

Cultural Appropriation and the Limits of Identity: A Case for Multiple Humanity (ies)¹

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Introduction

In late April 2018, a controversy erupted in the social media after an American high school student, Keziah Daum posted her high school graduation pictures on twitter. She was wearing a Chinese Cheongsam. She was heavily criticized by the Chinese diaspora community in the social media and was condemned for a mindless appropriation of a Chinese cultural outfit. A twitter handle, @Jeremy² Lam bitterly complained, “my culture is not your god***prom dress.” @gGavo Dude accused her of living a clueless and meaningless life, “what is the theme of your life? Ignorant? (sic).” The most ostentatious criticism came from Jeannie @JeannieBeannie99: “This isn’t ok. I wouldn’t wear traditional Korean, Japanese or any other traditional dress and I’m Asian. I wouldn’t wear traditional Irish or Swedish or Greek dress either. There is a lot of history behind these clothes. Sad.” These criticisms which range from benign outrage of cultural insensitivity to a more serious charge of cultural imperialism and mostly came from Chinese diaspora community.

A few days later, social media reaction from mainland China showed a stark difference from the diaspora outrage. In fact, by May 1, an editorial in the *Wenxue City News* praised and applauded the student’s creative adaptation of a Chinese cultural artefact. Amid mostly positive reactions and outpouring of support, a reader commented, “very elegant and beautiful! Really don’t understand the people who are against her, they are wrong!” The reader even recommended that Chinese government, state media and fashion industry extend her an invitation to visit China for cultural display. The cheongs, another reader claimed “is not cultural theft” but in fact a “cultural appreciation and cultural respect.” A position supported by another person who argued that “Culture has no borders. There is no problem, as long as

¹ I dedicate this essay to the Jesuit, Rev. Ray Salomone, SJ (1933-2018) who taught me the virtue of tolerance.

² It is ironical that “Jeremy” is not a Chinese name even if used as a pseudonym

there is no malice or deliberate maligning. Chinese cultural treasures are worth spreading all over the world.” The most sympathetic comment was from twitter handle, *another mother @ user handle YingLi*: “I am a Chinese woman. I support you. You rocked that dress!! I have an 18-year-old daughter who just had her prom. She said people might be just jealous that you looked awesome in that dress.” And from CYLinTW, expressing gratitude for her use of the cheongs: “Thank you for letting everyone know the beauty of Chinese culture.”

As to whether her action constitute a cultural spite, Ms. Daum was adamant: “To everyone causing so much negativity: I mean no disrespect to the Chinese culture. I’m simply showing my appreciation to their culture. I’m not deleting my post because I’ve done nothing but show my love for the culture. It’s a fucking dress. And it’s beautiful.” But why would what ordinarily seem like a genuine benign activity generate such emotive and passionate debate in the public sphere? *The elephant in the room* is culture. Why is conversation on culture a sensitive topic? Could we not share culture? Is culture a closed system of values or is it open to change? Could it be that we often impose a rigid category of identity schema and codify it as culture? Is culture a top-down mandate of homogenous values, a dogmatic effusion of reality or bottom up generation of human contingencies that are in constant flux, sensitive to history and context?

Writing for the *London Independent*, Eliza Anyangwe dismissed Ms. Daum’s explanation, arguing instead that her action merely reinforces cultural domination, where cultural appropriation is all about “power” insofar as Ms. Daum remains an “embodiment of a system that empowers white people to take whatever they want, go wherever they want and be able to fall back on: ‘well I didn’t mean any harm’” (Anyangwe). For Anyangwe, cultural attire such as the cheongsam is a symbolic representation of our human expression. What we wear and how we wear it are symbolic representation of who we *truly* are insofar as it is constitutive of our cultural identity. Drawing parallel with the public outcry against UK’s Prince Harry’s Nazi-like costume for a fancy dress party in 2005 (The Independent, January 13, 2005), and New Zealand’s Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern choice of a Māori cloak during a meeting of the heads of Commonwealth of Nations in April 2018 (The Independent, April 20, 2018), Anyangwe concludes that clothing is a cultural schema of a people and when “appropriated” by the likes

of Ms. Daum, the PM or Prince Harry, it becomes a symbolic representation of power to dominate or occupy.

The challenge here is that things like clothing even where they signify “cultural attributes” are primarily material as they are fixated only at the moment of expressiveness. Beyond this point, cultural artefacts as material representation of cultures are rarely immune to change. Just as culture evolve, these artefacts evolve in symbolic meaning and representation. Would the swastika evoke such powerful emotive revulsion if the Nazis never came to power? Would it make a difference if the New Zealand PM was Māori and yet in power? What would be the boundaries of cultural infusion and effusion? Does cultural appropriation occur only when one from a dominant culture practices it? Is it then synonymous with power? What are its boundaries? Does it extend to everyday cultural practice like eating (other people’s food), clothing (wearing American Suit or some European dress as an African), hairstyle (braiding dreadlocks or using foreign hair extensions), theater (participating in English drama), even language (writing this essay, or speaking others like German, French or Xhosa), music (listening to country or blues)? Whom to love,³ et cetera. What could we appropriate or avoid? What are the limitations and consents? When does a cultural good become normalized and ceases to be “appropriation”?

