

Appreciation Over Appropriation of African American Culture

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Oftentimes, the meaning and understanding of cultural appropriation is misconstrued. The definition of appropriation according to Chen et al. (2021) is that it is, “the adoption of elements of one culture by another, especially in cases where a dominant culture exploits aspects of a minority culture outside of its original culture context and/or at the expense of the original culture for personal gain.” Many people understand the personal gain involved in appropriation; power is held by the individual or group who holds and controls culture, influence, and the economic wheel. Yet many do not speak about the outcome when an excluded minorities’ scarred traditions and resources are mined and taken for the majority’s “trends” in society. Minorities are suppressed, judged, and frowned upon for embracing themselves within a society that does not accept the values of different backgrounds. On the other hand, the majority has the power to choose what is acceptable within the community as a whole, while also having the privilege to select and adopt tendencies from another culture into their own. At the same time, communities in power also have the ability to abandon the tendencies when they no longer serve them, as well.

Cultural appropriation is seen constantly through media, music, fashion, speech, cuisines, and it is hidden within many other aspects of culture as well. For example, recently the world’s number one packaging and distribution service, Amazon Prime, aired a commercial that followed the plot of a commonly known fairy tale, Rapunzel. The commercial’s branding team managed to change the character herself and rewrite the ending of the classic story, casting Repunzel as an independent African American girl who orders a ladder from Amazon Prime and receives quick and easy delivery, which contributed to her escape from the tower. The character then decides to open her own hair salon and extension business for the kingdom, depicting an independent black woman escaping her trials without the help of a prince. Nicki Minaj’s “I’m Feeling Myself” plays in the background of this storyline. Some may applaud the commercial for its positive depiction of a minority female taking a stand for independence, but this ignores the offense to the stereotype of African American women doing hair and having attitude, along with the hip-hop music choice.

Appropriation may seem harmless to a dominant culture, but it is not. Appropriating oppressed peoples’ cultures maintains mistreatment of certain groups of minorities in the US and carries on a colonialism mindset. It does this in two main ways. First, when powerful people and companies use oppressed people’s culture to shape their own for a profit, an economic ceiling is

built which places limitations on creativity. Additionally, cultural appropriation creates and maintains stereotypes of minorities that become so pervasive that individuals within the minority begin to lose sight of who they truly are, giving in to the idea of what the media has shown them. This damages the image of an entire culture, and it removes the soul and purpose of the minority's creations.

This paper will first discuss what cultural appropriation is and how it has been seen in U.S. black history. To do this, the section will first take a glimpse into how cultural appropriation was introduced through minstrel shows and black seamstress' work during slavery and the Jim Crow era. The paper will then shift to discuss how cultural appropriation has impacted the music industry since the 1960s, when many artists and labels realized how profiting from black culture could lead to economic gain. From music, this paper will move towards the discussion of black fashion history and describe the struggle of black designers' work being mimicked by white fashion houses without gaining any form of profit or recognition. In each section, the paper will display how appropriation is not only a tool to maintain economic profit, but it will also show how appropriation damages black culture and opportunity.

What is Cultural Appropriation?

Culture can be exchanged between people in multiple ways. Direct diffusion is an occurrence where cultures are adopted because people live within the same vicinity and interact with each other. Another form of adoption of another culture is indirect diffusion, which takes place through trade and travel between ethnic groups. Lastly, forced diffusion happens when a majority oppresses a minority by using their power to determine what a positive culture is. These forms are still being exemplified in today's time, yet it is now seen as an inclusive act to incorporate styles and dispositions into mainstream culture. This blurs the line between what is considered appropriation and appreciation.

Appropriation is much different than appreciation because it is a modernized form of colonization. It is the act of taking resources, including tradition, music, and fashion, to influence and improve your own. Appropriation creates a system where the oppressed have little power while the majority and those in power claim parts of a culture that is not theirs, all while asserting themselves as the originators. Baruti Kopano, the author of *Soul Thieves*, argues that just as there are three ways to spread culture through diffusion, there are also three major

objectives in cultural appropriation. The first objective is to maintain current orders of power by keeping African Americans in a modern form of oppression issued by racial or economic difference. This could be done through the second objective, which is encouraging Black self degradation along with brainwashing and promoting negativity through people in the black community. Lastly, an obvious reason is to profit from another culture (Kapano 2014).

Each objective goes hand-in-hand with each other and plays into a system. This system is used to control the eye of the media, and can be seen clearly when it comes to music videos and lyrics in hip hop music. The big companies use the artist as a pawn for displaying whichever message music companies want to portray. For example, this image and belief that looking older and acting as an adult while still being in a child's position is constantly present in the African American community through music. These detrimental themes are many times included into the music contract, pressuring artists to sign away creative control and musical rights to a white majority run corporation. In the early 2000s, rapper Too Short was an example of an artist that had no say in what he able to communicate with the world, for the label instructed him to use and depict women in a sexual way, believing that this is the look the people want (Kopano 2014, 4). This imagery was not only shown through models in music videos, but also within his lyrics. When interviewed about his past music career, Too Short gave statements identifying the fact that the labels presented financial threats to him if he did not follow through with acts that didn't feel true to him. He also took ownership, saying that being in his early twenties, he was old enough to know what was right and wrong, but he also noticed the fact that he was young and impressionable. Labels purposefully recruit inner city African American young adults who live in low income housing due to them knowing that a twenty year old would do whatever the label sees fit for millions of dollars (Negus 1992, 535). The record company not only gained more profits from the imagery, lyrics, and reputation of Too Short's career, but it also profited from his youth and from being naive. Too Short realizes the domino effect his music has contributed to the degradation of black culture, but he is only one out of thousands of artists who have also contributed to the downfall of the black community in exchange for money. The widespread and accepted nature of appropriation makes it hard to stop the spread of this disease.

