Cultural Appropriation and Aesthetic Normativity

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Abstract:

Is it ever aesthetically permissible to engage in acts of cultural appropriation? This paper shows how recent work on aesthetic normativity can help answer this question. Drawing on the work of Lopes (2018) and McGonigal (2018a, 2018b), I argue that in many cases those who engage in cultural appropriation act against their aesthetic reasons. Lopes and McGonigal advocate for externalist accounts of aesthetic reasons according to which whether or not an agent has an aesthetic reason to act depends on whether or not their action will be an aesthetic achievement. Employing this framework, I argue that insofar as acts of cultural appropriation are seldom aesthetic achievements, many agents who engage in culturally appropriative aesthetic activities act against their aesthetic reasons.

(1) – Introduction

A highly skilled artist engages in a particularly artistic act of cultural appropriation. In spite of his good intentions, many think it possible that he has committed a moral transgression. Perhaps he has engaged in a kind of cultural theft,[1] perpetuated harmful stereotypes,[2] enacted oppressive power structures,[3] participated in an act of silencing,[4] or performed a harmful breach of group intimacy.[5] But what has received far less attention is the question of whether he has erred aesthetically as well.

Some might think that there is reason to resist the idea that he has. Remember, one might caution, it has been stipulated that he has done something quite artistic. Moral and aesthetic

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[1] For a discussion of the prospects of understanding cultural appropriation as theft, see Young 2008, pp. 1-35, and 65-105.
[2] See e.g. Young (2008, pp. 118–120)
[3] Matthes (2016)
[4] Matthes (2019)
[5] Nguyen and Strohl (2019)

considerations can sometimes pull in opposite directions, and one might think that this is just such a case. One might think, in other words, that this is a case in which the artist's aesthetic reasons suggest one course of action, while his moral reasons suggest another. The aim of this paper is to interrogate this position by examining what agents have aesthetic reason to do in cases of cultural appropriation. Drawing on recent work on aesthetic normativity, I argue that in some cases of appropriation, facts about an agent's identity can impact what they have aesthetic reason to do.

I begin by situating my analysis within the existing philosophical literature on cultural appropriation (§2). I then outline recent work on aesthetic normativity that addresses the question of what can impact the aesthetic reasons that agents have to act (§3). I argue that this literature suggests a normative framework that can help us to theorize socially complex aesthetic phenomena (§4). I then go on to discuss the benefits of this framework in furthering our analyses of the aesthetics of cultural appropriation (§5).

But before proceeding, it is important to say something about how I will be using the term *cultural appropriation*. I will not be arguing for a precise definition of what makes it the case that something is culturally appropriative. Throughout my discussion, I will understand cultural appropriation to be the act of engaging in the cultural practices of cultures to which one is an outsider.[6]

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[6] It is important to note that while the term "cultural appropriation" is often taken to have a negative valence, my usage is neutral. This departure from common usage has become somewhat standard within the philosophical literature on cultural appropriation, as it facilitates discussion of the permissibility of cases of cultural appropriation (Matthes 2016, p. 348). As C. Thi Nguyen and Matthew Strohl note, a neutral usage can also allow for more nuanced discussions of the complexity of certain cases of cultural appropriation, by allowing for "the possibility that some forms of appropriation are ambiguous, unproblematic, or even laudable" (Nguyen and Strohl, p.982 n.1). That being said, what I will argue for in this paper can be made consistent with adopting an asymmetric analysis according to which cultural appropriation is simply the morally objectionable instances of cross-cultural engagement. To do this, instances in which the permissibility of engaging in cultural appropriation is discussed can instead be read as discussing whether or not the act counts as culturally appropriative. (See Matthes 2016, p. 347) for a more detailed discussion of how to make this translation).

(2) – Aesthetic Analyses of Cultural Appropriation

While most work on cultural appropriation has focused on its moral dimension, Joel Rudinow (1994) and James Young (2008) are two notable exceptions. Both Rudinow and Young take up the question of whether or not those who engage in cultural appropriation will produce works that are necessarily aesthetically flawed. They reach a similar conclusion, namely, that while many instances of cultural appropriation are aesthetic failures, it is nevertheless perfectly possible that with sufficient skill and dedication, one might succeed aesthetically when engaging in cultural appropriation. Rudinow and Young both focus their discussions on whether or not there are aesthetic demerits that a work will inherit in virtue of facts about the identity of its creator. Specifically, they focus on whether or not works of cultural appropriation will inherit the aesthetic demerit of inauthenticity. According to Rudinow, while having a certain identity might mean one has experiential knowledge that can lead one to develop the kind of understanding necessary to produce authentic works, works of cultural appropriation will not necessarily lack authenticity, as one can, in at least some cases, achieve sufficient understanding of an experience one has not had first-hand to be able to represent it authentically.