“Fed by the products of their soil, dressed in their fabrics, amused by games they invented, instructed even by their ancient moral fables”, Kwame Appiah has come to wonder: “why would we neglect to understand the mind of these nations, among whom our European traders have traveled ever since they could find a way to get to them?” (Appiah xv). Does not the fact that we already speak a language indicate that we are already inserted in the culture of those who speak those languages? What then defines culture? Is it dress? Is it cuisine? Is it aesthetics? Language? Traditions? Stories? Or Race? But if language is a source and custodian of culture should we not then

³ If I may push the boundaries to extreme absurdity: whom to love - as a heterosexual black male: could I love a straight (or non-straight) white woman or man without defaulting on appropriation (since *whiteness* and *straightness* is a culture)? Could I even leave the boundaries of “maleness” and its misogyny and fall in love with a woman - black or white or yellow – since this too is cultural?

recognize that as soon as we begin to speak a foreign tongue we are “appropriating” the cultural artefacts of that society. As Fanon observed, if you want to have access to a culture, speak the language for “[a] man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed in that language” (Fanon, *Black Skin* 18). But could I speak a foreign language without transforming it to suit my own experiences? English as a language for example has variations both in spelling, syntax or even pronunciation; it is not the property of *English* people alone. At the same time, to have a language is already a social contract that I agree to the meaning for words as products of the community. The same language we own, we disagree or agree within it (Appiah 29ff).

The aforementioned questions are my preoccupation in this essay. In what follows, I examine the dominant conversations on cultural appropriation. The first part of the essay will examine the ideological configuration of what constitutes cultural appropriation (hereafter as CA) first, as the politics of the diaspora and second, within a normative understanding of culture and its diachronic contradictions. This will be followed by a critical reevaluation of our subject theme as primarily a discourse of power with multiple implications. Framed as a discourse of power, CA is equally exposed to ideological distortions, and its critics becoming afflicted with the same virus they set out to cure in the first place. I am interested in the aspect of culture as a constant location of tensions and rupture, yet constitutive of core credential in the making of modern identity. I argue that the failure of dominant criticisms of cultural appropriation is precisely because they do not leave epistemic space for prior commitments: the internal variation of culture. If as critics have argued that CA enables cultural violence, we need to understand the epistemic space where cultural violence occurs in order to make a meaningful proposal for identity discourse and conversation. I will make a case for what may be termed multiple humanity (ies) as a way of transcending the homogenous claims imposed upon cultural memories.

Cultural Appropriation as Politics of the Diaspora

Defining cultural appropriation is intensely complex. According to Bruce Ziff and Pratima Rao, it means “the taking – from a culture that is not one’s own – of intellectual property, cultural expressions or artifacts, history and way of knowledge...and profiting at the expense of the people of that culture” (1, 24). For Denise Cuthbert, it is an idea

that erupted as a reaction against the illicit “theft” of tangible cultural artefacts for exclusive or even shared usage by the “appropriator” and *owners* of such (258). This meaning extends too to non-tangible materials like “a song, literary genres” or other forms of cultural representations over “which the people of [a] community concerned have little or no control” (Cuthbert 258). Although Cuthbert recognizes that cultural infusions by definition are multidimensional, she nevertheless ascribes “appropriation” to that which occurs when dominant culture take from “marginal, minority and colonized cultures”, whereas, the reverse becomes “assimilation” (258). For Raven Davis, cultural appropriation involves suppression of voice for a person of another culture, a selective adaptation of cultural goods; “manipulating or reinterpreting what’s been removed” and disrupting the “ability to keep cultural knowledge and teachings sacred” (Couchie *et al*).

Asymmetries of cultural power becomes then the shibboleth for evolving criticisms of CA. Configured as responses to the evolving processes of social relations, the criticisms equally assume an ideological pose as discourse of liberation and power. But ideology often demands an audience. It does not emerge in a vacuum, it always has a political space, negotiating between layers of social processes and relations. Its legitimation lies in its capability to produce meaning for its adherents. As an ideological discourse, CA is thus construed as universalistic designation through which critics forge a new consciousness that fuses cultural memory with homogenous claims on identity. Becoming functional as an ideology of power,⁴ its pose of repudiation also offers a political space, a space in which the *universal is particularized* (Buchanan 487) *as a homogenous certainty* - what I have termed for this purpose *the politics of the diaspora*.

But who is the diaspora? Modern Western societies are often conceived as a “location of tolerance”; a geopolitical space not only of human progress but a domain where pluralism, multiculturalism and cultural diversity are actively promoted (McLeod 227). These representations nevertheless, are often cast in the shadows when confronted with

⁴ Power is understood here as ability to control, manage or influence the action of others. Yet, even without legitimation, i.e. [have authority], when applied to culture, [cultural] power can influence social change with huge socioeconomic and political consequences.

reality of subjective differences. The language of rights and its history thereof in the West would constitute “conceptual blinders” and would impose a misrecognition of the socio-economic and political inequalities experienced by the minority and migrant subcultures in these societies. It masks the reality that within the so-called Western liberal societies are invisible structures of inequalities, injustice, inhumanity which are very often direct cause or aftermath of these regime of rights. As David Dabydeen argued, “cultural diversity” is a “cozy term” which “evolved out of a blend of European post-colonial guilt and enlightenment, to justify tolerance of our presence in the metropolis...a sizeable segment of the British people of certain generation, those above forty, say, would prefer it if we went away and never come back” (McLeod 227ff). The upshot is that these minority groups usually confine themselves to their own “cells” without any form of inter-cell communication or “cross-fertilization of cultures taking place” (McLeod 227). This the sociopolitical context in which the diaspora emerges. Cultural homeland offers an idea of an imagined community that is comforting and safe from the ripple effects of abstract modernity.

