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Culture vs. Experience: The Popularization of Black Culture in White America

Abstract

Overview: Before there was Iggy Azalea's "Fancy," there was Eminem's "The Real Slim Shady," Vanilla Ice's "Ice Ice Baby," the Beastie Boys' "No Sleep Till Brooklyn," and Marky Mark and the Funky Bunch's "Good Vibrations." Since the 1980's, hip-hop has frequently been adopted by White rappers, but the genre has largely remained a Black art form and a key aspect of Black culture in the United States. White rappers, while co-existing alongside Black rappers, are often left out of the conversation when it comes to discussions of hip-hop's impact—until Eminem. In 2000, Eminem won the Grammy Award for Best Rap Album for his debut album *The Slim Shady LP* and has since taken home this award five more times. Eminem separates himself from his fellow White rappers, in that, he's the only one to ever be considered the "King of Rap." When *Rolling Stone* gave Eminem this title in 2011, fans of hip-hop and the African American community alike were divided—Eminem is an undeniable titan in hip-hop, but having a White man labelled the "King" of a genre African Americans created for themselves left some confused. While Eminem has always been aware of his privilege as a White man (seen in his 2017 song "Untouchable"), being dubbed the "King of Hip Hop," (Molanphy) left some wondering where the line between Eminem, and others participating in Black culture, appreciating Black culture, and appropriating it lies.

Author's Reflection: My name is Tamaron McKnight, I'm currently a sophomore Childhood Education Major and English Major from Rochester, NY. Last spring, I was fortunate to take ENGL 199: Race in America with Fionnuala Regan. Upon reading the course description during course registration, I was intrigued by the idea of taking a class in which I was given the opportunity to explore a wide variety of topics before focusing on one for my research paper. The most challenging thing about the writing process for me was sharing my ideas with others, especially ideas I feel passionate about; I've been sharing my writing with my peers ever since I entered School of the Arts as a Creative Writing Major in 7th grade, but there was always something vulnerable about having people look at work you're especially passionate about. In a sense, though, having people read work you're passionate about is also rewarding. Even if the reader does or doesn't connect with the content of it, it's validating because in some way or another they're motivated by your writing enough to react to it. This was especially enjoyable for me for this paper because of the issues of black culture I discussed are very personal to me; as a black person, I live and breathe black culture every day of my life, so to have a position in which I can discuss the issues I see is rewarding in the best way. However, ENGL 199 was also rewarding in the fact that it has helped me with future English classes, in that, it has helped me improve my research skills (which were pretty much nonexistent before this class), and helped improve planning skills. Before ENGL 199, I never wrote an essay without creating an outline first, but my outlines were very sparse and, looking back at it now, I realize that these outlines helped very little in the actual essay I was writing. As such, by taking 199, I honed in on my planning skills that are going to benefit me as an English major and well after graduation.

Professor Regan's Reflection: Our Research Writing class began with a lot of reading—authors like Frederick Douglass and Toni Morrison provided a rich literary introduction to our topic, Race in America. From the start, Tamaron had a passion for the subject because of her affinity for reading and her personal life experience as African American. As the class methodically plodded through scaffolded assignments, Tamaron regularly produced unexpected perspectives; she challenged us to view an issue from angles that surprised even other creative thinkers in the class. At the same time, she was a disciplined researcher, allowing herself the opportunity to locate and digest useful and credible sources. As she constructed her argument, Tamaron worked to fairly present her evidence and synthesize her sources. She ended up writing a timely paper on the blurring lines between appropriation and appreciation of Black culture. Tamaron drew in history and literature as foundations that can help us understand the current popularization of Black culture in America, and then analyzed the problems that this causes. She herself used the scaffolding skills developed in class to build her argument from the ground up, educating her

reader about history and walking us through how it often plays out to negative results in pop culture. We come to appreciate Tamaron's views because she weighs them against the relevant perspectives uncovered in her scholarly search. Ultimately, the paper makes a strong case for a more informed and deeper appreciation of Black American culture.

