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Class

June 10, 2018

The Inclusion of Cultural Elements in Popular Music: A Form of Respect or Appropriation?

Few musical compositions are truly unique, and musicians have a long history of sampling works by other artists, reusing elements of their own work, and basing their compositions on the other works that inspired them to enter the industry. None of these activities are illegal or immoral provided that they do not infringe upon the rights of the original artists; however, both sampling and creating music based on existing pieces have the potential to serve as forms of cultural appropriation. This can leave the cultures in question in a position of feeling taken advantage of. Popular artists may also engage in cultural appropriation when creating music videos and participating in live performances. Musicians like Beyoncé, Chris Martin, Katy Perry, and Taylor Swift adopt the clothing, symbols, and social behavior of other cultures as a means of generating wealth and enhancing their popularity with audiences. This is especially apparent in “Hymn for the Weekend,” “Wildest Dream,” “Shake it Off,” and “Unconditionally” as will be discussed in this paper. Industry insiders like Tricia Rose argue that they are simply trying to honor other cultures, but respecting the traditions of others does not come easily. Although many artists seek to appropriate foreign influences or cultures that differ from their ethnic background, some of today’s most popular artists cross that line with their costumes, dance routines, set decorations, and compositions, committing cultural appropriation every time they take the stage.

One of the most recent examples of cultural appropriation in popular music is the video created for “Hymn for the Weekend,” a piece performed by Beyoncé and Coldplay. Shot in Mumbai, the video features Beyoncé wearing a Bollywood-style costume and henna tattoos. In some scenes, she is wearing a headdress adorned with bangles; in others, a crown of colorful flowers frames her face. Chris Martin from Coldplay runs through the streets of Mumbai with a group of children, rides in a taxi driven by a man wearing traditional Hindu garb, and wears a shirt with a design that looks similar to the mandala, a Hindu and Buddhist symbol used to represent the universe. The release of the video prompted an immediate backlash, with critics labeling the colorful costumes and backdrops a form of cultural appropriation.

Multiculturalism has always played an important role in the development of new music, but there is a vast difference between Beyoncé and Coldplay’s appropriation of Indian culture and the fusion of cultural elements to create a new genre. Rose (292) claims hip hop was “shaped by multiple sources of Afro-diasporic cultural influences and the postindustrial urban New York terrain.” Hip hop includes elements of the Dominican, Puerto Rican, Jamaican, Cuban, and Haitian cultures, but it does not appropriate those cultures. Instead, it serves as a “form of cultural affirmation” for those who contributed to the development of the genre. Hip hop highlights some of those cultural elements, giving the listener a greater appreciation for the traditions of others. In contrast, the “Hymn for the Weekend” video uses Indian culture as a mere background for Beyoncé and Coldplay.

Although the video contains many cultural elements—traditional dress, Indian artifacts, and colorful symbols—it does not emphasize those cultural elements in a meaningful way. Instead, it uses them to highlight Beyoncé’s beauty and Coldplay’s use of musical instruments. Because Beyoncé and the members of Coldplay are cultural outsiders, their use of Indian cultural

elements serve as a form of subject appropriation. Young (136) claims subject appropriation occurs “when an outsider represents members or aspects of another culture.” The “Hymn for the Weekend” video is also problematic because Beyoncé and Chris Martin do not truly interact with the Indian performers. When Chris Martin is running through the streets of Mumbai, he does not stop to talk to his companions or highlight their culture. The Indian taxi driver, the person operating a colorful phonograph, and the men wearing traditional Indian clothing are part of the set design, not part of the action. This relegates Indian culture to the background of the video, making “Hymn for the Weekend” a strong example of cultural appropriation.

Taylor Swift also received criticism for “Wildest Dreams,” a music video depicting her as a colonial-era woman in Africa. The video features African animals and sweeping views of the landscape, yet almost all of the people in the video are white. Critics claim that the video romanticizes Colonialism and whitewashes Africa’s history, leaving viewers with a skewed perception of the long-lasting harm caused by colonial rule. Agawu (2) states that Colonialism affected almost every aspect of life in Africa, from economic growth to religious freedom, but he focuses on how Colonialism affected the development of African music. He argues that Colonialism “transformed the musical language” by giving African musicians access to foreign musical instruments and prompting the emergence of new institutions in each colony. As European colonists attempted to spread Christianity throughout the continent, they opened churches, giving African musicians a new venue in which to perform (Agawu 6). Without colonial influence, African music may have evolved in a completely different way. By romanticizing Colonialism, Swift perpetuates the harmful idea that European rule improved life in African countries instead of causing political, economic, and social devastation.

