substantial spike being in August 2013, the same month as Miley Cyrus' controversial VMA performance. After the beginning of 2015, interest begins to increase far more rapidly and steadily, peaking in April 2016. April 2016 was marred by two high-profile controversies that will be discussed in chapter two, both focusing on the appropriation of dreadlocks. When comparing Google's statistics on search interest to its statistics on the topic of 'cultural appropriation' (see Figure 2 and 3), many correlations between the two in the years following 2013 emerge. However, it is also evident that the *topic* predates the *online interest* of recent years. This shows that the concept of cultural appropriation has received some attention prior to the explosion of public interest in the term – in fact, as this genealogy has demonstrated, academic interest predates even Google's analysis. There are numerous reasons behind the snowballing of public interest, which will be explored in more detail in the subsequent sections of this chapter. Yet, while this historical tracing of cultural appropriation has showed that approaches to appropriation have varied, it also highlights that there has been fundamental continuity in interest regarding cultural consumption, cultural preservation, and the broader consequences of white entitlement.

### *An Online Sensation*

As outlined previously, academic interest in the appropriation of African American culture has increased rapidly in the past three decades. Moving from broad discussions of an intrinsic longing for otherness and the historic

commodification of Blackness to narrower explorations of cultural authenticity and appropriation's potential for the enforcement of supremacist structures. Public interest has also heightened as mass media grew to unprecedented levels and allowed anyone, through the medium of the internet, to access or publish critiques regarding social issues. This was further amplified through innovations such as portable computer devices (smartphones and tablets) and the social media revolution which allowed information and opinions to be circulated instantaneously to both public and private audiences. However, while discussions of cultural appropriation have been brought to a critical juncture, there has also been a vocal backlash against focus on the subject and political correctness in general. This section will, therefore, examine the role social media and the omnipresence of online platforms has had in creating this flashpoint.

Unprecedented interconnectivity has resulted in a global society which is increasingly interlinked through 'trending' news, discussions and events. Out of the nine most popular social media platforms, only the photo sharing app Instagram does not offer a 'trending' option to summarise its most popular stories or hashtags at any given point.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, any issue, with enough discussion on social media platforms, can reach vast numbers of users, even if

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<sup>40</sup> These are Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube, Google+, Tumblr, Pinterest and Reddit. They are the most commonly used social media platforms which can be used to connect to peers, share experiences and express opinions. Two other popular platforms have been excluded in this list: WhatsApp for being primarily a closed messaging app that does not facilitate interaction to a larger audience; and LinkedIn as its predominant function is for professional advancement rather than social commentary.

NB. Snapchat utilises premade photo 'stories' to summarise what it perceives to be trending each day; others use algorithms to calculate what has been commented upon most via their platform.

they would not usually be aware these debates. If, for instance, an internet user deems another's behaviour as noteworthy, they can attempt to elevate it into a trending topic to draw attention or publicly chastise. This has become a common occurrence on social media platforms, where the combination between online anonymity, physical detachment and the ease of voicing one's opinion has resulted in a wave of public policing. Jon Ronson, author of *So You've Been Publicly Shamed* (2015) which examines this phenomenon, has called it the "start of a great renaissance of public shaming" comparative to the "public punishments [that] were phased out in 1837 in the United Kingdom and 1839 in the United States".<sup>41</sup> The contemporary cultural appropriation movement can be seen arising from this policing of online misconduct: the instances of outrage against appropriation discussed at the end of section one all attracted vast online criticism on social media sites. These stories consequently move into mass media coverage if there is enough online debate, resulting in a cumulative effect as this additional publicity further aids in trending the issue.

Once discussions have entered an individual's 'virtual personal space', what opinions they are exposed to are often influenced by social media newsfeeds and search engines. Although these sites have enormous potential for introducing people to new debates, personalisation algorithms are employed by all major online platforms which create a filter bubble. While not *hiding* opposing information, these algorithms customise the data a user most easily accesses to suit their personal affiliations. Linked to selective exposure theory, or

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<sup>41</sup> Jon Ronson, *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*, (London: Picador, 2015), 9.



‘confirmation bias’, which theories the tendency to favour information that aligns with pre-existing views while avoiding contradictory opinions, the bubble created depends on the actions of the user as it is who “we connect with online and which stories we click on”<sup>42</sup> that shape the algorithms. This is also called an echo chamber, in which the information we choose to expose ourselves to reflect the opinions we want to hear. Echo chambers are often viewed as harmful to constructive social discourse: they have been likened to “the curation function that was previously performed by news editors”, raising concerns that “instead of creating a global village, [social media has] further fragmented us”.<sup>43</sup> Trending stories break these online filter bubbles as they appear on the user’s newsfeed regardless of their interest in them, however, the commentary of said stories will be engineered to suit the user’s pre-existing preferences. The rise of the online anti-appropriation movement and its subsequent backlash can be strongly attributed to the combination of trending news and personalisation systems. Those predisposed to view the focus on cultural appropriation through a certain lens will be exposed to critiques that align with their viewpoints compounding these beliefs and thus creating opposing movements.

Nevertheless, social media has not solely acted as a divisive force. It is often used as an attempt to connect to others “in the face of all the obstacles that modernity imposes on our lives”<sup>44</sup> or as a tool to learn about foreign

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<sup>42</sup> Kartik Hosanagar, “Blame the Echo Chamber on Facebook. But Blame Yourself, too”, *Wired*, 25 Nov 2016, <https://www.wired.com/2016/11/facebook-echo-chamber/>, (14 May 2017).

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Zeynep Tufekci, “Social Media’s Small, Positive Role in Human Relationships”, *The Atlantic*, 25 Apr 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/04/social-medias-small-positive-role-in-human-relationships/256346/>, (17 May 2017).

experiences. The internet makes this possible through the vast quantity of easily accessible information, the ability to divulge ideas to audiences that one may not usually encounter offline, and the ease with which news can be shared. In fact, Kellner argues that the internet (including social media) offers an open forum incomparable to any other medium. He reasons that mass media, which has been “increasingly organized on a business model” since rapid globalisation resulted in “a series of global mergers . . . that consolidated media ownership into ever fewer hands”, can no longer claim democratic impartiality.<sup>45</sup> By contrast, the internet “provides potential for a democratic revitalization of the media” by providing “a wider array of sources than any instrument of information and communication in history” and allowing “two-way communication and democratic participation in public dialogue”.<sup>46</sup> Although echo chambers are a problem in achieving a truly open forum, this is not limited solely to virtual personal spaces. As Hosanagar explains, “the primary issue is that we deliberately choose actions that push us down an echo chamber”<sup>47</sup> by connecting with like-minded people and news outlets, and often ignoring cross-cutting content when we are presented with it. Just as Americans “have sorted themselves into like-minded neighborhoods” offline, the same appears to happen online.<sup>48</sup> However, if users choose to connect with different perspectives, they are able to exchange ideas easily, without fear of physical confrontation and

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<sup>45</sup> Douglas Kellner, “The Media and Social Problems”, in *Handbook of Social Problems: A Comparative International Perspective*, ed. George Ritzer, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2004), 216.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 221 and 222.

<sup>47</sup> Hosanagar, “Blame the Echo Chamber”.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

with the ability to easily provide sources. Even when trapped in online echo chambers, personalisation algorithms are applied less stringently to the comment section of posts, tweets, videos, pictures or other forms of social media interactions. Commentators on these posts often represent a wide variety of opinions, in which it then becomes the user's responsibility to break through their confirmation bias.

In fact, it was online platforms that allowed greater public discussions of the politics of representation and cultural identity to begin with. Starting on blogs, forums and comment feeds, it was these twenty-first century medias that acted as a catalyst for the contemporary cultural appropriation debate. Unimpeded by the politics of corporate mass media, ordinary citizens and journalists alike could address matters important to them. The ability to circulate media was now widely available which allowed the Black voice to be publicly heard and Black grievances to be expressed on their own terms. In the realm of social media sites, this is particularly prominent on Twitter where online African American communities have formed to empower and connect. According to Pew Research, 27% of Black internet users are on Twitter, higher than any other polled ethnicity.<sup>49</sup> Using the platform to “drive visibility to discussions about black life and culture”,<sup>50</sup> this loose network has been dubbed ‘Black Twitter’. While primarily used to “find strength, and beauty, in the diversity that often goes

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<sup>49</sup> See Jens Manuel Krogstad, “Social Media Preferences Vary by Race and Ethnicity”, *Pew Research Center*, 3 Feb 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/02/03/social-media-preferences-vary-by-race-and-ethnicity/>, (20 May 2017) for statistics.

<sup>50</sup> Lilly Workneh, “How Twitter Has Helped Amplify Black Voices Around The World”, *The Huffington Post*, 21 Mar 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/black-twitter-us\\_56ef1198e4b09bf44a9d9d60](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/black-twitter-us_56ef1198e4b09bf44a9d9d60), (20 May 2017).

unacknowledged in mainstream culture”,<sup>51</sup> Black Twitter has also been instrumental in fuelling socio-political activism with hashtags such as #HandsUpDontShoot, #OscarsSoWhite, and #BlackLivesMatter which has evolved into an international activist movement. Therefore, the internet and social media sites have tremendous potential for constructive social discourse and connection to other cultures, yet users must actively exploit this function of their virtual personal space.

The stark divisions in the reaction towards the cultural appropriation debate are indicative of the impact online platforms have had in shaping this cultural moment. Much of the backlash against the cultural appropriation movement focuses on the idea of ‘political correctness gone mad’, which often blames the “uptight, fun-dodging, thought-policing millennial”<sup>52</sup> generation who “gather in droves to trawl through the net – hungry to drink the blood of their next victim to ‘shame’ on twitter [sic] or through a bull-dozing think piece”.<sup>53</sup> Worries over censorship and the ‘right to offend’ permeate many debates, often pinpointing the origins of these issues to university networks. “Trigger warnings, mandated euphemisms, safe spaces, speech codes, speaker dis-invitations, and anonymous hotlines to report ‘microaggressions’ are just some examples [of how] [c]ampus activists have contributed to a homogenized culture of hypersensitivity

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Brendan O’Neill, “This Obsession with ‘Cultural Appropriation’ is Leading Us Down a Very Dark Path”, *The Spectator*, 24 Nov 2015, <https://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2015/11/this-obsession-with-cultural-appropriation-is-leading-us-down-a-very-dark-path/#>, (13 May 2017).

<sup>53</sup> Eleanor Halls, “Millennials. Stop Being So Offended By, Like, Literally Everything”, *GQ*, 12 Aug 2016, <http://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/millennials-created-generation-snowflake>, (13 May 2017).

that pre-empts speech”<sup>54</sup> argues Stuart Whatley. Pointing out a “common etiology, a ‘willful misunderstanding,’ between many public shamings and acts of campus censorship”,<sup>55</sup> Whatley is echoing author Lionel Shriver’s condemnation of “this touchy ethos, in which offendedness is used as a weapon, [that] has spread far beyond academia, in part thanks to social media”.<sup>56</sup> Shriver, impressing the importance of protecting the right to offend in order to preserve freedom of speech, attributes a trepidation of “instinctive self-censorship”<sup>57</sup> for her avoidance of Facebook and Twitter.

In addition to highlighting the concerns regarding uncontrolled online policing of cultural matters and its potential for self-censorship, these arguments also indicate a generational divide in the cultural appropriation debate. From indignant condemnations of the so-called outrage generation’s incessant need to control their environment to more thought provoking commentaries on the curtailing of artistic freedom; denouncement of the resurgent focus on cultural appropriation and political correctness has largely laid blame on the millennial generation. From this it can reasonably be assumed that much of the backlash is being driven by persons born before the early 1980s – the generally accepted start of the millennial generation. This is in accordance with the condescension towards the term ‘political correctness’ which first appeared in the 1980s and

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<sup>54</sup> Stuart Whatley, “‘A Rather Pathetic Play’: On Public Shaming and the Cult of Censorship”, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 4 May 2015, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/a-rather-pathetic-play-on-public-shaming-and-the-cult-of-censorship/>, (20 May 2017).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Lionel Shriver, “I Hope the Concept of Cultural Appropriation is a Passing Fad”, speech at Brisbane Writers Festival, Sep 2016, published in *The Guardian*, 13 Sep 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/13/lionel-shrivers-full-speech-i-hope-the-concept-of-cultural-appropriation-is-a-passing-fad>, (18 Jan 2017).

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

1990s as “a sarcastic reference to Maoist or Stalinist thought police”.<sup>58</sup> These derogatory connotations seem to have been retained by those criticising the anti-appropriation argument, while their opposition may interpret the idea in a more positive manner as a concept that is constructive to equality and harmonious society.

The emphasis on political correctness in the appropriation-focus backlash also suggests ideological divisions. Traditionally conservatives have been accused of “invoking this vague and ever-shifting enemy”<sup>59</sup> as part of the culture war against liberalism. This has been rekindled, perhaps even stoked to unprecedented levels, by President Donald Trump who proclaimed that “the big problem this country has is being politically correct”.<sup>60</sup> Liberals may also take issue with the idea, particularly those with extremely left-wing ideals who are concerned excessive focus on political correctness promotes censorship or damages cross-cultural contact. The impact of the online echo chamber is, again, evident in these divisions: social media users are “far more likely to interact with others from the same [political] party and to share articles from publications that match their views”<sup>61</sup> resulting in a reinforcement of predisposed opinions

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<sup>58</sup> Neil Howe, “Why Do Millennials Love Political Correctness? Generational Values”, *Forbes*, 16 Nov 2015, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/neilhowe/2015/11/16/america-revisits-political-correctness/#127212302de7>, (16 May 2017).

<sup>59</sup> Moira Weigel, “Political Correctness: How the Right Invented a Phantom Enemy”, *The Guardian*, 20 Nov 2016, [https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/30/political-correctness-how-the-right-invented-phantom-enemy-donald-trump?CMP=fb\\_gu](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/30/political-correctness-how-the-right-invented-phantom-enemy-donald-trump?CMP=fb_gu), (17 May 2017).

<sup>60</sup> Donald Trump quoted in “Republican Debate: Analysis and Highlights”, *The New York Times*, accessed 17 May 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/republican-debate-election-2016-cleveland/trump-on-political-correctness/>, (17 May 2017).

<sup>61</sup> Jasper Jackson, “Twitter Accounts Really are Echo Chambers, Study Finds”, *The Guardian*, 4 Feb 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/feb/04/twitter-accounts-really-are-echo-chambers-study-finds>, (17 May 2017).

regarding political correctness due to generational customs or political ideologies. The nature of these divisions is extremely public, with clashes occurring mainly in mass and social media spheres. This has been interpreted as a demonstration of “who has power and who is powerless . . . [by] legitim[ising] the power of the forces that be and show[ing] the powerless that they must stay in their places”.

<sup>62</sup> The tensions in the cultural appropriation debate can therefore also be understood as an ideological and generational power struggle fought under the guise of political correctness and the morality of cultural appropriation.

The backlash against the focus on appropriation, however, can also be attributed to a prevalent hypersensitivity surrounding the subject. Cumulating online interest in the concept has led to intense scrutiny regarding the use of any cultural products, resulting in cases of cultural exchange being castigated as appropriation. Some of the most controversial instances include the wearing of sombreros at a tequila themed party at Bowdoin College in Maine, the banning of yoga classes at the University of Ottawa, and Western adaptations of ethnic food such as sushi. The high volume of cases accused of appropriation has inflamed tensions with those sceptical of the argument against it, while also discouraging those who agree with the anti-appropriation movement by focusing on specific instances which often do not appear to be harming the original culture. Eckhardt, blogging for *The Huffington Post*, summarises:

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<sup>62</sup> Douglas Kellner, “Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism, and Media Culture”, in *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Critical Reader*, ed. Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2011), 7.

Hypersensitivity to cultural appropriation presents an obstacle to overcoming the issue. Well-intentioned individuals classify any use at all of foreign aesthetic elements as incidences of appropriation. Anything from displaying native artwork to wearing chopsticks in one's hair is classified as horribly offensive, even if the cultural artefact in question doesn't hold particular significance in the nation of origin, such as with the chopsticks. This method . . . causes misconceptions about the nature of cultural appropriation, arguably causing more harm than good by presenting the concept as nothing more than unnecessary political correctness, which some individuals dismiss outright as a matter of principle.<sup>63</sup>

In addition to isolating allies and motivating opponents, the over-use of appropriation rhetoric has contributed to the persistent misunderstanding of what constitutes the concept as oversensitive accusations are themselves a misinterpretation.

This has been bolstered by the general trend of sensationalism in mass media. Journalism has increasingly "turned toward a tabloid style journalism and away from analysis, criticism, and genuine investigative reporting that engaged social problems".<sup>64</sup> Consequently, articles are ever-more frequently concerned with attracting attention, even controversy, rather than quality and accuracy.

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<sup>63</sup> Rachel Eckhardt, "The Fine Line Between Cultural Appropriation and Cultural Diffusion", *The Huffington Post*, 4 Nov 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rachel-eckhardt/the-fine-line-between-cul\\_b\\_8470092.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rachel-eckhardt/the-fine-line-between-cul_b_8470092.html), (14 May 2017).

<sup>64</sup> Kellner, "Media and Social Problems", 219.



These sensationalised stories, commonly termed clickbait if published online, utilise exaggeration of matters that are not thoroughly analysed, resulting in extreme narratives such as oversensitivity to instances of cultural exchange or overreaction to claims of cultural appropriation. Sensationalism is extremely common in social media where contemporary interconnectivity has facilitated the spread of ideas regarding cultural appropriation, yet usually in a hyperbolised manner without in peer-review. This can help explain why appropriation is so frequently misunderstood to mean cultural exchange therefore leading many to believe that those who oppose it are “fuelled by the borderline racist idea that to mix cultures is bad”.<sup>65</sup>

The notion of cultural appropriation entering public discourse has been profoundly impacted by developments in social and online mass media. The snowball effects that frequently determine life in the twenty-first century have resulted in a cumulative growth of interest in the concept. Instant access of information, shaped by the engineering of what we are presented with by personalisation algorithms, have amassed certain perspectives in an individual’s ‘virtual personal space’. The ability to publish emotions and ideas instantaneously, followed by recognition in the form of likes and retweets, can be argued to have resulted in a culture of entitlement regarding one’s beliefs irrespective of research or exposure to opposing opinions. Bolstered by a general trend towards sensationalism, “social media has created a stage for constant

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<sup>65</sup> O’Neill, “This Obsession with ‘Cultural Appropriation’”.

artificial high drama”<sup>66</sup> in which others are easily shamed for their opinions or actions. Danah Boyd’s statement that “the tools that were designed to bring people together are used by people to magnify divisions and undermine social solidarity”<sup>67</sup> is offset by instances such as the community-driven Black Twitter acting as an effective tool of grassroots activism and connectivity. However, there has undoubtedly been a polarisation of opinions regarding the largely online-based movement against cultural appropriation.