Culture vs. Experience:
The Popularization of Black Culture in White America

Tameron McKnight

ENGL 199C: Race in America

Prof. Fionnuala Regan

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“What if we loved black people as much as black culture?”

-Amandla Stenberg, “Don’t Cash Crop My Cornrows”

Introduction

Before there was Iggy Azalea’s “Fancy,” there was Eminem’s “The Real Slim Shady,” Vanilla Ice’s “Ice Ice Baby,” the Beastie Boys’ “No Sleep Till Brooklyn,” and Marky Mark and the Funky Bunch’s “Good Vibrations.” Since the 1980’s, hip-hop has frequently been adopted by White rappers, but the genre has largely remained a Black art form and a key aspect of Black culture in the United States. White rappers, while co-existing alongside Black rappers, are often left out of the conversation when it comes to discussions of hip-hop’s impact—until Eminem. In 2000, Eminem won the Grammy Award for Best Rap Album for his debut album *The Slim Shady LP* and has since taken home this award five more times. Eminem separates himself from his fellow White rappers, in that, he’s the only one to ever be considered the “King of Rap.” When *Rolling Stone* gave Eminem this title in 2011, fans of hip-hop and the African American community alike were divided—Eminem is an undeniable titan in hip-hop, but having a White man labelled the “King” of a genre African Americans created for themselves left some confused. While Eminem has always been aware of his privilege as a White man (seen in his 2017 song “Untouchable”), being dubbed the “King of Hip Hop,” (Molanphy) left some wondering where the line between Eminem, and others participating in Black culture, appreciating Black culture, and appropriating it lies.

From as early as the 1800’s, White Americans have been fascinated by black culture, whether it be in the form of fashion, hairstyles, music, or even vernacular. This fascination has led White Americans to participate in Black culture, even though it is, historically, not theirs. However, the pervasive social, economic, educational, and political disadvantages African Americans endure is just as much a part of Black culture as fashion and music. Yet, even as

White Americans indulge in Black culture, they still keep the privileges associated with whiteness, and, thus, the negative aspects of the African American experience in America are overshadowed. As such, there is a disconnect between the White mainstream using Black culture, what it means to be a Black in America, and the historical significance of the culture. White Americans have adopted and popularized Black culture in its numerous forms, while African Americans are still degraded and undervalued for using their own culture and the real issues they face on a daily basis are ignore; White Americans want to partake and participate in Black *culture* but do not want, nor address, the Black *experience*.

What Can Black Culture Look Like?

Black culture is heavily influenced by the historic injustices committed against African Americans (such as slavery and Jim Crow laws) as well as social, economic, and political turmoil. For as long as there has been Black people in America, Black culture has continued to develop in response to the Black American experience. Much like other cultures, Black culture manifests in a variety of forms. Specifically, music and Black features have been some of the most impactful forms within White America and the White mainstream.

Music

Many of the genres of music, specifically Blues, Rock, Country, and Rap/Hip-Hop, Americans of all races enjoy have been largely developed by African Americans and can be traced to the first slaves brought to America. When slaves were brought to America, they brought their music with them and blended it with Christianity to create Spirituals (which would later evolve into folk music). For slaves, Spirituals and music, was not just a luxury to enjoy during free time—Spirituals were a necessity for survival and communication between slaves and to reflect the oppression felt by slaves after emancipation. In a similar fashion, Blues music (which later developed into Rhythm and Blues or R&B) was developed in the 1920's as a

reaction to the harsh reality of racism the Southern Black community felt during Jim Crow. Blues was a dynamic genre and could be played using readily available instruments that could even be made at home. This effectively made Blues accessible to different communities and races, not just African Americans (Dressman & Ilawole). This sentiment is also true of Rock music and Country music. While both of these genres are generally considered to be largely by White people and for White people, both genres have roots in Black music—Rock music evolved directly from R&B while Country evolved from folk and blues music. However, as the genres grew popular among White audiences, record labels gradually rebranded them as such.