Young's reasoning is similar. Drawing on discussions of authenticity in the context of forgeries, Young considers a number of ways a work might fail to be authentic as a result of being culturally appropriative. He argues that while a work's being culturally appropriative can result in its failing to be authentic, there are nevertheless certain instances of cultural appropriation that face no barrier to authenticity. According to Young, when an agent engages in innovative cultural appropriation – that is, when they do not merely copy a style, but use the style in a new way – they can produce authentic works. These works might still be morally flawed, but aesthetically, the fact that they are culturally appropriative does not present a barrier

to their success insofar as it does not entail that they have the particular demerit of being inauthentic. On this basis, he concludes that there is no necessary connection between a work's being culturally appropriative and its having aesthetic flaws.

My aim in this paper is not to dispute the claim that there can be aesthetically successful instances of cultural appropriation. Rather, it is to resist the move from the claim that that there can be cases of aesthetically successful appropriation to the claim that identity is never a necessary condition on aesthetic success. I will do this by suggesting a normative framework that makes a more fine-grained analysis of cases of cultural appropriation possible. To be clear, I am not suggesting that identity *always* plays a role in determining whether one acts successfully. What I will argue for is simply that it is possible for there to be cases in which facts about one's identity can impact what one has aesthetic reason to do. This is consistent with the claim that there are certain cases in which identity has no aesthetic import.

I call this approach *aesthetic externalism*, for reasons that will become clear in (3). A feature of aesthetic externalism, and in particular, of the version of aesthetic externalism advocated by Lopes, is that it embraces the idea that what determines whether or not an agent has aesthetic reason to act is established by aesthetic practices. It is therefore perfectly possible on his account that some practices might have norms according to which facts about an agent's identity can impact the success of their actions.

(3) – Aesthetic Normativity

Though there is debate about precisely what kind of normativity we take aesthetic normativity to be, there is a near consensus that aesthetic concepts are normative. To say that an object is beautiful is not simply to describe it, it is to make a prescription regarding what kinds of responses to that object would be appropriate. G. Michael Watkins and James Shelley's

explanation of what is distinctive about aesthetic normativity is particularly illuminating. In their words, aesthetic concepts "possess a distinctive kind of perceptual normativity that extends beyond ordinary perceptual normativity: if a painting is beautiful, then you ought to see that it is beautiful if you look at it and you ought to look at it" (2012, p. 348). This explanation highlights the sense in which the kind of normativity at issue has two dimensions: aesthetic concepts are normative insofar as they tell us both what we ought to do and how we ought to do it: if an object has a certain aesthetic value, then you have a reason to engage with it, and to experience it as having the value that it does.

Recently, there has been an increased interest in attempting to theorize this distinctive kind of normativity. This is arguably because of a growing dissatisfaction with the dominant account of aesthetic value, *aesthetic hedonism*, which conceives of aesthetic normativity as a species of hedonic normativity.[7] According to aesthetic hedonism, we have reason to experience a beautiful painting as beautiful because doing so yields pleasure. What we have reason to do is thereby explained in terms of the maximization of aesthetic value: artists ought to produce maximally valuable works because these works yield the greatest pleasure, and observers ought to engage with them, because doing so will afford the greatest pleasure. Recent attempts to theorize aesthetic normativity abandon this idea and explore alternative ways of explaining what makes it the case that there are facts about what we aesthetically ought to do. Rather than beginning with an account of aesthetic value, as aesthetic hedonism does, they turn their focus to aesthetic action. The idea is to ground aesthetic normativity not in a desire for pleasure, but in aesthetic achievement. Call this approach *aesthetic externalism*. According to aesthetic externalism, what

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[7] This view also goes by the name of aesthetic value empiricism (Shelley 2011).

determines our aesthetic reasons are the outcomes of our actions. We have an aesthetic reason to undertake a particular action if so acting will constitute an aesthetic achievement.