This division of opinion relies strongly on a backlash against hypersensitivity towards instances of appropriation. While both those hypersensitive and those staunchly pro-appropriation misunderstand what the term means as per my definition, debates concerning themselves with whether the *focus* on cultural appropriation is potentially harmful has raised some important questions. Over-policing has resulted in fears of censorship both in terms of freedom of speech and artistic license. Additionally, worries over a halt in cultural mixing resulting in stagnation are commonly expressed by those who condemn the focus on cultural appropriation. The possibility of sociocultural paralysis or the “essentialis[ing of] race as the ultimate component of human identity”<sup>68</sup> are issues central to the argument against the focus on cultural appropriation.

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<sup>66</sup> Ronson, 74.

<sup>67</sup> Danah Boyd, “Self-segregation: How a Personalized World is Dividing Americans”, *The Guardian*, 13 Jan 2017, [https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/jan/13/self-segregation-military-facebook-college-diversity?CMP=fb\\_gu](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/jan/13/self-segregation-military-facebook-college-diversity?CMP=fb_gu), (27 Apr 2017).

<sup>68</sup> Yo Zushi, “In Defence of Cultural Appropriation”, *The New Statesman*, 12 Oct 2015, <http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/art-design/2015/10/defence-cultural-appropriation>, (14 Feb 2017).

### *Contesting Culture*

While social media has changed the complexity and dynamic of the cultural appropriation argument, there continues to be continuity in its underlying principles. A key point throughout the term's development, and prominent focus of this thesis, is that appropriation is "inescapably intertwined with cultural politics".<sup>69</sup> Culture is shaped through sets of "symbolic forms by which ordinary people codify their quotidian experience",<sup>70</sup> including artforms, language, personal presentation and societal affiliations. It functions as a space in which different ethnicities, societies and classes can interact with one another, and experiences can be related to peers and strangers alike. These interactions, however, are always socially positioned as "acts of communications and cultural appropriation both reflect and constitute the identities of the individuals and groups involved as well as their socio-political positions".<sup>71</sup> This can refer to whiteness, which can be interpreted as a collection of appropriated cultures, or to Blackness, which has been shaped by systematic discrimination towards cultural forms. As culture is used to explore these identities and relationships, it can be viewed as a contested terrain which provides a platform for both racial agency and reinforcement of existing power dynamics.

Appropriation may be utilised by both marginalised and dominant groups as a tool to assert dominance through the devaluing of the other's cultural

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<sup>69</sup> Richard A. Rogers, "From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation: A Review and Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation", *Communication Theory* 16, no.4 (2006): 474.

<sup>70</sup> K.G. Tomaselli, "A contested terrain: Struggle through culture", *Communicatio* 13, no.2 (1987): 61.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 476.

symbols of power. Minority groups may appropriate a form that usually carries repressive connotations to create a resistive cultural form. An example of this would be the redefining of racially derogative rhetoric.<sup>72</sup> However, while marginalised cultural groups can appropriate to transform a sign of the other's dominance into a symbol of agency, the taking from mainstream culture would usually constitute assimilation, acculturation or simple appreciation due to the pre-eminence of said group. Therefore, simply appropriating is symbolic of power and privilege, and always comprises an assertion of cultural dominance. Appropriation, therefore, represents a symbolically political act which may be unquantifiable in cultural terms but carries the weight of socio-political hierarchies. While appropriation can also be argued to be an attempt to connect to other societies, it can never be truly severed from socio-political determinants as culture is exemplified by its function as an indeterminate space in which wider social factors are explored and reacted to. The unwarranted taking and manipulation of cultural forms, therefore, cannot constitute an apolitical process but should rather be viewed as a form of exercising power and playing a central role in the "ideological battle over symbolic representation".<sup>73</sup>

This is particularly relevant when examining the appropriation of African American culture, as "cultural identity and values are *politically and historically* charged issues for peoples in [the USA] whose access to exercising political power and controlling their symbolic representations has been limited within

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<sup>72</sup> See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* for ideas of signifyin' and other verbal practices.

<sup>73</sup> Fusco, 63.

mainstream culture”.<sup>74</sup> The obstruction of Black expression, representation and voice is deeply rooted in American history, and is often discussed in terms similar to hooks’ assertion that “white cultural imperialist appropriation of black culture maintains white supremacy and is a constant threat to black liberation”.<sup>75</sup>

Cuban-American artist and writer, Coco Fusco, supports this in her argument that white appropriation serves to grant subordinated groups a sense of social progression without any real power. She argues that, after the Reagan and Bush Senior administrations fuelled a backlash against the legal victories of the Civil Rights Movement, it became apparent that “superficial assimilation through consumerism and tokenism can be lauded as a sign of the mainstream’s acquiescence, while fundamental changes needed to bring out a more profound form of equity are still thwarted at every turn”.<sup>76</sup> Fusco further reasons that cultural appropriation is “about reckoning with a history of colonialist power relations”, in which “the erasure of authorship and the exchange of symbols and artifacts across cultural boundaries have never been apolitical”.<sup>77</sup>

The context of white imperialism is poignant in the issue of cultural appropriation. The hierarchical structures synonymous with appropriation have been frequently compared to a new form of neo-colonialism. Olufunmilayo Arewa draws a direct comparison to colonial powers’ extraction of “not only natural resources but also cultural booty”, arguing that “a similar dynamic exists

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 64 (own emphasis).

<sup>75</sup> hooks, 32.

<sup>76</sup> Fusco, 66.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 65.

in contemporary use of African cultural symbols, creations and products”.<sup>78</sup> Others state that “cultural appropriation is at the heart of debates on postcolonialism and neocolonialism”<sup>79</sup> and that those who condemn the focus on appropriation therefore “epitomis[e] the kind of attitude that led to the normalisation of imperialist, colonial rule: ‘I want this, and therefore I shall take it’”.<sup>80</sup> These issues are particularly problematic if the appropriated cultural element is commodified and monetary remuneration is not shared with the original culture. However, implications of commodification are not solely limited to compensation or unjust financial gain. Rogers, building on key Karl Marx writings on exploitation and materialism, argues that:

In the conditions of capitalism, any object that enters the exchange system is inescapably commodified. Commodification abstracts the value of an object (or form or person) so that it can enter systems of exchange. In this process, the use-value and the specificity of the labor and social relations invested in the commodity are lost; it becomes equivalent to all other commodities.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Olufunmilayo Arewa, “Cultural Appropriation: When ‘Borrowing’ Becomes Exploitation”, *The Conversation*, 20 Jun 2016, <https://theconversation.com/cultural-appropriation-when-borrowing-becomes-exploitation-57411>, (12 Mar 2017).

<sup>79</sup> Jonathan Hart, “Translating and Resisting Empire”, in *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation*, ed. Bruce H. Ziff and Pratima V. Rao, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 164-165.

<sup>80</sup> Yassmin Abdel-Magied, “As Lionel Shriver Made Light of Identity, I Had No Choice But To Walk Out On Her”, *The Guardian*, 20 Sep 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/10/as-lionel-shriver-made-light-of-identity-i-had-no-choice-but-to-walk-out-on-her>, (13 Mar 2017).

<sup>81</sup> Rogers, 488.

In this interpretation, any cultural element that is appropriated is commodified through its utility to the appropriator, even if it does not hold commercial value. The process devalues the appropriated form, stripping it of any original cultural or symbolic value and turning it into a commodity fetish.

In the appropriation of African American culture, the value of the cultural form often lies in its non-commercial cultural capital. The nature of this can be varied. It may be associated with the cultural value certain aspects of ethnicity are seen to carry, or, more commonly, it is connected to the perception of inherent 'coolness' in Black culture. This 'hip' or coolness stems from the historically enforced distance between Black and white cultures which created a sense of 'otherness'. Intrinsic voyeuristic interest in the unknown results in an idealisation and exteriorisation of this otherness. Following a prevalent trajectory in American history, Fusco calls the current wave of multiculturalism a continuation of "a long tradition of 'celebrating' (or rather, objectifying) difference as light but exotic entertainment for the dominant culture".<sup>82</sup> In this Fusco is pointing to the preservation of distinct cultures, which is the central pillar of cultural exchange within multiculturalism, as being beneficial to white society through its utilisation of maintained difference. hooks, commenting on the link between 'hip' and Blackness, says that the appropriation of otherness "gives [appropriators] a special flavour, an added spice" as "encounters with Otherness are clearly marked as more exciting, more intense, and more

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<sup>82</sup> Fusco, 64.

threatening”.<sup>83</sup> Yet this engagement with the other is based on a stereotyped ideal of hipness which ignores the historical, social and political context that helped create the cultural form. It is a superficial communication in which the appropriator gains self-appraised cultural capital while the appropriated lose their claim to and the symbolic value of the appropriated form.

The imposition of value on societies and cultural elements is in itself indicative of power: “in fetishizing and reifying ‘artificial’ meanings . . . the social relations and history involved in that act of commodification are obscured”.<sup>84</sup> It also demonstrates “control over cultural difference through the presentation of static models of diversity”.<sup>85</sup> These mechanisms suggest a neo-colonial relationship between dominant white and marginalised Black cultures. They represent an almost imperialistic power of cultural relations in the USA, exemplifying the hierarchical structures embedded in appropriation but also its role in shaping cultural identities.

The inherent power structures in appropriation are what differentiates it from cultural appreciation. Those who appropriate often claim they are doing so to connect to the appropriated culture, however political implications render this problematic. Cultural exploitation can “include appropriative acts that appear to indicate acceptance or positive evaluation of a colonized culture . . . but which nevertheless function to establish and reinforce the dominance of the colonizing

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<sup>83</sup> hooks, 157 and 26.

<sup>84</sup> Rogers, 488.

<sup>85</sup> Fusco, 64.



culture".<sup>86</sup> Frequently appropriators assume their actions are paying homage to the original culture or even uplifting its social status, yet in reality they are ignoring the depth and complexity of the appropriated element. Understanding the difference between cultural exchange and cultural appropriation is key to any debate relating to these concepts. Cultural mixing is desirable and natural in a multicultural society. It facilitates good relations between ethnicities and can inspire progressive notions of race. Nevertheless, the guise of cultural exchange is often used in place of a deeper examination regarding socio-political structures: by 'sharing' cultures an image of equality is produced, even when the sharing is one-directional or not as voluntary as the borrowing individual may believe. Identifying cases of straightforward cultural exchange can be difficult as cross-cultural communications are rarely devoid of power. The context in which the exchange occurs will strongly alter its dimensions; for instance, individuals may immerse themselves in said cultures thus limiting the superficiality of the interaction. Exchanges can also be mutually beneficial for both parties, especially if involving artistic artefacts or knowledge such as traditional medicine. In the framework of white and African American cultural exchange, however, the context of historical oppression, power and privilege is so deeply ingrained in contemporary society that it continues to overshadow cultural communication.

The danger of cultural exchange that unconsciously constitutes appropriation is that, instead of bringing communities closer together, it further isolates them as the marginalised have not participated in the exchange. This

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<sup>86</sup> Rogers, 486.

results in a cultural exploration that tends to be superficial at best, connecting only to elements that may interest the dominant group without reciprocation or genuine understanding of the appropriated society. Increased cultural fluidity has been encouraged by postmodern fascination of flexible cultural property and identity. However, this phenomenon may seem “less like emancipation and more like intense alienation”<sup>87</sup> to minority cultures who are still fighting for the right to their own self-defined identity. The attitude toward postmodern values regarding transformative identity and culture is revealing of power structures in itself. Fusco comments upon this, remarking that the interpretation of identity as flexible and performative fails to consider the “controlling forces that affect identity, such as racism and the determining force of collective historical experience”.<sup>88</sup> She further states that “such elisions still appear too similar to the racial violence that has robbed many in [the USA] of the right, first to be considered human beings, and then to have access to political power”.<sup>89</sup>

Issues revolving around postmodern identity also raise questions of ‘whose culture is it anyway?’ The question of whether fundamental rights to culture or cultural elements exist can be examined from a variety of viewpoints. Within contemporary discourse “the very notion of cultural purity can seem like something of a nostalgic fantasy”<sup>90</sup> due to prevalent multiculturalism and ever-increasing awareness of cross-cultural influences in cultural forms. In the world of art, pastiche, intertextuality and copyright have complicated notions of

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<sup>87</sup> Fusco, 64.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 63.

cultural ownership, while increasing numbers of hyphenated or mixed-race citizens blur social lines of cultural belonging. Yet even when there are clear connections between cultural forms and cultural groups, it can be difficult to assert any form of rights. There are logistical issues regarding ownership of often intangible forms as well as a lack of cultural moderators. Without “central organisations with absolute mandates to represent minority groups”<sup>91</sup> it can be difficult to seek permission for cultural reproduction or to verify claims of authenticity. Furthermore, my definition of appropriation specifies that the appropriated form must have symbolic worth to the original culture, yet there is no clear person who has the authority to decide what is culturally significant.

Another element in fluid racial identities is the notion of post-racialism. The concept centres on the idea of a society free from racial bias, prejudice and discrimination. Generally accepted to have been conceived at some point in the early 1970s, the term exploded onto public discourse after the election of President Barack Obama in 2008. The first African American president seemed to signal that race had detached itself from identity to allow all citizens to have equal opportunities to fulfil the American dream. Conservative radio host Lou Dobbs declared that “we are now in a twenty-first century post-partisan, post-racial society”,<sup>92</sup> while shortly afterwards Chris Matthews of MSNBC said of President Obama, “You know, I forgot he was black tonight for an hour”.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Zushi, “In Defence of Cultural Appropriation”.

<sup>92</sup> Lou Dobbs, *Lou Dobbs Radio on United Stations Radio Networks*, Nov 2009, see “Dobbs Calls On Listeners To Rise Above ‘Partisan and Racial Element That Dominates Politics’”, *Media Matters*, 12 Nov 2009, <https://www.mediamatters.org/video/2009/11/12/dobbs-calls-on-listeners-to-rise-above-partisan/156917>, (20 Jun 2017).

<sup>93</sup> Chris Matthews quoted in “‘I Forgot He Was Black’: Chris Matthews Under Fire for Comment About Obama”, *Fox News*, 28 Jan 2010, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2010/01/28/chris-matthews-saying-forgot-obama-black-state-union.html>, (20 Jun 2017).

However, post-racialism carries some controversial connotations. Most commonly used by white social commentators, many Black Americans have argued that the term is “an attempt by white people to liberate themselves from the burden of having to deal with that legacy [of chattel slavery and subsequent racial oppression]”.<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, post-racialism erases race as a base for identity as it describes a world free of racial categorisation. Children of mixed-race couples have often been construed as the “avatar for a colorblind civilization”:<sup>95</sup> symbolic of a cultural mixing which transcends race to produce a new post-racial identity. There are several issues with this, including that not all peoples (mixed-race or otherwise) desire to rid themselves of their racial identity. Minorities have often “created rich cultures out of resistance and unity in the face of exclusion, marginalization, and domination”<sup>96</sup> of which they are proud to have forged their collective and individual identities from. Moreover, there are fears that a post-racial identity would stem from “celebrating, recognizing, and eventually assimilating racial identities into the dominant culture”,<sup>97</sup> masking the impact of institutionalised racism and therefore providing a framework for maintaining it. Therefore, the notion that race can cease to be a deterministic force in US socio-political can be interpreted as a vehicle for avoiding confrontation with the realities of white privilege and systematic racism, while

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<sup>94</sup> Anna Holmes, “America’s ‘Postracial’ Fantasy”, *The New York Times Magazine*, 30 Jun 2015, [https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/05/magazine/americas-postracial-fantasy.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/05/magazine/americas-postracial-fantasy.html?_r=0), (22 Jun 2017).

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Rebecca John, “Why ‘Post-Racial’ Worldviews Are Actually Just Racism in Disguise”, *Everyday Feminism*, 23 Feb 2015, <http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/02/post-racial-is-racism/>, (22 Jun 2017).

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

also indicating a process that would ultimately result in an omnipresent white identity.

At its most basic form, cultural appropriation is a theft of resources which treats marginalised cultures “as a resource to be ‘mined’ and ‘shipped home’ for consumption”.<sup>98</sup> It is a vehicle of commodification, sociocultural domination and superficial acceptance. As an example of contemporary fetishisation, it is a clear continuation of the historic commercialisation and prying interest in African American culture. Greg Tate argued this in the early 2000s, believing that “capitalism’s original commodity fetish was the Africans auctioned here as slaves, whose reduction from subjects to abstracted objects has made them seem larger than life and less than human at the same time” thus resulting in their very existence becoming a “hungered-after taboo”.<sup>99</sup> Stereotypes of ‘Blackness’ have consequently ingrained themselves into social perception which tend to form the core of cultural appropriation, negating African American efforts to cast them off. They are also constant “reminders of a painful legacy of bigotry and disempowerment that has fuelled [African Americans’] systematic misrepresentation, *and* [are] the starting point for understanding the racially inflected, voyeuristic impulses in Euro-American and other colonizing cultures”.<sup>100</sup> Cultural appropriation, often promoting racial stereotypes and historic fetishisation, can therefore serve as an artificial exploration of identity that ultimately further alienates and misrepresents marginalised cultures.

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<sup>98</sup> Rogers, 486.

<sup>99</sup> Tate, “Introduction”, 4.

<sup>100</sup> Fusco, 64-65 (emphasis in original text).

Moreover, cultural appropriation “has historically served as a substitute for ceding to those [marginalised] peoples any real political or economic power”.<sup>101</sup> There are two core elements to this, one being appropriation obstructing cultural power and ‘taking’ fiscal profits. The other is the idea of it acting as a proxy battleground that mirrors more tangible socio-political issues. This notion is supported when the creation of this cultural moment of appropriation is considered. Interest in the concept started during the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, decades which saw improvements in African American rights and prosperity but were also marked by Black poverty, the socio-economic aftermath of the 1980s crack cocaine epidemic, and the race riots following the Rodney King incident in 1991. Similarly, the term exploded into the public mindset in the early 2010s, coinciding with contemporary issues such as police brutality, racial profiling and the Black Lives Matters movement. These correlations could indicate that cultural disputes, such as the cultural appropriation argument, serve to detract from hard-hitting ‘real-life’ issues or to act out power struggles in less tangible environments.