One of the most well-known musical creations to come from Black culture is that of Hip-Hop and Rap music. Hip-Hop music and culture were developed to reflect the “social, economic, political, and cultural realities and conditions of [the] lives [of African Americans], speaking to them in a language and manner they understand” (Alridge & Stewart 190). Much more than Spirituals and Blues, Hip-Hop has transcended musical boundaries and created new fashion trends, a new dialect and language, and an aesthetic that resonated with youth. Hip-Hop is largely considered one of the most influential parts of Black culture on American culture, as hip-hop has been the most consumed genre of music in America since 2017 (Caulfield).

Blackface and Black Features

Another aspect of Black culture is the idea of what it means to look “Black.” Since race is a hegemonic and social system rather than a genetics-based system, (Robinson-Moore 69) it can be argued that there is no way to “look Black.” While this may genetically be true, in a study done by Current Directions in Psychological Science, “research suggests that stereotypical Black faces consist of some combination of facial features including full lips, wide nose, dark eye color, coarse hair, and dark complexion” (Kleider-Offutt 28). However, this does not mean that only Black people can have these features. In this same study by Current Directions in Psychological

Science, Kleider-Offutt demonstrates a White man with stereotypical Black features, such as coarse hair and thick lips (30). While features are not genetically related to Black people or any other races, features such as the ones Kleider-Offutt describes are found more consistently in African Americans than any other race. Thus, these features are *stereotypical* and are often associated with African Americans more than anyone else.

The association of these features with African Americans lead to one of America's oldest forms of entertainment—blackface minstrelsy. Although not created by African Americans, minstrel shows are connected to Black culture as they serve as offensive emulations of Black features and mannerisms. Minstrel shows comprised of White actors wearing blackface, a popular form of makeup White actors would use to portray themselves as African Americans. In doing this makeup, White actors would darken their skin with burnt cork, shoe paint, or shoe polish and paint on large red lips and other exaggerated African American features. When assuming this “costume,” these White actors perpetuated negative stereotypes about African Americans, such being lazy, ignorant, hypersexual, and criminal (Clark). However, blackface was not exclusive to White actors. African Americans also performed in blackface as it was one of the only ways Black performers could be in the entertainment industry. Black artists in blackface often countered White actors' depictions of African Americans by infusing political commentary in their comedic minstrel routines and offering an intellectual representation of the Black community (Clark). While the practice of blackface has not contributed to Black culture in a positive way, it is important to consider as it shows one of the earliest instances in which African Americans were allowed to permeate the mainstream.

Are We Appropriating Black Culture or Appreciating it?

With Black culture manifesting in a variety of different forms, it's almost impossible for it to singularly be used by African Americans. Due to America being a “melting pot” of sorts,

which allows for the continuous exchange and intermingling of cultures, Black culture has always been easily accessible to the White mainstream. As such, it is becoming harder to find the line between the *appropriation* of Black culture and the *appreciation* of Black culture. Cultural appropriation refers to “the ways people adopt or adapt an aspect of another’s culture and make it their own” (Han 9). The act of adopting usually refers to a dominant group, such as White Americans, adopting aspects of an oppressed groups culture, such as Black culture. Furthermore, appropriation of a culture leads to the development of racist generalizations about the oppressed group, while the dominant group is praised and given positive attention. Cultural appropriation also stems from the disregard or lack of knowledge about the significance of the culture the dominant group is partaking in.

Cultural appreciation aims to achieve the opposite. Appreciation, in general, is the “recognition and enjoyment of the good qualities of someone or something” (Han 9). As such, cultural appreciation is the act of recognizing and enjoying the good qualities of a culture. This is different from appropriation because of *intention*. If someone from another culture adopts aspects of Hip-Hop culture with the intention of making it their own or gaining popularity, that is appropriation. If someone from another culture praises aspects of Hip-Hop culture or finds enjoyment in listening to Hip-Hop, that is appreciation.