While their views diverge on the particulars, both Dominic McIver Lopes (2015, 2017, 2018) and Andrew McGonigal (2017a,b) can be read as advocating aesthetic externalism. Notably, both Lopes and McGonigal explicitly model their views on efforts in epistemology to account for epistemic normativity by appealing to successful epistemic action. This is significant insofar as it has recently been argued that these externalist epistemic frameworks are needed in order to theorize how social factors can impact our epistemic obligations (Srinivasan 2019). Motivating this paper is the idea that this insight might extend into other normative realms. An aesthetic analogue of these externalist epistemic frameworks might be particularly well-placed to aid our theorizing of the relationship between the social and the aesthetic.

Lopes presents his account of aesthetic normativity as an aesthetic analog to Ernest Sosa's virtue theoretic approach to epistemic normativity. On Sosa's framework, epistemic normativity is a kind of performance normativity wherein successful performance grounds what we ought to do.[8] What we have epistemic reason to do is to succeed out of competence, where to succeed out of competence is to succeed non-accidentally on the basis of ability. Lopes proposes that aesthetic achievements be thought of in the same way: "of any aesthetic act we may ask whether it succeeds, displays competence, and succeeds as a result of competence" (2015, 240). This insight forms the basis of his theory of aesthetic reasons. On his account, what an agent has aesthetic reason to do is act well aesthetically – that is, to succeed as a result of competence. What an agent has reason to do is therefore explained in terms of what they can succeed at; if

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[8] Insights from virtue epistemology might also be helpful in resolving other normative debates in aesthetics. See e.g. Ransom (2017), for example of how a virtue aesthetic approach also modelled after Sosa's epistemic framework might help to address issues concerning aesthetic testimony. Other discussions of virtue aesthetics include Woodruff (2001), and Goldie (2007), (2010).

acting in a certain way would not be aesthetically successful, the agent lacks an aesthetic reason to so act.

McGonigal also endorses this conclusion, though his framework is instead modelled after so-called "knowledge first" approaches in epistemology. Knowledge first theories reject the orthodox approach to understanding knowledge as analysable into other more basic components, instead taking it to be either conceptually or metaphysically fundamental.[9] McGonigal seems to be concerned with the metaphysical fundamentally of knowledge – that is, with the view that knowledge is what explains other epistemic phenomena like belief and justification; it is not itself to be explained as having these states as components (2018a, 63). He argues that aesthetic achievement is structurally analogous to knowledge in this way – it too is fundamental. Aesthetic achievement is that which explains what we have aesthetic reason to do, rather than being itself explicable in terms of correct responses to reasons. While this is a different picture from the one Lopes suggests, McGonigal's account nevertheless understands aesthetic achievement as playing the same role outlined for it in Lopes's account: it grounds what we have aesthetic reason to do.

Aesthetic externalism has the benefit of being able to take into consideration the social reality in which we act. The epistemic theories Lopes and McGonigal model their accounts after are externalist theories that hold that whether we have acted correctly in forming a particular belief concerns the conditions of the world we find ourselves in, rather than on facts accessible from our first-personal perspectives. Correlatively, this externalist account of aesthetic reasons maintains that how we should act depends on the effects our actions have in the actual world. What we have aesthetic reason to do is act in ways that constitute aesthetic accomplishments, not

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[9] See Ichikawa and Jenkins (2015) for a helpful overview of the different ways a view can put knowledge first.

simply to try our best at whatever we like. If the conditions do not make it possible for our actions to yield aesthetic accomplishments, then we lack aesthetic reason to act.

(4) – Aesthetic Achievement

How might aesthetic externalism inform theorizing about what is going on aesthetically in cases of cultural appropriation? Aesthetic externalism makes room for the possibility that what we have reason to do depends on more than just the skills that we have. It is therefore well positioned to provide the fine-grained analysis alluded to in the introduction. It also invites us to think about what kinds of factors might impact whether or not an agent succeeds aesthetically. Thinking in this way can assist our theorizing of morally complex cases of aesthetic action like cases of cultural appropriation by focusing our attention on the question of whether or not there might be factors present in these cases that impede an agent's ability to succeed. In this section, I'll defend *identity-relevance*, a hypothesis about the relationship between identity and aesthetic success:

> *Identity-relevance.* In some cases, whether or not an agent's action will be aesthetically successful can depend on features of the agent's identity.