There are, of course, seemingly less antagonistic motivations for the appropriation of culture including empathy, admiration and exploration of self. The first two of these highlight the importance of cross-cultural movement which fosters understanding and positive relations. They also indicate the potential danger of placing too much emphasis on race in culture which would serve to segregate cultural groups, an end that is antithetical to what the majority of anti-

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<sup>101</sup> Fusco, 66.

appropriation campaigners desire. Exploration as a motivation for appropriation is, however, somewhat more complicated in its morality. Lipsitz argues that exploration of self may “involve the appropriation, colonization, or eroticization of difference” but that these “appearances of escape and appropriation can also provide protective cover for explorations of individual and collective identity . . . detours [that] may enable individuals to solve indirectly problems that they could not address directly”.<sup>102</sup> When this is carried out by members of themselves aggrieved communities – racial, sexual or otherwise – this can in many ways be justifiable or more readily understood. However, when it is dominant group(s) that appropriate to explore their identity, in the process ignoring their own privilege, the morality of it becomes more questionable. Furthermore, while the right to creation, labour and identity are very real arguments in favour of appropriation, the fetishisation of a historically repressed culture raises ethical questions. The role of context and awareness of power structures is clear in appropriation, showing how the debate over cultural appropriation is synonymous with wider debates regarding cultural politics.

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<sup>102</sup> Lipsitz, 62.

## You Are Not My Hair

*Oh, your face it may be dark, but you'll be happy as a lark –*

*When they straighten all the colored people's hair.<sup>1</sup>*

When socialite, teen superstar and cosmetic range entrepreneur, Kylie Jenner, posted a picture of herself in cornrows on Instagram in July 2015, there was an explosion of vocal opinions regarding the appropriateness of the hairstyle. Known for changing her hair frequently to match her outfit, Jenner was accused of 'dressing up' in Black styles for vanity reasons rather than cultural connection or practicality (Jenner does not have naturally afro-textured hair which is easier to maintain in styles such as cornrows or braids). Leading the criticism was African American actress and civil rights campaigner Amandla Stenberg. Stenberg had been attempting to highlight the issue of the appropriation of Black hair for some time, having earlier that year published an informative video about the subject entitled *Don't Cash Crop My Cornrows*. She directly responded to Jenner's cornrows, commenting on her picture in order to highlight the social issues it raises: "When u appropriate black features and culture but fail to use ur position of power to help black Americans by directing attention towards ur wigs instead of police brutality or racism #whitegirlsdoitbetter" [sic].<sup>2</sup>

The Jenner controversy, which broadened to include a number of contemporary celebrities, was reminiscent of the so-called 'Bo Braid' sensation

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<sup>1</sup> Gussie Davis, "When They Straighten All the Colored People's Hair", Spaulding & Gray, (1894).

<sup>2</sup> amandlastenberg, 12 Jul 2015, comment on kyliejenner, "I woke up like disss", *Instagram*, 11 Jul 2015, <https://www.instagram.com/p/5AWcLYHGty/?hl=en>, (23 Aug 2017).



of the early 1980s. For the hit film *10* (1979), Bo Derek, a white actress, styled her hair in beaded cornrows. The style proved hugely popular with white women and subsequently became known as 'Bo Braids' even as African Americans "hastened to point out that this hairstyle has African roots".<sup>3</sup> At the time, reactions to the widespread appropriation of cornrows were mixed: some "saw it as adding insult to injury . . . After years of being seen as the antibeauty, Black women now had to face something that was essentially stripped of its historical legacy and only given acclaim after being adopted by a White, blonde woman", while others "liked to point to Bo Derek as an example of America's embracing a multicultural, more inclusive beauty ideal".<sup>4</sup> These contrasting sentiments are echoed in the Jenner debate in which there are arguments for the spreading of Black hairstyles not constituting an act of appropriation, but rather an indicator of greater cultural acceptance in a time of political and racial unrest.

Both incidents provoked strong responses highlighting that there is a wide variety of issues at play, including the acknowledgment of cultural origins, the motivations behind interest in African American cultural beauty rituals, and the potential implications of racially segregating hairstyles. These themes recur frequently in discussions about the appropriation of various Black hairstyles, as do questions regarding the importance of hair as a cultural form which has at times been interpreted as an innocuous matter with little 'real' significance. Dismissals along the lines of 'it's just hair' are frequently met with frustrated

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<sup>3</sup> Victoria Sherrow, *Encyclopaedia of Hair: A Cultural History*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), 98.

<sup>4</sup> Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*, (New York: St Martin's Griffin, 2001), 101.

explanations of racialised beauty standards and accounts of discrimination against natural Black hairstyles, usually in the workplace but also in terms of broader social discourse. These arguments are countered by insinuations that the adoption and commodification of Black hairstyles by non-Blacks is part of the path to equality, or by assurances that hair is no longer a contentious racial issue. Yet the appropriation of styles designed for afro-textured hair continues to evoke extreme and polarised reactions, suggesting that there is more at stake than the arguments presented from both sides of the discussion.

As is common with many socio-political aspects of African American culture, its past permeates modern society and forms the backbone of contemporary discourse. Therefore, to fully understand discussions surrounding the appropriation of Black hairstyling, one must examine the history of Black hair. The intrinsic cultural and social significance of hair in African American communities is apparent throughout history and can be traced from as early as the fifteenth century. Hair “functioned as a carrier of messages in most West African societies”, as elaborate styles were “used to indicate a person’s marital status, age, religion, ethnic identity, wealth, and rank within the community”.<sup>5</sup> Great pride was placed in the aesthetic value of hairstyles in many African cultures, as well as its spiritual qualities as “communication from the gods and spirits was thought to pass through the hair to get to the soul”.<sup>6</sup> During the transatlantic slave trade, however, traders often shaved the heads of

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

transported Africans, usually for sanitary purposes although it also had the added effect of depriving slaves of their identity and dehumanising them to indistinguishable cargo. Subsequent regrowth came to signify the position held in plantation slavery: those who toiled in the fields kept their hair short or covered for practical reasons, while those in more frequent contact with the white population – cooks and housekeepers for instance – often imitated the styles of their owners. Slaves “who worked inside the plantation houses were required to present a neat and tidy appearance . . . so men and women often wore tight braids, plaits, and cornrows”.<sup>7</sup>

Eurocentric beauty ideals have dominated in the USA since the arrival of the first Black slaves, resulting those of African heritage being viewed as unattractive and inferior. Black hair became synonymous with the sub-human status of Blacks in the New World and was commonly referred to in a derogatory manner, being described as ‘wool’ or ‘nappy’, for instance. These words permeated literature from the early eighteenth century onwards, with runaway slave advertisements, slave auction posters and daily newspapers frequently using “this classification . . . likening the hair to animal’s”.<sup>8</sup> Even anti-slavery campaigners such as Harriet Beecher Stowe used negative images to portray African American hair. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) the character Topsy’s hair is described as “woolly” and braided in small plaits which stuck out “in every direction”.<sup>9</sup> The idea of ‘good’ (long, lacking frizz or curls) and ‘bad’ (afro-textured in its natural state) hair became ingrained in American society, creating

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>9</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, (St Ives: Wordsworth Classics, 1995), 221.

a hair texture hierarchy that spread to within Black communities. Ingrid Banks calls this distinction “probably the most indelible construction of hair that occupies the psyche of African Americans” in which “‘Good hair’ becomes a marker of privilege in the eyes of those who have it as well as those who don’t”.<sup>10</sup>

The preference for those with straighter, ‘neater’ hair continued after emancipation when “straight hair translated to economic opportunity and social advantage”.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, in the century following the Thirteenth Amendment it was common for African Americans to straighten their hair to resemble Caucasian Americans. To achieve this, afro-textured hair would be submerged in homemade chemical solutions followed by painful hours combing out the natural ‘kink’. Chemical relaxers were developed in the twentieth century, yet these continued to cause pain and extensive damage to the hair and scalp. Malcom X recalls conking (chemically straightening) his hair: “my head caught fire. I gritted my teeth and tried to pull the sides of the kitchen table together. The comb felt as if it was raking my skin off”.<sup>12</sup> During the mid-1960s, however, increasing numbers of African Americans began to wear their hair naturally or in styles “meant for naturally textured Black hair”<sup>13</sup>. Inspired by years of sit-ins, freedom rides and increasing legal recognition, Black consciousness exploded in new ways and movements such as Black is Beautiful flourished. Natural hairstyles were

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<sup>10</sup> Ingrid Banks, *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women’s Consciousness*, (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 28.

<sup>11</sup> Byrd and Tharps, 17.

<sup>12</sup> Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, ed. Alex Haley, (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin Books, 1968), 137.

<sup>13</sup> Byrd and Tharps, 57.

commonly interpreted to be tied directly to political movements, particularly the afro to the Black Panther Party. Byrd and Tharps describe the period thus:

In the mid-sixties, Black hair underwent its biggest change since Africans arrived in America. The very perception of hair shifted from one of style to one of statement. And right or wrong, Blacks and Whites came to believe that the way Black people wore their hair said something about their politics. Hair came to symbolize either a continued move toward integration in the American political system or a growing cry for Black power and nationalism.<sup>14</sup>

The increasingly widespread decision of African Americans to wear their hair in Afrocentric hairstyles deepened the connection between Blackness and hairstyling. In fact, those who continued to straighten their hair were frequently ostracised as 'Uncle Toms'.

The large-scale adoption of styles that accentuated natural afro-texture was radical through its rejection of dominant white beauty ideals and its celebration of Blackness. Wearing Black hair naturally or in afros, cornrows, braids and dreadlocks was a public stance against the historic repression of afro-textured hair. Nonetheless, hegemonic Eurocentric beauty standards still dominate contemporary American society. The University of Minnesota's open-access social science project, *The Society Pages*, published a collection of modern

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 51.

make-up advertisements in which the Black models' features had been manipulated because they "are expected to look white in order to qualify as beautiful".<sup>15</sup> These images showcase the dominance and normality of Caucasian beauty ideals. The psychological and social consequences of being perceived as aesthetically unappealing in wider society have been documented in a variety of forms. For instance, Toni Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), explores the impact of white beauty standards while Althea Prince offers personal accounts of the important journey African Americans undertake with their natural hair in her non-fiction book, *The Politics of Black Women's Hair* (2009). Similarly, there have been attempts to reclaim offensive descriptions of Black hair: bell hooks' book, *Happy to be Nappy* (1999), Carolivia Herron's children's story, *Nappy Hair* (1997), and singer India.Arie's single "I Am Not My Hair" (2005) are examples of efforts to change the narrative of afro-textured hair.

Despite the persistence of Eurocentric beauty ideals, the first prominent appropriations of Black hairstyles began to occur simultaneously with broad-scale reclaiming of ethnic hair heritage. White celebrities such as Barbara Streisand and Art Garfunkel wore afros during the 1960s and 70s, and of course it was Bo Derek who catapulted braids into a white fashion sensation. Mainstream America's interest in Black hairstyles was ground-breaking in that it reversed the flow of beauty ideals: white women were suddenly "willing to spend hours having cornrows put in, at a cost of between \$100 to \$300".<sup>16</sup> However,

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<sup>15</sup> Lisa Wade, "When Whiteness is the Standard of Beauty", *The Society Pages*, 16 May 2014, <https://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2014/05/16/white-as-beautiful-black-as-white/>, (28 Jul 2017).

<sup>16</sup> Sherrow, 98.

these appropriations also held problematic connotations. Many resented how quickly whites became involved in a Black cultural movement that had taken centuries to manifest. Others claimed that the adoption of Afrocentric hairstyles was disrespectful due to their connection to Black empowerment movements. The disparity between African Americans adopting straighter hairstyles for socioeconomic reasons such as increasing chances to “get a job and to be deemed acceptable and more easily integrated into society”,<sup>17</sup> and white women wearing braids because it was ‘hip’ at the time presents perhaps the most serious issue.

In fact, simultaneous with the Bo braids trend, Black women were making national headlines for challenging employment discrimination against the wearing of cornrows. One of the first widely known cases was *Renee Rogers v American Airlines* (1981), which was dismissed in court due to “lack of jurisdiction”.<sup>18</sup> In 1987, Pamela Mitchell gained national attention after being sent home for wearing her hair in cornrows in her job at the Marriott Hotel in Washington, D.C. Her supervisor cited a “prohibition against extreme hair styles” which Mitchell countered with an argument that she wore “neat small braids” that were “an expression of my culture”.<sup>19</sup> The same year, the Hyatt Regency hotel chain also battled multiple legal cases regarding discrimination: its Chicago hotel was challenged by Pamela Walker while Cheryl Tatum filed legal action

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<sup>17</sup> Byrd and Tharps, 103.

<sup>18</sup> *Renee Rogers v American Airlines*, 527 F.Supp. 229, United States District Court, (New York, Dec 1981). See <https://onlabor.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Rogers.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> Linda Wheeler, “Hotel Worker Fights to Keep Cornrows”, *The Washington Post*, 5 Jan 1988, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1988/01/05/hotel-worker-fights-to-keep-cornrows/5ac8713e-4910-4ca3-a8e5-d84af1b544f1/?utm\\_term=.f8680fb5186f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1988/01/05/hotel-worker-fights-to-keep-cornrows/5ac8713e-4910-4ca3-a8e5-d84af1b544f1/?utm_term=.f8680fb5186f), (26 Jul 2017).

against the Crystal City branch in suburban Washington, D.C. Both women had braided hair, and Tatum had already previously observed her supervisor's instruction to "pull the braids into a bun to comply with Hyatt's dress code".<sup>20</sup> She was later told to un-braid the hairstyle which she refused, resulting in the loss of her employment. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission eventually "ruled that the Hyatt Hotels engaged in racial discrimination by prohibiting Black women from wearing their hair in cornrows".<sup>21</sup> While these cases highlight that by the late 1980s employment law had begun to recognise the cultural heritage of certain hairstyles, Black styles continued to be seen as socially unacceptable, especially in professional spheres.

Current debates about the racial politics of hair are predominantly reactions to incidents that have become 'viral' on social media. Arguments can be split crudely into two viewpoints: either appropriation is seen as destructive and dismissive of African American cultural identity and history, or as a sign that Black hair is being "'promoted' in the same way that 'white' hair was 'promoted' in the past".<sup>22</sup> Sometimes the cultural significance of Black hairstyles and the implications of their appropriation are dismissed as superfluous. Yet in context with its history, the pervasiveness of hair as a racial issue becomes clear. Althea Prince argues that "hair is at the heart of many Black women's sense of who they

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<sup>20</sup> E.R. Shipp, "Braided Hair Style At Issue in Protests Over Dress Codes", *The New York Times*, 23 Sep 1987, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/09/23/garden/braided-hair-style-at-issue-in-protests-over-dress-codes.html?pagewanted=all>, (27 Jul 2017).

<sup>21</sup> Byrd and Tharps, 106.

<sup>22</sup> Banks, 36.



are in the wider world that they navigate daily”.<sup>23</sup> It functions as a point where race, beauty and power intersect for African Americans. These themes and tensions dominate contemporary debates regarding the appropriation of Black hair, which has become a significant aspect of the more generalised consciousness of and sensitivity toward cultural appropriation.

In examining the appropriation of African American hair, this chapter will view Black hair practices as a cultural form with a clear historical trajectory. The appropriation of cornrows and braids receive much coverage due to the larger movement against the fetishization of ‘ghetto’ and ‘urban’-ness. However, my focus will be on the appropriation of the afro and dreadlocks. These provide a broader scope with regard to the politics of appropriation due to the afro’s overwhelmingly clear racial history and dreadlocks’ more ambiguous one. Between these two hairstyles questions concerning the continued symbolic importance and racial origin of particular styles will be examined, as well as what impact the passage of time has on the harmfulness of appropriation. This connects to other conversations about the power of “normalization” to “Caucasian standards of beauty that still dominate on television, in movies, in popular magazines”,<sup>24</sup> and the whitewashing of appropriated cultural forms. It is worth noting that the case study examples throughout this chapter are often geared towards the experiences of Black women, rather than men, as conversations about hair are more frequently examined from a female viewpoint. I believe that the issues at play in the *appropriation* of hair are less gendered

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<sup>23</sup> Althea Prince, *The Politics of Black Women’s Hair*. (Ontario: Insomniac Press, 2009), 16.

<sup>24</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 255.

than this suggests and that the prevalence of female examples stems from reasons such as a greater preference for short natural hair by men (which is not possible to appropriate without naturally afro-textured hair) and the gendered nature of beauty ideals in general. Therefore, the chapter will not actively differentiate between male and female experiences but does reflect the general genderisation of beauty narratives.

### *Nostalgia for the 'fro?*

Of all Afrocentric hairstyles, the afro is perhaps the most intrinsically linked to Blackness. It is traditionally regarded as being deeply connected to African American cultural identity and periods of politically-charged history. While still requiring maintenance, it often is viewed as the style that most resembles natural Black hair through its hyperbolization of afro-texture. Famous as a sign of Black power and resistance, the afro is evocative of civil rights icons such as Angela Davis, Assata Shakur and Kathleen Cleaver. There is some debate, however, as to whether these political links continue to be as strongly present in the twenty-first century. Althea Prince maintains that “rendered meanings that may or may not be correct” still plague African Americans: “women who wear their hair in its natural form are assumed to be radical, or at least progressive . . . . On the other hand, women with straightened hair are often assumed to be conservative”.<sup>25</sup> Byrd and Tharps believe differently, arguing instead that “talk about Black hair has shifted away from the political arena and into the realm of

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<sup>25</sup> Prince, 16.

fashion and style".<sup>26</sup> They praise this development to some extent, hypothesising that the cross-cultural exchange of hairstyles will result in "Black men and women [being] finally freer than ever before to choose a hairstyle based on personal taste rather than what mainstream society deems acceptable".<sup>27</sup>

White appropriation of the afro blurs the boundaries between fashion and politics, just as the style did in the twentieth century when popularised by African Americans. Yet, the ways in which it does are inimical to one another. The Black afro, regardless of a continued connection to Black nationalism, remains a symbol of Black pride and defiance. White appropriation can be construed in a variety of ways, including as a gesture of socio-political solidarity, as co-option of cultural origins, or as an appreciation of its aesthetics. Due to the afro's political history, however, any form of appropriation will carry political connotations, even if these are not necessarily evident to the appropriator. Further complicating the matter is the impossibility of a white afro. As the style requires naturally afro-textured hair, white appropriations are in fact mislabelling volumized twist-outs. Nonetheless, the afro's increasing acceptance by mainstream society can be interpreted as constructive to positive race relations and as an acceptance of Black beauty standards. Yet the appropriation of something so inherently connected to Blackness raises questions concerning social consciousness and the progressiveness of racially autonomous cultural forms.

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<sup>26</sup> Byrd and Tharps, 167.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 168-169.