The distinction between appropriating and appreciating is very slim and hard to discern, especially in America. With America being known and praised for its diversity and constant cultural exchange, it leads to questions of whether individual cultures exist or if Americans live under the umbrella of American culture. A common argument against the legitimacy of cultural appropriation is the idea that, because of cultural exchange, there is no original or authentic culture. According to *Sapiens* “... ‘authentic’ cultures... that developed independently, and that

consists of ancient local traditions free of external influences...” (Harari 10) do not exist anymore. While this is true in a historical sense, it does not account for *how* these external influences helped shaped various cultures. Black culture has been continuously shaped by the ever-changing social, economic, and politic turmoil African Americans have endured since they were brought to the Americas as slaves. While the culture they’re created may not be wholly authentic or original, it reflects their struggles. As such, while Black culture is not considered authentic in the sense of being original, the development of Black culture is an authentic reaction to the hardships African Americans have endured. These hardships are not the same as the hardships of White Americans or other groups in America and does not fall under the umbrella of a singular American culture. Therefore, *it is* possible to appropriate culture, specifically Black culture, because it represents a unique experience that outsiders are trying to take part in.

Miley Cyrus and Black Culture

One of the most recognizable examples of the thin line between cultural appropriation and the cultural appreciation of Black culture by the White mainstream is the rebranding of pop-star Miley Cyrus. In 2013, Cyrus used artists in Hip-Hop and Hip-Hop culture to help officially cut ties from her clean-cut image. Cyrus’ single “We Can’t Stop” helped the singer transform from a Disney starlet to the “ghetto” and “ratchet” voice of the music scene. In the music video for “We Can’t Stop,” Cyrus uses several styles associated with Black culture, such as gold grills, hair extensions, gang signs, and even actual Black women, to be “cool” and “edgy.” On the surface, there is nothing wrong with Cyrus being inspired and trying to *appreciate* Black culture, but her later comments on Hip-Hop and Hip-Hop culture show that her use of Black culture is rooted in appropriation. In 2017, when Cyrus yet again rebranded and went “back to her roots” with her single “Malibu,” that noticeably lacked Hip-Hop influence. According to Cyrus, it was because “[she] can’t listen to [Hip-Hop] anymore...” and the “[lyrics] pushed [her] out of the hip-hop

scene... [because she was] so not that” (Norris). Cyrus’ comments left a lot of people shocked because she was seemingly trashing the culture that brought her so much success.

The constant rebranding of Miley Cyrus perfectly demonstrates why the line between appreciating a culture and appropriating a culture will always be blurred. Cyrus isn’t seemingly doing anything wrong by participating in hip-hop culture if it’s something she truly enjoys, but her ability to drop Black culture like an old fad is where the problem lays. As a White woman, Cyrus “is very privileged to be able to play dress up and adorn herself with the trappings of an oppressed/minority culture. She can play at blackness without being burdened by the reality of it” (Stewart). This is the reason why appropriation of Black culture by the White mainstream is problematic; even if White Americans are partaking in the culture of an oppressed group, such as African Americans, they have the privilege to stop participating at any time and shy away from the cruel realities of it. For African Americans, Black culture is a part of the *experience* of being African American, and no matter how hard it gets or how desperately they want to shy away from it, they don’t have the privilege to abandon it.

The Issues with Appropriating and Popularizing Black Culture

Many of the problems associated with appropriating Black culture connect to the idea of having privilege; White Americans who appropriate Black culture, whether knowingly or unknowingly, help perpetuate racial inequality and inequity. This is due to the fact that White Americans who use Black culture often are equated with being “trendy” and “fashionable” by the White mainstream, while African Americans are equated with negative stereotypes by the White mainstream. In addition to this, White Americans who appropriate Black culture not only ignore the cruel reality of being Black in America, but also the way this reality is intertwined with Black culture.