Accordingly, the term diaspora evokes different sentiments for different cultural groups and communities. As Robin Cohen puts it, the diaspora refers to communities of people “settled outside their natal (or imagined natal) territories” and:

[who] ‘acknowledge that ‘the old country’ – a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore – always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions. That claim may be strong or weak ... but a member’s adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history and a sense of co-ethnicity with others of a similar background (ix).

For my current purposes, I use the term in reference to the so-called *third-world* communities in the Western world for whom diaspora symbolizes “a collective trauma, a banishment, where one dreamed of home but lived in exile” (Cohen ix). An active state of alienation, the unified sense of the “we” is a symbolic state in which the “old country” offers a cultural capital for subjective reclamation. It is this cultural capital that CA is threatening to existential bankruptcy. But this “we” is not a homogenous certainty; it is in fact derivative of a “differentiated, heterogeneous, converted spaces” (McLeod 207).

A pseudo political constituency colored by an ideology of superficial universalism, diaspora politics offers a modern political avatar as a response to the challenges faced by many who find themselves as liminal subjects in Western societies. Subjective in its criteria of reference, diaspora politics is a way of creating a *subjective space* for those who though belong to a society, yet they do not feel they are part of that society. The space thus created is at the same time cultural as it is political; a site of refusal, revolt but also subjective reclamation. Confronted with the anxiety of the present, the idea of a metaphysical homeland becomes attractive as a source of emotive and social stability for a disembodied subject. Writing on the African experience during colonialism, Es'kia Mphahlele offers a parallel example:

It is significant that is not the African in British-settled territories – a product of ‘indirect rule’ and one that has been left in his cultural habitat – who readily reaches out for his traditional past. It is rather the assimilated African, who has absorbed French culture, who is now passionately wanting to recapture his past. In his poetry he extols his ancestors, ancestral masks, African wood carvings and bronze art and tries to recover the moorings of his oral literature, he clearly feels he has come to a dead-end in European culture (Mphahlele 25).

While these diaspora citizens may not fight wars for their cultural homelands, pay taxes or even relocate to these places, they are those for whom culture plays an even more critical role in identity formation. This is the migrant who lives in a contested space, an anxious location of memories. Caught as he or she is between the old home and new home, she creates a new space for a new identity. In the Chinese example, the people in China thought it was actually a wonderful thing; but not so with the Chinese diaspora, some of whom are even Americans. Yet, the memory, the liminality, subjective uncertainty pushes one to reclaim. Identity here is not tangible, it is grounded in a utopian memory. The critique of those who appropriate is also an affirmation of identity - *it is mine; it belongs to me*.

Beyond the Diaspora: What then is Cultural Appropriation?

The phrase “cultural appropriation” is an evocative stimulus for an articulated form of resistance by subordinated groups anxious over “cultural erosion” and subsequent loss of identity. It nevertheless

assumes a unanimous character through which a *majority* subjective dominates and exploits a *minority* (or periphery) culture. In the language of Deleuze and Guattari, the term “minority” is a complex phenomenon, existing only as a *reference*, a *subjective footnote* (Deleuze and Guattari). *Majority* on the other hand indicates a constant, a standard or yardstick with which to measure an expression or content of that which is or which is not, who has potential *to be or not to be*. Minority is a residual subjective; conceived only in reference to the majority which symbolizes “a constant, of expression of content, serving as a standard measure by which to evaluate it” (Deleuze and Guattari 105). If French in colonial West Africa for example, (although spoken by a minority) was a standard measure of humanity, then even as those who spoke it were a minority (less than majority black Africans), the few who spoke it still possessed symbolic majority since they are symbolic source of what it means to be a citizen in this colonial state. The French herein even if a minority represent symbolic majority and possesses “a state of power and domination” (Deleuze and Guattari 105). But what is culture? Thus far I have used the term with vague generalizations without any substantive content. Following Mahmood Mamdani, I will argue that the very notion of culture is “reproduced through socio-historical struggle which remains differentiated, diverse and heterogeneous.”

The term *culture* generates degrees of representations depending on context (and sometimes) history of the speaker. In the six years that I taught cross-cultural communication in an American university, I was intrigued that most of my students in response to the question *what is culture* or *culture as metaphor* would often give culturally differentiated responses shaped by their sociopolitical, historical and everyday experiences: *Culture is like a pair of glasses, ... the heart of a person, ... sweet wine, ... a good book or a beautiful painting, ... a box of crayons, ...a fruit, ... beautiful salad, ...an iceberg, a box of chocolate, ...DNA, ... tomato plant, ...a puzzle, ...mosaic, ... body, ...computer brands* – amongst other responses. Very rarely in between years would a metaphor become repeated even as these students seem to come from what ordinarily look like a homogenous background: White, middle-class Americans. What this suggests is that the very idea of culture is as amorphous as those who speak of it. It is also an understanding which belies the façade of culture as a primordial universal of a given society. Culture is very rarely a primordial unanimity; it is *essentially* inclusive; contingent to change yet

transcends change without being any less active. This is what Mahmood Mamdani means in claiming that, “culture is as seldom as compact and singular as it is sometimes made out to be... it is full of tension, diverse and differentiated” (226).