The “Wildest Dreams” video is not the first Taylor Swift creation to spark outrage among members of the black community. Amandla Stenberg, an actress featured in *The Hunger Games* films, criticized Swift’s “Shake it Off” video for the adoption of hip hop elements. She asks, “What would America be like if we loved black people as much as we love black culture?” (Gajewski). The video features Taylor Swift dressed in a variety of costumes, one of which is a hooded jacket that appears similar to the jackets worn by some hip hop artists. Swift carries a boom box while surrounded by break dancers, appropriating both black culture and elements of the hip hop genre. Walser (3-4) describes heavy metal as a genre inspired by several visual and musical styles, so it is not always immoral to borrow ideas from others, but Swift’s adoption of cultural elements crosses the line into cultural appropriation. She is not blending several visual styles into one cohesive style or using musical elements from her own culture; instead, she is borrowing cultural elements so that she can sell more albums and continue getting paid to create music. What is most shocking about Swift’s habit of cultural appropriation is that it goes against everything she stands for as a self-proclaimed feminist. Swift talks about feminism regularly, but by appropriating elements of other cultures, she is engaging in some of the same behavior she rails against when the behavior is perpetrated by men against women.

Even more offensive is the way Swift appears to mock black women in the video. The video opens with a group of white women standing at a ballet barre; after a brief shot of Swift dressed in the hooded jacket, the white ballerinas dance and bend with graceful movements. Approximately ninety seconds into the video, Swift appears in a pair of denim booty shorts, an animal-print top, and heavy gold jewelry. She is surrounded by black women who are twerking and gyrating. The stark contrast between dance styles and costumes sends a clear message to viewers: White women are graceful and refined, while black women are more interested in

wearing revealing clothing and making suggestive movements with their hips. This is a dangerous stereotype, as it helps confirm the biases people have about black culture.

Swift's appropriation of hip hop culture is also offensive, as she takes music that is "of and by young Latinos" (Kun 743) and uses it to augment her wealth and popularity. Hip hop often addresses cultural issues of importance to Latinos: disparate treatment, unfair social structures, economic inequality, and globalization (Kun 743): Swift's video uses hip hop elements as nothing more than a backdrop, giving viewers no insight into the issues faced by millions of Latinos on a daily basis. Her appropriation of black culture and the hip hop genre may be entirely unintentional, but her intentions do not matter when the finished product results in the perpetuation of stereotypes and makes it difficult for Latino musicians to advance their careers.

When it comes to cultural appropriation in popular music, Katy Perry is one of the worst offenders. At the 2013 American Music Awards, Perry performed "Unconditionally" while wearing a traditional kimono and standing in front of a set designed to look like a fantasy version of Japan. *Billboard* staff members called her performance "sophisticated," but it was actually an offensive form of cultural appropriation. Without the proper cultural context, viewers see an idealized version of Japan. One of the main problems with Perry's performance is her use of the lotus blossom, which is a symbol of Buddhism. When used by Westerners, however, the lotus blossom paints Japanese women as passive servants who exist only to please men. Perry's use of heavy geisha makeup also serves as a form of cultural appropriation, as her entire performance ignores the artistic aspects of the geisha culture.

Cultural appropriation in music is a serious problem that has broad implications for global cultures. When outsiders adopt the elements of other cultures, they are changing the

power dynamic between dominant groups and groups that have had to deal with systemic oppression and marginalization for hundreds of years. Some musicians argue that their use of cultural elements is actually a form of cultural exchange; however, this argument falls flat in the face of a power imbalance between cultural groups. When musicians adopt elements from other cultures, there is no exchange taking place; instead, they are taking power away from the very cultures that created those elements. When developing new compositions, producing music videos, and giving live performances, musicians must be careful not to appropriate the elements of other cultures.



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