The political affiliations of the afro have been in decline since the dissolution of the Black Panther Party in the early 1970s. Its normalisation to a racial, rather than specifically political, hairstyle was helped by blaxploitation films such as *Coffy* (1973) and *Foxy Brown* (1974) in which Pam Grier, an African American actress, sported a large afro while the stories hyperbolized images about Black communities. This helped depoliticise the afro at the time by removing it from the context of civil rights and Black resistance, yet kept it closely tied to socio-political ideas of race. Subsequently, the afro increasingly entered mainstream culture through a variety of popular culture platforms. Black musicians such as Lenny Kravitz, Macy Gray and Bruno Mars have sported the style. Blaxploitation films and their use of the afro began to be satirised through parodies such as *Austin Powers in Goldmember* (2002). Eventually, under continued scrutiny regarding lack of diversity, the fashion world too embraced the afro: Prada's 2015 Autumn/Winter runway included Lineisy Montero who sported a small afro, and the 2017 Pre-Fall Gucci campaign featured an all-Black cast wearing afros in a tribute to the Northern Soul movement.

The presence of the afro in a range of mainstream culture outlets both reflects and aids its move into a matter of personal style rather than of political statement. However, there have been contemporary efforts to reignite the nationalistic connotations of the afro. Perhaps the most famous of these is Beyoncé Knowles' 2016 Super Bowl half-time performance. In it the singer raised her hand in the Black Power salute while her dancers wore Panther-style berets and paid homage to Malcolm X through choreographing themselves into an 'X'. Heightening the overt Blackness were her dancers' afros and the performance of

Knowles' politically charged song "Formation" which addresses contemporary racial tensions and includes the lyric "I like my baby hair, with baby hairs and afros".<sup>28</sup> While the dancers' hairstyles were only one of many explicitly Black components, their use clearly aligns them with the current struggle for Black equality in popular culture and the broader population's mindset. If this connection between the afro and racial politics is re-established in contemporary society, then any appropriation of the afro would also be an appropriation of its political connotations. For example, a member of the dominant white community may adopt an afro hairstyle as a show of solidarity with Black political movements. Although this act is well-intended, it may be perceived as a co-option by African Americans. Movements for racial autonomy that are associated with the afro, such as the Black Panthers and Black is Beautiful, were constructed around Blackness in a society that typically valorised whiteness. The appropriation of their symbols appears to re-centre the movements towards the white mainstream. Thus, white adoption of cultural forms symbolic of Black self-determination may be perceived as disrespectful, or even as an attempt at homogenisation of Black autonomy.

This inherent connection between the afro and Black power ideology also complicates Knowles' use of the hairstyle. Despite the fact that she is Black, her performance can be argued to constitute a co-option of Black Nationalism if it is interpreted as a superficial politicisation of the afro which commercialises its contentious history. Knowles, who is of African American and Louisiana Creole

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<sup>28</sup> Beyoncé Knowles et al, "Formation", *Lemonade*, prod. by Asheton Hogan, Mike Will Made It and Beyoncé Knowles, Parkwood Entertainment/Columbia, (6 Feb 2016).

descent, could be described as a member of a dominant social group through her wealth and influence, rather than by virtue of ethnicity or race. Her socioeconomic status protects her from many of the issues that less privileged Black Americans face. This, coupled with the contrast between her racialised Super Bowl show and her previous work which has largely been characterised by apolitical themes, could be argued to indicate the performance appropriated Black Panther symbols for commercial purposes. Supporting this idea is the heightened racial politics at the time guaranteeing a large reaction from the media and public. This would mean that Knowles is appropriating from her own cultural history, even if not from her social class. The consequences of this are similar to aforementioned non-Black appropriations in that it re-centres a largely grassroots activist movement towards the homogenised mainstream. Yet, in this case, the co-option of the afro's symbolism also stems from its commercialisation which turned the style into a fetishized commodity. In the process the afro's cultural and political power is diminished to a superficial symbolism that no longer presents a real threat as it can be utilised by the dominant mainstream for financial gain. The commodification of the afro, then, represents a misappropriation as it works against the form's original intended purpose by being destructive to the Black liberation narrative. However, the performance placed the afro as an overtly Black form into the centre of mass media, the Super Bowl representing the epitome of US pop culture, which can be argued to be radical, no matter the superficiality of the Blackness.

The link between the depoliticization and greater acceptance of the afro within mass-produced popular culture follows the process of the 'culture

industry' as conceptualised by the Frankfurt school in the 1930s. This position theorised that cultural artefacts within the context of capitalism would exhibit "the same features as other products of mass production: commodification, standardization, and massification" so as to provide "ideological legitimation of the existing capitalist societies and of integrating individuals into its way of life".<sup>29</sup> Through the afro's commercialisation and integration into the mainstream, its political connotations have, it could thus be argued, been negated. This links to the idea of the 'conquest of cool' as theorised by Thomas Frank. Frank argues that since the 1960s capitalism has become centred on co-opting what he terms the 'counterculture idea'. This is seen to be a tool "with which the Establishment hoped to buy off and absorb its opposition [while] emblems of dissent that were quickly translated into harmless consumer commodities".<sup>30</sup> The Black radical image associated with the afro can be seen to have undergone this process, therefore detaching Black Panther iconography from the revolutionary politics that were central to the Panther's ideology. Yet, even when the afro is detached from nationalistic politics, it is still linked closely to African Americans. Blaxploitation films and fashion campaigns that use the style are focused on Blackness, and Knowles' Super Bowl performance, whether authentic or not, centred on a celebration of Black leaders. The afro, therefore, has remained closely linked to Blackness even as it is distanced from the radical political positions of the Black Power movement. However, it also highlights the

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<sup>29</sup> Douglas Kellner, "The Media and Social Problems", in *Handbook of Social Problems: A Comparative International Perspective*, ed. George Ritzer, (Thousand Oaks, CA.: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2004), 210.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: business culture, counterculture, and the rise of hip consumerism*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 16.

impossibility of removing the afro from *all* political associations as it continues to represent an overt Blackness that sits parallel to white beauty standards which is in itself political.

In August 2015, *Allure* magazine published a tutorial entitled “You (Yes, You) Can Have An Afro – even if you have straight hair”. The responding outrage quickly labelled the article the height of cultural appropriation, stressing that “when it comes to the afro, the offensiveness of this suggestive cultural appropriation is far greater than others . . . because the origin and popularity of the hairstyles runs far deeper than anything that belongs on a beauty or style page”.<sup>31</sup> The magazine’s exclusion of Black audiences through its direct targeting of those with straight hair and its failure to use a Black model was seen to reinforce white beauty ideals, especially as the use of a white model consequently meant that afro-textured hair was not included in the feature. Through its disregard of Black readership, the magazine appeared to also omit the Black experience. This may be viewed as a continuation of the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ hair trajectory, yet, in this instance, the narrative is being sustained through the appropriation, rather than rejection, of Black hair.

The majority of critics responding to the *Allure* article focused less on the afro’s connections to the Black Panther Party but rather on its sociocultural symbolism. Their opinions made it clear that the afro is considered a cultural form so authentically African American that it should be clear to non-Blacks that

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<sup>31</sup> “No, White Women, You May Not Wear An Afro”, *Clutch*, n.d., <http://clutchmagonline.com/2015/08/no-white-women-you-may-not-wear-an-afro/>, (27 Aug 2017).



it is off-limits. The article, which failed to include an indication of the racial history of the hairstyle, was seen to undermine Blackness itself and reduces the afro to a mere fashion trend. Responding to the controversy, a spokesperson for the magazine told media outlets that “the Afro has a rich cultural and aesthetic history” and is used “as a form of self-expression”.<sup>32</sup> This suggests that the context of the style was apparent to the editors but was not considered necessary to present to its readers, instead seemingly choosing to ignore its cultural origins. The magazine may have assumed that the racial connotations of the hairstyle would be already known to their readers, yet this is in conflict with contemporary African American issues which continue to struggle for cultural recognition of history. These factors suggest that while Black hairstyles may have entered the mainstream’s consciousness, Black consciousness has not.

The de-racialisation of the afro into an unaffiliated hairstyle is particularly poignant when considering the continued discrimination against afros worn by African Americans. In 2006, *Divorce Court* Judge Mablean Ephriam was replaced on her show after “she refused to wear a wig over her own hair” after her natural hair recovered from salon damage.<sup>33</sup> The hosting network said that it was easier to style the wig than her natural hair, which Ephriam, speaking at a press conference, called “a racial and ethnic issue”.<sup>34</sup> In 2007, a former *Glamour* magazine worker reportedly told female attorneys at an event called ‘Women, Race & Beauty’ that afros and other “political” hairstyles are *Glamour’s*

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<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Julee Wilson, “Allure Catches Hell For Teaching White Women How To Get An Afro”, *The Huffington Post*, 3 Aug 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/allure-afro-tutorial-outrage\\_us\\_55bf852ae4b06363d5a2b1ae](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/allure-afro-tutorial-outrage_us_55bf852ae4b06363d5a2b1ae), (23 Aug 2017).

<sup>33</sup> Prince, 117.

<sup>34</sup> Mablean Ephriam quoted in *ibid.*

“don’ts”.<sup>35</sup> Similarly there have been recent cases of discrimination in schools: in 2013, Vanessa Van Dyke was told to “cut her natural hair or leave Faith Christian Academy in Orlando” as it was a “distraction”,<sup>36</sup> while an Ohio charter school attempted to ban afro-puffs (essentially natural afro-textured hair in a ponytail).<sup>37</sup> While afros have become increasingly common, these instances highlight that the hairstyle still carries racial and/or political connotations when worn by African Americans, the overlooking of which can be interpreted as insensitive to African American struggles.

Nevertheless, instances such as the *Allure* article could indicate a deliberate attempt at negating these racialised associations. This idea is open to different interpretations: some may view the disconnection between the afro and its cultural heritage as liberating, while others see it as the imposition of white validation. Indigo, one of the women surveyed in Ingrid Banks’ *Hair Matters*, relates to the latter view:

I’m insulted, especially when white people come up to me and say they like my hair because I’ve had to listen to [their] value judgments to create who I am for so long. I don’t want [them] to

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<sup>35</sup> Tania Padgett, “Ethnic Hairstyles Can Cause Uneasiness in the Workplace”, *Chicago Tribune*, 12 Dec 2007, [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2007-12-12/features/0712100189\\_1\\_hair-glamour-dreadlocks](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2007-12-12/features/0712100189_1_hair-glamour-dreadlocks), (23 Aug 2017).

<sup>36</sup> Clare Kim, “Florida School Threatens to Expel Student Over ‘Natural Hair’”, *MSNBC*, 26 Nov 2013, <http://www.msnbc.com/the-last-word-94>, (23 Aug 2017).

<sup>37</sup> Kaylee Remington, “Part of Horizon Science Academy’s Dress Code Removed After It Offends Some Parents”, *The Morning Journal*, 25 Jun 2013, <http://www.morningjournal.com/general-news/20130625/part-of-horizon-science-academys-dress-code-removed-after-it-offends-some-parents>, (23 Aug 2017).

validate or not validate me. [Their] opinion has no bearing on what I choose to do anymore.<sup>38</sup>

In this regard, appropriation is a form of unsolicited approval which acts to uphold the necessity of white endorsement to be accepted into society. However, others will be emboldened in their choice to style their hair into an afro through its place in mainstream culture. Furthermore, white appropriation of the afro may aid to certify the style's place in US society. By becoming increasingly common in white media and society, the afro could integrate itself into a commonly accepted hairstyle for all ethnicities and help minimise racialised perceptions of beauty. This could prove to be a liberating and progressive development in the narrative of Black hair, as Byrd and Tharps predicted regarding Black hairstyling's move into fashion.

The afro may not be appropriated as commonly as cornrows or dreadlocks, perhaps partly due to the practical difficulties in achieving true white afros, yet when appropriation occurs it carries complicated and conflicting ramifications. Evocative of unashamed Blackness, its commodification and entry into popular culture has detached it from former associations with the Black Panther Party. However, appropriation under the guise that it no longer carries any political symbolism at all indicates an ignorance regarding Black identity's fundamental connection to US politics. The style celebrates what in traditional

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<sup>38</sup> Banks, 72.

Eurocentric beauty standards would be defined as 'bad' hair thus embodying a racial aesthetic pride that was repressed for centuries. White appropriation goes against the very essence of the afro: the rejection of mainstream beauty standards. This is why Knowles' Super Bowl performance did not produce a considerable Black backlash: while it can be argued that she may have been misappropriating Black Panther symbolism and African American struggles, her status as a Black woman legitimises her celebration of a racially-defined aesthetic.

Appropriation of the afro also represents a progressive change in hegemonic beauty ideals. Its commodification has resulted in its increasing acceptance in mainstream popular culture, as well as broader society. Cross-cultural adoption can be representative of a socio-political solidarity with African American civil rights movements, which is particularly significant in current times of racial unrest. Contemporary race relations could also play a part in the severity of the backlash against the *Allure* article: a sign that the movement against the repression of African American freedoms through police brutality and mass incarceration is carrying over into cultural sphere to fight against the appropriation of Black identity. This will have been further helped by the generally heightened climate regarding political correctness and cultural appropriation. Yet, the very act of appropriation may undermine the afro's cultural significance, regardless of the appropriator's intentions, through a suppression of African American individuality. The obliviousness to this of powerful media influences such as Knowles and *Allure* magazine highlights the power of capitalist mechanisms such as the culture industry and commodification of counterculture ideas. However, it also indicates that

although ethnicities are increasingly blending in the cultural melting pot, they are still viewed through a white lens.

### *Loc-ing Cultural Ownership*

Dreadlocks have been described as “along with the afro . . . the most distinctive black hair style among other ethnic groups”.<sup>39</sup> Yet the style has a long history of cross-cultural adoption and it has become common to see a variety of ethnicities wearing their hair in dreadlocks. The hairstyle is often viewed in connection to Rastafarianism, a modern religious movement which originated in Jamaica during the 1930s and emphasises natural living and the empowerment of Black populations. Some have argued that “Rastafarians see dreds as ‘an indisputable racial characteristic’”<sup>40</sup> due to Black hair often naturally dreading if simply left alone. Others, however, disagree with this statement instead focusing on the multicultural history of dreadlocks and diverse following of Rastafarian theology. While the hairstyle has been popular throughout modern history, criticism of its appropriation by non-Black ethnicities has been a relatively recent phenomenon. Discussions regarding the appropriation of dreadlocks have been catalysed by incidents that attracted a large amount of attention on social media and online media platforms rather than forming part of a wider ongoing debate.

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<sup>39</sup> Rumeana Jahangir, “How Does Black Hair Reflect Black History?”, *BBC News*, 31 May 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-merseyside-31438273>, (28 Aug 2017).

<sup>40</sup> Byrd and Tharps, 125.

In spring 2016, two high-profile white dreadlocks cases entered the cultural appropriation conversation. At the end of March, Cory Goldstein, a white male student at San Francisco State University (SFSU), was confronted by Bonita Tindle, a Black female student, over his decision to style his hair in dreadlocks. Their heated exchange was filmed by an onlooker and subsequently posted on YouTube where it accumulated over 4 million individual views by October 2017. A week after the incident occurred, in early April, white Canadian singer Justin Bieber uploaded a picture to his Instagram account which showed him with short dreadlocks. Both incidents received much attention on social media and even news outlets such as *CNN*, *The Guardian* and *Time* magazine. Many criticised Goldstein and Bieber for their assertions that their dreadlocks are “just my hair” when responding to the controversies,<sup>41</sup> although Tindle was also criticised for her use of physical force and intimidation towards Goldstein. Many commentators wondered if the white appropriators in these incidences were aware of the privileges protecting them in their decision to wear dreadlocks. Josie Pickens, writing for African American magazine *Ebony*, claims that “seeing [as] both men are protected by a combination of privileges (class and education, status and fame, maleness, Whiteness), I’m sure they get along just fine in the world whether they wear dreadlocks or not” while for Blacks “wearing locs can mean being ostracized even today”.<sup>42</sup> These privileges are exemplified by the fact

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<sup>41</sup> “Cory Goldstein responds to viral dreadlocks video”, *Xpress News* on YouTube, 29 Mar 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQSJnE1dmG4>, (24 Oct 2017); and Syreeta McFadden, “Justin Bieber’s Dreadlocks: What He Should Learn About Locked Hair”, *The Guardian*, 5 Apr 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2016/apr/05/justin-bieber-dreadlocks-cultural-appropriation-black-pride>, (21 Oct 2017).

<sup>42</sup> Josie Pickens, “Dear White People: Locs Are Not ‘Just Hair’”, *Ebony*, 6 Apr 2016, <http://www.ebony.com/style/justin-bieber-locs#axzz4pTCaQ6gc>, (28 Aug 2017).

that if Goldstein or Bieber decided to un-dread their hair they would be able to easily fit into mainstream society's ideas of acceptability, while an African American removing dreadlocks would likely continue to face social prejudice towards their hair.

The contrasting standards whites and Blacks are usually held to are central in the discussion surrounding the appropriation of dreadlocks. In February 2015, mixed-race artist Zendaya wore faux dreadlocks for the Academy Award ceremony which *Fashion Police* panellist Giuliana Rancic later suggested probably smelled of "patchouli" and "weed".<sup>43</sup> Yet, in the same month, Kylie Jenner sported the style in an Instagram picture and *Teen Vogue* photoshoot which was not subjected to the same prejudiced caricaturing, although she was criticised for potentially culturally appropriating. This celebration of a style on a white woman as a "'bold statement' [while] simultaneously regard[ing] darker-skinned women donning the same style with lesser esteem"<sup>44</sup> highlights the racial disparity in mainstream perceptions of beauty. Rancic's comments also upheld stereotypes that have plagued dreadlocks for years. The hairstyle, perhaps due to its associations to Rastafarianism, is frequently assumed to indicate a predilection for marijuana use which in itself has racial connotations. There is also a longstanding misconception that dreadlocks are unhygienic or unwashed and therefore must smell unpleasant. These social predispositions towards the hairstyle have resulted in a movement to rename dreadlocks as 'locs'

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<sup>43</sup> Princess Gabbara, "The History of Dreadlocks", *Ebony*, 18 Oct 2016, <http://www.ebony.com/style/history-dreadlocks#axzz4pTCaQ6gc>, (28 Aug 2017).

<sup>44</sup> McFadden, "Justin Bieber's Dreadlocks".

“due to dread’s negative connotation”.<sup>45</sup> Lasting prejudices and racialised stereotypes regarding dreadlocks can make white appropriation of the style particularly frustrating as it highlights white privilege through a medium that is commonly perceived as Black.