I will argue that *identity-relevance* is a natural extension of two widely held views: Waltonian category-dependence of aesthetic properties, and aesthetic contextualism. A thoroughgoing defence of these theories falls outside the scope of this paper. My goal here is modest. It is to make the case that anyone broadly sympathetic to these views should find *identity-relevance* plausible.

But first, some clarifications are in order. While aesthetic success is taken to be explanatorily basic, there are some things that can be said to further an intuitive grasp of what the concept is doing within the aesthetic externalist framework. Insofar as. aesthetic achievement can

be thought of as aesthetic success attained non-accidentally, aesthetic success is therefore something that we can attain by acting. It is what we attain when we act as we ought to, aesthetically. Aesthetic success can thereby be taken to ground what it is that we have aesthetic reason to do: what one has aesthetic reason to do is to act so as to attain success.

It is also important to note that insofar as aesthetic success is subject-independent, aesthetic reasons are objective – they depend not on how things seem, aesthetically, to the agent who acts, but on the subject-independent facts about successful aesthetic action. This implies that there is a great difference between a case where one takes an aesthetic risk and succeeds, and one where they fail. In the latter case, the agent acted against their reasons, but not in the former, no matter how aesthetically risky their action was.

Regarding what constitutes an aesthetic action, it is important to note that many aesthetic ventures are best understood as complex actions made up of a great number of more basic actions. To understand what reasons the agent acted in accordance with, we need to evaluate the more basic actions that make up their complex act. For example, a complex activity like composing a symphony is to be analysed as made up of a number of different actions, corresponding to all the various choices the agent made over the course of their engagement in composition. It is this analysis that permits us to diagnose all the ways in which an agent has acted in accordance with their reasons. Suppose, for example, that our composer composes what is in many respects a successful symphony, but one that would nevertheless have been better. Such a case is best analysed as one where the agent has heeded some of their aesthetic reasons but not all of them: they have written a hauntingly beautiful wind melody, for example, but they

have underused their cellos. Aesthetic externalism diagnoses such a case as one in which the composer has acted in accordance with some of their aesthetic reasons, but not others.[10]

With these clarifications in mind, we can now turn to discussing how it is that identity can come to have aesthetic import. The claim I want to make is that identity can impact whether or not an agent has reason to act by impacting whether or not they act successfully. But in order to see if this is correct, we need some explanation of what determines which factors can impact success. One possibility, adopted by Lopes, is to hold that there is no general theory of what makes an act aesthetically successful, rather, what it is to succeed is different in different aesthetic practices.[11] Call this insight *practice-dependence*.

> *Practice-dependence*. For an action to be aesthetically successful is for it to be successful according to the norms of some aesthetic practice.

Practice-dependence is effectively an extension of Kendall Walton's influential insight that what properties a work of art has depends on the category to which it belongs (see Walton 1970). On Lopes's update, whether or not an act is successful depends upon the practice in which it is enacted, where aesthetic practices are constituted by norms that map aesthetic properties to non-aesthetic properties.[12] The thought behind this extension is that aesthetically successful action is simply action that results in an aesthetically successful outcome. Insofar as aesthetically

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[10] Thank you to an anonymous referee for putting a version of this case to me.

[11] Aesthetic practices are simply categories of aesthetic activity: cubist painting, samba dancing, Italian Futurism, stream of consciousness writing, to name but a few). Some authors refer to these as art-kinds or aesthetic kinds (see Thomasson 2005). Insofar as Lopes takes aesthetic activity to be irreducibly social, aesthetic practices may be understood as kinds of social practices – the social practices that have an aesthetic dimension. While this definition is undeniably vague, it should nevertheless be serviceable for the purposes of this paper. Exactly what makes something aesthetic has been the subject of the notoriously fraught project of trying to give a theory of art. Settling the question of which activities can properly be described as aesthetic falls outside the scope of this paper. My aim here is to provide a framework according to which aesthetic action may be evaluated. To this end, I will proceed on the assumption that we can grasp what kinds of activities are being theorized, and table the question of exactly what makes an activity aesthetic.

