

Week 14 Handout: “Should White Men Play the Blues?”

. . . appropriation is what novelists do. Whatever we write is, knowingly or unknowingly, a borrowing.

Nothing comes from nowhere.

– Margaret Drabble

Bad artists copy. Good artists steal.

– Pablo Picasso



## Section 1

### Cultural/voice appropriation:

- (i) “[W]hen an artist from one cultural group (usually the member of a majority culture) makes the lives or experiences of members of another group (usually from a minority culture) the subject of an artwork” (415).
- (ii) “[W]hen members of one culture incorporate into their work images, stories, or other artistic elements which have been produced by another culture” (415).

**POLL:** Is cultural appropriation morally and/or aesthetically problematic?

- A. Yes
- B. No

Response		Vote %	Votes	
A		57%	17	
B		43%	13	
C		0%	0	
D		0%	0	
E		0%	0	

### Young’s thesis:

Voice appropriation has been widely debated in the popular press and in the publications of the artistic community, but it has not yet received any rigorous and sustained philosophical attention. Once the matter receives such attention, we will see that nothing is inherently morally or aesthetically objectionable about artists borrowing from other cultures or making them the subject of their works. (415)

### Three arguments:

- A. Harm argument
- B. Economic argument
- C. Theft argument

## Section 2

### 2a. The Harm Argument

In the first half of Section 2, Young develops four objections to the harm argument.

*Objection 1:* The harm argument requires the premise that *all* artworks that are products of cultural appropriation present distortions of an inside culture. There are reasons to reject this premise.

- Why does Young think that?
- Counterexamples (*Black Robe*)
- Implausible consequences (sociology, history)

*Objection 2:* Even if it can be shown that *all* artworks that are products of cultural appropriation present distortions of an inside culture, it doesn't follow that artistic cultural appropriation is inherently wrong.

At this point in the paper, you should be aware of the distinction between *consequentialism* and *non-consequentialism*. This distinction is important in the field of *normative ethics*, which attempts to uncover a set of general action-guiding principles. You've probably heard of the *Golden Rule*: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Arguably, the Golden Rule is not meant to be a piece of useful advice but rather to reflect the general "shape" of moral reality (as a law of nature is meant to reflect the "shape" of physical reality). That's the kind of thing moral theorists examine.

Theories tend to fall into one of two categories. *Consequentialist* theories disregard the intrinsic features of actions and instead focus on their consequences. The most well-known consequentialist theory is *utilitarianism*, which is roughly the view that actions are *right* when they maximize happiness (and *wrong* otherwise). *Non-consequentialist* theories are sometimes called *deontological*, from the Greek word for *duty* (*deon*). These theories hold that certain basic actions are intrinsically right or wrong, regardless of their consequences. Immanuel Kant is a widely discussed deontologist. Infamously, he held that lying is always wrong, even when it could save a person's life.

In *applied ethics*, these debates are sometimes set aside. An ethicist might bring various theories to bear on a single issue (e.g., cultural appropriation). The goal is to achieve "reflective equilibrium" by adjusting theory and intuitive judgments about particular cases into a coherent system of thought.

1. What about *unduly favorable* distortions? They might lead to various *positive* consequences for the group in question. A consequentialist might *prescribe* cultural appropriation in such cases. Young mentions *Dances with Wolves* (it's unclear why). Can you think of any examples?
2. Even if distortion is *always* harmful, it doesn't follow that cultural appropriation is inherently wrong, *unless* it can be shown that this harm is *never* outweighed.

*Objection 3:* It is unquestionable that *some* works by outsiders harmfully distort other cultures. But these works are neither morally nor aesthetically problematic in virtue of the fact that they are products of cultural appropriation.

*Objection 4:* All works of art involve distortion. The fact that a given work distorts its object is not in itself an aesthetic flaw of the work.

## 2b. The Economic Argument

At this point, Young turns to the economic argument. He maintains:

The second argument is an economic argument which cuts both ways. Every time an insider benefits from an audience, some outsider does not. There are no moral grounds for saying that an insider should receive an audience in preference to an outsider. No artist has a right to an audience. Artists may deserve an audience, but not because they are insiders or outsiders. They deserve an audience if they create worthwhile works. That good works of art are created is important. Who creates them is not important. (419)

**POLL:** Are you inclined to agree with Young here?

- A. Yes
- B. No

1. Perhaps artists do not have a *positive* right to an audience but rather a *negative* right to not be discriminated against. Do you agree? What does that suggest (if anything) about cultural appropriation?
2. According to Young, we might have reason to think that only insiders are able to create worthwhile artworks about their culture, but then the works of outsiders would be problematic for ordinary aesthetic reasons.
3. Products of cultural appropriation can economically *benefit* insiders in the long run. Young mentions Paul Simon's *Graceland*. From the article I sent out on Canvas:

South African musicians and singers were invited to share the spotlight with Simon, giving many of them mainstream international exposure for the first time. . . . There are many who would argue that the South Africa cultural boycott was a deeply flawed strategy that did more harm than good for the black population it was put in place to support. This view was shared by practically all of the musicians who played with Simon on *Graceland*. 'In South Africa, we had no opportunity,' recalled saxophonist Barney Rachabane in 2012, 'You could have dreams, but they never come true. It really destroys you. But *Graceland* opened my eyes and set a tone of hope in my life.'

4. Can you think of other examples?

## 2c. The Theft Argument

1. According to Young, “The consideration that art, not the artist, matters also tells against the view that insiders have some sort of inviolable right to their cultural creations” (420). Why think that?
2. Young grants for the sake of argument that members of a culture might have property rights with respect to their cultural creations, but it doesn’t follow that cultural appropriation is wrong unless it can be shown that these rights can *never* be overridden. But what if overriding those rights results in great artistic/aesthetic value?

## 2d. Offense

After considering the arguments mentioned at the outset of the paper, Young considers whether *offense* might be relevant to cultural appropriation:

One important context exists in which artists should, at least, hesitate before appropriating artistic forms of another culture. As has already been noted, many cultures endow certain images, stories, and compositions with religious or cultural significance. The use of these artistic elements in the art of outsiders might be regarded as sacrilege by insiders. . . . In such cases, insiders are not being denied economic or artistic opportunity by voice appropriation. The suggestion is, rather, that the insiders are being done (what may be called) *moral harm*. The insiders feel, that is, that something essential to their cultural being is offended in some way.

**POLL:** Are you inclined to agree that causing a cultural group offense morally harms that group?

- A. Yes
- B. No

1. Young mentions Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*. Does that help or hurt his case?
2. According to Young, even if appropriating specific elements of a culture is likely to cause offense, it doesn’t follow that *all* cultural appropriation is wrong. But why couldn’t the opponent of cultural appropriation run a broader offense argument?
3. According to Young, even if appropriation causes offense, this might be outweighed by the artistic/aesthetic consequences.

## Section 3

Questions to consider:

1. What does Young’s position imply for awards ceremonies like the Academy Awards?
2. Why should the primary goal of arts agencies be to promote the best art?
3. Should arts agencies largely disregard the potential for causing offense?
4. According to Young, it is extremely implausible that only members of some culture will be able to fully appreciate the artistic outputs of that culture. But does it follow that arts agencies shouldn’t bother to include minority members on their juries?
5. On p. 423, Young considers a final argument against cultural appropriation. In light of this, what would he say about *talented* artists who come from underprivileged minority cultures?

**POLL:** Is cultural appropriation morally and/or aesthetically problematic?

- A. Yes
- B. No