Cultural Appropriation During Slavery

Cultural appropriation has been in American history since the establishment of Africans in America. One of the early ways that African culture was first seen, examined and incorporated into popularized art was through minstrel shows especially. Minstrel shows, also known as “blackface,” are considered to be the beginning of appropriation of black culture in the US. Minstrel shows were responsible for the utilization of black music and dance, transitioning that type of style into comedy for whites in the south. This form of entertainment during the time was not perceived as appropriation due to its original intent: to degrade and mock a minority. Yet with today's definition, that is exactly what appropriation is. According to Kopano (2014), white men found a sense of freedom and creativity while performing blackface, making claims of experiencing a pure emotional escape and release when acting in Minstrel shows. Performers such as George Thatcher and Dave Wambold were drawn towards new instruments, instruments that were used to play soul music among blacks. The theory of feeling more inspired and free while in black cosplay helped performers in their craft as a whole while also aiding them within other careers in entertainment. This is a perfect example of how the majority used black expression and benefited the careers of white actors while degrading African American culture at the same time. It is unsurprising that minstrel shows started becoming popular in the 1830s and 40s, during a time when many poor white Europeans immigrated to the US. (Balanda 2020) Minstrel shows displayed the superiority of whiteness to unite a diverse group of white people by excluding and literally taking ownership of Black Americans. This left it up to white people to define what is acceptable in American culture.

Appropriation of a culture is not just shown by mocking or taking the characteristics of a minority culture, as seen within minstrel entertainment, but also by the act of not acknowledging black individuals or creators while expressing their work. This was constantly expressed in the very early stages of fashion history for Black, enslaved seamstresses. In the early 1800s, some Black women were appointed the role of being a seamstress for the elite, white slave owners. The white elite commonly wore beautiful garments that were crafted from the hands of black burden and sorrow. Claiming ownership of the slave was also claiming ownership of the creation, meaning, black enslaved women received no credit when finished with each dress that was made. The lack of acknowledgement towards African Americans who created luxurious, handcrafted objects continued through history, yet this exclusion was used as a step towards giving the African American culture time to develop and grow. Going unseen gave the

seamstresses the space to build what they wanted their culture to look like and consist of since originally it was stripped from them (Balanda 2020). During times of slavery, there was no solidified culture for black minorities, and this is the reason for why African American culture becomes so unique within itself. However, the work of these seamstresses would continue to be appropriated throughout generations. In today's world of fashion, oversized clothing is oftentimes referenced out of the look of the oppressed. The fashion industry in many ways has rebuilt the oversized look into something that is trendy, comfortable, chic and neutral, while giving subtle references to the look of slaves that wore oversized burlap sacks. (Kopano 2014)

Harriet Jacobs is one of many women whose skill was exploited and not recognized. Harriet Jacobs was sold into an elite white family and was taught by other former enslaved seamstresses on how to create and sew clothing. Harriet would eventually be appointed the role of being a seamstress for the master's wife, responsible for sewing luxurious dresses for the balls she would attend with other white elites. Harriet would later escape from slavery and start a new life in the north. She used her skills to promote abolitionist movements, supplying them with clothing and designing emblems for abolitionists (Kopano 2014). Another seamstress during this time was Elizabeth Keckley. Elizabeth was not sold but born into slavery and was considered a mulatto for her light skin complexion. She too was taught to sew clothing for not just the white women of her plantation, but also for a white family that was closely acquainted with her owners. When worn in public, Elizabeth's work would catch the public eye, and her owners would allow her to receive forms for payment from outsiders that wanted garments crafted from her. Elizabeth saved 1,200 dollars and used her opportunity to buy her freedom (Kopano 2014). White elites gave her loans to push her production. Not to support her skill and ambition, but because her garments were benefiting the lives of the rich. She eventually moved to Washington D.C. where she built a loyal clientele of white women, eventually crafting a dress for first lady Mary Todd Lincoln and the wife of Jefferson Davis (Kopano 2014). Elizabeth Keckly is a rare example, where at least in some way she was noticed for her work, but it is believed that she benefited from her lighter skin and acceptance from the white community due to her talent, which allowed her to buy her freedom (Kopano 2014). These two examples show how their and many other women's work was appropriated and hunted for the benefit of those in power. Black seamstresses knew that this form of free labor would not be recognized at this time. So, when sewing clothing and given exotic and fine fabrics to work with, they would incorporate ivory cloth into their pieces.

(Kopano 2014). Although they may not have recognized it, by wearing these fabrics whites were truly flaunting the beauty of Africa.

Black Culture and Jim Crow

Fashion however was not the only realm in culture where sound and talent were exploited and malnourished because of skin color and greed for profit. Music between the 1920s-40s, the Jim Crow era, set African American artists and musicians along the path of inevitable failure to grow and surpass their white competitors. This is surprising given the fact that genres of music such as the blues, jazz, and gospel began to grow in popularity and recognition. These forms of music derived from black struggle and were performed and shaped by the black majority. This, however, did not mean that black artists themselves were receiving the best treatment and recognition for this popular sound of swing.