[12] Lopes's terminology differs from mine. On his account, aesthetic profiles are what map aesthetic properties to non-aesthetic properties (see Lopes 2018 p. 129-30).

successful outcomes are successful because of the aesthetic properties they express, then if it is in relation to the norms of a practice that aesthetic properties emerge, it follows that success is also determined in relation to these norms. To illustrate, some claim that it is a norm of impressionist painting that one ought not use black paint. If we assume this is the case, then according to practice-dependence, a painting is less successful for its having used black paint to illustrate shadowy darkness, than one that had instead achieved this effect via a mixing of deep blues, browns and purples.[13]

Practice-dependence supports *identity-relevance* by offering an explanation of how identity could come to affect the success of an action. If in fact there are circumstances in which an agent's identity can affect the aesthetic success of her action, practice-dependence explains this by appealing to aesthetic norms: the agent is engaging in an aesthetic practice that is structured by norms that preclude the possibility of their acting successfully on account of some feature of their identity. That is, the agent might be participating in a practice structured by norms that prevent her from effecting the instantiation of certain aesthetic properties, on the basis of facts about her identity.

Now *practice-dependence* is silent on the question of whether or not any practices in fact have such norms. Support for the claim that they do derives from elsewhere: from the motivations that have pushed aestheticians with differing theoretical commitments towards accepting at least a minimal form of aesthetic contextualism. Aesthetic contextualism (contextualism henceforth) is the view that the context in which a work of art is produced plays a role in determining which properties it has. Contextualism is therefore a rejection of a kind of empiricism or formalism, the view that works of art are simply formal structures that give rise to

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[13] Thanks to [name redacted for anonymous review] for this example.

aesthetic experiences.[14] For contextualists, works of art are more than formal structures – they are historically and culturally embedded structures, and as such, some of their properties are historically and culturally determined. That is, according to contextualism, some of the properties a work has are had in virtue of facts about how and when it was produced. Crucially, this implies that not all of the properties of a work of art are perceptible; two perceptibly indistinguishable works can have different properties in virtue of having been produced in different contexts. In fact, not only is this an implication of contextualism, it is one of the insights that motivates it. Arthur Danto's influential contextualist manifesto *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* begins with a thought experiment designed to make this point, featuring an exhibit of perceptually indistinguishable red squares that nevertheless intuitively differ in their aesthetic properties as a result of differing facts about the contexts of their creation.[15] Given the methodological assumption that our theories should properly capture our practices, it is widely accepted that some kind of contextualist thesis is true. Even self-avowed formalists, like Nick Zangwill, accept the claim that at least some aesthetic properties are context-dependent.[16] Accordingly, the debate today is not over whether a work's context affects its properties – it is over which properties it affects, and whether the difference context makes is always aesthetic. Because *identity-relevance* leaves open the question of exactly which facts are aesthetically relevant, its plausibility is unaffected by these debates. It therefore ought to be palatable to

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[14] Empiricism and Formalism are used interchangeably for many authors, but see Levinson for a helpful disambiguation of these positions (2007, p.4).

[15] The richness of Danto's thought experiment escapes reconstruction (see Danto (1981, pp.1-4)), but its intuitive thrust can be exhibited with the following contrast: a red canvas entitled "The Israelites crossing the Red Sea" representing the state of affairs after "the Israelites had already crossed over, and the Egyptians were drowned" has different properties from a canvas painted red in an explicit attempt not to be a work of art (4).

[16] Zangwill (2001) concedes that some of a work's aesthetic properties are contextual. He simply argues that the properties of at least some works are purely formal.

anyone sympathetic to the idea that at least some aesthetic properties of artworks can sometimes be impacted by facts about who has created them.

Let's take stock. What I've tried to do in this section is present a claim about what kinds of facts can impact whether or not an agent acts successfully, for whether or not an agent has a reason to act depends on whether or not their action will result in an achievement. I called this claim *identity-relevance* and set out to situate it within the theoretical landscape. I demonstrated that it is supported by two widespread insights in aesthetics: *practice-dependence* and aesthetic contextualism. *Practice-dependence*, inspired by Waltonian category dependence, says that whether or not identity is relevant depends on the norms of an aesthetic practice, and contextualism provides an explanation for why it's plausible that identity could be relevant in this way.