Derivative lesson from my students is that culture is a plethora of ambiguities. It is by nature constitutive of individuals (who practice it) and the *practice thereof* (values, customs) while simultaneously possessing an internal rationality. Culture and its subjects (or objects) evolve together. It is neither a readymade epistemic dress tailored to fit all sizes nor fixated on the past or the present. It evolves out of specific context, shaped by history but not entrapped within it. As context changes so does our understanding and application of culture. To codify culture as a dogmatic infusion of reality is to deny historical dynamism, a pernicious move that de-historicizes the subject (Mamdani 226).

Discourses on cultural appropriation often accentuate a rigid bent towards culture. For such theorists, CA is what happens when “a dominant culture adapts elements from a marginalized culture and uses it outside the original culture’s context – often without credit or against the wishes of the said culture” (Sharma). On this view, when culture is appropriated, it changes meaning and becomes diffused in terms of signification and symbolism. This change is what provokes resistance from those who “own” the culture insofar as the specific culture is a location of identity, a locus of re-imagination. On this point, culture is primarily an extension of the subject or as Raymond Williams noted, a cumulative of one’s overall lifeworld experiences such as the material, social, linguistic and intellectual (Kulchyski 606). The *material* is referential to “things” – the signifier (clothes, food, music); the *intellectual* is symbolic to ideological attestations in form of “thoughts and beliefs”; the social denotes kinship systems while linguistic connotes language.

While cultural exchange is an inevitable reality between groups, critics have argued that the manner of such transmission is what constitutes appropriation or assimilation. Appropriation is what happens when a dominant group “takes” from a minority group. However, if and when reversal occurs, i.e. minority “taking” from majority group, it becomes assimilation (Ziff and Rao 5ff). The reasoning is that cultural appropriation is primarily a location of power, a one-way phenomenon

perpetrated by the dominant group. Notice however that, the very idea of “dominant” is not problematized. Is it racial? Numerical? Economic? What is the threshold for this domination? Is dominant synonymous to subordination? Would minority rule under apartheid South Africa constitute dominant or subordinated or both? Whichever way, it is not precisely clear the extent to which the minority culture assimilates or conditions of such assimilation. Appropriation then becomes “creative pluralism where homogeneity had previously reigned” insofar as culture is an exclusive reserve of a primordial group fixated within exclusive time and space (Buchanan 491).

In an attempt to explain cultural transitions, scholars often conflate culture with naturalism (and/or ethno-tradition), that is, as if culture is something one is born with. Specific cultures are associated with certain groups as essentialized identity category. Upon this complexity derives the idea in which culture becomes enunciated as racialism, equally suggestive of culture as a closed system of values. Thus, we speak of Black, White, Asian cultures as some activity exclusive to people of racial categories.⁵ To the extent that these representations offer symbolic guide for an imagined community, this is certainly inescapable. The dangers are nevertheless three-fold. First, they distort the very notion of culture, projecting an image of a coherent universalism. Second, the complexities associated with culture as a location of tension, rupture and timeless fragmentations are obfuscated. Third, is a misrecognition that culture evolves within history and not outside of it. In projecting the image of coherence and homogeneity individuals are cast as passive recipients of culture. Yet, our relationship with culture is contemporaneous. We *make* culture, but culture shapes us. We respond to culture as it responds to us, we (i.e. betwixt culture and us) mutually reproduce each other according to history, context and environment. But – and this is a crucial caveat - we are the *chief principals* of culture. These are issues of most vivid concern as they are emotive for genuine debates on cultural

⁵ This understanding does not address the issue of parallel culture; “dominant” here is not cultural but political. This is primarily because “appropriation” (thus understood) does not seem to occur in cultural exchanges between two “dominant” cultures – like when the Dutch learns a drinking habit from the German or when the English “appropriates” certain cultural habits from the Swedes. This applies too to when minority groups “steal” from each other.

appropriation. In what follows, I will negotiate these issues in terms of claims and counter claims in ways in which cultures reproduce identity schemes and these in turn influence our own sense of being and becoming.

If we draw our sense of identity from culture which by nature is fluid and placid, should our identity not remain discursive? If identity is multilayered, does cultural appropriation delegitimize our subjective enunciation? The challenge with dominant claims on CA is varied. First, it takes for granted that these are values shared or normatively inspired by all who subscribe to that culture. Second, the content, context and limitations of what constitutes our cultural space are not interrogated but assumed as given. Third, the interdependence of people across cultural boundaries ruptures any claim of homogeneity. Fourth, a denial of capacity for cultural role reversal is a denial of agency for the so-called peripheral group. The last point is even more critical since the minority group is even further subjugated through what may be termed *auto-colonization* or *colonization of the subjective*. Minority thus assumes a permanent feature of identity, frozen without discursive essence. This misunderstanding as I argued earlier is grounded in our vision of culture as timelessly homogenous; a “primordial universal” that is devoid of tension and ruptures. *Cultural symbolic constitution*⁶ is not naturalism but functional as residue of politics, religion and society. A “cultural symbolic constitution,” Ronald Inden then argues, “embraces such things as classificatory schema, assumptions about how things are, cosmologies, worldviews, ethical systems, legal codes, definitions of governmental units and social groups, ideologies, religious doctrines, myths, rituals, procedures, and rules of etiquette” (Cohn 173).