Black artists were targeted and exploited specifically due to their lack of knowledge of the corporate side of the music industry. This added to the lopsided power dynamic between record label companies and their African American artists. Black artists themselves ran into complications and obstacles when finding time to produce songs of their own. Financially, studio recording equipment was expensive and hard to come by. This made it to where hardly any Black artist could have a sustainable music career as an independent artist. White company CEOs were aware of this and persuaded black artists to sign to their label under poor contracts. White music groups, due to the normalized segregation of the Jim Crow Era, created race records, which categorized all music sung and written by black musicians.

One reason record labels invested in race records was because they were struggling financially, as Columbia Records declined from 7 million dollars to 4.5 million dollars between 1921 to 1925 (Blakemore 2018). Recording companies looked at race records as a form of profit. The system behind race records was set up to capitalize on black artists who needed help launching their music publically. White CEOs took advantage of the situation because the average African American did not know their musical rights when publishing, and multiple artists signed away all of the profit they would ever earn to the company (Blakemore 2018, #)White artists had the means of hiring managers and producers to guide them alongside the business aspect of the music industry. As a result, white owned companies made large amounts of profit from bad deals with their black artists. Not only did white companies add to the stress of

black artists, but black supporters and listeners bought race records believing that royalties would be returning to the artist, providing steady profit for companies (Blakemore 2018). Companies harvesting black music still did not recognize blues and jazz as their own genres of music, and kept all black music in the race records category, which were placed in stores in predominantly black neighborhoods. Black artists were not only rejected from joining mainstream music, but also excluded from the American Society of Composers, Artists and Performers, who determined an artist's royalty agreement. By using these tactics, Queen of soul, Bessie Smith, made a million dollars in a year for Columbia Records and received no royalties due to being excluded from her royalty agreement (Killmeier 2013). On a larger scale, race records provided for Music labels, reaching 100 million dollars in profit gain in 1927 (Killmeier 2013). The fall of race records correlated with the combined fall of the economy during the great depression, when labels could not afford to record new music, which forced artists to forfeit their careers. Although race records ended in the 1930s, race record tactics continue to be expressed to many young and impressionable artists new in the music industry. Rigid contracts will always be a part of profit and capitalism in business.

The end of race records, however, was not the end of musical appropriation in the Jim Crow Era. Sun Records was a perfect example of another route the industry took to appropriate black music and make even more money than with race records. Sun Records was created by Sam Phillips, who was born and raised in Florence, Alabama in 1923. During his childhood in the deep south, he was familiar with sharecroppers who sang while faring in the field. This would shape his musical ear and influence his musical taste and perspective. When reflecting on his childhood, Phillips stated, "A day didn't go by when I didn't hear black folks singing in the cotton fields" (Martin 2003). Later in his life Phillips would establish Sun Records, which was first a race record selling company. This company would fail in that area of business, and this failure caused Phillips to try to find another option for profit and success. It was during this time that Phillips would be quoted saying, "If I could find a white man who had the negro sound and the negro feel, I could make a billion dollars" (Martin 2003). Phillips said that he was falsely quoted on this statement, yet his actions hold himself accountable for following through with the sentiment. In 1954 Phillips came across a young Elvis Presley and signed him to Sun Records. Elvis Presley would go on to have an astonishing career, gaining millions of fans and leaving an impact on American culture.

In the African American community, Elvis is a figure of thievery of Black music. From the cadence of his music, the extravagant clothing, to his stage presence and dance moves, it was clear to see where Elvis's inspirations were from. Sam Phillips received exactly what he wished for: a white man who had the stolen soul and sound of a black man and took a popular music style such as swing and jazz and called it rock and roll, introducing this style of music to a larger demographic and claiming it as his own. Phillips also would state a reasoning for his discovery of this new sound, "Teenagers did not have, before rock and roll and rhythm and blues. They did not have any type of music they could call their own" (Garner 2015). This disregards that the music that white teenagers claimed already existed, but was not capitalistically owned, by the Black community. Lastly Phillips would have the audacity to say, "If you're not doing something different, you're not doing anything.," while co-signing and backing artists such as Elvis and Johnny Cash, who both made their fortune off of black music (Garner 2015). Despite his admiration for black music, Phillips conformed to the racial prejudices of his audience and appropriate black culture for profit and publicity.

