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JACKSON, LAUREN MICHELE. *White Negroes: When Cornrows Were in Vogue ... and Other Thoughts on Cultural Appropriation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2019, 187 pp, \$25.95 cloth

The politics of cultural appropriation claims and the power dynamics they resist has captured the attention of philosophers, cultural critics, race scholars, communications scholars, and intellectual property law scholars in recent years. Cultural appropriation claims are possessive claims over a tangible or intangible aspect of culture or cultural identity and an objection to a perceived incursion by a cultural outsider. In this context, 'appropriation' is broadly understood as exploitative and as including a suite of unauthorised actions such as the physical theft of cultural objects, commercialisation of traditional knowledge, copying of intangible property such as arts styles or musical expressions, seeking inspiration from spiritual beliefs or practices, and self-identification with an ethnicity that is not one's own. Commentators critical of cultural appropriation typically seek a better understanding of one or more of these phenomena as a means of exposing, and thus better understanding, problematic social, intercultural, and legal relations. To study cultural appropriation in settler colonial states is to study the legacies of slavery, genocide, and disenfranchisement.

In *White Negroes: When Cornrows Were in Vogue... and Other Thoughts on Cultural Appropriation*, African American studies and literature scholar Dr Lauren Michele Jackson develops a series of narratives, and narratives-within-narratives, of cultural appropriation of black aesthetics in North America. The purpose of Dr Jackson's book is to expose and critique contemporary racial orders built upon an unequal distribution of power. Its title pays homage to essayist Norman Mailer's, 'The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster' (Dissent, 1957). That work was one of the first to psychologise cultural appropriation. Mailer argued that the the "psychic havoc" experienced in the West following WWII, led to the rise of "white negroes", white American existentialists who adopted the "synapses of the Negro" and embraced a sensual, improvisational and "primitive" present as a form of rebellion against the sanitised nature of 1950s American life.

While Mailer's work is discussed in the context of the appropriation of black vernacular in chapter four, 'The Hipster: The New White Negro', I found the reference to white negroes in the title of Dr Jackson's book a touch misleading. As Dr Jackson herself proclaims, *White Negroes* does not psychologise appropriation. I wanted it to (I have been searching for bell hooks-esque analytical frameworks for approaching the mentality and oppressive stereotypes that drive the desire for, and consumption of, cultural difference for a number of years). However, while desire and dynamics of acceptance and rejection of blackness feature in *White Negroes*, it is not its mainstay. Rather, *White Negroes* provides a social commentary of the empty black aesthetics of white America who "hoard power like Hungry Hungry Hippos" (p.4) to expose the ambiguities and contradictions that define contemporary intercultural relations. It critiques what is, rather than unpacks the psychological processes of white identity formation through which this conduct came to be. *White Negroes* does what it does extremely well, but the analytical frameworks deployed in cultural appropriation discourse remain overdue for refreshment from critical race scholars.

White Negroes is divided into four parts: 'Sound and Body', 'Art and Language', 'Technology', and 'Economy and Politics', each of which probes the boundaries of culture, representation, and identification through accounts of the cultural appropriation of black aesthetics. Some of the sites and examples Dr Jackson traverses might be familiar to regular readers of cultural appropriation literature

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– musical genres like jazz, hip-hop, rap, and fashion trends like braided hairstyles. Others are resoundingly atypical – for example, Southern cooking, the regulation of marijuana, and viral memes. The creativity with which Dr Jackson traverses her subject matter makes for very engaging reading.

Part I, ‘Sound and Body’, explores the problematics of cultural appropriation in the music and fashion industries. Key moments in the career of singer Christina Aguilera are deconstructed as a form of consumption of the *idea* of black aesthetics for entertainment. Those who grew up listening – as I did – to early 2000s pop music, will welcome the insights into Aguilera’s career. Cameos from other performers that owe a debt to black music, such as Miley Cyrus, David Bowie and Mick Jagger, help to tease out the ambivalence of the use of black culture – as stereotyped as “young, trendy, gritty, sexualised” or “older, elegant, sensual, classic” (p. 28) – as part of a musical coming of age, or journey to rock renown. This Part also interrogates cultural appropriation in the fashion industry, using Armenian American reality TV star Kim Kardashian and her sisters as the lens through which to explore the line between inspiration and theft in fashion shows, hairstyles, and makeup tutorials, such as those by Nikki de Jager. Kardashian is a symbol of the social acceptance of black aesthetics and the rejection of black people – with her brown features she is ‘ethnic but not *too* much so, supplying the spice America craves without tipping into the jungle’ (p. 33). The desire for a “boss-ass-bitch-meets-chola aesthetic” (p. 34) in the fashion industry reinforces Dr Jackson’s argument that ‘black aesthetic innovations don’t matter until repurposed by the select group of people who do’ (p. 42). In fast fashion, high fashion, and fashion online, empty black aesthetics are acceptable, but the black aesthetics of black people are not.

