

In this essay from Megan Shea's "Writing the World Through Art," Summer Okoye uses pop culture and media criticism to map processes of cultural appropriation, considering both sides of this very contemporary debate. From Basquiat to President Obama, she asks how systematic Othering and extraction can occur, and how Black artists maneuver in this terrain and continue to make powerful art.

THE BLACK COMMODITY

Summer Okoye

I was tired by the end, oversaturated by an amusement park of Blackness. Such idolatry sensationalizes the organic productivity of black people. Commodity seems to be the only way that audiences can engage with our unique voices.

—Erica Cardwell, "The Immortal Black Life"

White hands on a Black body. Their carefully clipped fingernails, thin wrists, and fair complexions, though unassuming, take hold. Six hands grasp at her full black thighs. Five hands pull at her cheeks and thick lips. They finger her dark kinky-haired afro, and reach for her bare black neck. She doesn't seem to know where they are, but she can feel their presence, and as the white hands, like parasites, enclose her, her expression evolves from passivity to discomfort to a frustrated anger. *Erosion* by Daniel Stewart is comprised of four black-and-white photos depicting a nude Black woman being grabbed by hands of White women. Even though these images are simple in composition, they are complex in their intent.

In America, the Black woman is an 'Other'—a new and intriguing body to be deconstructed. "[Viewers] are not to look at her as a whole human being. They are to notice only certain parts," says bell

hooks in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, a book in which she expresses consumer culture's obsession with "Blackness" and deconstructs the personal and political issues with the representation of race in a White supremacist culture (62). The objectification of Black people is in a manner similar to that of Black slaves, who were viewed as "salable parts" with no presence, things to be used (hooks 62). Daniel Stewart's photographs literally depict, in his own words, "white society's lustful appropriation of a Black woman's body." As a Black artist, he uses these images to call our attention to things he's noticed, such as the way "Black women are slandered for their natural physical attributes, attributes that are then praised when on a white woman's body" (Stewart). In doing so, he attempts to unravel issues concerning the appropriation of the Black woman's body in American society. hooks views this in an even larger sense—not only is White America appropriating the Black woman's body but White America is appropriating all of Black culture, a process she calls "eating the Other" (21). But why is Black culture so marketable in today's society? hooks says "the commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying [. . .] ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (21). She points to many musicians, entertainers and films that use Blackness as a spice, such as Madonna, whose obsession and use of Black culture contributed significantly to her success. "Voguing," for example, a dance that she made popular, actually evolved out of the LGBT Harlem scene (Lawrence). In addition, in many of her music videos, she uses Black culture as a backdrop, such as in the video for "Just Like a Prayer," which uses Black church and religion. "White women 'stars' like Madonna [. . .] name their interest in, and appropriation of, Black culture as yet another sign of their radical chic," says hooks. "Intimacy with that 'nasty' Blackness [that] good white girls stay away from is what they seek"—to appear transgressive, White people appropriate Black identity (hooks 157).

In 2013, Miley Cyrus released the music video "We Can't Stop" in which she is shown at a party surrounded by Black women twerking while she grabs their asses (Vevo). She won a total of seven awards that year ("Miley Cyrus—Awards"). In 2014, Iggy Azalea, the

Australian born rapper, was accused of appropriating Black rappers by using a Black Southern accent when rapping (Marantz). She won a total of 15 awards that year (“Iggy Azalea—Awards”). In 2016, #oscarswhite began trending when, for the second year in a row at the Oscars, zero awards were given to people of color—they weren’t even nominated. In recent years, as the intersections of race and the entertainment industry have been tested, many controversies have sparked a debate over what it means to be a Black artist in a world where “Black” is a commodity. Many are confused as media socialite Kendall Jenner gains thousands of followers on Instagram for posting a picture sporting cornrows, praised on social media as being “bold” and “epic” (Wilson). Meanwhile, Blue Ivy, Beyoncé’s four-year-old daughter, is condemned for wearing her hair in its natural afro, receiving cruel comments on social media such as “the child looks like [she] hasn’t seen a comb since she was born” (Duncan). Amandla Stenberg, activist, and voice for many Black youth in America, is known for bringing the cornrow controversy into the limelight. Stenberg called out Kendall’s sister Kylie, who has also been known to wear cornrows, for culturally appropriating Black women’s hair, asking “what would America be like if we loved Black people as much as we loved Black culture” (Stenberg)?