Appropriation of black culture was not just used within the music industry during the Jim Crow Era, but slowly began to become noticeable during the early stages of black fashion and style in America. Even with few resources in the 1940s, African Americans had the tendency to build and create extravagant looks out of gear that was normally worn as business attire. A prime example of this was when African Americans and Latinos brought the zoot suit look to the streets of New York, purposefully purchasing oversized suits and tailoring them to fit around their ankles. African American males popularized this look during the 1940s, which was adopted by influential black leaders like Dizzy Gillespie and Louis Armstrong (Gregory 2016). Harold Fox, a black entertainer, stated that the zoot suits were, "not a costume or uniform from the world of entertainment. It came off the street and out of the ghetto (Gregory 2016)." Harold Fox and the black community understood that this style was not an industry planted trend, but was created out of the feeling of inner city blacks; a sense of expression and creativity that grew from the oppressive state of concrete. This aligns with fashion historian Kathy Peiss, who wrote that, "For those without other forms of cultural capital, fashion can be a way of claiming a space for yourself." (Gregory 2016, #)

Zoot suits are a prime example of the harms of appropriating black fashions during the 1940s. The white majority profited, corrupted, and modified black culture so much that

eventually the soul of the art was not recognizable by the creators, the black community. This caused the black community to adopt this white washed version of black culture. Many Black Americans failed to realize that they were constantly trying to become accepted by the standards of American culture, when in reality black Americans contributed to the major trends of American culture. This can be seen within the realization from Malcolm X in his autobiography as he discussed buying a new suit and conking his hair. Despite running into credit debt to portray a look he would later be ashamed of, he stated, "I endured all of that pain, literally burning my flesh to have it look like a white man's hair...that they will even violate and mutilate their god-created bodies to try to look 'pretty' by white standards" (Malcolm X, 1964, 56). This shows that appropriation has more outcomes than just keeping profit in the hands of the powerful. It also causes Black Americans to receive hate from outsiders while also receiving hate from themselves.

A Black Renaissance: Black Culture of the Late Twentieth Century

As the twentieth century moved forward to the fashion and artistic renaissance period in the 1960s-80s, Black Americans began to search, create and embody "true blackness." Fashion styles, colors and patterns were taken from Africa and incorporated into pieces from black designers. Due to segregation and racial oppression, the black voice was oftentimes not heard, but artists used fashion and music as their canvases to paint and express feeling. In the 1960s, while radical movements and freedom of speech were used to portray the message of the fight for inequality and equal rights, designers also began using fashion as a platform for their messages.

Black designers of the civil rights era were heavily influenced by the mothers and grandmothers who were seamstresses and made clothes for the elite whites (Friedman 2015, #). Though they didn't receive many accolades from society, the skill of fabric sewing was passed on and observed by the children and grandchildren. That generation would take this skill and break the mold that their mothers' generation were stuck in. Black female seamstresses would inspire a generation of designers with names as big as Willi Smith, Steven Burrows, Arthur Mcgee, Scott Barrie, Dapper Dan, and John Haggins. This "renaissance" era for African Americans finally gave a handful of black designers their shot at the American Dream by using

what they know and how they feel to turn the stress of oppression and inequality into beautiful art.

An example of an African American designer who flourished from this idea was the iconic Willi Smith. Willi Smith founded his brand Willi Wear in 1976 and was one of the first African American gay male designers to construct clothes for both men and women under the same fashion line (Pritchard 2021, #). Willi Smith, unlike many others, was not a label driven designer. He created quality clothing and garments that exhibited black pride and sold them for cheaply, specifically for the poor blacks in the inner city. He understood that the price tag does not make or break good clothing, and that price should not be another barrier for creatively expressing oneself (Pritchard 2021, #). The average person would be able to buy his clothing, widening his clientele and allowing his work to be seen more on the street. This was a risk because, "When fashion goes through the trickle-down cycle, and becomes available to different financial levels, it is not considered high fashion anymore" (Lewis-Mhoon p. 69). However, Willi Smith would label his styling type as "Street Couture," relating to the fact that during this time other black designers had invested much of their work to style the black community and music scene. Yet in the case of Willi Smith, he wanted to add on another branch of what black fashion can look like and to stray away from urban wear, such as leather jackets, jeans, and sneakers, to formal garments of blazers, pants suits and blouses. Street Couture took inspiration from street culture and made it business casual, ghetto chic. At the height of his success, Willi Wear generated a revenue of 25 million dollars, proving that his plan to make high quality fashion accessible to common people was possible, especially from a black owned brand.(Pritchard 2021, #)

Throughout Willi's fashion career he was faced with many obstacles and limitations. During this time, fashion was dominated by white men and women, and this area of art was also corrupted by a system similar to Race Records in black 60's music. This term would later be reworked into the treatment of black fashion, calling it Race Werk, instead of including it under couture fashion generally (Pritchard 2021, #). Additionally, Willi Smith was an openly gay black male in the fashion industry. Discrimination was demonstrated due to him being black within a predominantly white profession, yet there was also discrimination given to him originally by the black community because of his sexuality. Being gay in the black community during this time

was not as accepted and embraced as it is during the present day, yet the limitation and judgement is actually what led him to become a great designer.

Willi Smith used this motivation to push the boundaries of his work even further by creating a new collection of clothing that was meant to replicate and substitute the normal black and white cliché work attire. This collection would be titled “Totally Serious” based on the mockery that was displayed towards him trying to take a spin of professional clothing (See Image 1). Critics sarcastically called his next collection a totally serious one (Elia 2021). Willi Smith took advantage of what the media had given him and created an image that would catch the eye of the public and amplify his way of thinking. This collection was not just a message of rebellion towards the labels, but it was also used to show every black artist that it was possible to write their own narrative. He worked inside the system and made opportunities out of limitations instead of completely doing away with the system as Dapper Dan would do a little over ten years later. Men like Willi, gave way to the doors that would welcome many black male designers that would follow a similar narrative in their own way, such as the late and iconic Virgil Abloh, CEO and creator of street wear brand Off-White, who would later obtain the role of Men’s Creative Director of Louis Vuitton.