Hypocrisy

As noted earlier, cultural appropriation leads to stereotypes about the group whose culture is being appropriated, while the group who is appropriating is praised. Within American culture, “when it comes to the appropriation of Black features, thick lips, big booties, and natural hair styles are only deemed hip by the media when White celebrities start doing it” (Deck). This kind of hypocrisy and double standard is what leaves some to argue against White Americans popularizing and participating in Black culture; it is unfair that the that are inescapable parts of the African American experience, lead to racist generalizations for Black people and celebrities, but these same features are deemed popular on White Americans and celebrities.

The Kardashian-Jenner Empire

One such example of this unfair double standard is the empire the Kardashian-Jenner family has built for themselves. Much of what has made the Kardashians and Jenners so popular is based on Black culture and the emulation of Black features (Cakrani). While it is insensitive to debate whether or not the features the family is known for (such as large bottoms and fuller lips) are natural or cosmetic, it is important to note these features are not typically related to Caucasian women, such as they are. However, these features on Black women, specifically their bodies, have lent them to abuse and exploitation.

Throughout the late 1700’s and early 1800’s, Sarah “Saartjie” Baartman, also known as the “Hottentot Venus,” was an African slave who was paraded around Europe as a freak show attraction because of her large buttocks. While darker skin definitely had an impact on the way Black women were treated, “... physique and anatomy further characterize[d] [them] as...inferior being[s]” (Mothoagae 71). While this directly contradicts the way the Kardashians and Jenners have made a name for themselves in the entertainment industry, it also demonstrates the hypocrisy of how society views traditionally Black features on White women. While society

has progressed, in that, people of all races are typically accepted no matter the shape of their body, the struggles and humiliation Black women have endured should not be forgotten under this guise. Sarah Baartman spent nearly her whole life being degraded and hypersexualized for her natural body, yet the Kardashians are often named some of the most beautiful women in the world because of these same features. While this is not necessarily the fault of the Kardashians themselves, it is important to recognize the power that women of their celebrity status have and how the images they portray have cultural implications.

In addition to being praised for having Black features, the Kardashians have also been wrongly credited for making traditional Black hairstyles trendy and popular. Kim Kardashian, Kylie Jenner, and Kendall Jenner have all been mentioned to have “brought back” cornrows in an “innovative” and “edgy” way. However, it wasn’t until Kylie Jenner wore dreadlocks that the full extent of the hypocrisy associated with White celebrities participating in Black culture was actualized. In April of 2015, Jenner appeared on the cover of Teen Vogue sporting dreadlocks and several publications “...loved her edgy, boho-chic look” (Deck). While Jenner’s cover did illicit a conversation about cultural appropriation, much of the controversy surrounding it dealt with the media’s hypocritical reaction to when African American actress Zendaya Coleman wore dreads just two months earlier. When Coleman wore dreadlocks to an awards ceremony, it was noted that she probably “smells like patchouli oil or weed” (Deck). The difference in the way Jenner and Coleman were treated when they wore dreads speaks volumes about the consumption of Black culture. As a Black woman, Coleman is well within in her right to wear dreadlocks, and yet the White mainstream subjects her to racist generalizations when she’s taking part in her own culture. However, Jenner, a White woman, is essentially praised for doing the same thing, even though she is taking part in someone else’s culture. Within the White mainstream, Black culture

and the features associated with Black people are desirable, but only if they are being used by someone who is White.

Blackfishing

Hypocrisy with White Americans popularizing and using Black culture is also seen in the relatively new trend of “blackfishing.” Blackfishing entails white individuals, most often White women, appropriating stereotypically Black features with the expectation of gaining attention, followers, and sponsors. This trend was brought to the mainstream’s attention by a Twitter user who posted before and after photos of these women who are accused of Blackfishing (Zaragoza). In the after photos, these women whose skin was once pale, lips were thin, and hair was pin-straight, now had dark tan, skin, full lips, and textured hair. In a sense, women who blackfish are emulating the stereotypical features of light-skinned Black women.