In restricting the epistemic boundaries of appropriation and assimilation to performative pedagogy⁷ of dominant and minority groups (respectively), critics are problematizing cultural appropriation as a discourse of power and domination in which minority groups are

⁶ A term I borrowed from Bernard S. Cohn, “Representing Authority in Victoria India”, In *the Invention of Tradition: Past and Present Publication*, edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger, 104-164. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p 173

⁷ Performing ideology as culture

mere passive agents only capable of assimilating. Assimilation is construed as a direct response (of the subordinated group) to cultural imperialism (of the dominant group). But if cultural appropriation is about power differentials, does it occur when the largest English soccer club (with millions of fans and social power) appropriates the cultural mannerism of a side-street English soccer club? Since the social space of culture is not territorialized, what then happens when the French language as an element of culture is minority in Canada but majority in France or Belgium? Or English (cultural identity) being symbolic majority in the USA or Canada and yet political reason for subjugating minority non-French speakers in Cameroon? As Deleuze and Guattari put it, “the problem is not the distinction between major and minor language [M.E or culture]; it is one of becoming. It is a question not of reterritorializing oneself on a dialect or patois [or a sub element of culture] but of deterritorializing the majority language [or culture]”.

In relocating cultural appropriation to the realm of politics, critics by way of double maneuver are able to frame CA as a movement about sociopolitical and economic rights⁸ of minorities, and critiquing appropriation is thus simultaneously an act of revolt and resistance against “cultural degradation” of the “integrity and identities of cultural groups” (Ziff and Rao 6). Here too, it becomes a question of identity politics. As Ziff and Rao argue, cultural appropriation is tied to “misrecognition or nonrecognition” (11) which makes it possible for the continual disempowerment and continual colonization of “peripheral and subordinate subjects.” Citing Charles Taylor, they argue that, “nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.” This citation nonetheless omitted the phrase “our identity is *partly* shaped” from the passage [my emphasis] (Taylor 25). In fact, Taylor is at pains to avoid homogenous claims on identity discourse and his focus is on ethics of subjective authenticity:

There is a certain way of being that is *my* own. I am called upon to my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else’s life. But this notion gives a new importance to being true to myself.

⁸ Rights to their cultural heritage. Language of rights and claim of heritage suggests an economic dimension that seeks to safeguard cultural good from material exploitation. See Ziff and Rao, *Borrowed Power*, 6

If I am not, I miss the point for my life; I miss what being human is for *me*. This is the powerful moral ideal that has come down to us. It accords moral importance to a kind of contact with myself, with my own inner nature, which it sees as in danger of being lost, partly through the pressures toward outward conformity, but also because in taking an instrumental stance toward myself, I have lost the capacity to listen to this inner voice. It greatly increases the importance of this self-contact by introducing the principle of originality: each of our voices has something unique to say. Not only should I not mold my life to the demands of external conformity; I can't even find the model by which to live outside myself. I can only find it within [emphasis in the original] (30).

Taylor is criticizing the scripted narrative identity where we become copies of others. This is the point of misrecognition as triggers for subjective fatality because of its sociopolitical and economic consequences such as stigmatization, alienation or outright deprivation. Critics of cultural appropriation often assume a primordial character of identity. Yet identity far from being a monolithic concept, drawn from one historical experience is notoriously vague, a multilayered, "ideological baggage" which is socially produced or culturally enabled" (Eze, "The Politics of Being Human" 300). Yet remains an "ever-present phenomenon... irreducible to merely a metaphysical doctrine.... [or] an epistemological question." What this means is that Identity is constitutive of what may be termed *convoluted narrative-spaces* or "an inchoate collection of subjectivities" (Eze, "The Politics of Being Human" 300). It becomes possible to possess different identity all at once: I am Roman Catholic, Igbo, American, Black, African, historian, Sufi and a member of the Green Party. They are parallel and sometimes potentially contradictory but speak to me as possessing "multiple possible selves" all which colors my identity as an individual.

But even as I recognize these substantive layers of my identity I still have to contend with negotiating a less recognizable but nevertheless insidious pathology of culture, embedded in what I distinguish for this purposes, *macro and micro* culture. By macro and micro culture, I mean to suggest that culture is beyond an act or practice internal to the goods of our community it also includes those goods external to us. Macro points to those globalized attributes and tendencies of culture, externalized and reproduced as "pedagogical narratives and

rituals.” Micro culture on the other hand embodies intricate layers of complexities; often subtle, sometimes invisible from everyday practice as in the relationship between young and old, male and female, between relatives, within family, school mates, best friends, *et cetera*. It is in this domain of micro culture that cultural violence mostly takes place as in those instances when macro culture is appropriated, enforced and internalized as local truth. The micro culture adopts cultural universals often anachronistic to the micro-context.