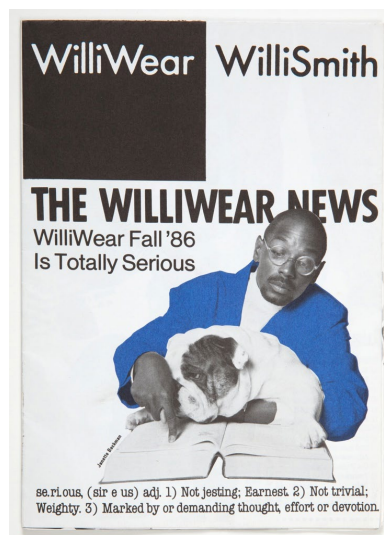


Image 1. WilliWear Fall'86 Is Totally Serious. (Elia 2021)

While Willi Smith worked within mainstream fashion, his contemporary, Dapper Dan, made moves outside of the traditional industry. Daniel R. Day was born on August 8, 1944 (Cooper 2017). Being raised in the booming borough of Harlem, New York, Daniel Day

influenced the style, and feel of a culture. His genius in fashion was short lived, but he left a huge impact on how the African American community dresses today. Daniel Day gave the term “luxury” a different look and meaning, making predominantly white brands into relatable, comfortable garments, giving him the name of Dapper Dan (Cooper 2017).

Dapper Dan had humble beginnings, and he would later grow up with a hustler’s mentality. Dan would gamble and resale items on the streets of Harlem, allowing him to build a small clientele while improving his understanding of business (Elia 2021). He would later have the idea of selling luxury clothing products such as Gucci, Louis Vuiton, and Fendi in order to attract more sales and clients with a higher price range to obtain a greater profit. While in the fashion reselling business, Dan began to notice that within the European fashion market there were hardly any garments that resemble a more comfortable and urban look. Dapper Dan, whose mother was a seamstress, used the skills he obtained from seeing his mom sew and contributed that ability towards the reconstruction of luxury products into more of an urban look that catered to and attracted the African American audience (Cooper 2017). Over the span of his career, Dapper Dan obtained enough money to open his own shop titled Dapper Dan’s Boutique and distribute his work to clients nationally.

Dapper Dan saw that these world dominating fashion houses were not using what they had to their fullest extent: their logos. Dan realized that the only thing that truly separates the clothes of the common folk and the garments of the well off was the emblem or name on the clothing. Dapper Dan pursued to take the classic monogram LV logo that was display over the entirety of a briefcase or handbag and rework the leather material into bomber jackets, pants, coats, and hats (Cooper 2017). This work was the first of its kind. This was an enormous change for not just the life and size of his business, but also for how black culture would display itself for decades to come. Dapper Dan's legacy continues to be praised and respected today. Rap artist ASAP Ferg, whose music is highly influenced from fashion, stated that, “What Dap did was take what those major fashion labels were doing and make them better. He taught them how to use their designs in a much more effective way” (Cooper 2017, 2). Dapper Dan continued to excel at his craft and gained more followers, especially as artists such Fat Boyz, Roxanne Shante, and Missy Elliot wore his garments in music videos.

Dapper Dan’s designs brought pride and business to the African American community. He would purposefully only buy fur from other black businesses to support upcoming black

designers and sellers, trying to open up the doors of the fashion world and welcome the black community (Cooper 2017). Dapper Dan's use of luxury labeling won the hearts of many consumers. The logo was everything in low income communities because it gave people who were consistently oppressed and overlooked a chance to stand out and feel as if they belonged among the rich. Additionally, his work existed outside of the norm, and because he did not expand outside of Harlem, his fashion became something unique that people would want to seek out (Elia 2021).

Dapper Dan, now noticed and labeled the don of luxury streetwear fashion in New York, gained influence and publicity to add on to his reputation. Dapper Dan's longing for recognition, however, would be the death of his branding journey. Although nationally he was sought out by many for his products, he eventually gained the attention from the high end brands he was sampling for his designs. GUCCI, Louis Vuitton and Fendi were informed that an African American man from Harlem New York was profiting off of fabric and legally owned logos. The companies viewed Dapper Dan as a threat towards the work of designated fashion designers and the reputation of their brand. In reaction to the information, Louis Vuitton and Gucci sued Dapper Dan for product misrepresentation and for usage of a legally owned logo and fabric for 100 percent profit (Elia 2021). Due to LVMH's power hold within the fashion industry and wealth they could use to hire teams of lawyers, Dapper Dan was forced to settle, shut down his store and let go of all of his designs. LVMH later used Dapper Dan's designs themselves to reel in profit themselves.

The Harm in Appropriating Hip Hop

During the late 1980s to the mid 1990s, the rise of hip hop culture began to grow into a lifestyle for many inner city African Americans. Fashion and music went hand in hand, occasionally allowing people to picture a sound and hear a look. During this time, revolution was furthered through personal expression in music and style. Although hip hop originally grasped the soul and style of the black community, it began to be appropriated, much like past forms of black music. Recording companies used old techniques to preserve their power and eventually alter the sound of the genre, which in turn degraded what was considered to be black culture.