Cultural appropriation is the adoption and use of one culture’s traditions by members of another culture, usually for financial gain. It has become a buzzword that has provoked many arguments. Some believe that it is overly and wrongly used: “these accusations have become a common attack against any artist or artwork that incorporates ideas from another culture, no matter how thoughtfully or positively,” states Cathy Young, writing for *The Washington Post*. She argues that cultural appropriation today has morphed from serious accusation of cultural theft having to do with financial gain, to an accusation made every time someone is caught mimicking another culture, such as in the instance of gay White men being accused of “imitating Black women’s gestures and speech styles” and “stealing’ Black womanhood” (McWhorter). John McWhorter writes that “it used to be [. . .] said that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery,” arguing that appropriation in which neither culture profits is harmless, that it “is what human beings do.” What McWhorter might be

imagining is sometimes called cross-cultural fertilization—the idea that, when two cultures occupy one space, these cultures will naturally interchange and trade traditions, resulting in mutual benefit. However, in a country where individuals are raised with and among multiple identities, this raises questions regarding the rights we have to these identities and the freedom we have to express them.

Artists such as Miley Cyrus and Iggy Azalea, who have been accused of appropriating Black culture, have spoken out in defense of their actions. In a *Rolling Stone* article, Miley admitted: “I’m from one of the wealthiest counties in America. I know what I am. But I also know what I like to listen to. Look at any 20-year-old white girl right now—that’s what they’re listening to at the club” (qtd. in Eells). Artists have a right to draw from the world around them and give the people what they want. But can this right be abused? When does inspiration become appropriation? James O. Young, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Victoria, suggests that “even when [art] is profoundly offensive,” freedom of artistic expression must be upheld—that an artist’s freedom to create is above their moral responsibility (140). In his article “Profound Offense and Cultural Appropriation,” Young further explores an artist’s right to express and offend as well as the social values of appropriation. He writes: “artists cannot act wrongly in expressing themselves in their art [. . .] the free expression of one’s opinions, even when they are offensive, has a special moral status” (J. Young 140). He defends his argument by explaining that appropriation is not often used to inflict intentional offense, but is used by artists “in pursuit of self-realization and disinterested inquiry,” often doing so “because they find something of value in that culture” (J. Young 140). Artists should be free to express and offend. But are they void of any responsibility? Even Young admits that “if freedom of expression gives them the right [. . .] expression carries with it certain responsibilities”—at the very least, a responsibility to represent the culture they are appropriating, in a way that does not lead to racist stereotypes, to acknowledge the works’ artistic origins, and to speak out on issues that come along with that identity (J. Young 140, 141). However, this isn’t usually done. For example, “white musicians who partook in hip-hop culture and adopted Blackness—Iggy Azalea in particular—failed to speak on the

racism that comes along with black identity,” says Stenberg. When Iggy Azalea was asked to comment on taking on a ‘Black rapper persona,’ she said “I want to be that person you can listen to for four minutes and not think about that stuff at all, and it’s important to have that too [. . .] I’m not going to suddenly start rapping about political matters; it’s just not what I do” (qtd. in Shamsheer). Azalea is demonstrating her appropriative privilege: the privilege to pick and choose (i.e. appropriate) elements of Black culture she admires and “not think about” all the other “stuff.”

McWhorter may say that “her heart was in the right place” and that her use of Black identity is in some way an appreciation of Black artists. However, Iggy Azalea, and many other artists who claim to borrow aspects of Black culture out of appreciation, fail to recognize that true appreciation means a willingness to understand and represent all aspects of that culture, even taking on the difficult issues. In avoiding this responsibility, Iggy Azalea’s use of Black identity has serious repercussions. Besides the fact that she is capitalizing on this identity, even scarier is the impact of this use—a trickle-down effect. Accepting her appropriation perpetuates the practice of White America taking aspects of Black identity in order to feel transgressive, without acknowledging the full history and origins of the culture from which they take. Though McWhorter argues that this is harmless because neither culture is “reaping financial rewards,” one culture is most definitely at a disadvantage (McWhorter).

In 2014, the Black female rapper who goes by the name Azealia Banks got into a feud with Iggy Azalea about her appropriation of Black culture. During a radio interview with Hot 97, Banks stated: “[appropriation is] like a culture smudging . . . all it says to white kids is, ‘you’re great you can do whatever you put your mind to,’ and it says to Black kids ‘you don’t have shit, you don’t own shit, not even the shit you created yourself” (Banks). Many are in agreement with Banks and say that artists such as Miley and Iggy should have no part in performing a culture they have no real understanding of. In the words of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, *TIME* columnist and six-time NBA champion, any way you put it, cultural appropriation “feels an awful lot like slavery to have others profit from your efforts” (Abdul-Jabbar). Taking into consideration the artist perspective, yes, there has to be

freedom in creativity, freedom to offend people, but an artist does not have the right to create by “smudging” another culture. At a certain point something isn’t really creative if it appropriates.

