

A Review of Cultural Appropriation and How To Spot It.

By

[Nadra Kareem Nittle](#)

Updated on January 04, 2019

Cultural appropriation is a persistent phenomenon. Voyeurism, exploitation and capitalism all play a role in maintaining the practice. With this review of cultural appropriation, learn to define and identify the trend, why it's problematic, and the alternatives that can be taken to stop it.

[What Is Cultural Appropriation & Why Is It Wrong?](#)



capecodphoto / Getty Images

Cultural appropriation is hardly a new phenomenon, yet many people don't quite understand what it is and why it's considered to be a problematic practice. Fordham University Law Professor Susan Scafidi defines cultural appropriation as follows: "Taking intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artifacts from someone else's culture without permission. This can include unauthorized use of another culture's dance, dress, music, language, folklore, cuisine, traditional medicine, religious symbols, etc." Very often those who appropriate culture of another group profit from their exploitation. They not only gain money but also status for popularizing art forms, modes of expression and other customs of marginalized groups.

Appropriation in Music: From Miley to Madonna



Gwen Stefani with Harajuku Girls.

James Devaney / Getty Images

Cultural appropriation has a long history in popular music. Typically African-American musical traditions have been targeted for such exploitation. Although

Black musicians paved the way for the launch of rock-n-roll, their contributions to the artform were largely ignored in the 1950s and beyond. Instead, white performers who borrowed heavily from Black musical traditions received much of the credit for creating rock music. Films such as “The Five Heartbeats” portray how the mainstream recording industry co-opted the styles and sounds of Black artists. Music groups such as Public Enemy have taken issue with how musicians such as Elvis Presley have been credited with creating rock music. More recently, performers such as Madonna, Miley Cyrus and Gwen Stefani have faced accusations of appropriating a wide range of cultures—from Black culture to Native American culture to Asian culture, to name but a few.

Appropriation of Native American Fashions

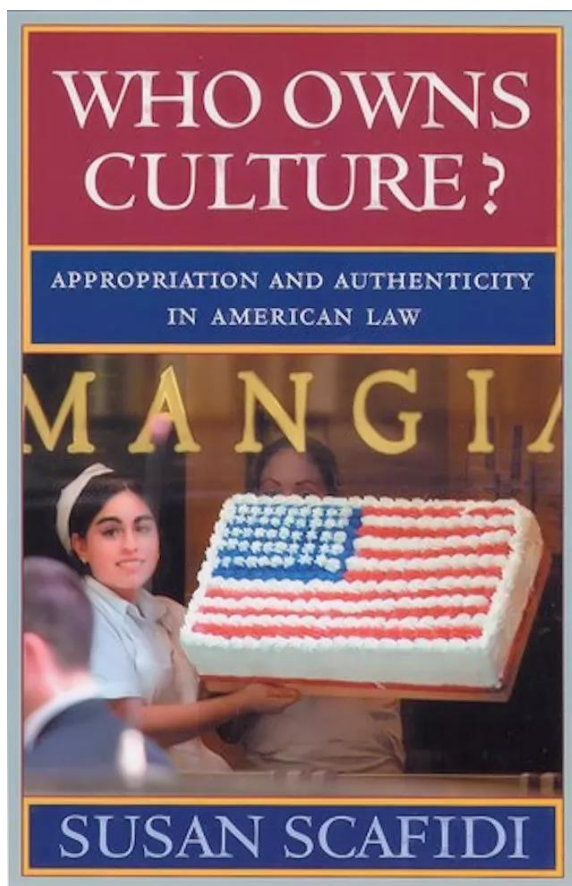


Beaded moccasins.

Spiritartist / Getty Images

Moccasins. Mukluks. Leather fringe purses. These fashions cycle in and out of style, but the mainstream public pays little attention to their Native American roots. Thanks to the activism of academics and bloggers, clothing store chains such as Urban Outfitters and hipsters who sport a blend of boho-hippie-Native chic at music festivals are being called out for appropriating fashions from the indigenous community. Slogans such as “my culture is not a trend” are catching on, and members of First Nations groups are asking the public to educate themselves about the significance of their Native-inspired apparel and to support Native American designers and artisans rather than corporations who profit while peddling stereotypes about indigenous groups. Learn to shop responsibly and to be more culturally sensitive with this overview about the appropriation of Native American fashion.

Books and Blogs About Cultural Appropriation



Rutgers University Press

Want to know more about cultural appropriation? Aren't sure what the issue means exactly or if you or your friends have taken part in the practice? A number of books and blogs shed light on the issue. In her book, *Who Owns Culture? - Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law*, Fordham University Law Professor Susan Scafidi explores why the U.S offers no legal protection for folklore. And in the *Ethics of Cultural Appropriation*, author James O. Young uses philosophy as the foundation to address whether it's moral to co-opt another group's culture. Blogs such as *Beyond Buckskin* urge the public not only to stop appropriating Native American fashion but also to support indigenous designers and artisans.

Wrapping Up

Cultural appropriation is a complex issue, but by reading books about the topic or visiting blogs about the phenomenon, it's possible to develop a better understanding about what constitutes this type of exploitation. When people from both majority and minority groups alike better understand cultural appropriation, they're more likely to view it for what it really is—exploitation of the marginalized.

Nittle, Nadra Kareem. "A Review of Cultural Appropriation and How To Spot It." ThoughtCo, Sep. 3, 2021, [thoughtco.com/a-review-of-cultural-appropriation-2834563](https://www.thoughtco.com/a-review-of-cultural-appropriation-2834563).