However, these prejudices are also frequently placed on white Americans. Associations between dreadlocks and 1970s counterculture movements continue to be prevalent today, hence presumptions that wearers of the style are anti-government or anti-mainstream culture are common. Discrimination in the workplace against the hairstyle has also affected members of all ethnicities. For example, the US military had a blanket ban on all locked hair (including dreadlocks, twists and large cornrows) on servicewomen until early 2017. This impacted non-Black dreadlock wearers as well as Black, although proportionally Black members would be more likely to be affected. Considering dreadlocks as unprofessional in the workplace also has cross-cultural implications. In September 2016, Chastity Jones, an African American woman, lost her discrimination case against Catastrophe Management Solutions who had rescinded her offer of employment after she refused to cut off her dreadlocks. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), who represented Jones, alleged that the company had discriminated on the basis of race therefore violating the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The court however dismissed the claim because “it did not plausibly allege intentional racial discrimination” as the court does not interpret “dreadlocks – though culturally associated with race – [as] an

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<sup>45</sup> Gabbara, “The History of Dreadlocks”.



immutable characteristic of black persons".<sup>46</sup> The court's consideration of dreadlocks as separate to race and legal decision to uphold employers' right to determine the style as unsuitable for the workplace means all ethnicities may be impacted. The decision throws into question any professional privileges white dreadlocks may be protected by, although African Americans can be argued to be at a greater disadvantage from this ruling due to Black hair's natural tendency to dread and the upkeep involved in styling it otherwise.

The ambiguous cultural origins of dreadlocks are also central to discussions about their appropriation. Unlike the afro, dreadlocks have been prominent in multiple cultures throughout history. While it is not clear where the style originally came from, there are references to dreadlocks in the Old Testament and depictions of Ancient Egyptians, Indian sages and Ethiopian priests with dreadlocks have been discovered. The Hindu deity Siva is also sometimes portrayed with the hairstyle, and it is accepted that dreadlocks were worn by some Vikings and Celts. In terms of the style within the USA, it has been argued that the name derives from the slave trade when whites "would declare the matted hair that had grown out of [transported Africans'] kinky unattended locks to be 'dreadful'".<sup>47</sup> In modern times, dreadlocks became popular with Caribbean Americans and followers of Rastafarian theology from the 1950s onwards due to the growing popularity of the religion, before becoming more

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<sup>46</sup> *Equal Employment Opportunity Commission v Catastrophe Management Solutions*, 1:13-cv-00476-CB-M, United States Court of Appeals, (Southern District of Alabama, Sep 2016). See <http://media.ca11.uscourts.gov/opinions/pub/files/201413482.pdf>.

<sup>47</sup> Byrd and Tharps, 125.

broadly popularised among African Americans in the 1970s following the success of musician Bob Marley. During this time, multicultural or predominantly white countercultures also increasingly adopted the hairstyle as a sign of anti-establishment attitudes. The cultural origin of dreadlocks, therefore, is difficult to claim as the style's history seems to embody cultural exchange rather than exclusivity. Consequently, claims for specifically African American historical or cultural significance of the style is questionable, as supported by the Court of Appeals' explanation of their verdict in *EEOC vs. CMS*, complicating arguments that white dreadlocks constitute cultural appropriation.

Another consideration, however, is that in modern US history dreadlocks have usually been used to make a statement or symbolise ideologies. Rastafarians believe that the Bible forbids the cutting of hair and use dreadlocks to distinguish themselves from those oppressed by Babylon (Western society). Furthermore, it is commonly believed that early Rastafarians adopted the style "out of admiration and reverence for the fearless resistance of the Kikuyu soldiers of the Mau rebellion in Kenya"<sup>48</sup> against British colonialists during the 1950s. This theory is in accordance with ideals such as Black nationalism and pan-Africanism which heavily influenced early Rastafarianism through activists such as Marcus Garvey. Therefore, the style, which in the contemporary USA is most commonly associated with Rastafarian ideology, represents more than religious belief but also an affinity with Afrocentric politics and a rejection of Western ideals. It can be argued that Black Americans who wear dreadlocks simply as a

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

fashion statement are misappropriating the style far more severely than white members of countercultures who dread their hair as a symbol for anti-establishment views. This, however, oversimplifies the issue of Black Americans appropriating dreadlocks:

First, even as a fashion statement the embracing of dreadlocks was significant in that it was a negation of all things Black hair was 'supposed' to look like, namely neat and straight. Second, many were wearing the look as a way to connect visibly to their African roots by celebrating the Blackness of their hair, hair that was able to grow in such a style.<sup>49</sup>

While this links back into ideas of race, clear connections between dreadlocks and socio-political statements remain, suggesting that symbolic or ideological misappropriation, rather than racial appropriation, of the hairstyle is the more likely issue at hand even if debates are usually focused on the latter issue.

This idea is supported by the reaction to the aforementioned cases of appropriation involving Goldstein, Bieber and Jenner. If dreadlocks occupy "both a physical and a metaphysical space",<sup>50</sup> as argued by Isha, one of the women interviewed in Banks's *Hair Matters* who wears her hair dreaded, then any appropriation which facilitates the style's entry into the culture industry would constitute a misappropriation of its function as a symbol of nonconformity.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>50</sup> Banks, 24.

When Jenner and Bieber, who in many ways personify US commercial pop culture, styled their hair into dreadlocks for Instagram posts it was widely interpreted as a commodification and fashionisation of the style. Their decisions to do so were condemned, particularly after Bieber's assertion that his dreadlocks were 'just hair' which was criticised for "disconnect[ing] locs from their history and cultural significance".<sup>51</sup> During the Goldstein-Tindle incident, the discussion centred purely on the racial history of dreadlocks. While there was criticism of both Goldstein and Tindle, many commentators hastened to point out the multicultural origins of dreadlocks and therefore dismiss Tindle's argument that dreadlocks are 'her culture' as a failure to recognise non-Black significance of the style. YouTube comments dwelt primarily on the issue of race, ignoring arguments regarding the ideological symbolism of dreadlocks. Yet the reaction towards Goldstein-Tindle was generally more divided than towards Jenner or Bieber who were criticised for reducing dreadlocks to a cultural commodity. This suggests that the ideological associations of dreadlocks are largely agreed upon to be significant to the style. The negation of its anti-Western establishment connotations was widely criticised. The perception of dreadlocks being significant to a particular race was far less unanimous, however it also received more attention in public discourse. This demonstrates how race obscures and dominates other issues in the USA. In a discussion that should centre on ideological or cultural authenticity, the issue of race invades and subsumes other considerations.

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<sup>51</sup> Pickens, "Dear White People".

The appropriation of dreadlocks, as with the afro, carries implications of ideological as well as racial co-option. Unlike the afro, however, the origins of dreadlocks undeniably lie in multiple cultures and ethnicities. In Cory Goldstein's response to the Bona Tindle incident he argues this point, stating that the style is "ingrained in so many cultures . . . it's in Egyptian culture, it's in Viking culture".<sup>52</sup> Some criticised this comment, insisting that Goldstein is not wearing "his dreads in 11<sup>th</sup> Century Scandinavia [but] in the US, where dreadlocks are still tangled in the black struggle against white supremacy".<sup>53</sup> Yet, after what length of time do cultural ties cease to be significant? Who holds the privilege to decide? The culture dreadlocks is most synonymous with in the contemporary USA would be Rastafarian ideology. Rastafarianism developed in Jamaica and has an Afrocentric focus; however, it is not an exclusively Black religion and has heavily influenced predominantly non-Black counterculture movements that have continued to hold social significance. It clearly represents a multicultural movement and, as a consequence, it can be argued that African Americans not following Rastafarian ideologies or using dreadlocks as a statement of anti-establishment beliefs are misappropriating the style even if it has strong Black connotations.

Yet there are racial privileges which protect white dreadlocks, particularly regarding the style's connections to stereotypes of militancy and drug use. In the

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<sup>52</sup> "Cory Goldstein responds", *Xpress News* on YouTube.

<sup>53</sup> Wedaeli Chibelushi, "I Wasn't Surprised by the US Dreadlocks Row. It's Another Example of Cultural Appropriation and White Entitlement", *The Independent*, 2 Apr 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/i-wasnt-surprised-by-the-us-dreadlocks-row-white-people-never-think-they-are-guilty-of-cultural-a6964906.html>, (26 Oct 2017).

workplace these negative associations can affect white dreadlocked Americans too. Yet within mainstream beauty discourse, dreadlocks on white and Black persons are perceived differently. As examples such as Ranic's comments about Zendaya's hair highlight, within the mainstream media white dreadlocks can be interpreted as a depoliticised fashion statement while Black dreadlocks continue to be seen through a racially stereotyped lens. This, however, is related more to white privilege and racial beauty standards than to the act of cultural appropriation. In fact, when considering discrimination in regards to appropriation, it could be argued that Tindle discriminated against Goldstein by insisting that his dreadlocks are offensive without explicitly knowing whether Goldstein felt genuine cultural connections to any associated ideologies of the hairstyle. When considering the broader context of dreadlocks, it is difficult to argue that they hold symbolic significance exclusive to Black or African American cultures. The wearing of dreadlocks cannot, therefore, be judged as cultural appropriation in the same racially orientated manner the adoption of the afro can, even if the essence of the style is Black.

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The seemingly innocuous issue of Black hair and its appropriation can reverberate through political discourse. Issues of social, political and cultural importance intersect with topics of beauty, race and American ideals. The afro and dreadlocks are connected with specific sets of issues that need to be addressed when considering the implications of appropriation. Yet the core

controversies involving both styles are centred on the question of cultural degradation, cultural preservation and failure to realise sovereign claim – three out of four main concerns regarding cultural appropriation in Ziff and Rao's *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation* (1997). Appropriation of political or ideological connotations can be observed *within* African American communities: the ideological appropriation of dreadlocks operates along the same principles as the co-option of Black Panther symbolism if the afro is seen to connote these. Yet the afro holds far clearer racial significance to African Americans, in part, perhaps, due to the clearer connection between ideology and race in the Black Panther movement. Even with the Afrocentric position of Rastafarianism, claims for the racial significance of dreadlocks are weakened due prevalent use of the style by multicultural anti-establishment movements and by significant non-Black participation in Rastafarianism itself.

The main issue with the appropriation of the afro is its enduring link to Blackness and clear origins with afro-textured hair. The style is undoubtedly connected to Black pride and history resulting in white attempts at an afro being interpreted as a form of cultural smudging which helps erase culturally significant history and disregards the associated Black pride movement. This could be termed 'whitewashing' due to its omission of Black origins and imposition of white values. Conversely, dreadlocks could be described as an object of transculturation: "cultural elements created through appropriations from and by multiple cultures such that identification of a single originating culture is

problematic”.<sup>54</sup> This results in hybridisation of the various associations of the style while also assuming a circular appropriation pathway in which cultures tend to be of equal status or, at least, not part of a dominant-subordinate relationship. Consequently, white adoption of dreadlocks can constitute an element of this transcultural movement if it is embedded in relationships of equal sociocultural esteem or hybridised significance (such as in counterculture movements). Yet, by entering mainstream culture as a fashion trend this cycle of cultural blending is broken as hybridised meanings are lost and the style becomes assimilated into dominant commercial and beauty discourses. It then plays an active role in the unequal treatment of ethnicities in the American beauty paradigm, resulting in a repressive appropriation. It is the fashionisation of the style while Black Americans continue to labour under the effects of Eurocentric beauty standards that is most problematic.

Fashionisation is inherently linked to commodification and standardisation. This plays a central role in the appropriation of Afrocentric hairstyles for a variety of reasons. As “popular culture reflects the standard determining beauty in hair in every crevice, nook, and cranny of society”,<sup>55</sup> the entry of non-white hairstyles should be celebrated for expanding the mainstream’s beauty ideals. However, these frequently appear only if sported by white persons and without cultural context, as indicated by *Allure*’s afro tutorial or *Teen Vogue*’s feature of a dreadlocked Kylie Jenner. These instances remove the hairstyle from its cultural background, diminishing it to ‘just hair’ as long as

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<sup>54</sup> Richard A. Rogers, “From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation: A Review and Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation”, *Communication Theory* 16, no.4 (2006): 491.

<sup>55</sup> Prince, 115.



it is worn by white Americans. As evident in the Rancic-Zendaya incident, the interpretation of afro suited hairstyles as purely a choice of style does not extend to African Americans. Furthermore, white commercialisation of afro suited hairstyles can be resultant in the last concern laid out by Ziff and Rao: deprivation of material advantage. This issue is less poignant with hair, a cultural form, than tangible cultural products which can make direct revenue, yet it is still a valid matter. Popular culture conduits such as magazines, public figures and fashion houses who treat hairstyles as a marketable commodity can profit from introducing them to their audiences. Any profit, which may be indirect through increased publicity, does not usually return to the culture the commodity originated from. As such non-Black cultures have profited from the commercialisation of a Black cultural form, while simultaneously decreasing its original cultural value or significance.

In response to discussions regarding the appropriation of Afrocentric hairstyles, 'reverse appropriation' is frequently debated. This usually means the practice of African American women straightening their hair and/or wearing weaves to aid in the appearance of thick, long hair. Power structures, which are central to interpreting instances of appropriation, complicate the categorisation of this practice as such due to the subordinate position of Black hair in American society. An example of contemporary socio-political prejudices against afro suited hairstyles is Michelle Obama's lack of said styles. The former First Lady usually wore her hair pulled back in a tight bun or blown out into a relaxed straight style during her husband's presidency. It neither showcased naturally kinky hair nor did she sport a long straight weave. At times she "allowed for some

natural roots to show . . . and that did not go down well” with many media outlets; yet for the majority of her public appearances she wore “politically correct” hair.<sup>56</sup> In July 2008, when *The New Yorker* magazine published a cartoon that satirized rumours that the Obamas were undercover terrorists, Michelle was depicted as an armed revolutionary with an eye-grabbing wild afro. This portrayal of an anti-government Obama with an overt afro exemplifies the continued stereotyping of obviously Black hairstyles. Similarly, Colin Kaepernick, fast rising quarterback in the National Football League (N.F.L.) who has been unsuccessful in joining a team since his widely publicised on-pitch protests against racial injustice, has been advised to “cut his hair”<sup>57</sup> so to be signed again. Michael Vick, the retired African American quarterback who made the comment, has since made a subsequent statement saying that “Kaepernick’s hair has nothing to do with him not being on an N.F.L. roster right now” yet insisted that “perception and image is everything”<sup>58</sup> suggesting that the predominantly conservative N.F.L. views Kaepernick’s large afro as symbolically linked to racial activism. The straightening of afro-textured hair, therefore, can still be considered a necessity for social, political and professional acceptance. As long as “braids, dreadlocks, and Afros continue to be considered socially radical hairstyles”,<sup>59</sup> the assimilation of afro-textured hair into mainstream beauty

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 140 and 142.

<sup>57</sup> Victor Mather, “Michael Vick’s Advice for Unemployed Colin Kaepernick: Cut Your Hair”, *The New York Times*, 18 Jul 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/18/sports/football/michael-vick-colin-kaepernick-hair-nfl.html>, (23 Oct 2017).

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Prince, 143.

discourse cannot be labelled appropriation as it constitutes an often-necessary avoidance of prejudices.

Socio-political context, then, matters in distinguishing cultural appropriation from assimilation or exchange. As do intentions when considering the severity of the appropriation: for instance, a conscious co-option of political associations can be considered as more damaging to a cultural form than ill-considered adoption stemming from aesthetic reverence. Appropriating a cultural form that represents racial defiance does not necessarily advance the appropriated form, but rather constitutes a misappropriation with repressive socio-political connotations. It is the responsibility of an appropriator to respect a form's social, cultural and historical symbolism without perpetuating prejudiced ideas if the form's original significance is to be preserved. Therefore, when considering examples which may appear to be of little racial significance or inherently transcultural in nature, it is perhaps not a question of whether this is right or wrong to appropriate, but of whether it is culturally sensitive to do so. This, however, could result in the perpetuation of an issue in the contemporary cultural appropriation debate: the over-emphasis on race. For instance, the cultural construction of dreadlocks, which does not have to be premediated by race, becomes evident when considering its ideological, in comparison to its racial, connotations. The discourse surrounding the appropriation debate, however, racializes the hairstyle thus ignoring other potential cultural significances. Bona Tindle is guilty of this as she essentialises the discussion of dreadlocks through her insistence that Cory Goldstein is appropriating from her (Black, not

Rastafarian) culture. The racialized dialogue used in the cultural appropriation debate therefore exemplifies how race colonises American sociocultural issues.

## Black Like You: The Rachel Dolezal Case

*The emotional garbage I had carried all of those years – the prejudice and the denial, the shame and the guilt – was dissolved by understanding that the Other is not other at all.*<sup>1</sup>

In the narrative of Rachel Dolezal, sometimes styled as Doležal, the importance of hair to Black identity is easily identifiable. A white woman who had been publicly identifying and presenting herself as Black for almost a decade before being ‘outed’ by her parents in June 2015, Dolezal devotes substantial space in her autobiography to the subject of Black hairstyling. Two chapters in *In Full Color* (2017) are titled simply as “Hair I” and “Hair II”, and the subject repeatedly appears in her personal account of cross-racial identification. Dolezal reminisces about how she, as a child, would draw herself with “black curly braids” because this is how she saw herself “instinctual[ly], coming from some place deep inside”.<sup>2</sup> She dedicates informative but personal pages to the unique needs, properties, products and styles specific to afro-textured hair which Dolezal became learned in through her maintenance of her younger adopted Black siblings’ hair. This task is described by Dolezal as having “undoubtedly deepened my connection to them . . . but also awakened a part of me that I’d never been allowed to express”,<sup>3</sup> alluding to the Black identity she feels represents her true

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<sup>1</sup> John Howard Griffin, *Black Like Me: The Definitive Griffin Estate Edition*, eBook Edition, (Wings Press, 2010), 193.

<sup>2</sup> Rachel Doležal, *In Full Color: Finding My Place in a Black and White World*, (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2017), 9.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

self. Further on in her autobiography, Dolezal attributes the decision to wear her own hair in typically Black hairstyles as the beginning of others perceiving her as “a biracial or a light-skinned Black woman”.<sup>4</sup>

Sharing experiences related to Black hairstyling made Dolezal feel connected to Blackness, yet it also constitutes an act of cultural appropriation. The example of hairstyling may be viewed as a ‘micro-appropriation’ which helped contribute to the subsequent self-reidentification of Dolezal as Black – a ‘macro-appropriation’ of racial identity. Yet hairstyling was not the only micro-appropriation which aided in this: her speech, appearance and artistic focus have all been accused of being appropriated. There have been allegations made by her family that Howard University, the typically Black college where Dolezal read her Masters in Fine Art, awarded her a full scholarship because she had misled them about her racial identity through her artwork exploring Black identity and “sound[ing] like a Southern African American woman”<sup>5</sup> in telephone interviews. Dolezal herself denies these claims yet acknowledges that as she delved deeper into Black culture she was inspired by it. She describes how she “gravitated to where [she] felt most comfortable”<sup>6</sup> socially and artistically, but also physically in her being “instinctively drawn to Black aesthetics”.<sup>7</sup> This immersion in the Black experience eventually manifested in acts of harmonisation between what she felt was her internal identity with her external white persona.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>5</sup> Laura Italiano, “NAACP Leader Has Pretended to be Black for Years: Family”, *New York Post*, 12 Jun 2015, <https://nypost.com/2015/06/12/naACP-leader-has-pretended-to-be-black-for-years-family/>, (18 Dec 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Dolezal, 79.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 84.