With the entertainment industry mimicking Black culture, and Black people being cast aside in the entertainment industry, and lines being crossed between appreciation and appropriation and the freedom of artist versus their moral responsibility, it can all get a little bit . . . complicated. But it boils down to this: For those Black artists and entertainers who just want to share their craft, what happens when prying White hands, like the ones in Stewart’s photos, are constantly clawing at and feeding on their Blackness? What does it mean when your identity becomes something to be bought and sold?

On the walls of The Whitney Museum of Art is a painting that could sell for millions of dollars. The canvas is an electric yellow, a patch of strident blue and strokes of a dark greenish brown graze the corners. Like a child picking from a crayon box, the painting has a sort of freedom in its colors and strokes. The lines that cover the yellow-painted canvas are in no order or pattern, but create a cacophony of royal blue, red, and sharp green words, symbols, and figures that look as if a child painted them. But the details of the images hold a mature meaning that turns the cacophony into a symphony. Written across the top of the painting are the words “Hollywood Africans;” written underneath, the phrase appears again, however, it is crossed out by a bold red line. The phrase “Hollywood Africans” appears a total of five times throughout the painting, along with other words, such as “sugar cane,” “tobacco,” “tax free,” and “gangsterism.” Three figures are depicted among these words, one of them a self-portrait of the artist himself, Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Basquiat was one of the most well-known artists of the eighties, and is considered by many as the most well-known Black artist in American history. As the first famous Black artist of the high art scene, he faced a unique artistic experience—he was creating work for the majority White audience of the high art world and was called everything from “the Black Picasso” to “wild” and “primitive” (*The Radiant Child*). *Hollywood Africans* illustrates the story of other Black artists and entertainers, many of whom he knew personally. Toxic, depicted in the painting wearing a snapback with the letter Z

inscribed on it, was a fellow artist. Rammellzee, depicted wearing shades and a hoodie, was a musician friend of his. The words inscribed in the painting— such as “gangsterism,” “tobacco,” as well as these, crossed out—“what is bawan?” “allude to the limited roles available to black actors in old Hollywood movies” (Whitney Museum of American Art). “I think there’s a lot of people that are neglected in art . . . Black people are never really portrayed realistically,” Basquiat said (qtd. in *State of the Art*). He attempted to fill this void by using his artistic voice to figure Black heroes into his own work.

On the canvas, Basquiat used the freedom of his paintbrush in the fight to redefine images of Black artists, yet in his everyday life he was losing the fight to define his own identity.

He was essentially a talentless hustler, street-smart but otherwise invincibly ignorant, who used his youth, his looks, his skin colour and his abundant sex appeal to win an overnight fame that proved to be his undoing. [His work] consisted of a raw, ungifted amalgam of graffiti art, children's art and the kind of ‘primitivist’ art that sometimes passes as imitations of Jean Dubuffet. (Kramer)

This excerpt was taken from the 1997 article “He had everything but talent,” written by art critic Hilton Kramer. This article, written after Basquiat’s death in 1988, though harsh, was representative of many people’s opinions about both Basquiat’s work and his character. Throughout his career, Basquiat’s name and success were attributed to his identity as a young, Black, “art-scene hustler” (Kramer). Though I do not agree that Basquiat’s paintings are anything less than proof of his raw talent, I do find truth in Kramer’s claim that Basquiat’s fame had a lot to do with his race. Yet perhaps Basquiat intentionally used this identity in order to become famous, and it was only in gaining fame that he was reduced to a mere stereotype by society. His ‘unique background’ in the White-dominated New York art scene fetishized him—he became an object to be desired and capitalized upon. Racial fetishization involves fetishizing a person through stereotyping and objectification; it is a form of appropriation. Although White America is not embodying Black culture through

fetishization, it is still profiting by selling a stereotyped idea of Black identity in the same way appropriation does, and at the expense of Black people whose voices are then suppressed, as evident in Basquiat's life.

Basquiat is often described as "the Jimi Hendrix of the art world" (Armand). Both were young, talented Black artists who performed and created for mostly White audiences. Both died too young due to drug overdoses and both were limited by their identity. The only thing that separated them was time. "He was frustrated by legions of white fans who only saw him as a racial stereotype—a hypersexual Black man who was high all the time" (Blake). Which artist is being described here? Does it really matter? When Black culture is lusted over by White artists, Black artists are reduced to stereotypes. When Black artists are stereotyped, their identity, individuality, and creative voice are confined. With these limitations, their power as an artist is relinquished.

