

Appropriation vs Appreciation: Where Do We Draw the Line?

In recent months, the African American community has been outraged by the many ways their culture and history have been shamed and mimicked in mainstream media. From Rachel Dolezal's portrayal of "Blackness", the creation of bantu knots being credited to Marc Jacobs as "twisted mini buns", cornrows going from unprofessional to edgy, and the twist out being coined as a "rope trick", many are taking to social media to express their absolute disgust at the colonization or appropriation of Black culture.

Appropriation, as defined by teen actress Amandla Stenberg "occurs when a style leads to racist generalizations or stereotypes where it originated but is deemed as high fashion, cool or funny when the privileged take it for themselves. Appropriation occurs when the appropriator is not aware of the deep significance of the culture they are partaking in." There is a fine line between appropriating and appreciating Black culture and that line is crossed and often ignored.

Why the Uproar?

To many this may seem like a trivial but to those that are on the receiving end of appropriation, this is disrespectful. A common claim is that appropriation pushes the unspoken feeling that as African Americans, the things that are a part of our culture are more acceptable when used by others.

In the spring of 2016, a slight Google search revealed how the standards of beauty are viewed in the corporate world. Twitter user *BonKamona* posted the following tweet, "I saw a tweet saying 'Google unprofessional hairstyles for work'. I did. Then I checked the 'professional' ones." The search itself was not the issue, but the results which shoed "unprofessional" hairstyles to be the natural texture and type of African American women.

Similarly, when *Allure* magazine offered advice on how to achieve a "loose Afro", it was not received well when two years before a 12-year-old Florida student faced expulsion for what was described as "distracting" hair. Why is it that what is natural to a group of people is penalized but acceptable when replicated? This is the central question that is both asked and ignored in the cultural appropriation debate.

Mainstream media, particularly blogging sites and magazines with millions of followers, have taken opportunities to create content directed towards females with naturally curly or kinky textures and in turn made the community feel more isolated. The magazine article was titled "You (Yes You) Can Have An Afro* even if you have straight hair." There was no reference to the origin of the afro or a single image including women of color. This clear example of appropriation was singled out as a direct insult to Black culture.

We Need a Resolution

Styles such as the bantu knot, cornrow, and especially afros and twistouts are century old methods of maintaining and protecting natural African American hair. To call what is natural to a

large percentage of the United States population a “trend” when used by others and “unprofessional” and “unruly” when done for maintenance purposes, sends the message that all people are not equal and being yourself is unacceptable for some. This message is being passed from the youngest to oldest and has not changed.

To say there is an issue to cultural appropriation is to say that there is an end to cultural fusion. The community is not asking to have ownership over the many things that make them who they are. All that is being requested is the ability to have the pieces of their lifestyle appreciated. I'll end with the words of Stenberg because they summarize the situation perfectly, "What would America be like if we loved black people as much as we love black culture?"