In the years following her graduation from Howard University, Dolezal increasingly darkened her skin with make-up and other tanning techniques, as well as continued to wear her hair in typically Black styles such as braids, cornrows and permed twist outs. She began to claim Black heritage by referring to an African American friend, Albert Wilkerson, as her father, and ticked the boxes indicating non-white ethnic background on surveys such as job applications and medical forms.<sup>8</sup> These various micro-appropriations accumulated into a macro-appropriation that resulted in others assuming Dolezal to be Black to which she “made no effort to set them straight”.<sup>9</sup> While living and, in all manners of speaking, functioning as Black, Dolezal taught various modules in the department of Africana Studies at Eastern Washington University, was elected as the President of the Spokane chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and was appointed the Chair of the Police Ombudsman Commission in Spokane (in the application for which, it has been reported, she identified herself as having several ethnicities including African American).<sup>10</sup> In June 2015, however, a reporter for *KXLY-TV* questioned Dolezal about the validity of her claims to be of African American descent which resulted in Dolezal exiting the interview. Shortly after, her parents publicly stated that she is biologically white, providing childhood photographs and even Dolezal’s birth certificate.<sup>11</sup> Intense and predominantly negative media attention

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<sup>8</sup> See Dolezal, chapter: “Adopting a New Dad II”, 145-155.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>10</sup> Jessica Elgot, “Civil Rights Activist Rachel Dolezal Misrepresented Herself as Black, Claim Parents”, *The Guardian*, 12 Jun 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/12/civil-rights-activist-rachel-dolezal-misrepresented-herself-as-black-claim-parents>, (28 Nov 2017).

<sup>11</sup> See *Ibid.*; and Kip Hill and David Wasson, “Spokane NAACP President Rachel Dolezal’s Claims About Background Disputed”, *The Spokesman-Review*, 12 Jun 2015, <http://www.spokesman.com/stories/2015/jun/12/naacp-presidents-claims-about-background->

followed these revelations, causing Dolezal to withdraw publicly. She subsequently resigned from the NAACP and was dismissed from her positions at Eastern Washington University and the Police Ombudsman Commission. She describes the public reaction thus:

I became one of the hottest trending topics of the day every day for weeks. A handful of people expressed their support of me, but they were drowned out by all the shouting, as nearly everyone else on the planet was calling for my head on a platter.<sup>12</sup>

In the almost frenzied response to the Dolezal affair, accusations of cultural appropriation, blackface, white-to-black passing and fraud were frequent. Some smaller voices suggested the possibility of racial fluidity and self-determination, and comparisons to the contemporary transgender movement become more prominent as time went by. Many initially debated the factors leading to Dolezal's change of racial identity, opting to psychoanalyze her whiteness just as much, if not more, than her Blackness. Almost all commentators seemed happy to condemn Dolezal as a racial imposter who had caused damage to both races. As remarked in an article published some eighteen months after the scandal: "Her case, for many, ultimately hinges on deception,

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[disputed/#/1](#), (28 Nov 2017) for further information. Elgot, "Civil Rights activist Dolezal" contains said interviews with Rachel Dolezal and with her parents, Ruthanne and Larry Dolezal.

<sup>12</sup> Dolezal, 2.



dissemblance, and a fallacious and unearned claim to a racial identity that was used to her benefit".<sup>13</sup>

It is not the task or objective of this chapter to pass moral judgement on Rachel Dolezal, nor to discern whether she, or any other persons, is able to genuinely identify as Black when born white. Instead I aim to examine the underlying themes and mechanisms of race, identity and cultural appropriation that the Dolezal affair has brought to light. These differ from those associated with micro-appropriations in the sense that Dolezal has pushed the boundaries of multiculturalism so far that we must view this incident as something greater – as something that has not been clearly defined before. For sake of clarity the chapter has been divided into two sections, the first of which concerns itself with issues directly related to the Dolezal affair while the second more broadly contextualises the wider cultural response and its narratives. The issues explored in the two sections cannot be viewed as completely independent from one another thus some topics, in particular those regarding the construction of racial identity, may be split between the two.

Some of the themes scrutinised are complicated, convoluted and controversial. Debates of separate biological races carry historically degrading and racist connotations, yet an examination of nature versus nurture, society versus self-determination seems unavoidable. Conversely, similarities and differences to transgenderism will mostly be avoided. This is largely due to

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<sup>13</sup> Marquis Bey and Theodora Sakellarides, "When We Enter: the Blackness of Rachel Dolezal", *The Black Scholar* 46, no.4 (9 Dec 2016): 33.

limitations in terms of the length of this thesis as such a comparison should warrant a detail of depth that cannot be satisfied here. Equally, it seems inappropriate to discuss transgenderism with the vocabulary used in this thesis, namely: cultural appropriation. Nonetheless, it will be touched upon to contextualise the idea of 'transracialism'. While I also strive not to support, as some have, the accusation that Dolezal "may have been driven by ulterior motives that inclined her to pretend to be black",<sup>14</sup> notions of personal benefit must be explored to fully understand Dolezal's macro-appropriation. This presents another issue that is crucial to acknowledge at the outset: the unreliability of Dolezal as a source. Not only is it impossible for her statements regarding her own identification to be unbiased, she has been known to be inconsistent with aspects of her life. In addition to her presentation of Wilkerson as her father, Dolezal has claimed she lived in a tepee and in South Africa as a child (both of which her parents affirm to have done without her), and assert that she is a professor (which Eastern Washington University has repeatedly denied). Perhaps most seriously, there seem to be condemning discrepancies in several accounts of supposed hate crimes committed against her.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, Dolezal's autobiography will be used to examine her personal claims of identification and experience, but with the understanding that these cannot be adequately verified.

### *Functioning Blackness*

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<sup>14</sup> Rebecca Tuvel, "In Defense of Transracialism", *Hypatia* 32, no.2 (Spring 2017): 263.

<sup>15</sup> See Hill and Wasson, "Spokane NAACP president".

The varied terminology used to pass comment on the Dolezal affair is an interesting starting point when examining the incident's most prominent themes. The phrase 'cultural appropriation' was common, appearing in almost every discussion about Dolezal. Yet, the notion that she had surpassed appropriation, gone beyond the usual conditions of this cultural crime, was evident in the jargon used in conjunction with the term. "African American commentators called her a 'blackface', guilty of the worst extremes of cultural appropriation",<sup>16</sup> while the concept of 'passing' was also abundant in public discourse. These ideas were, essentially, debating where the boundaries of appropriations lie – at what point did Dolezal's racial identity evolve into something greater? Blackface, which is most notoriously known in the context of Blackface Minstrelsy, comprises of the 'blacking up' of a white person through methods such as darkening skin and copying typically Black features including hairstyles or physical characteristics. In this sense blackface accusations against Dolezal seem well substantiated. Yet, it usually also implies "an instance of performance [that] is recognized by its audience as such", while passing "is *not* mere performance and does *not* call attention to its own spuriousness".<sup>17</sup> The other key difference is that blackface is designed to denigrate Black Americans, while passing is used to explore the other. Under this definition, the concept of white-to-black passing would be more appropriate regarding Dolezal, who insists that her Blackness is not an appropriation or costume. However, even within passing are conflicting schools

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<sup>16</sup> Decca Aitkenhead, "Rachel Dolezal: 'I'm Not Going to Stoop and Apologise and Grovel'", *The Guardian*, 25 Feb 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/feb/25/rachel-dolezal-not-going-stoop-apologise-grovel>, (28 Nov 2017).

<sup>17</sup> Baz Dreisinger, *Near Black: White-to-Black Passing in American Culture*, (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), 5 (emphasis in original text).

of thought. Some argue that it “does not involve changing one’s race; it involves successfully pretending to be something one is not”<sup>18</sup> usually to personal advantage. Others view the concept as an involuntary act but draw distinctions between “passing identities [fashioned] not from a culture but from a *caricature*” and true “cultural passing . . . [involving] cultural appropriation driven by heartfelt admiration for and identification with black culture”.<sup>19</sup> The idea of macro-appropriation, a term coined in this thesis, is that it encompasses all the contending mechanisms of these various phrases. It describes an act that reproduces or practices not just a singular cultural object but an entire cultural identity, in the process also claiming ownership to the contesting and often conflicting processes behind micro-appropriations.

Yet each of these terms – blackface, passing, (macro-)appropriation – are deemed unsuitable by Dolezal who claims her “situation was different . . . I wasn’t pretending to be something but expressing something I already was”.<sup>20</sup> She describes Blackness as an innate identity she has always felt an affinity to and, through her studying of and involvement in Black culture, has “gained enough personal agency to feel confident in defining [herself] that way”.<sup>21</sup> To Dolezal “Blackness seems to be something that is achieved; it [is] not only an identity she sensed a strong ‘spiritual and visceral connection to,’ but also a lived experience she attained through her unique set of personal and professional

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<sup>18</sup> Rogers Brubaker, “The Dolezal affair: race, gender, and the micropolitics of identity”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39, no.3 (Sep 2015), 432.

<sup>19</sup> Dreisinger, *Near Black*, 6 (emphasis in original text).

<sup>20</sup> Dolezal, 148.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

circumstances".<sup>22</sup> The notion of Blackness being transmittable has been prominent throughout history, although typically "in the context of white anxieties about turning black".<sup>23</sup> For white passers, however, physical "proximity to blackness becomes an authenticating badge":<sup>24</sup> a tangible means to cross a metaphorical colour line. Historically, rhetoric surrounding racial transmission and proximity carried "sexual, homosocial, and geographical connotations",<sup>25</sup> but in contemporary society notions of racialised cultures, rather than biological races, overshadow (or indeed, combine) these. Within multiculturalism, the idea that physical proximity can alter a person's characteristics would suggest a change in cultural identification rather than a transmission of race.

This introduces the delicate premise that identity and identification are separate principles. Dolezal argues that she is Black, yet one could hypothesise that she *identifies* as a Black woman but that this is not her *identity*. She states:

There is a black side and a white side on all kinds of issues, whether it's political, social, cultural. There's a perspective, there's a mentality, there's a culture. To say that I'm black is to say, this is how I see the world, this is the philosophy, the history, this is what I love and what I honour. Calling myself black feels more accurate than saying I'm white.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Bey and Sakellarides, 33.

<sup>23</sup> Dreisinger, *Near Black*, 4.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>26</sup> Dolezal quoted in Aitkenhead, "Rachel Dolezal".

This statement illustrates that she identifies with Black culture, history, politics and so forth, yet it does not necessarily depict her identity. This position is supported by theorists who argue that,

racial identity . . . is constituted by an ensemble of *supra-individual facts*: the biogenetic and genealogical facts of ancestry; the social facts of classification systems and categorization practices; and the historical facts of enslavement, oppression, and discrimination . . . [H]ow one *feels* about race – no matter how sincerely – is irrelevant. Subjectivity is understood as an *expression* of racial identity, not its *ground*.<sup>27</sup>

In this view, identity is created through biological and societal factors that are beyond the control of an individual. Subjective factors, such as how a person may present themselves, decide to live or what they feel connected to, are purely personal identifications. This argument may also be considered in a less absolute manner which acknowledges that some factors of identity, such as the “social facts of classification, oppression, and discrimination”, may be circumstantial and therefore can be impacted by subjective identification. For instance, vis-à-vis Rachel Dolezal, an identification with Black culture resulted in a different social classification and treatment. The principle that they are qualitatively

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<sup>27</sup> Brubaker, 432 (emphasis in original text).

different – race being a static entity and identification a dynamic process – is thus complicated through their symbiotic re-fashioning one another.

These fine differences between identity and identification reverberate throughout cultural appropriation discourse. The conflict between ‘race’ and ‘culture’, as demonstrated in the previous chapter in regard to the cultural ownership of dreadlocks, poses similar points of difference: race and identity appear to be societally objective facts, while identification, like culture, seems to comprise of more personal attributes which are subject to change. The distinction made between race and ethnicity also shares similar characteristics. In fact, Dolezal herself acknowledges these tensions when she identifies herself as Black, not African American.<sup>28</sup> The terms are frequently used in a manner that suggests they are synonyms and there is no official terminology to differentiate between them. However, African American could be interpreted as being primarily based on having African heritage. Black American, on the other hand, may relate to other ethnic backgrounds, such as the Caribbean, as well as referring to a wider collection of ethnic and cultural groups.<sup>29</sup> If ‘Black’ relates to a collection of non-heritage specific ethnocultural groups, then it could be considered a cultural identification. In comparison, ‘African American’ constitutes an identity through the objectivity of its determinants. The subjectivity of Black as identification rather than an identity remains a contested area however, as the option of self-determination as *not* Black for a person born

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<sup>28</sup> Dolezal, 1.

<sup>29</sup> Dolezal addresses this in a footnote in her autobiography: justifying her use of capitalization for ‘Black’, she argues that it “denotes a group of people” and refers to “culture or ethnicity”. See Dolezal, 1.

with dark skin may not be possible. Nonetheless, these points of difference may support Dolezal's identification if we view Blackness as a cultural, rather than racial, term which can be acculturated or appropriated.

However, Dolezal complicates this through her Blackness manifesting as a racial identity. Issues such as declaring herself as African American on surveys, fabricating family heritage, and 'blacking up' juxtapose the perception of her Blackness as a mere cultural identification. As such, the term 'transracial' can be employed as an alternative when considering the case of Dolezal. The idea of transracialism and its place in US society will be examined in greater detail at a later point in this chapter, yet this seems an appropriate place to introduce the concept. It denotes claiming a racial identity that differs from the one assigned at birth. A highly controversial phenomenon, the term entered public discourse largely in response to the Dolezal affair, although Michael Awkward used it to describe "the adoption of physical traits of difference for the purpose of impersonating a racial other"<sup>30</sup> in 1995. The term harbours some problematic connotations but due to the lack of alternative vocabulary, it may be the most suitable in current discussions, particularly if the interpretation of Blackness as a *cultural* identification is objected to.

The Dolezal case has also been widely criticised for harbouring antagonistic undertones that jar with her claims of true racial identity. The stereotype that "cases of passing involve exaggerated and sometimes

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<sup>30</sup> Michael Awkward, *Negotiating difference: race, gender, and the politics of positionality*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 19.



caricatured negotiations of racial boundaries”<sup>31</sup> can be seen to stand true with Dolezal’s fetishized ideas of Blackness. Her first intrinsic connection to Blackness was to “the Bantu women living in the Congo I’d read about in copies of *National Geographic*”.<sup>32</sup> These inspired a young Dolezal to fantasise about her parents having “kidnapped me, brought me to the United States, and were now raising me against my will in a foreign land”.<sup>33</sup> The suggested comparisons between slavery and her childhood continue to be upheld by Dolezal. In her autobiography she chronicles her childhood in rural Montana with fundamental Christian parents as abusive and isolated. She shares lengthy stories of the labour she was forced to undertake as a child, saying that it allowed her to “empathiz[e] with those whose [unpaid] labor helped build this country” and to “develo[p] a similar resourcefulness at a very young age” as the Black slaves who needed “an incredible amount of inner fortitude and day-to-day resourcefulness” to survive.<sup>34</sup> When working in Washington, D.C., as a young adult, she compares herself to “an indentured servant”.<sup>35</sup> There are also frequent references to the physical and emotional punishments she alleges her parents used, at one point utilising the word “lashes”<sup>36</sup> when describing wooden paddle spanking.

These fetishizations of Blackness also equate to an appropriation of Black struggles. Her insistence of having been targeted by “North Idaho white supremacy groups, including the Ku Klux Klan, the Neo Nazis and the Aryan

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<sup>31</sup> Dreisinger, *Near Black*, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Dolezal, 11.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 25 and 26.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

Nations” with “at least eight documented hate crimes [against her] and her children”,<sup>37</sup> although the severity and frequency of these has been repeatedly challenged, indicates a continued overidentification with the Black experience. It can also be interpreted as a rejection of accountability for her own whiteness. Allegations of mitigating white guilt were common in the public backlash against Dolezal: even her civil rights activism was accused to be a vehicle to “disavow [her] privilege and thus [her] complicity/responsibility *in* that violent history”.<sup>38</sup> Dolezal’s ability to choose to opt into a racial struggle highlights the whiteness she is spurning. Black Americans do not have the option to reject participation in the racial politics of the USA, a contrast “all the more poignant in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement, focused on police violence against black bodies”.<sup>39</sup> As Baz Dreisinger puts it, “the choice to take on a racial mantle at will is a mark of white privilege; so, too, is the choice to take it off”.<sup>40</sup>

Another charge against Dolezal was that she was obscuring ‘real’ Black narratives. Days before Dolezal was ‘outed’ as white, a twelve-year-old Black girl was violently mishandled by a white police officer in Texas, resulting in national media attention and protests.<sup>41</sup> This, however, was overshadowed by the Dolezal

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<sup>37</sup> “Rachel Doležal”, profile on *Eastern Washington University* webpage, u.d., archived on *Web Archive*, 14 Jun 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150614010049/http://www.ewu.edu/csbsw/programs/africana-studies-program/aep-faculty/rachel-dolezal>, (12 Nov 2017). Also see Dolezal, “Malicious Harassment”, 157-167 for further information.

<sup>38</sup> Bey and Sakellarides, 34 (emphasis in original text).

<sup>39</sup> Brubaker, 433.

<sup>40</sup> Baz Dreisinger, “When Saying You’re Black and Being Black are Two Different Things”, *The Washington Post*, 24 Mar 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/when-saying-youre-black-and-being-black-are-two-different-things/2017/03/24/d41a6590-0a4b-11e7-93dc-00f9bdd74ed1\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/when-saying-youre-black-and-being-black-are-two-different-things/2017/03/24/d41a6590-0a4b-11e7-93dc-00f9bdd74ed1_story.html), (28 Nov 2017).