This emulation can be likened to that of blackface—both practices involve darkening the skin, changing the lip shape, and changing the texture of one’s hair. However, blackface and blackfishing differentiate in their purposes. Blackface was used for comical purposes to demean African Americans while blackfishing serves to popularize Black features on White faces and bodies. Blackfishing is hypocritical due to the ambivalent history toward African American features. Historically, African Americans have been shamed by White people for their skin color, large lips, and textured hair. However, when these same features are seen on White women, they are seen as “trendy” and “desirable” which in turn gets them sponsorships, cosmetic brand deals, and praise (Abera). The hypocrisy surrounding praising White women for appropriating Black features speaks volumes about the way in which privilege interacts with White Americans popularizing Black culture.

Culture vs. Experience

When it comes to Black culture, culture and experience are often viewed as two separate entities; Blues is treated as a cultural revolution in the Black community and the Jim Crow South is treated as an experience African Americans endured. Within White America, these are treated as two separate events that happened around the same time and, thus, there is no historical context to consider when a White person creates Blues music. This, however, is false—to partake in Black culture, one cannot ignore the numerous injustices African Americans have faced and continue to face.

The African American Experience

The experience of being African American in America and the issues African Americans face are hard to narrow down to a concise list due to a variance in lifestyles—some Black people go through their whole lives without ever thinking about racism, while other Black people have to fight against racism every day. However, in looking at data related to the inequality African Americans face, there is enough consistency to conclusively say that there are specific problems that more Black people will face than not face. Many of these problems stem from different institutions in America that consistently keep African Americans disenfranchised and White Americans in a dominant position.

One example of an institution that keeps African Americans disenfranchised is the prison system. African Americans make up 13% of the U.S. population and constitute 40% of the prison population while White Americans make up 64% of the U.S. population and 39% of the prison population (Farbota). In addition to this, the Sentencing Project reports that 1 in 3 Black men will spend time in jail during their lifetime, compared to 1 in 17 White men who will spend time in jail (Knafo). This is a staggering and expected statistic considering the way African Americans are treated by the criminal justice system before they even go to jail. Even if a White person and

a Black person are arrested and charged for the same crime, the Black defendant is more likely to be convicted due to racial bias among judges and jurors. Similarly, Black person is convicted of a crime, they are more likely to be sentenced to incarceration compared to a White person convicted of the same crime (Farbota). As such, the gap in incarceration rates is not a case of African Americans simply committing more crime or more violent crimes; the gap is a direct result of a flawed system that allows for African Americans to be punished more harshly for their crimes than White Americans.

In addition to a large gap in incarceration rates, there is also a large gap in unemployment between African Americans and White Americans. According to the Pew Research Center, Black unemployment rates are twice that of White unemployment rates and have consistently been so since the 1960s (DeSilver). Many researchers cite the “last hired, first fired” hypothesis to explain this gap. The Current Population Survey (where the unemployment rate is derived) has found support for the “first fired” part but no support for the “last hired” part. The Current Population Survey found that African Americans disproportionately lose their jobs when the business cycle weakens (DeSilver). This unemployment gap even affects college graduates as Black college graduates are still twice as likely to be unemployed (Ross). This gap in employment leads to the large wealth gap between that is also present between White Americans and Black Americans. According to The Atlantic, “unemployment...can permanently alter the trajectory of a worker's lifetime earnings” (Ross). As such, it's no surprise that the wealth of White households is 13 times the wealth of Black households (Kochhar & Fry). Thus, the institutions that perpetuate Black unemployment and subsequently less median wealth for Black Americans are a part of the experience of living as a Black person in America that creates the culture we all know and love.