(5) – Aesthetic Externalism, Identity and Cultural Appropriation

I now turn to the task of arguing for why aesthetic externalism can further our understanding of cultural appropriation. My use of the term aesthetic externalism throughout this section will refer to an aesthetic externalism that takes on board *identity-relevance*, as my aim will be to show how aesthetic externalism and identity-relevance form an attractive normative package, particularly when it comes to theorizing socially complex aesthetic phenomena.

According to *aesthetic externalism,* to evaluate the actions of those who engage in cultural appropriation, we need to ask the following question: what are the aesthetic norms of the practice that they are engaging in? If the norms of the practice are such that she fails to act successfully, we can understand her as having failed to act in according with her reasons. This section outlines four considerations that favour this approach for understanding socially complex aesthetic phenomena like cultural appropriation.

First, aesthetic externalism is able to accommodate existing aesthetic analyses of cases of cultural appropriation in a way that helps bring into focus what exactly is at issue when disagreements arise. To illustrate, consider some of the literature interrogating Amiri Baraka's famous claim that "the materials of blues were not available to the white American" (Jones 1963, p.147).[17] Both James Young and Joel Rudinow argue that while Baraka's claims about the necessity of understanding the social context of blues music are important insights, it is not strictly speaking true that white people shouldn't play the blues. It is possible for aesthetic externalism can support this diagnosis – it can deliver the verdict that white musicians have reason to play the blues if their doing so constitutes an aesthetic achievement. But, importantly, alternative perspectives can also be rearticulated within this framework and doing so highlights exactly what is at issue between these diverging perspectives.

Paul Taylor (1995) argues that Rudinow's analysis fails insofar as it assumes that whether or not someone can succeed at playing the blues depends wholly on the capabilities of the musicians. Taylor's recommendation is that Baraka's claim should be interpreted as a claim about the listeners of blues and how their experience can be impacted by race. He argues that blues performances can "fail when people are unconvinced that the performer can properly bear witness to the racialized moral pain that the blues is about" (314). This is because the blues is a racial project – a project oriented around articulating and understanding race (ibid.). Specifically, blues "depicts race as a social category whose members are oppressed, insulted, and burdened with diminished life chances," and as such, "moral deference is owed to black contributions to the project" (ibid.). The term moral deference comes out of the work of sociologist Laurence Thomas, and is defined as "the act of listening that is preliminary to bearing witness to another's

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[17] Cited in Young (2006 p.457), (2008, .35); and Rudinow (1994, p.148.)

moral pain, but without bearing witness to it" (ibid.) Thomas explains that to bear witness for another "is to have won her trust that no one will tell her story with her voice and not with one's own voice (...) that one will render salient what was salient for her" (ibid.). What Taylor seems to be arguing is that Baraka's claim should be understood as alleging that race can be a barrier to the uptake of blues performances when listeners do not think the performer is able to bear witness to the racialized pain that is essential to the practice. White blues performers owe moral deference to the work of black blues musicians because doing so functions to lay the groundwork for inspiring the kind of trust needed for listeners to become convinced that the white performer can bear witness in the way required for their work to be aesthetically successful.

Seen through the lens of aesthetic externalism, Taylor's claim becomes a claim about the norms of the blues: the blues has norms according to which the race of a blues performer can sometimes stand as an impediment to their success, in virtue of their needing to have demonstrated moral deference so as to make it clear that the performers can be trusted to bear witness to the racialized pain that plays a fundamental role in blues music. Rearticulating Taylor's claim in this way is helpful insofar as it highlights exactly what is at issue in Rudinow and Taylor's disagreement. Rudinow is alleging that the blues does not have norms according to which white performers will necessarily produce inauthentic works. Taylor is instead articulating the need to expand the discussion beyond concerns about authenticity in order to properly understand how it is that race can function as a barrier to aesthetic success. Such a reframing is helpful because it allows us to see exactly what we need to examine to settle the disagreement. We need to interrogate the norms of the blues in order to determine whether the account Taylor has provided is supportable. If race can indeed have the effect that Taylor has outlined, then it

follows that even highly skilled musicians can act against their aesthetic reasons when they play the blues, if they have not shown moral deference to black blues contributors.

