

When is appropriation appropriate?

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The answer is almost always. Cultural borrowing and exchange are the fuel of human creative progress.

The idea that “cultural appropriation” must be guarded against, and rooted out, is arguably one of the wobbliest ideas that the era of identity politics has given us. Cultural appropriation is a vastly bigger and healthier process than its opportunist edges: in a very real sense, it is the engine of human intellectual progress.

Today’s cultural world is the fruit of thousands of conversations between far-flung nations and civilisations, in which ideas have circulated, mutated and evolved. Some of those conversations began with eruptions of violence: cultural mixtures have resulted from wars of conquest, economic imperialism, slavery and migrant labour.

But the resulting osmosis of intellectual and artistic exchange was not violent or coercive. It happened in myriad individual acts of travel, whether physical or imaginative. The biggest of those journeys were migrations, and the inner leaps required of those who grew up between two cultures as a result of migration. But much less demanding journeys also flow into the rich delta of cultural flux: crossing town, travelling abroad, reading a translated book, loving a foreigner...

Without the relentless organic force of what we call cultural appropriation, there would be no modern art, no jazz or pop music, no global sport, no democracy and very little in the way of advanced technology. And at an individual level, the act of truly embracing – and then reinventing – another culture’s creativity is a profound gesture of humanism.

Johnny Clegg did this by immersing himself in Zulu migrant workers’ dance subculture as a teenager in apartheid-era Joburg. That leap led to Juluka, the band he formed with Spho Mchunu. Their music – a rock-maskandi-mbaqanga mashup – loosened the mental vice-grip of late apartheid for many young white South Africans who heard their music, this writer included.

Nina Simone did something similar in the 1960s by marrying her classical piano training to the subversive power of the blues: both traditions amplified each other in her songs of personal and political pain, creating an entire genre in the process. The young Ai Wei-Wei did it too, by hurling his fearless Chinese mind into the underworld of the New York art avant-garde in the 1970s, whose anarchic energy he later weaponised as political resistance in China.

The South African artist William Kentridge doesn’t like the term “cultural appropriation”, but he also doesn’t believe that the thing it describes should be sanitised: in his view, it is a profoundly creative process, but an intrinsically messy one.

“I wouldn’t describe it as cultural appropriation,” he told me, “but I would say it’s about impurity, bastardy, misunderstanding, mistranslation. Understanding that the richness that comes from that. It’s also this understanding that comes from South Africa, and how calamitous the project of purity was during the apartheid era.”

“I believe in a universalist politics rather than an identity politics,” says Kentridge. “I believe that the way in which traditions have been constructed is an artifact, rather than a natural phenomenon. I believe that very often the most interesting developments within traditions are from people who are outside of the tradition. In language, for example, where poets can be improved by translation. Great leaps forward are made by people mixing traditions,” he says.

“For example, Mandela being influenced by the Transvaal Indian Congress, who were influenced by the ideas of Gandhi, who was influenced by the ideas of Tolstoy, who brought him back to understand the ideas of the Bhagavad Gita, through the writings of Ruskin and English aesthetes.

“I’m interested in the way in which the Jewish tradition turns into Marxism and into Freudianism. They become the great rabbis of the 19th century. That kind of mix is the one that’s most interesting for me rather than singular linearities,” says Kentridge.

The South African guitarist Derek Gripper is alive to the risk of being accused of cultural appropriation in its negative connotation. But his work is in fact a textbook example of how to “appropriate” respectfully. Gripper has won global acclaim for transcribing the kora masterpieces of Mali’s Toumani Diabaté, which were hitherto unwritten and transmitted by personal tutelage, and then developing a way to play those compositions on a six-string guitar (the kora is a 21-string harp).

Diabaté believes Gripper’s versions of his pieces are his own compositions, but Gripper insists they are Diabaté’s, and thus pays the composer’s royalties over to him.

He has a similar light-hearted argument with Madosini, the great South African mouthbow musician. “I have this painstaking transcription of one of the pieces on an album that I produced with her – just her playing solo about 10 years ago – and then worked out one of her pieces on guitar and played it back to her. She thought it was my composition, and there was never a way to get her to think of it otherwise.”

But in the contemporary pop music economy, an act of musical tribute is treated as either a crime or, in the case of legitimate cover versions, a pricy speculative investment. “It’s thought of as theft because property is at the forefront in our minds,” says Gripper. “So when we’re talking about profit, then we have a certain narrative. But when we’re talking about the conditions for the greatest level of creativity throughout a bunch of people – that would be the freedom to be able to do something without fear. To be able to write a song without thinking, ‘This might be a Beatles song.’”

“That utopia of free creation still exists in West Africa and throughout most of Africa, for now,” says Gripper. “You can absolutely follow your body and take a song that you’ve heard a million times, or part of it, and also sing about what’s happening now, and the music keeps on living. Because the myth of the godlike creator, who has made something from nothing, doesn’t exist.”

If any big idea should be urgently appropriated by the West, it is that idea: that artistry is communal, that invention is a conversation, that any given story lasts longer than its first telling. Artists should be rewarded for reinventing the world, and not for inventing the wheel.