In her lecture "Speaking in Tongues," Zadie Smith explores identity and the difference between those who possess a single voice and those who utilize a multiplicity of voices. Through the lenses of race and class, she provides evidence that one should be able to express their voice and create their own identity despite the labels others put upon them. Smith believes that multiplicity of voice becomes a power when fully embraced by the individual. Smith praises President Obama for his ability to use many different voices. Obama's biracial background allows him to identify as both Black and White, and other pieces of his heritage and life experiences added to his identity. He was a "Jewish male, Black old lady from the South Side, white woman from Kansas, Kenyan elders, white Harvard nerds, Black Columbia nerds, activist women, churchmen," and so much more (Smith). These identities formed his unique voice. Smith argues that such a versatility of voice is the ultimate freedom, freedom from a "single identity [which] would be an obvious diminishment" (Smith). However, Obama's ability to cross-identify is written into his appearance and how people view him; it may not be a power all are able to cultivate. Is freedom of identity really a freedom, or is it a privilege? Many Black artists feel that they have ties to other identities, whether from a specific cultural background, or life experience that transcends

skin color. However, due to appearance, they are often limited to a single identity—'Black.'

It's the way of the American system. "When I go to the movies, I'm expected to identify with all of the characters, and most of them are white . . . But when you put a Black character in there, somehow the white audience isn't expected to identify with them. That's a problem," says African-American artist from Chicago, Kerry James Marshall, whose works often explored Black social life in the Projects from the interior perspective (qtd. in Sooke). White audiences don't identify with Black characters; they look at them as an Other and can only find meaning in viewing the culture as some special, foreign, thing. It's this 'Otherness' that made artists like Basquiat and Hendrix so popular in White society, and it is "that desire for . . . or fantasies about the Other [that] can be continually exploited" (hooks 22). And these artists were exploited. "Basquiat, with his good looks, his double 'minority' origins—his father was Haitian, his mother Puerto Rican—and his overweening appetite for success, they had found the client of their dreams . . . the race card was played for all that it was worth" (Kramer). Even Basquiat's relationship to his famed friend Andy Warhol can be questioned. "When Basquiat started to work and become friends with Andy Warhol, in 83/84, he was himself seen as the pawn, Andy's pet, used to keep Andy relevant as his critical acclaim flagged" (Petty). Was Basquiat just Andy's token Black friend? Was he just craving a piece of the Basquiat buzz? These are relevant questions when even the most successful Black artists of today, through racial fetishism and stereotyping, have become "scenery for narratives that essentially focus on white people" (hooks 32). Zadie Smith equated the ability to choose one's identity to ultimate freedom, but in a society that limits your identity and silences your authentic artistic voice, how can one be free?

Perhaps the answer can be found in the way Black artists have continued to use their limitations to motivate and inspire great works of art. Looking back on Stewart's photography, what speak to me are the expressions on the Black woman's face, evolving in each photo. In the first photo, with the hands grabbing her thighs, her face isn't shown at all; she is turned away, completely oblivious. In the second photo, she looks at you but there is an absence in her eyes, still

unaware of what is happening. In the third, her brow becomes furrowed and her mouth is parted in an expression of pain. In the last, her hands rise up, she is angry, she is resisting—she has woken. These photos are a very depiction of the evolution that is going on within the Black artist community right now. There is a growing awareness and need to push back against the appropriation, stereotyping, fetishizing, and commodification of Black identity. In 2015, Kendrick Lamar released *To Pimp a Butterfly*, an album dedicated to the Black experience. In 2015, painter Kehinde Waley won the U.S. Department of State Medal of Arts for his portraits of Black individuals. In 2016, Beyoncé released “Formation,” a single that showed her Black pride and spoke to racial issues. In 2016, ten Black women were nominated at the Tony awards for shows written by, directed by, and about people of color. Through painting, photography, design, music, theater, and film, Black artists are reclaiming Black identity, empowering it, redefining it, and pushing away White hands. But it is still a far journey before Black artists can transcend the singular label of “Black” all together.

Even after his death, Basquiat is sold as the African American painter who “poetically evoked the vicious greed, racism and inhumanity of the society [he] was struggling to learn to live within,” in the words of the director of the Whitney during the first Basquiat retrospective (qtd. in Kramer). A Black artist is never free of their identity. “In death, as in life, Basquiat has become a commodity. A cash corpse” (Armand). There is no doubt in my mind that Basquiat and many other successful Black artists are talented, and that they deserve the accolades they receive today. But to whom do they owe their success, and to what expense? Commodity is limitation. And when your own race is your only limitation, it’s easy to want to be free of it. “I don’t want to be a Black artist,” said Basquiat; “I am an artist” (qtd. in Cadwell).

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