Record labels oftentimes did not take hip hop and rap music seriously when it first came to be. The genre was described as a risk, not profitable enough, and too black for the world's

taste (Negus 2004, 533). Part of the reason for this was that rap music was known for using samples with the beats and vocals. This was costly for artists and labels due to having to pay the sample artist royalties every time the hip hop version of their song was played. Companies did not want to invest in sounds that they determined were more expensive and had shorter shelf lives (Negus 2004, 532). Because labels provided a low amount of funding to the hip hop genre, many artists created independent labels to try to take back their profits. This intention was meant to empower black artists and provide better opportunities, but because of the existing power structure and financial trouble, most black founded labels had to sell their label to a dominating company such as Universal Music Group (UMG) (Kopano 2014, 6). This would allow black labels to remain but no longer be truly independent.

In some cases, there were independent, black founded and owned labels that were taking the music industry by storm, one of which was Death Row Records. Death Row Records, which was created in 1991, operated by Dr. Dre of the infamous gangster rap group N.W.A, and owned by Marion “Suge” Knight (Universal Music Group 2022). Death Row Records housed many of hip hop’s legends such as Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, and Tupac Shakur. The label's prime was from the years of 1992-1995 due to their production of gangster rap. This form of music gained the attraction from the masses due to the street image and the hard hitting beats that allowed fans to glorify and relive the street life through their headphones. While gangster rap has stereotypical imagery within it, what caused millions to follow the movement was the honesty it had when addressing the U.S. government.

Specifically within Death Row Records, N.W.A and Tupac Shakur were known for using their experiences from the street and transforming it into intellect. They discussed controversial topics while disguising it in the gangster rap image. Tupac's legacy was established from his truth, and his truth was something he was not ashamed of. Artists like Tupac are the children of revolutionaries such as The Black Panthers (Universal Music Group 2022). This plays a huge part in their thinking of the justice system and the police. This creativity and rebellious mindset was passed down from their parents, who worked through politics, to their sons, who worked to make an impact through the arts. For example, Tupac's 1992 single “Ghetto Gospel” addressed the hardships that Black children face, and the fear and hate they face (Shakur 1992). He stated that society is afraid of the youth due to the fact that change is more likely to occur through them.

*“Everyone’s ashamed of the youth
 ‘cause the truth look strange
 And for me it’s reversed
 We left ‘em a world that’s cursed and it hurts
 ‘Cause any day they’ll push the button, and all good men like Malcolm X or Bobby Hutton died
 for nothin’
 Don’t it make you get teary? The world looks dreary
 When you wipe your eyes see it clearly
 There’s no need for you to fear me
 If you take your time and hear me
 Maybe you can learn to cheer me
 It ain’t about black or white, ‘cause we human
 I hope we see the light before it’s ruined; my ghetto gospel”*

- “Ghetto Gospel”, Tupac Shakur (1992)

The portrayed emotion of sadness and loss of hope for Americans are seen within his lyrics and tone. Through his anger and loud tone, Tupac hoped that his music would attract the attention of many. In particular, the line, “No need to fear me” revealed that Tupac knew that his audience was largely white Americans who could try to understand black culture through gangster music. This shines light on the fact that though there continue to be music divisions for certain ethnic groups, music still has a wide range and audience.

Smaller labels that were founded and formed by current artists or producers struggled financially in terms of tour funding, artist promotion and payment. This caused many independent companies to sign over their business rights to major distribution companies such as UMG for financial and relational assistance. Oftentimes this brought about the illusion that a once “independent” label continued to act that way, when in fact it was now a branch of a parent company. UMG created their empire from this arrangement (Negus 2004). For example, in the 1980s, Uptown Records was known for being one of the largest producers of Hip Hop and R&B music, but they ceased to be independent and joined a parent company for financial benefit (Negus, 2004, 529). It joined UMG, the parent company of the majority of the world's most influential labels today such as Def Jam, Roc a Fella Records, EMI, GOOD Music, Quality Control and many more (Universal Music Group, 2022). This not only makes UMG responsible

for successful companies, but also for the world's biggest artists who are not necessarily signed under UMG, but their one of the branches.

While having branches and black divisions create more opportunities for black labels, the CEOs of the larger parent company, such as Universal Music Group, stay dominated by white executives who truly are responsible for decision making when it comes to musical image, marketing, and sound of an artist. Executives and publishers of the industry are predominantly white suburban males (Negus, 2004). While Capitol Records, Def Jam Recordings, and Motown Records all have black executives, those executives have never obtained the opportunity to become an executive or head of a department at UMG, Warner Brothers Studio, or Sony Music (Balanda 2020, 5).

This hierarchy exists throughout the label's hiring practices. Author Keith Negus discusses the difference between the streets and the executive seat of music. A perfect example of this can be seen in Russell Simmons, who was raised in a middle class household and had an education that allowed him to become an entrepreneur and co-founder his own recording label, Def Jam Records (Negus 2004, 531). Like most, Def Jam Records was a small independent company that had to sell parts of their company over to UMG. UMG positioned Russell as the head of the "black music" genre category instead of giving him a seat at the table at the corporate office due to UMG wanting Russell to stay, "street." The thought behind this was that individuals who were familiar with black style and sound could locate and sign more artists under UMG (Negus 2004, 531). Corporate offices place A&Rs into the public field and issue them to go out onto the street and find talent, calling them street marketers. Andre Harrell, head of Uptown Records in the 1980s, said:

"But as black music becomes more important there should be more black presidents and black chairmen. As soon as the black executives' artist reaches platinum, suddenly the artist and manager have to deal with the president of the corporation, because he controls the priorities at pop radio. The black executive becomes obsolete. As his music gets bigger, his power diminishes. He's more or less told, 'Go find the next act and establish it.'... That's why young black executives don't get to become the old chairmen-the wise men who've seen it and done it. They get to stay hot black executives so long as the instincts are hot... the black executive is not given the opportunity to become the business and the music" (Negus 2004, 529).