A second reason why aesthetic externalism can be helpful in analyzing cases of cultural appropriation is that it has the resources to interrogate the aesthetic significance of identity without falling into some important pitfalls. As many have noted, discussions of identity often fail to account for the ways in which cultural appropriation is sensitive to contextual variables.[18] Aesthetic externalism can avoid the danger of providing a reductive account of identity that bottoms out in claims that either essentialize social categories or are implausibly general. This is because identity-relevance leaves open exactly which features count as pertaining to an agent's identity. This permits us to keep concerns about essentialization in mind when theorizing about which factors count as identity-relevant.[19]

It also allows us to adopt a methodological commitment to incorporate ways of understanding identity that are central to the experiences of various marginalized communities. One interesting case that shows the importance of employing concepts of identity that are operative within the communities under discussion is that of Joseph Boyden, a Canadian author accused of cultural appropriation in 2016 after it was argued that he had misrepresented his Indigenous heritage. In response to these allegations, a number of Indigenous thinkers noted the importance of taking care to employ the understanding of identity that features in the community under discussion. Boyden's works feature Indigenous protagonists, and while he did not claim to be writing from a first personal perspective, his novels were nevertheless considered to offer a kind of insight into Indigenous life that first personal experience affords. When this controversy

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[18] See numerous contributions to: "Artworld Roundtable: Is Cultural Appropriation Ever Okay?" :
https://aestheticsforbirds.com/2018/08/22/artworld-roundtable-is-cultural-appropriation-ever-okay/
[19] See Matthes (2016) for a thorough discussion of cultural essentialism.

surfaced, a number of media outlets peddled the idea that Indigenous people felt Boyden was not

Indigenous enough to write about Indigenous experiences. This narrative prompted Boyden to

produce a DNA test, so as to prove his Indigeneity and stop the accusations of cultural

appropriation. However, to many Indigenous people, his efforts fell flat. This is because for

many Indigenous people, identity has less to do with genetics and more to do with the

relationships one forms to and within a community. As Sissiton Wahpeton Oyate scholar Kim

TallBear explains:

> We construct belonging and citizenship in ways that do not consider these genetic
> ancestry tests. So it's not just a matter of what you claim, but it's a matter of who claims
> you (…) having some genetic markers from ages ago doesn't mean you have the lived
> experience to become part of that community.[20]

This suggests that in order to capture the sense of identity at issue in at least some cases of

cultural appropriation, it is essential that we understand identity broadly, as extending to

encompass one's commitments and relationships so as to include cases where communities

understand these features to be essential to their understanding of group membership.

A third consideration in favour of aesthetic externalism is that it is not overly restrictive

in the analyses it offers. Some have worried that efforts to discuss the aesthetic significance of

identity results in overly aesthetically cautious verdicts that function to stifle creativity. Sterling

Holywhitemountain's articulation of this point is particularly arresting.[21] Of the dangers of

ignoring the concerns of artists when theorizing about cultural appropriation, he writes:

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[20] Quoted in: "Sorry, that DNA test does not make you Indigenous" : https://www.cbc.ca/radio/the180/least-important-election-the-case-to-stop-changing-the-clocks-and-the-problem-of-dna-as-proof-of-culture-1.3834912/sorry-that-dna-test-doesn-t-make-you-indigenous-1.3835210

[21] See also: Jawort (2019).

"The appropriations critique—because it doesn't start from a place of appreciation, because it views art merely as a political tool, because it erases artists' perspectives from the conversation—is anti-art."[22]

His point is important, particularly when our focus is on the aesthetic import of cultural appropriation. Aesthetic externalism is not, in other words, *anti-art.* While a central motivation behind aesthetic externalism is to provide a framework capable of making sense of how facts about one's identity could come to have aesthetic significance, aesthetic externalism does not imply that those who engage in cultural practices of groups of which they a member always act in violation of their aesthetic reasons. Aesthetic externalism simply provides a way to understand what aesthetic reasons an agent has given the context in which they act. It says nothing about whether what an agent has aesthetic reason to do is what they have all-things-considered reason to do. This is a positive feature of the account as it leaves open the possibility that one's aesthetic and moral reasons may sometimes conflict. This is exactly what seems to be going on in complex cases of cultural appropriation.