<sup>41</sup> See Ashley Fantz, Holly Yan and Catherine E. Shoicet, “Texas Pool Party Chaos: ‘Out of Control’ Police Officer Resigns”, *CNN*, 10 Jun 2015, <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/06/09/us/mckinney-texas-pool-party-video/index.html>, (25 Jan 2018).

story which continued to remain breaking news even after Dylann Roof, a white supremacist, killed nine African Americans during prayer service in Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Charleston, South Carolina, two days after her 'outing'.<sup>42</sup> While these incidents, including Dolezal's own publicity, were not her direct doing, "a reasonable criticism would suggest, then, that the news of Dolezal's façade eclipsed [these] event[s], and disrupted a much-needed discourse about race, violence, and a corrupt criminal justice system".<sup>43</sup> Yet even before Dolezal's whiteness became publicly known it can be argued she damaged Black advancement. Many saw her scholarship at Howard University, teaching of Africana Studies, and high-profile role in the NAACP as successful examples of a "capitaliz[ation] on her enactment of Blackness vis-à-vis *the rejection, occlusion, and disavowal* of her whiteness".<sup>44</sup> While it is not legal for Black institutions to discriminate against Dolezal for being white, it could plausibly be suggested that she may have faced obstacles or difficulties in attaining these positions had she not presented herself as Black. Dolezal's identification as Black or African American in job applications could carry some legal issues if affirmative action systems were in place, therefore potentially filling positions earmarked for African Americans. Regardless of legality, however, many have argued that Dolezal "occupied and dominated spaces ostensibly reserved for people who had life-long experiences of racial marginalization and disenfranchisement".<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> See "Dylann Roof Guilty of South Carolina Church Killings", *BBC News*, 16 Dec 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-38336701>, (25 Jan 2018).

<sup>43</sup> Bey and Sakellarides, 34.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* (emphasis in original text).

<sup>45</sup> Brubaker, 433.

The assumption of status in Black establishments is perhaps one of the most controversial issues related directly to Dolezal's identity. While "white passing involves a move from the center to the margin",<sup>46</sup> Dolezal moved herself into the centre *of* the margin. Her prominence in civil rights activism and education meant she was influential to both white and Black audiences. She built not only an identity, but a career off her Blackness. Dreisinger calls attention to "how white it is that her transition to blackness instantly involved authority and power".<sup>47</sup> These accusations are particularly inflammatory when considered in context to a past lawsuit filed by Dolezal against Howard University which claimed discrimination against her as a white woman.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, the negation of hindrances to non-Blacks in Black institutions also negates the very Blackness Dolezal is claiming which is so prominently based on systematic repression.

In some ways the Dolezal narrative can be considered a journey into whiteness rather than Blackness. Her aversion to her parents and the history of white America clearly stand out as foundations of her racial identity in her autobiography. This could suggest that her own place in that white world is being examined through her Blackness. Yet Dolezal's case is not so simplistic to be understood as purely an exploration of self. Her racial identity can be interpreted as an example of passing, transracialism or blackface. It can be charged with doing damage to Black narratives or understood to be born out of intrinsic

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<sup>46</sup> Dreisinger, *Near Black*, 41.

<sup>47</sup> Dreisinger, "When Saying You're Black".

<sup>48</sup> See Dolezal, 117-118.

connection to Black cultures. Moreover, emphasis on identity politics can be argued to have brought about the Dolezal narrative. She herself states that “there is a black side and a white side on all kinds of issues”<sup>49</sup> thereby ignoring the many issues, and aspects of issues, that are not centred on race. This manner of racial essentialism is dominant in contemporary ideas of identity and socio-political identification, particularly in the realm of political activism in which Dolezal has a history of participation. Dolezal’s overidentification with Black issues resulting in her being interpreted as Black, then, could be viewed as a by-product of contemporary focus on the connections between identity, politics and race.

The issues examined in this section have focused primarily on the different interpretations of the Dolezal case as well as, to some extent, racial identity in general. Ideas that racial identity is a social construction rather than a self-identification have come forward through essentialist schools of thought. Issues surrounding her assumption of Black identity, in particular the fetishization of Blackness and appropriation of struggles, have also emerged in the examination of the accusations specific to Dolezal. These themes complicate Dolezal’s assertion that she *is*, rather than acting, Black. Dreisinger says “racial mimicry or masquerade is not the same as white-to-black passing . . . for the latter take their performance of ‘blackness’ further than the racial masquerade of the former by, for a committed length of time, fully adopting, not simply idealizing and imitating, black culture”.<sup>50</sup> If this is applied to Dolezal then her

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<sup>49</sup> Dolezal quoted in Aitkenhead, “Rachel Dolezal”.

<sup>50</sup> Dreisinger, *Near Black*, 5.

fetishized reproduction of the Black experience would suggest that she is in fact “idealizing and imitating”, yet it can also be argued that she has lived as Black for so long to be functioning as Black rather than simply masquerading. These tensions are evident throughout the Dolezal narrative, with one point of view contradicting another. Additionally, Dolezal’s own assertions about her certainty in her Blackness cannot simply be disregarded, complicating the matter further. Perhaps the only certainty is that Rachel Dolezal represents an unprecedented form of racial self-identification for the USA.

### *Identity (and) Politics*

The reaction towards the Dolezal affair was overwhelmingly negative and thus far less divisive than towards many cases of micro-appropriations which routinely provoke passionate responses from all sides. Age and race seemed to make little difference in the opinions regarding Dolezal: she herself notes “Black people and white people hated me equally”.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, those against the anti-appropriation movement tended to discredit Dolezal just as much as those they usually criticised, although some distinctive differences between politically liberal and conservative commentators remain. By studying the response and its socio-political narratives, we can contextualise the current cultural appropriation debate as well as the state of American identity politics in general. While Rachel Dolezal’s personal journey of identification is crucial in discussions about the mechanisms of cultural appropriation, the reaction to her narrative is vital in

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<sup>51</sup> Dolezal, 245.

understanding “just how divided – and confused – we remain in [the USA] when it comes to talking about (or even defining) race”.<sup>52</sup>

The issue of what defines race in the USA was brought into focus by the response towards Dolezal. The subject has historically plagued US politics and social stratifications, resulting in various attempted classifications such as the ‘one-drop’ rule. As biological foundations for race began to be discredited throughout the twentieth century, the idea that race is a social construction became more popular and with it a preference for socioeconomic or cultural groupings. Nevertheless, the determining factors of race have remained unclear and the Dolezal affair reopened age-old questions. Dolezal discusses this in her autobiography, highlighting some of the most commonly examined factors: “Is it their DNA? Is it their skin color? Is it how other people perceive them, or is it how they perceive themselves? Is it how they were raised or is how they currently live?”.<sup>53</sup> While notions of objective versus subjective identification have already been explored, what factors govern the social construction of race is yet to be examined in greater detail.

Skin tone is a common factor seen to be a determinant of race: even the terminology for racial classification – Black and white – is derivative from skin colour. Often it is the most obvious indicator as dark skin is equated to Black or African Americans and light skin to white or Caucasian Americans. However, this is not always reliable as demonstrated by passing stories. More common than

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 3.

Dolezal's reverse pass are incidents of extremely light-skinned African Americans, such as former NAACP leader, Walter White, having passed as white. Yet Dolezal, who is considered biologically white, also successfully passed as Black for many years, partially through darkening her skin. This highlights a fundamental flaw in the use of skin tone as a determinant of race: while social perception dictates that those with dark skin are Black, not every Black person has black skin due to genetic variation and an increasing mixed-race population. Consequently, other racial indicators have to be relied on, particularly genealogy which has a prominent history in the USA through the one-drop rule. In the response to Dolezal, this was often focused on with many criticising her insistence that she was Black because her "'blood' isn't Black [therefore] she is believed to not possess the crucial component of Black racial truth".<sup>54</sup> The continued importance ancestry plays in determining race in the USA becomes evident in this criticism. Although biological races have been disproven, lack of Black genealogy was one of the most prominent objections levelled against Dolezal. Her white parents were frequently mentioned by critics condescending her Blackness, while the presence of four adopted Black siblings did not atone for her lack of Black lineage but was viewed in a far more encouraging manner. For the majority of critics, Dolezal could not *be* Black, regardless of her years functioning as Black, simply because she did not have a Black lineage.

Hence biology evidently continues to hold significance when determining race. If this is considered from an anti-essentialist view, it could be attributed to

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<sup>54</sup> Bey and Sakellarides, 40.



the notion that ancestry, in this sense, is closer related to culture than to genetics. Dolezal implies this in her autobiography when she describes calling her African American friend her father as being an embodiment of being accepted into his family, life and community, rather than him being her 'actual' father.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, Dolezal did showcase her Black 'dad' in a manner which supported the public perception of her as Black, potentially pointing towards an understanding of the importance of genealogy in determining race in the USA. Moreover, Dolezal actually highlights the continued value placed on the genealogically-based one-drop rule by justifying her identification as Native American on applications and medical forms "because of what [she'd] been told about my great-grandmother's ancestry".<sup>56</sup> These instances raise questions regarding appropriation: is Dolezal appropriating Black *cultural* ancestry, to which she has no genetic claim but has immersed herself in culturally, in the same manner in which she is appropriating her Native American *biological* ancestry, to which she has genetic claim but little or no cultural connection? The reaction against Dolezal's Black identity would suggest that her cultural macro-appropriation was considered more offensive than her biological assertion. While Dolezal's claiming of Native American ancestry was not placed under the same public scrutiny as her claiming of Black identity, it may reasonably be assumed that ethnic or racial identities are often declared by way of lineage with similarly little rebuttal. This suggests public opinion regards the socially or culturally constructed factors of race as something which can be

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<sup>55</sup> See Dolezal, "Adopting a New Dad II", 145-155.

<sup>56</sup> Dolezal, 85.

(mis)appropriated, while biological determinants cannot as individuals are entitled to these owing to continued emphasis on genealogy.

Dolezal, however, views this differently. Having repeatedly asserted that race is a state of mind, she has “argued many times that her insistence on black identity will not only allow her to live in the culture that she says matches her true self, but will also help free visibly black people from racial oppression by helping to destroy the social construct of race”.<sup>57</sup> Her claim demonstrates an anti-essentialist view of race as a sociocultural construct without basis in biological factors. She has also suggested that instead of micro-appropriations of cultural elements being harmful, they can destroy the constraints of socially constructed race: “I began to feel that if I *didn't* wear my hair in braids I was reinforcing European beauty standards”.<sup>58</sup> These beliefs hold true in the sense that Dolezal destabilises notions of what race is or can be. Bey and Sakellarides claim Dolezal “throws Blackness into racial crisis because she unmoors it from its perceived fixity and absolute knowability”,<sup>59</sup> but even more, she throws whiteness into a crisis by rejecting it. While some have argued that the privilege of rejecting a racial identity is in fact the epitome of whiteness, it can also be interpreted to be renouncing the limitations of constructed race. In this manner, Dolezal introduces the notion that race is fluid in a manner previously unknown

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<sup>57</sup> Ijeoma Oluo, “The Heart of Whiteness: Ijeoma Oluo Interviews Rachel Dolezal, the White Woman Who Identifies as Black”, *The Stranger*, 19 Apr 2017, <https://www.thestranger.com/features/2017/04/19/25082450/the-heart-of-whiteness-ijeoma-oluo-interviews-rachel-dolezal-the-white-woman-who-identifies-as-black>, (28 Dec 2017).

<sup>58</sup> Dolezal, 96 (emphasis in original text).

<sup>59</sup> Bey and Sakellarides, 40.

in multiculturalism which has hitherto viewed race and culture as connected but separate entities.

However, there is also an argument to be made that Dolezal is essentialising race. If race was truly only a social construction with interchangeable cultural elements, then Dolezal would not have to rely on deception to become Black. By fabricating her heritage, darkening her skin and appropriating Black hairstyles, she negates her own concept of race. Dreisinger, considering passing stories in general, foreshadowed these conflicts: “certain instances of white passing are anchored in essentialist notions of whiteness and blackness, but others destabilize racial identity altogether”.<sup>60</sup> He also differentiates between passing narratives that were born out of necessity or sincere affinity which “are founded on the blurring of racial lines”, and “skin-dyeing narratives [which] maintain a sharp distinction between black and white”.<sup>61</sup> While it may not be fair to accuse Dolezal of ‘skin-dyeing’, her appropriation of Black physical features, including darker skin, are an admission that “there *are* two distinct groups”<sup>62</sup> of racial identity which cannot be separated from skin tone. This is inherently an act of racial conservation as it implies that white and Black experiences do not operate in the same realm. Furthermore, it “utterly eliminates the possibility of authentic cross-racial alliances and friendships”.<sup>63</sup> The paradox between Dolezal’s post-racial notions of racial construction and recognition of fixed characteristics highlights how she

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<sup>60</sup> Dreisinger, *Near Black*, 3.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* (emphasis in original text).

<sup>63</sup> Dreisinger, “When Saying You’re Black”.

is conserving racial essentialism while also blurring its boundaries. It exemplifies why Dreisinger called passing both “a liberal and a conservative enterprise”.<sup>64</sup>

Moreover, Dolezal’s insistence on the social constructiveness of race has been countered by critics who state that “the impact [race has] on our lives, and the rules by which they operate, are very real” and that Dolezal “open[ed] herself up to be treated as black by white society only to the extent that they can visually identify her as such, and no amount of visual change would provide Dolezal with the inherited trauma and socioeconomic disadvantage of racial oppression in this country”.<sup>65</sup> Dolezal does repeatedly acknowledge the impacts of race on Black Americans in interviews and her autobiography, yet she also continues to campaign for the possibility of a post-racial USA if it was more widely accepted that race is a social construction ingrained into the American mindset. Although Dolezal may have legitimate reasoning behind this idea, it can also be seen to be a misunderstanding of contemporary race politics. While race *is* simply a social construct, the hope for a post-racial society is not necessarily the desired outcome of current activist groups or ethnic societies. There are demands for an end to the impacts race has on Black Americans, yet many wish for recognition of differences and a celebration of Blackness rather than social colour-blindness.

The context in which the Dolezal affair occurred also needs to be examined to fully understand the issues it raised. Multiculturalism and increasingly complex identities had been characterising issues of identity for

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<sup>64</sup> Dreisinger, *Near Black*, 7.

<sup>65</sup> Oluo, “The Heart of Whiteness”; Aitkenhead, “Rachel Dolezal”.

some time, both within the USA and on a global scale. Yet this did not necessarily result in widespread confidence regarding the matter; Rogers Brubaker summaries,

The massive destabilization of long taken-for-granted categorical frameworks has significantly enlarged the scope for choice in the domains of race, ethnicity, sex, gender, and sexuality. Yet the enlargement of choice has generated anxieties about unnatural, opportunistic, exploitative, or fraudulent identity claims. And this, in turn, has generated efforts to police questionable claims in the name of authentic, objective, and unchosen identities, as well as attempts to justify unorthodox claims in the name of such identities. Instead of a shift from given to chosen identities . . . we see a sharpened tension – in everyday identity talk, public discourse, and even academic analysis – between idioms of choice, autonomy, subjectivity, and self-fashioning on the one hand and idioms of givenness, essence, objectivity, and nature on the other.<sup>66</sup>

This heightened anxiety can be seen in the cultural appropriation debate which has evolved alongside greater identity fluidity. The debate, however, has also developed to a background of recent socio-political unrest. A rise in right-wing

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<sup>66</sup> Brubaker, 415.

politics and racial tensions have been accompanied by high-profile activism such as Black Lives Matter and movements such as “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot”. Police brutality, mass incarceration and racial profiling have also been garnering increased attention for several years. The focus on these issues and race in general has continued to intensify, especially in the face of increasing demographic diversity and under the administration of President Donald Trump who frequently utilised racialised rhetoric during his 2015-2016 presidential campaign.

It is in this context that the Dolezal affair introduces the concept of transracialism to the American mindset. It was widely rejected by critics who preferred to refer to Dolezal’s Black identity with the previously discussed vocabulary. Others favoured labelling her a “race-traitor” or, in Dolezal’s opinion, use her as “a target for anger and pain about white people”.<sup>67</sup> This knee-jerk reaction highlights the extreme anxiety regarding racial fluidity while also indicating how the narrative was used as a form of escape from these concerns. As mentioned previously in the chapter, the attention Dolezal received eclipsed other racial incidents. Dolezal contrasted these by offering an almost novel alternative within the debate of racial politics. While her narrative represented the first high-profile case of transracialism and undoubtedly “marked the migration of ‘trans’ from the domain of sex and gender to a much broader domain of public social thought and commentary”,<sup>68</sup> its significance in contemporary race relations does not necessarily correlate to incidents of police

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<sup>67</sup> Aitkenhead, “Rachel Dolezal”.

<sup>68</sup> Brubaker, 415.

brutality and right-wing extremism. This seems particularly true as she has not, so far, spawned a transracial movement or inspired others to ‘come out’.

Dolezal’s narrative did, however, generate discussions comparing transracialism and transgenderism. These debates increased after Caitlyn Jenner, a transgender woman well-known for being an American television personality and former Olympic athlete, appeared on the cover of *Vanity Fair*’s July issue. However, those who compared the two favourably in the academic world were frequently discredited. One prominent example is the controversy surrounding Rebecca Tuvel’s article “In Defense of Transracialism” which was published in the feminist journal, *Hypatia* (April 2017). The article argues that “since we should accept transgender individuals’ decisions to change sexes, we should also accept transracial individuals’ decisions to change races”.<sup>69</sup> It focuses largely on comparisons between Dolezal and Jenner, and “entertain[s] and reject[s] four objections that suggest a society should not accept an individual’s decision to change races”.<sup>70</sup> Its content was interpreted as a form of epistemological violence by some readers which quickly attracted attention online. An open letter urging the article to be retracted was published on the 29<sup>th</sup> of April and had attracted 830 signatures by the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May. Cressida Heyes, an associate editor, issued an unofficial apology which was later revealed to be “disseminated without adequate consultation with the Editor” in a statement by the editor-in-chief, Sally Scholz.<sup>71</sup> The public shaming of Tuvel and *Hypatia* was so intense that

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<sup>69</sup> Tuvel, 264.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> See Cressida Heyes, “To our friends and colleagues in feminist philosophy”, *Facebook*, 30 Apr 2017, archived on *WebCite*, 1 May 2017, <https://www.webcitation.org/6qKIW3Fnc> (3 Feb

Scholz eventually resigned and the associate editors were suspended. The controversy highlighted how divisive issues of race are and that the idea of its fluidity is seen as particularly inflammatory.

The comparison between transracialism and transgenderism also revealed political divides in the evaluation of Dolezal. While the disparaging response was largely unanimous across different political ideologies, rifts became apparent when Jenner entered the narrative. Right-wing conservatives quickly adopted the phrase “If Jenner, then Dolezal” which served to expose perceived hypocrisy in the anti-cultural appropriation movement. It also worked to delegitimize the transgender movement by playing on the assumption that Dolezal cannot be Black, and as such Jenner cannot be a woman. This is “why the cultural left, committed both to gender voluntarism and to racial essentialism, rejected the premise of the syllogism and denied that the Jenner and Dolezal cases were comparable”.<sup>72</sup> The dispute highlighted how the negative reaction towards Dolezal may have had similar narratives but different origins: the political left wanted to encourage multiculturalism and fluid identities while also protecting racial origins and minority cultures, while the political right was exercising doubt over matters of identity larger than just the Dolezal case.