If our identity is thus multilayered; it also means that at one time we belong to a dominant group and other times a minority group. Which means too that we both appropriate and assimilate; simultaneously turning us into cultural villains and victims; imperialists and subjects - all at once. In September 2018, the Texas Republican Party in an election commercial had equated the American’s Republican Party symbol with the Hindu deity, Ganesha. As I will show later, critics of cultural appropriation are unable to reconcile the seeming tension where a cultural dislocation in one territory is potentially a ripple effect of that culture’s domination in other socioeconomic or geopolitical spaces. If we adopt the criteria of “appropriation” in this case, would the American Republicans constitute a minority or majority culture? If majority, then how do we reconcile the fact of over a billion Hindus compared to a few million American Republicans? Where it is construed as minority, then it undermines the core definition for what constitutes cultural appropriation, i.e. “taking” from dominant culture. Yet, we cannot underestimate the associative trauma accompanying this politicization of a people’s cultural identity. The challenge here is not so much the subsisting binary, but that the notion of minority versus majority is never really a cultural reference as opposed to an epistemic reference for politics of identity. Relocated in this realm, it becomes meaningful to expand the conversation and articulate what the terms symbolize and make meaningful statement on them.

While assimilation is thus presented as a benign cultural performance, I will argue that it is in fact a site of subordination with evolving repercussions: First, as an ideological practice of colonialism in which a numerical “minority” group subordinates a numerical “majority.” As indicated earlier, minority and majority are primarily symbolic. Second, in proposing assimilation, scholars instead of offering absolution to the *sin* of appropriation (for minorities) are actually imposing objectifying eccentricities upon these groups and cultures. In colonial Africa, the

principle of assimilation was an administrative policy employed by the French and Portuguese to foster divide and rule through state bifurcation and subjective differentiation of Africans into citizens and subjects. To be assimilated offered one access to European identity – a citizen of the colonial state. The non-assimilated remains a subject of the colonial state and as such subject to the full wrath of colonial violence. The assimilated however, would have to speak either French or Portuguese excellently, be a Christian, Western educated and abandon all attachment to indigenous ways of life. To be assimilated is to become a new creation, Westernized insofar as colonial citizenship equals dignity. But it also suggests subjective dislocation; one had to abandon his or her identity to become a mimicry of Western modernity. Thus, both appropriation and assimilation primarily inhere the same intentionality towards homogenization of individual particularities and subjective annihilation. Appropriation and assimilation equally open a critical convergence that both indict peripheral subjectivities and yet create space to mask their visibilities. The foregoing ambivalence is what shapes the epistemic commitment of CA as a critical ideology. On the one hand, criticisms are wedged as a “protectionist” ideology of the diaspora, to safeguard corruption/degradation of cultures and other forms of cultural imperialism. On the other hand, they insert a globalized cultural experience as an authentic reflection of indigenous cultural goods and values. As Homi Bhabha would note however, this idea of culture as holistic, separated, unique, static, embodying ‘pre-given cultural contents and custom’ is a false illusion. Culture is permeable, with “porous borders,” “leaking into each other, crisscrossing supposed Barriers.” (Bhabha 34, McLeod 228). I concur with Bhabha that “cultural interaction emerges only at the signifiatory boundaries of cultures, where meanings and values are (mis)read or signs are misappropriated” (Bhabha 34).

In the next section, I will offer a theoretical framework for what I have termed *multiple humanity (ies)*. Instead of *wholesale* dismissal of CA as critical ideology, I shall examine the merits of the ambivalence it inspires in the context of the shifting and often critical relationship between culture, history and identity or as John McLeod puts it, “the subscription to a notion of culture as interactive, constantly recomposed from a wide variety of possible sources becomes an important political act” (McLeod 228). Framed as an ideology of power, appropriation and assimilation equally yield to hybridity of cultures. Instead of hybridity, I propose confluence of cultures. The explanatory

weight of a confluence narrative is suspicious of hybridity of cultures which projects epistemic dislocation of the subject. In hybridity the object and subject are one and the same thing. There is no space for negotiation or creative tension. The purpose of tension and space is for regeneration, growth, knowledge and viability. Hybridity offers parochial universalism which dislocates the individual who is then *grafted* in an alien metaphysical foundation. As I have argued somewhere else, a “confluence of narratives” is a creative meadow of identity negotiation (Eze, *Intellectual History*)

Beyond Cultural Appropriation: A Case for Multiple Humanity (ies)

My analysis thus far has however failed to accommodate the psychosocial implications of CA as a cultural practice. This is primarily the material dispositive of culture where culture is “commodified” for the benefit of the appropriator and subsequently diminishing the material value of the subordinated culture. In an interview with *Canadian Art journal*, Nancy King (a.k.a Chief Lady Bird hereafter as CLB), invited us to ponder the psychosocial and material impact of Picasso’s appropriation of African masks in his creation of “cubist visualities” for which he achieved international fame (Canadian Art May 16 2018). To what degree does this impact the value of the original African masks? Notice the intuitive link between Picasso’s action and colonial policy of exploiting non-Western societies for the benefit of Europe as characterized by Fanon: “The wealth which smothers her [Europe] is that which was stolen from the underdeveloped peoples. The ports of Holland, the docks of Bordeaux and Liverpool were specialized in the Negro slave-trade, and owe their renown to millions of deported slaves” (Fanon, *The Wretched* 81).