While it was positive that there was more black representation in companies through black divisions, by assigning people to become street marketers instead of CEOs, the representation did not really change the power structures of the companies.

Major companies and corporations have constructed a purposeful system of corporate colonialism (Kopano, 2014). Expansion, influence, and power are the three values that drive the major companies towards making the most profit. Major corporations such as UMG have no pinnacle of success, for every opportunity is a way to expand and colonize the management of smaller label companies and obtain responsibility over the biggest artist. The goal is not just obtaining ownership over records, but also crafting the face of current music as a whole. By 2008, UMG, Sony BMG, EMI Group, and Warner Music Group held, “81.87 percent of the US music market and supply 90 percent of the music that the public purchases” (Kopano 2014, 3).

Expansion is only a small part of the greater plan and impact that a company has over not just the artist but the masses as well. Once expansion and ownership of a hit single is acquired, companies are in control of artists' rights, which allow labels to dictate the messaging that is being said through an artist. Controlling the message is an important profit goal for companies, especially in rap music. Every time a fashion house, food or drink, or technology is mentioned, the companies that are rapped about oftentimes benefit from profit increase due to the public purchasing the items that are raved about in songs. For example, Seagrams alcohol company bought Death Row Records just before Snoop Dogg's hit single “Gin and Juice” released in 1993 (Kopano 2014, 11). This song caused a strong partnership to grow between Death Row and Seagrams. Both companies gained major profits from both the feeling and sound of the song, but also the commercial-like promotion of the alcoholic beverage that existed in the name of the song. As the cycle of profit from messaging continues, depending on the message there are negative effects that take place amongst individuals in society. Surely, major companies' main focus is to not be the cause of ethnic degradation, but in the grand scheme of things the ruin of cultures falls partially on the messages of the media. While Tupac made political messages popular in 1992's “Ghetto Gospel,” Snoop Dogg had to hide philosophies of black power and awareness of brutality inside of his party music.

This, however, was not the only instance of musical distortion. Transforming hip hop into party music carried on and preyed among the youth in the music industry into the 2000s. For example, former hip hop artist Too Short, who was signed to EMI and Jive records, was

notorious for his vulgar word play and sexualizing visual content. With the temptation of money, 18 year old Too Short agreed to portray the imagery that his executives gave him (Kopano 2014, 3). In recent years, Too Short spoke of wanting to change his image as he progressed. Yet, the president of Jive Records, Berry Wess, would not allow him to create a “positive” Too Short album. Too Short wanted to create socially conscious songs about poverty and police brutality. While Too Short wanted to balance his work, the heads of Sony advised him to create an album featuring a large amount of cursing and sex (Kopano 2014, 4).

The plague of cultural tourism is a way that the white music industry plants artists that are able to play into the persona of black music and image while having the freedom to relinquish the image at will, being the puppet that showcases a negative outlook on black America (Balanda 2020, 6). In today's time, artists such as Iggy Azalea, Justin Timberlake, Macklemore, and Eminem have been publicly spotlighted on the topic of cultural appropriation. Black artists such as J.Cole discuss each individual in his single, “Fire Squad”. Containing his outlook on how it feels as a black artist to contribute towards a sport that was created for and by you, while outsiders gain recognition and awards when most white people know nothing about the culture. J.Cole also makes reference towards Elvis and his rock and roll legacy from black gospel music (Cole 2014). During the 2015 MTV music video awards, Nicki Minaj called out Actor and musician Miley Cyrus for cultural appropriation stating, “You're in videos with black men, and you're bringing out black women on your stages, but you don't want to know how black women feel about something that is so important?” (Feeney 2015). resulting from a comment of Miley laddering HipHop, yet she used the sound and image of hiphop as a vessel for profit (Feeney 2015). A classic example of Appropriation holding more weight than the appreciation of a culture.

Conclusion

Throughout American history, black fashion designers have always existed, but not always recognized. In the late 1800's, seamstresses were the originator of black contemporary fashion. Enslaved creators such as Harriet Jacobs and Elizabeth Keckly are representations of social and racial economic opportunities that limited them from receiving real recognition from consumers. In Harriet Jacobs case, the appropriation of her garments was displayed by the elite white women that wore them without giving any recognition to whom it was made while having