The African American Experience in *The Bluest Eye*

While it is fictional, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* serves as an excellent example of another issue that plagues the African American experience—self-esteem issues and low self-worth. Throughout *The Bluest Eye*, the novel's central character, Pecola Breedlove, struggles with feeling beautiful because of the way her community views Blackness. Pecola is told throughout her whole upbringing that Blackness equates to ugly and she subsequently strives for “White” features in the form of blue eyes. Within Pecola's community,

It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given [Pecola and other African Americans] a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, “You are ugly people.” They have looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement. (Morrison 39)

With the degradation of Black features, Pecola develops a sense of “Negrophobia [which] emerges both from the contact with the white and as an escape from blackness” (Maleki & Haj'jari 70). Thus, the only way Pecola feels she can look beautiful is if she abandons her blackness.

Pecola and her community's regard for their Blackness represents the African American experience because Black people have historically been negatively affected by Eurocentric ideals. African Americans, specifically African American women and girls like Pecola, have continually dealt with self-esteem issues because their features were deemed undesirable in the vein of White beauty standards. For White Americans, the pinnacle of beauty has always been features associated with Eurocentric standards that typically include lighter skin and straight hair and such features are imposed on Black women and girls (Robinson-Moore 73). Instead of learning to love her blackness, Pecola “yearn[ed] for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning [was] exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment” (Morrison

204). The degradation of black features in Pecola's community affect her so much that her psyche is damaged because she develops an intense desire to have these features in order to feel beautiful.

Pecola's yearning for Whiter features is an important depiction of the self-esteem issues African Americans face because it demonstrates why the appropriation of stereotypically black features is problematic. Little black girls like Pecola are told all their lives that they have to abide by Eurocentric beauty standards and look "Whiter" in order to be beautiful. Nowadays, though, it's common to see White women with stereotypically black features and are praised for having such features. If White women are considered beautiful for having "Whiter" features and for having stereotypically black features, it shows little Black girls and Black women that their features *are* desirable, but only on White skin.

How Does The African American Experience Relate to Black Culture?

The experience of African Americans is often forgotten when it comes to the consumption of Black culture by the White mainstream. White Americans will rap along to the pain and struggles of Kendrick Lamar and call Beyoncé their queen, all while disregarding the people they use their platform to represent. White Americans will put their hair in cornrows all while disregarding the Black women who cannot get a job because they choose to wear their hair natural (Gandy). White Americans will self-tan their skin so dark they rival light-skinned Black women, all while disregarding the fact that having Black skin is more likely to get you convicted of a crime.

Black culture is much more than music and style. Black culture was developed to retain humanity in the face of adversity and continues to develop to address the rampant inequality African Americans live with every day. Black culture and the Black experience aren't so much

related, rather, they are intertwined—Black culture is rooted in the way African Americans deal with what it's like to be a Black person living in America. However, in the popularization of Black culture by the White mainstream, the issues African Americans face are more often than not ignored. In embracing Black culture, one must also embrace the struggles that go into creating Black culture.

Conclusion: How Do We Draw the Line?

There is no question that much of what we consider popular culture finds its roots in Black culture. As a result, Black culture has continually been made synonymous with American culture. In doing this, we lessen the significance of the history in Black culture as well as neglect the experience of being African American when Black culture, history, and experience are inherently linked. As an African American, there is no way to separate the experience of being Black in America and Black culture—that is a privilege that only people from outside cultures have, specifically White Americans, have when they appropriate Black culture. White Americans who appropriate Black culture get to pick and choose the “trendy” and “fun” parts of Black culture to participate in. As such, White Americans get to participate in Black culture without experiencing the racial discrimination and social inequality that Black Americans deal with. White Americans can braid their hair, turn on Hip-Hop, and tan their skin and still live a life of White privilege; if they don't want to participate in this culture anymore, they also have the privilege to stop at any time.

If White Americans can use Black culture because of their privilege, then how do we draw the line between *appropriation* and *appreciation*?

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