Beyond the material dispossession is a question of depersonalization and identity fragmentation as CLB puts it: “by positioning Picasso as one of the greats in Westernized art history canons, non-indigenous students end up internalizing and normalizing a culture of appropriation within contemporary art” (Couchie *et al.*). This is what Homi Bhabha referred to as mimicry of the colonial subjective and Fanon terms “colonization of the mind” through internalization of colonial logic (Fanon, *The Wretched* 219ff, Bhabha 85). According to this logic, material and physical space can only be subjugated when the mind is colonized. Colonization of the mind becomes operationalized through displacement and domination of the indigenous cultures often substituted with European cultural goods cast as a universal moral

good (Fanon, *The Wretched* 219). Appropriation *thus understood* not only legitimizes this cultural dislocation, it imposes a psychosocial violence on the native who only begins to think of his or her culture as *naturally* inferior to whites. Subjective redemption is only possible with touch of a *white humanity*. We become human only when we mimic or a totality of subjective embrace of Western culture. Appropriation becomes an act of civilization – to touch, to humanize or make visible non-Western cultures that would otherwise remain at the fringes of humanity. These cultures become animated at this point of encounter (with whites).

Problematized thus far, CA as a critical ideology gains a new intentionality. First the term as used suggests impossibility of cultural exchanges which as we have seen earlier is an epistemic cul-de-sac. Second, the problem is not with *appropriation* but the nature of appropriation that occurs. Third, if our critical focus is on the material and psychosocial impact of appropriation, then we ought to avoid arbitrary claims of homogenous certainty and instead negotiate those instances where CA becomes (i) inevitable reality of human co-existence and/or (ii) embody colonialist tendencies.⁹ I propose that CA (without colonialist tendencies) offers creative cultural energy as a gift for humanity. This gift is only accessible through the space of dialogue. I will propose two kinds of dialogue and show to what extent they critique and affirm our notions of interculturality.

When I sing or listen to the Negro spiritual *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*,¹⁰ I experience a metaphysical connection with African slaves in the American plantations. I *connect* as a black person, a connection that might not be easily accessible to others (not impossible). This song is a story, a history and at the same time a performance of survival and loss, hope and anxiety. The context in which the song was written and performed enacts a subjective conversion. I feel its story, and its history, I recognize the intention, I put myself in their shoes. An exclusive empathy occurs as the song, the lyrics speaks to the depth of

⁹ Cultural domination for purpose of exploitation and/or psychosocial or physical annihilation.

¹⁰ Credited to Wallace Willis, the song was composed circa 1865 but became popularized by the Fisk Jubilee Singers during their tour of the *Underground Railroad*.

my being. It is a song of celebration and yet of revolt, revolt against oppressive structures, against slavery, against those who oppressed others just because *they were like me*. This song has a symbolic meaning for me; to think of a people enslaved and oppressed for no other reason than their race. It is a spiritual and emotive connection to me as a black person provoking a moral empathy for action or inaction. Located in the history, the *Spiritual* embodies a mythic narrative of coded messages, “one designed at the time to lead slaves to the mythical Underground Railroad” (White). It is constitutive as a spiritual cry for freedom from the anguish of the present, but also symbolic plea for the abolitionists to hasten to their rescue. Yet, does it mean that I own this history, this piece of cultural history? What happens when and if the context exchanges? Does this delegitimize the original intent for which the song was written and strip it of meaning?

In contemporary history, the *Spiritual* evokes a new intentionality for English rugby fans who have adopted it as celebratory hymn over opponents (White). In this way, the song is not just a cultural residue of a people's past; it evokes a symbolic sense of present and past identity; contextual meaning and a primordial universal communion – not only for blacks but as *claimed* by English rugby fans. The *adaptation* is not a mere “textual poaching” in which “fans of popular culture”, *freely borrow* cultural goods and mass culture of other communities; “claiming its materials for their own use, reworking them as the basis of their own cultural creations and social interactions” (Ziff and Rao 1, 24). As Deleuze would have argued, this adoption engenders “multiplicity of actualization”, somewhat “a condensation of distinctive points or an open collection of intensities” (257ff). Here, culture transcends primordial universalism for civic universalism, one that is mobile, creative, casual and yet “endowed with margins” (Deleuze 257). The *margins* define its location, but also, offers space for negotiations, adaptation and appropriation. The song as used (by the English) neither speaks in terms of experience nor history but to the context of the present; yielding to metaphysical euphoria of the present time.

Where it is presented as a homogenous source of identity, the adaptation is not so much an appropriation as it is an invasion of a subjective social space. The problem is not cultural but rupture of a primordial source of black identity cast through historical experiences of slavery, oppression and black resistance. On this point, the song is a

subjective repertoire of black identity; symbolic of blackness as concocted in history, politicized, abused and redeemed within history. It is a song but also a *subjective biography* that speaks in terms of our *unique location* in history. But it is also prophetic, offering a discursive sense of identity. Accordingly, the usage of the song by English rugby fans while not at *default* for appropriation, nevertheless thrives through a suppression of history and “mobilization of bias” for cultural violence. In suppressing history, it seeks to invent a new identity; one that colors the past as a space of innocence or even perhaps, benign empty space. Denial of history imposes a misrecognition of the cumulative variances which gave rise to the song.