no idea that these extravagant gowns were infused with African based materials such as ivory. Elizabeth Keckly is another example of how black work, talent, and art was not appreciated but appropriated by others. Her dress being worn by the First lady, yet still no recognition was given towards the accomplishment. One hundred years later the same instance is occurring in different times. Examples of Dapper Dan and Willie Smith exemplify a time when black art was given its limited amount of freedom. Once seeing that white contemporary and black street formed a perfect match for new couture, power hungry corporate brands such as Gucci and LVMH involved themselves in the action of using their hierarchy to erase small businesses with great creativity such as Dapper Dan, take their victims blueprint and use it to benefit the future of the company. Willie Smith's work was constantly mocked for trying to incorporate black kente cloth and brighter colors into business work wear, just as Harriet Jacobs did in the 1800s. Willi Wear was on a mission to rebrand the meaning of sophistication and what should be taken "Totally serious". This phrase would later be used in his promotion of the line and gain mass appeal. Media would soon praise his work for the simple fact that it was made by a black man. Judging the line for who it was made from instead of how it looked. Willi Smith was labeled as a black designer instead of just a designer. The struggle of minorities being able to change not just the narrative or summary of fashion but the actual ideas themselves, relies on the education that is being given to minorities. Studies from today show that tuition for prestigious fashion schools are double that of the income of the average African American family. The table is not only difficult to get to, but the table was never set up for minorities in the first place. This becomes less of a competition of whose skills can survive in high fashion institutes, to who can afford to survive.

Appropriation may seem harmless to a dominant culture, but it is not. Appropriating oppressed peoples' cultures maintains mistreatment of certain groups of minorities in the US and carries on a colonialism mindset. It does this in two main ways. First, when powerful people and companies use oppressed people's culture to shape their own for a profit, an economic ceiling is built which places limitations on creativity. Additionally, cultural appropriation creates and maintains stereotypes of minorities that become so pervasive that individuals within the minority begin to lose sight of who they truly are, giving in to the idea of what the media has shown them. This damages the image of an entire culture, and it removes the soul and purpose of the minority's creations.

During the 1830s, minstrel shows went rampant throughout the country, especially in the south. These shows of course were blatant ways of discrimination and racial humiliation, yet there is a deeper meaning and take away from these shows that magnifies the origin of what we know as cultural appropriation in America. George Thacher and Dave Wambold were both musicians whose career boosted off of the lives and stereotypical racist actions of Black people. White actor claimed that performing in minstrel shows was an emotional escape and release. These shows continued to profit in many ways outside of the money. Profiting off of the funny show, black look, dance, music, and struggle. This idea has been modified and reconstructed to fit in the time in which it exists, while still carrying the same message and motive.

Profiting off of black culture while putting an economic ceiling on black performers has dwelled in the music industry specifically due to the power and economic structure of the both race groups. In the 1920s through 1940s, Race records were established to make sure that the popular sound and soul of black music could still be sold, while still installing segregation within the music industry. Sun records founded by Sam Phillips and other major labels executed race records throughout their careers. Yet to make matters worse, Sun records would soon sign the iconic face of rock and roll Elvis Presley due to his white image and soulful black sounding music and dance. Sam Phillips stating "If I could find a white man who had the negro sound and the negro feel, I could make a billion dollars". This quote came into reality for Sam Phillips, for Sun records signees Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash were exactly that. Both have background in experiencing the black churches, analyzing and adopting, stealing and transforming the soul of black music. White artists would promote music that was previously housed under the black division of race records, giving no recognition to the originators of rock and roll. Once again the appropriation of a culture transforms and molds itself deeper in the music industry during a time of black dominance in music. Hip-Hop music in the 80s and 90s produced many of the world's most influential and culture forming stars that are still relevant in today's music. Yet most of these artists under contract were obligated to agree and conform to how their recording label and management wanted them to act and display. Boundaries were placed on black artists who strived to possibly release music with a positive message and meaning, but had to disguise truthful messaging of police brutality, teen pregnancy and gun violence in gangster rap and party music. For the African Americans that worked in the offices of major labels such as UMG, they would be assigned as far away from the executive seat as possible. Being positioned as Street

marketers pushed to the streets to find the next big Rap star in the most impoverished neighborhoods. Portfolio management born for Race Records houses traditionally and originally independent black labels such as Jive records and Motown, and places their rights into the hands of more powerful white major labels like UMG. Corporations appropriate Hip-Hop music and business to gain as much profit as possible. Collecting all 80% of profit that is caused by white teens and young adults.

Appropriation of music and art did not just limit opportunities for black artists - it also degrades black culture. Minstrel shows displayed racial dominance and the superiority of whiteness while further degrading blackness. Playing on stereotypes, gaining laughs, and being a part of the most popular form of entertainment played a huge part in the growth of many white actors' careers. Major record labels have the control to depict what a culture looks and sounds like. Young black American teens being organized and told to claim a vulgar and promiscuous image because sex sells. The glorification of street and gang violence within rap music. Giving a display that this is what the day to day life of every black person in America, when yet the story is exaggerated for attention and profit. Messaging causes black youth to believe what rap music talks about especially when this negative image is told from someone who looks like them. Making dysfunctional things appear to be normal and in fake making them normal in today's society. Feeding lies to the black youth of what is "cool" and acceptable. The degradation of a culture due to power and profit mongers who perform a constant act of colonialism for profit with no regards to the burning path of destruction that is left behind them.

In present day fashion, improvements have been seen and made within the runway industry. Diversity and inclusion towards model scouting and representation on the runway. Yet, Major companies are using this form of representation not just for the cause, but almost as an apology for the years of appropriation and exclusion. This however has only made critics analyze the fashion industry more for appropriation. Large corporations having African American men and women modeling European clothing seems as if luxury is in love with the exotic dark brown skin rather than the culture still. The appropriation of people instead of culture.

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