These anxieties are “expressed inter alia in efforts to police identity claims by challenging [their] legitimacy”.<sup>73</sup> The policing of issues of identity that is seen in the *Hypatia* scandal is reflected throughout the broader discourse

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2018); Elizabeth Anderson et al., “Statement by the Board of Hypatia”, *Hypatia*, 18 May 2017, <http://hypatiaphilosophy.org/Editorial/index.html#boardstatement>, (3 Feb 2018).

<sup>72</sup> Brubaker, 427.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 421.



regarding cultural appropriation where it occurs not only in academic circles, but also in everyday public dialogue and widespread media focus. One impact of this is the enabling of a platform in which matters of race can be debated. Having always been a divisive subject, public discourse seems most comfortable talking about race in terms of scandal. “Identity issues undeniably garner greater attention when they are associated with the scandalous or outrageous”,<sup>74</sup> creating a foundation from which the issues can be further discussed. Dolezal herself has, in some respects, been a victim of this focus on identity. One could argue that she has been unlucky to experience her transracialism narrative during a period of increased scrutiny regarding identity and its authenticity. Yet it may also have encouraged her own focus on self-identification: without the pressure to conform to prescribed identities Dolezal’s narrative may not have been so extreme, instead being characterized by micro-appropriations and multiculturalism. As Dreisinger explains, “[t]he more conscious we are of appropriation and imitation, the more complex and varied are [sic] our passing narratives”.<sup>75</sup> The emphasis on ensuring the authenticity of racial identities can be argued to have damaged the credibility of Dolezal’s narrative by obscuring intersectional issues. The example of Dolezal encompasses more than just race but also gender, class and sexuality. These other aspects are overshadowed in favour for race in media responses, as common when examining issues of identity politics. Dolezal herself points to this when she states that “the times that I tried to explain more, I wasn’t understood more. Nobody wanted to hear,

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<sup>74</sup> Bey and Sakellarides, 35.

<sup>75</sup> Dreisinger, *Near Black*, 140.

‘I’m pan-African, pro-black, bisexual, an artist, mother and educator’”.<sup>76</sup> This, just as so many other aspects of the Dolezal affair, highlights the public’s innate fixation on race. As Dolezal asks, “what greater tension is there in America than race?”,<sup>77</sup> illustrating how the attention her narrative received follows quintessentially American traditions.

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The macro-appropriation of Blackness by Rachel Dolezal highlights a variety of issues, many centring around racial identity. The presumed facts of identity are challenged by the intensity of her subjective identification. This opens questions regarding what constitutes race and why it is perceived as such a fixed entity. The issue is further complicated by apparent truths not necessarily being reliable indicators of race. For instance, skin colour does not always correspond with supposed racial classification. Similarly, biological ancestry does not automatically correlate with a cultural connection. Notions of innate selfhood would seem to fit with contemporary identity fluidity, yet, in terms of race, the idea of an identity not regulated by societal structures has not been received well. This objection to self-determined race highlights discrepancies within white liberal cultural movements which usually strive for inclusiveness and a society free from racial categorisation. This was noted by “the cultural right [who] gleefully seized on the Dolezal revelations as a weapon in the culture wars,

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<sup>76</sup> Dolezal quoted in Aitkenhead, “Rachel Dolezal”.

<sup>77</sup> Dolezal quoted in Ann Morning, “Race and Rachel Doležal: An Interview”, *Contexts*, 28 Mar 2017, <https://contexts.org/articles/race-and-rachel-dolezal-an-interview/>, (14 Jan 2018).

constructing the Dolezal affair as a 'gotcha' moment that exposed the hypocrisy and inconsistency of the mainstream media, 'liberals', or 'the left'.<sup>78</sup> Yet in terms of cultural appropriation this is not necessarily as inconsistent with liberal views as charged with: in the appropriation debate the cultural left has usually been committed to preserving the integrity of marginalised cultures, defending it against illegitimate intruders and dilution of cultural authenticity. While there is also a distinct liberal commentary that stresses the value of cultural exchange and cross-fertilisation, this usually refers to the flow of persons and traditions within multiculturalism, rather than the one-sided appropriation of identity. These tensions highlight the deep-seated differences between cultural identification and racial identity.

In the first chapter of this thesis it was stated that, in acts of cultural appropriation, there is usually the presumption that the appropriator has little or no engagement with the appropriated culture. While it may hold true that ignorance of cultural significance or history prelude many instances of appropriation, Dolezal complicates this seemingly fundamental aspect of appropriation. Although she is engaged with Black culture, her appropriations, both on a micro and a macro scale, still constitute racial transgressions. One manner of interpreting Dolezal's particular narrative is through the approach Lipsitz takes in *Dangerous Crossroads*, mainly the idea that "transgressions of class, ethnic, and gender boundaries stand as surrogates for the unnamed crossings of sexual boundaries".<sup>79</sup> Her pre-marital loss of virginity, identification

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<sup>78</sup> Brubaker, 425.

<sup>79</sup> George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism and the Poetics of Place*, (London: Verso, 1994), 52.

as bi-sexual and eventual divorce violate her fundamental Christian upbringing. Moreover, according to her autobiography, her social association with artists and even minor decisions such as choice of attire go against the values she had been taught as a child.<sup>80</sup> The escapist opportunity of appropriation is, therefore, evident in the case of Dolezal. Her focus on racial otherness “provide[d] life-sustaining alternatives”<sup>81</sup> to the principles passed on by her parents. Additionally, it offered “the promise of recognition and reconciliation”<sup>82</sup> through her artistic focus and involvement in Black advancement.

This impact of identity politics is evident in the Dolezal affair. An ingrained societal connection between belonging to certain social organisations and holding certain political positions can be argued to have influenced Dolezal’s macro-appropriation, as well as aided in her eventual forced alienation from both white and Black networks. While it is not suggested that a white person cannot hold pro-Black beliefs and participate in organisations such as the NAACP, a white imposter who appropriated and deceived her way into Black culture is perceived to be outside of progressive Black circles. The contention and policing of who may represent a cultural group is evident here. Dolezal has actively advocated for progressive African American advancements, heading a NAACP chapter and teaching modules on African American history and culture. She has taken care to be respectful in her micro-appropriations, learning about the significance of cultural elements such as hair. Yet she is accused of imposing on matters of race. While this will largely be influenced by her deception, it also

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<sup>80</sup> See Dolezal, in particular chapters 1-10 and 16.

<sup>81</sup> bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 25.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

highlights how Blackness cannot be attained in the public mindset. Functioning as Black, even for a prolonged period of time, has not granted Dolezal access to Black identity. This inflexibility regarding racial identity may be viewed as outdated while simultaneously being considered politically correct.

Another aspect of the Dolezal narrative is its inherent whiteness. Dolezal's macro-appropriation seems to be deeply rooted in her disregard for white social politics and her own white upbringing. There appears to be a strong correlation between the fetishized ideals of Blackness used to escape an unhappy childhood and her apparent intrinsic connection to Blackness later in life. In a sense Dolezal is defining herself as non-white, rather than as Black, in her calculated micro-appropriations. Physical adoption of overtly Black features, such as hair and skin tone, serve as a public renouncement of whiteness, while claiming of African American heritage and focus on Black socio-political issues reject her biological complicity in white American history. Yet the privilege inherent in these appropriations and the disavowal of ascribed identity is implicitly white. Racial play has historically been a demonstration of social power in its ability to co-opt the cultural capital of others, but also in the option to reverse the appropriation if desired. Privilege is also evident in the response to the Dolezal affair in that the racial identification of a biologically white woman garnered greater media attention than physical violence against Black bodies. As a cultural phenomenon, the Dolezal narrative illustrates the national focus on the boundaries of race and, in particular, of whiteness. Faced with an increasingly multicultural demographic and a general fluidity regarding identities, the

exploration of racial limitations destabilises previously absolute notions of whiteness.

When considering the case of Rachel Dolezal, one might wonder, as Dreisinger once did, “is passing passé?”.<sup>83</sup> It is objected to politically and socially, while also being out of touch with modern ideas of identity. If race is seen through truly non-essentialist, post-racial notions then there would not be anything to appropriate. If viewed in essentialist terms of set identities, then the contemporary context of widely accepted multiculturalism would make passing unnecessary. There are arguments that appropriation breaks down the barriers that construct race and encourages cross-racial empathy. Yet, macro-appropriations impede cross-racial communication and can be reasoned to essentialise race by admitting its physical existence. Here a crucial difference between macro- and micro-appropriations can be seen as micro-appropriations usually negate racial connections while macro-appropriations define them. These two forms of appropriation are, however, fundamentally connected through their utilisation of cultural capital. Otherness, and in particular Blackness, has historically held a distinct form of fascination in the white American mindset. Certain sociocultural assets are therefore considered valuable in the broader context of social hierarchy. In micro-appropriations this value usually stems from the inherent hipness of Black cultural forms, the appropriation of which helps promote social status. In the case of Rachel Dolezal, cultural capital is associated

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<sup>83</sup> Dreisinger, *Near Black*, 121.

with the premium attached to certain identities and identity politics, particularly in the social organisations Dolezal immersed herself in. For instance, her assumed Black identity would benefit her in relation to diversity mechanisms in the USA, but also in the politically active contexts of the NAACP and the Black Lives Matter movement. Her further identifications with narrower subcultures (“pan-African, pro-black, bisexual, an artist, mother and educator”)<sup>84</sup> were claimed to have been uninteresting to mainstream media but would undoubtedly have held their own premium in the sociocultural contexts Dolezal was operating in. While the advantages associated with these cultural premiums may not have been the motivation for Dolezal’s narrative, they highlight the implicit function of sociocultural gain in appropriation.

When reflecting on Dreisinger’s question it becomes apparent that passing will likely never be *passé* in the USA. The central value race holds in American culture, society, history and politics encourages racial play and curiosity regarding otherness. Historical ideas of assimilation into a cultural melting pot and contemporary encouragement for the demographic to interact in a multicultural society has produced an intrinsic fascination with racial difference. However, divisive classification systems and a history of white cultural domination has also resulted in fierce protection of racial authenticity and cultural features. As such the boundaries of race are constantly tested and pushed in American society, the colour line representing something akin to the New Frontier in its inherent responsibility to be explored and defined. Rachel

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<sup>84</sup> Dolezal quoted in Aitkenhead, “Rachel Dolezal”.

Dolezal's story is, in this sense, a peculiarly American narrative illustrating the ultimate American Dream.



## Conclusion: An American Tradition

Fundamental conflicts in the concept of cultural appropriation become evident when a variety of examples are studied. For instance, in the commercialisation of the afro issues of cultural exploitation are central. This carries notions of whitewashing and misappropriation as it is being used in a manner that invalidates the afro's original purpose as a symbol of radical Black politics. Yet, the term 'whitewashing' may not always best describe appropriation as seen in Bona Tindle's reproach of white dreadlocks. Her actions are also a misrepresentation of cultural origins as the hairstyle can be argued to be more strongly tied to ideology than to race. In this case Tindle is in fact 'Blackwashing' elements of a transcultural form. Moreover, the case of Rachel Dolezal may be viewed as exploitative of Black identity, but also as escapist in nature rather than representative of an active exercising of personal privilege. These convoluted and sometimes conflicting aspects showcase how appropriation cannot be used as a blanket term for issues of cross-cultural communication. Examining the context in which appropriation occurs is important in determining what repercussions it carries. As Rogers says of cultural interactions: "cultural appropriation is inescapable, but that is not to say all acts of appropriation are equal".<sup>1</sup>

This is of particularly current significance due to the intense coverage of the subject in contemporary cultural discourse. Frequently cases of cultural diffusion are castigated as cases of cultural appropriation without sufficient

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<sup>1</sup> Richard A. Rogers, "From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation: A Review and Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation", *Communication Theory* 16, no.4 (2006): 499.

debate. While thinking “of identities as interchangeable or infinitely open does violence to the historical and social constraints imposed on [marginalised cultures] by structures of exploitation and privilege”,<sup>2</sup> it is also important to understand the different manners in which this occurs as well as the different mechanisms of cultural exchange. It seems necessary, therefore, to re-align the *concept* of appropriation with the *term* in the broader public debate. Appropriation must be understood to involve symbolic aspects of culture, the use or reproduction of which harms the original group. This harmfulness can, however, be difficult to pinpoint as it may take a variety of forms including one-sided economic gain, cultural degradation, elimination of cultural origins or social advancement that is not extended to the original culture. Furthermore, a socio-political element of power structures is central to appropriation: it occurs when a dominant culture imitates a marginalised group to utilise cultural difference in a manner that is not available to the appropriated culture. These factors should serve as key points of departure between appropriation, exchange and natural diffusion, although individual cases continue to present unique circumstances which may need further examination.

While the debate over cultural appropriation may have become particularly contentious in contemporary discussions, it is not a new phenomenon in the USA. The current debate is ostensibly about vanishing marginalised cultures, an issue which has long preoccupied the American mindset due to its traditionally diverse demographic. Many who lambast

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<sup>2</sup> George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism and the Poetics of Place*, (London: Verso, 1994), 62.

occurrences of appropriation point to the necessity of preserving cultures and cultural differences, voicing fears that “the Other will be eaten, consumed, and forgotten”.<sup>3</sup> Those who oppose the focus on appropriation usually argue either for its necessity to produce a truly multicultural society in which distinct cultural differences will be conserved, or point to the natural absorption of heterogeneous societies into the dominant mainstream culture as desirable as imagined under the melting pot ideology. However, both appropriation and its affiliated discussions can also be interpreted as being primarily concerned with vanishing whiteness. Incorporating other cultures’ elements, particularly those with powerful messages such as the afro, into the white mainstream neutralises their potential to disrupt whiteness. It also constructs white culture as dominant through its ability to take and utilise from others. Conversely, macro-appropriations outline whiteness by exercising a privilege that embodies the very thing they are rejecting. By exploring the racial other appropriators are emphasising their own whiteness and the confines of racial identity. This preserves the integrity and dominance of white culture, while ensuing discussions over appropriation examine affected cultures, in the process also examining and defining whiteness.

Debate regarding cultural appropriation is characterised by racialised rhetoric. By connecting culture and race the “belief that racial differences are essential to our understandings of ourselves and society”<sup>4</sup> is perpetuated, thus segregating races according to their cultural differences. It also implies that “the

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<sup>3</sup> bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 39.

<sup>4</sup> Jim Sleeper, *Liberal Racism*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 4.

acknowledged Other must assume recognizable forms”<sup>5</sup> which can be perceived as an essentialising and oversimplification of cultural elements. This is, however, often necessary to understand cultural significance, assign cultural origin and preserve cultural authenticity. In examining these factors, this thesis is guilty of over-essentialism at times. For instance, the automatic attributing of afro-textured hair to Black Americans ignores that not all Black Americans have hair that is afro-textured or naturally suited for hairstyles such as afros and cornrows, while also disregarding those non-Blacks who have frizzy hair that may be more easily managed in styles such as braids or dreadlocks. While it does not seem possible to examine appropriation without an emphasis on race, it is important to acknowledge how this can encourage over-essentialism in cultural debates. As Ziff and Rao note, “the need to describe a community of insiders and outsiders is implicit in most of what has been said about the practice of appropriation”.<sup>6</sup>

This focus on race can be seen to colonise the contemporary debate on appropriation. In cases where race may not be the determining factor of cultural origin, such as with dreadlocks, it dominates discussion with little consideration of other aspects. Instances of misappropriation by a member of the corresponding race, such as the commodification of the afro by Beyoncé Knowles, can be seen to cause little controversy as race is perceived as the definitive connection. This is mirrored in Dolezal’s macro-appropriation which exemplifies the strength of the American racial focus as she deemed a change of racial

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<sup>5</sup> hooks, 26.

<sup>6</sup> Bruce H. Ziff and Pratima V. Rao, “Introduction to Cultural Appropriation: A Framework for Analysis”, in *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation*, eds. Bruce H. Ziff and Pratima V Rao, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 3.

identity essential to fully immerse herself in Black culture and society. The failure to differentiate between culture and race oversimplifies the appropriation debate while also obscuring other issues. Just as common with identity politics, intersectionality is overlooked along with other factors contributing to the creation of culture such as ideology or shared experiences. The construction of race vis-à-vis the cultural other is a long-established practice in the USA, particularly in terms of the construction of whiteness. This is exemplified in appropriation narratives which carries particularly American notions of fascination with racial difference. In this sense contemporary cultural appropriation is both a trending issue and an entrenched tradition, while its over-essentialising of race can be interpreted as a truly American cultural phenomenon.

## Appendix

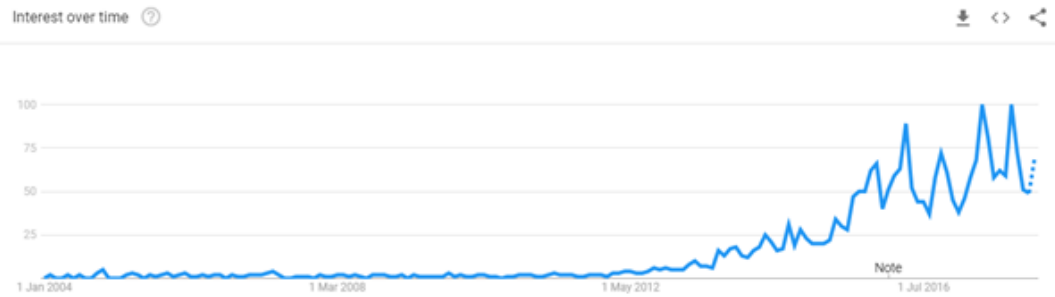


Figure 1: Search interest from 1 Jan 2004 to 25 Feb 2018.



Figure 2: Topic prevalence from 1 Jan 2004 to 25 Feb 2018.

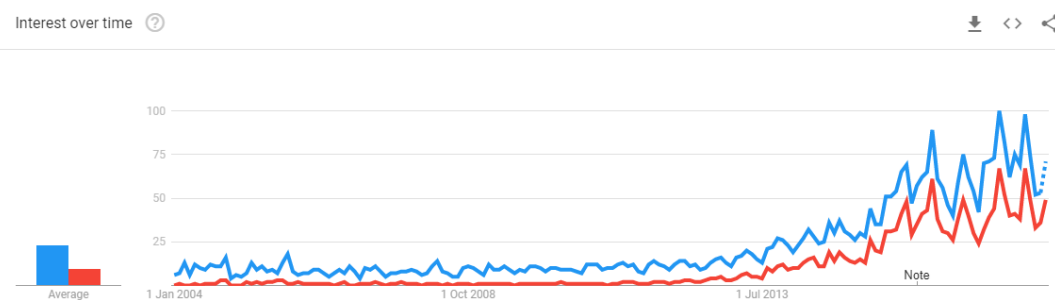


Figure 3: Comparison of topic prevalence (blue) and search interest (red) from 1 Jan 2004 to 25 Feb 2018.

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