Yet, history is neither a collation of dogmas nor a space of innocence. History like culture is equally “full of tensions.” As Howard Zinn noted, “There is no such thing as impartial history. The problem with historical honesty is not outright lie; it is omission or de-emphasis of important data – the definition of importance is dependent on what constitutes one’s values” (30). *Value, de-emphasis, omission, et cetera*, rather than being a critique of appropriation is in fact an indictment of history. Beyond history, critique of appropriation falters. Even though history offers us a source of modern black identity, we are not entrapped to this past as a homogenous experience. Black identity is discursive. It is not only a collation of distinct experiences; it is history but not limited to history. The purpose of history is to historicize these black experiences not only as a passive or oppressed subject but an active heroic agent within history. This understanding is critical in order to frame a new understanding of culture that is not merely a residual narrative of colonial historicity. When we out strip our culture’s capacity for variation contingencies we have become, in the words of Okot p’Bitek “mercenaries in foreign battles none of which was in the interest of African peoples... intellectual smugglers” (102, 107). Somewhere else I have termed this phenomenon *colonization of subjectivity*.¹¹ What this means is that our response to denial of history is merely an affirmation to the superiority of Western epistemic premise of coloniality. We are *responders*, responding to the intellectual gaze of Western historicity. The story may be told by us but it is not really *our story*. Colonization of subjectivity enunciates mimicry. Mimicry

¹¹ See, Eze, Michael Onyebuchi, *Intellectual History in Contemporary South Africa*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

disempowers. *In response to my terms of engagement you are also surrendering your right of authorship of your subjectivity. In fact, precisely because I determine the rules of the game and manner of your response I am ultimately your subjective biographer. I am your story teller both in content and motive – I own you!*

Culture is meaningful not only because of the past, but also because of our present encounters and experiences; a constant variation. This is what Deleuze and Guattari mean when they argue that “you will never find a homogenous system that is not still or already affected by a regulated, continuous, immanent process of variation” (103). To view culture as discursive in this sense is to understand that culture shapes our identity, but it is in turn shaped by us. It is true that identity is constitutive of culture but if culture is never a fixed phenomenon so is our identity – always at the interstices of historical transitions, fleeting experiences and encounters with “other” cultures. It is a vision of the world as perceived in the past and constructed in the moment. To freeze these interactions with the anathema of appropriation is equally to freeze ourselves as mobile subjects.

The African political theory of *ubuntu/botho* offers a critical insight as to what constitutes this mobile identity. In Xhosa/Zulu, the aphorism, *Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu* “a person is a person through other people” offers a vision of multiple humanity (ies) constitutive of humans, non-humans, animals, animate and inanimate beings. Our vision of the world is not primarily dependent on who we are as humans *alone*. Beyond these multiplicities, *ubuntu* advocates mobile subjectivity which recognizes our overall of humanity as a dialogic process of relation and distance. *Ubuntu* is an active-passive philosophy which offers us a theoretical disposition for epistemic transcendence (neither fixated nor dogmatic); it offers a framework to recognize, as William James wrote, that “in every concrete individual, there is a uniqueness that defies formulation. We can feel the touch of it and recognize its taste so to speak, relishing or disliking, as the case may be, but we can give no ultimate account for it...” (qtd. in Kaye 178). This uniqueness is the foundation of our cultural capital. The validity of our cultural capital is dependent on our individuality and uniqueness! It is to say, we are no longer monads but differentiating beings with unique identities which we bear as capital gifts to other persons. “Capital” gift indicates a subjective self-offering that seeks the nourishment of the self through a celebration of the other.

Appropriation thus understood is neither constituted as a negation of the subject nor inhibition of mobility. It is functional as a “creative act” of human survival:

It is through the practices of everyday life – the multiplicity of ‘uses’ to which social structures, the regulatory bodies that shape culture *and* cultural commodities, the already appropriated and about to be appropriated items that combine with desire to produce a culture, are put – that the passively formed subject becomes active [emphasis in the original] (Buchanan 487).

Cultures do not survive in isolation; they thrive in tensions and strife with other cultures. Where culture is conflated with race, the critique of cultural appropriation inevitably becomes a critique of *whiteness* and not necessarily for cultural theft. However, it is only when we offer space for difference as constitutive of our humanity are we able to convey the distinctive and unique gifts embedded in our cultures and in that process “avoid crude reversals of racial binaries in favor of more contextualized and flexible identity categories” (Wasserman).

Transcending “crude reversals” is a call for interculturality through cultural encounters. There are two kinds of encounters in dialogue. The first, what I have termed *encounter-in-dialogue* departs from the position of subjective appreciation, enrichment or celebration. Here we meet the *other* as an equal - a gift to my humanity, a being to be celebrated. On this point, the other who is different from us is a subject, a being like us both in dialogue and subjective affirmation. The second kind of encounter is what I have termed *encounter-to-possess*. Herein, the point of encounter is for domination or obsession. We encounter the other but only to possess him or her, what they have (skills, beauty, wealth, sex, *et cetera*). We do not see them as equals but objects, a material being useful only for my fantasy. This is also the context of obsession, fatalism, fixation, addiction, sexism, paranoia and colonial-minded appropriation. The first kind of dialogue is primarily invested in context of human experience geared towards *subjective equality*. The second is an abstract form of engagement, insensitive to what Clifford Geertz described as “its internal structure, *independant de tout sujet, et de toute objet, de toute contexte.*” (449). However, this idea of giftedness would have to be qualified. It does not mean subjective appropriation of the other in their otherness. What dialogue

does is to offer me the gift of recognition that one is first and foremost human; and second, it offers a space for education.¹² Here dialogue becomes a moment of education; unveiling of ignorance – educating our subjectivity. It is this opportunity for self-education that constitutes the ultimate gift.

That is All!

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¹² For a fuller development of this argument elsewhere see Eze, 2017.

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