Finally, aesthetic externalism seems to point in a helpful direction by bringing into focus a number of questions that can productively move dialogue forward. In order to put forth a comprehensive account of the aesthetics of cultural appropriation, two important sets of questions remain to be addressed. The first concerns how best to understand *practice-dependence.* How is it that the norms of an aesthetic practice come to be established? And how is it that practices are to be individuated? As I've suggested, I think that there can be cases in which the fact that members of a community take identity to be aesthetically relevant makes it

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[22] See: "Stirling Holywhitemountain on Blood Quantum, 'Native Art', and Cultural Appropriation": https://aestheticsforbirds.com/2019/01/31/sterling-holywhitemountain-on-blood-quantum-native-art-and-cultural-appropriation/

such, though I have not ventured to give an explanation of the mechanism by which this takes place. I think it is important to allow that there are cases in which the interpretations of individuals working within a practice plays a determining role in shaping the norms of that practice, but there is also reason to resist the idea that individuals have total control in determining what counts as successful. Plausibly, there can be cases in which one acts successfully within a practice even though the success of their act is not recognized.

A second set of questions concerns the relationship between aesthetics and morality. In the next section I will offer some remarks regarding what I think aesthetic externalism predicts about how the morality of an act can come to impact its aesthetic significance, however I am unable to provide a thoroughgoing investigation into what the best explanation is for how to understand the connection between moral and aesthetic normativity. One thing it is interesting to note is that while I take aesthetic externalism to be compatible with a range of moral analyses of cultural appropriation, it also seems particularly well-equipped to compliment Nguyen and Strohl's (2019) insight that some cases of cultural appropriation constitute breaches of intimacy and can be impermissible on this basis. It seems plausible to me that a breach of intimacy can have not only moral significance, but aesthetic significance as well, if an act's being a breach of intimacy could prevent it from being aesthetically successful.

6) – Conclusion

Thus far, I've explained how a recent approach to aesthetic normativity – aesthetic externalism - can aid in the theorizing of complex aesthetic phenomena like cultural appropriation. I've argued that insofar as this approach takes its cue from work in epistemology that aims to explain normative phenomena by appealing to success, it is well positioned to understand the factors that can impact what we aesthetically ought to do. Taking on board two

principles each supported by well-motivated and widely accepted ideas about how success is determined, this approach yields the recommendation that in at least some cases of cultural appropriation, facts about an agent's identity as an outsider can impact the aesthetic success of their actions.

To finish, I want to note two upshots of the framework I've presented that speak to its plausibility. The first is that it explains why there seems to be an asymmetry between the appropriation of dominant cultures and that of marginalized cultures. Plausibly, the aesthetic practices of dominant cultures might not have the same kinds of conditions governing success as might exist in marginalized cultures. In particular, one's identity might not stand in the way of success when engaging in the practices of dominant cultures because one's being an outsider to a community might not have an effect on how one's actions are interpreted.[23] When outsiders to marginalized communities engage in their aesthetic practices, their engagement can come to be seen as an exercise of power and entitlement, unless steps are taken to demonstrate otherwise.

Second, while my discussion has centered on cases in which the moral and aesthetic line up, the framework I've proposed is nevertheless compatible with one's failing morally but succeeding aesthetically. This compatibility is a feature of the framework insofar as it would seem to be revisionist to claim otherwise. However while it is important not to erase this possibility, it is equally important not to overstate its eminence. My framework predicts that while the aesthetic and moral can conflict, there is nevertheless reason to think that they often won't. This too seems accurate. After all, most complaints of cultural appropriation don't concern masterpieces, they concern people's everyday aesthetic choices – acts of thoughtlessly wearing the garments of cultures to which they have no connection, for example.

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[23] Paul Taylor makes a similar point when he remarks on the asymmetry between the appropriation of blues, and the appropriation of Shakespeare (315).

Taking aesthetic externalism on board, with an understanding of success as practice-dependent and identity-sensitive yields the following verdict: in cases of cultural appropriation, it is likely that what is moral is in line with what is aesthetically permissible. This is because in many cases of cultural appropriation, doing what is necessary so that facts about your identity don't prevent you from succeeding aesthetically is likely to make a difference to the moral evaluation of your action. Accordingly, it is inaccurate to pit the aesthetic against the moral when framing discussions of cultural appropriation. We ought, instead, to explore the possibility that aesthetic and moral failures might have a common cause – a disregard for what members of a community identify to be important.

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