Part II, ‘Art and Language’, investigates the appropriation of the black body in contemporary art and the appropriation of black vernacular in white speech. The identity appropriations of the artist formerly known as Rachel Dolezal and artist Joe Scanlon (who invented a female, African American artist alterego, “Donnelle Woolford”), the appropriation of black pain (and its violent recreation) in poetry and art representations of the deaths of African-American teenagers Michael Brown Jr (1996-2014) and Emmett Till (1941-1955), and the “vacuous” (p. 76) use of black language in internet slang (e.g. ‘lit’, ‘fam’, ‘woke’, ‘lowkey’) are traversed. The discussion of the latter constructs the theft of language as the mark of a crisis of whiteness à la Norman Mailer: “Speaking the language of hip, learning it on their tongue, seems one step closer to *being interesting* and distinct from their upbringing and destiny. White people speak black to feel alive – to feel *real*” (p. 80). However, it is the content that pertains to Michael Brown Jr and Emmett Till that is the standout inclusion. A deeply disturbing account of the problematics of Kenneth Goldsmith’s performance of his poem *The Body of Michael Brown* (2015), that translated Michael Brown’s autopsy report into plain English, and artist Dana Schutz’s painting *Open Casket* (2016), that recreated a photograph of Emmett Till’s dead body in his casket and shows his mutilated face, in oils is provided. The importance and significance of this content cannot be overstated. It provides one of the most evocative critiques of the destructive potential of white privilege, and persuasive arguments in favour of the need for ethical accountability in the arts, that I have come across. Her concluding comments to the chapter is worth quoting in full:

[In contemporary society] [l]ittle thought is given to the act of destroying to create. Yet, rupture is required to make that which ought not to exist because it cannot exist without pain onto others. An artist who cannot bear emotional responsibility for their work destroys these

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others every time they make. It's not enough to hold the art closer. We will never forget. Like the adage about a broken dish, the cracks are m'fucking everything (p. 66).

Cultural appropriation recreates a violence that goes well beyond financial exploitation.

Part III, 'Technology', offers an unique departure from the typical subject matter included in works on cultural appropriation. A comparison is made between the "movement" of memes and the modalities of "black language". Black language is widely interpreted as a "diction, a style, a politics" and a grammar system, 'all at once' (p. 93). Its innovations arise within these networks. Dr Jackson argues that the communicative, organic, and disruptive nature of memes appropriates some of the "spirit of black expression" (p. 94), and is therefore "indebted to very black processes of cultural survival" (p. 91). This argument is novel and highly original. The relationship between internet culture as language appropriation is a very promising site of future analysis. The second half of this Part considers the harm of the pace and frequency of the Internet on black experience as (unpaid) viral video sensations. The spectacle of viral videos of black people in distress – such as that of Kimberly "Sweet Brown" Wilkins, filmed as she fled a fire stating "Lord Jesis there's a fire", this audio later remixed and added to autotuned YouTube songs – is identified as the sin of gluttony; the objectification and consumption of these individuals an acute trauma. The internet is thus not only posited as responsible for the theft of a communicative style, but also part of the process through which black life is disregarded: "It's a short trip to turn black people into bits" (p. 111).

Part IV, 'Economy and Politics', presents an account of the economics of cultural appropriation, as refracted through the controversy surrounding celebrity chef, Paula Deen. While cultural appropriation controversies involving high profile chefs have been reported on in news media in recent years – Jamie Oliver's 'jerk rice' incident perhaps one of the most notable – a broader connection between a celebrity's brand, identity appropriation and black erasure is more unusual. Paula Deen's business is identified as built her persona as a "white Mammy, plumping America one fried delicacy at a time" (p.118). Despite racism controversies, liberal use of the N-word, and the erasure of the connection between her food and the South's history of slavery, Deen was able to amass "an empire because she represented the version of Southern culture American morality wanted to live with" (p. 121). The success of Paula Deen highlights that the twin forces of market and profits, "make the question of respect so impossibly knotted" (p. 126). The treatment of black enterprise and white violence that follows renders visible the role of a lack of an access to capital to the violence of incarceration and economic exclusion, yet also the exercise of power at margins. A discussion of race riots, including the destruction of "Black Wall Street", Greenwood, Oklahoma, and the history of weed in America and the policing of black bodies, is telling of the white stranglehold of economic power, but the persistence of black ingenuity. This latter theme is further extended through narratives of black, queer, and feminist activism in contemporary real and virtual sites, such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesmatter movements, a reminder of the vitality of the oppressed, and that voice – however oppressed it might be through appropriation – can be always be reclaimed. Appropriation might be an exercise of power, but it can also resisted, reshaped, and reiterated by the oppressed. There is hope for social change.

White Negroes is part social commentary and part truth telling. Across her chapters, Dr Jackson does not psychologise appropriator identity – she problematises appropriator identity and the society that

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permits and endorses such failings. *White Negroes* is powerful and it is compelling. When I finished reading *White Negroes*, I was left feeling confused, drained, unsettled, unmade. Dr Jackson's essays indeed made me "a little less sure" of myself (p.6). That feeling lingers.

In her Introduction, Dr Jackson describes *White Negroes* as about "black aesthetics without black people" (p.6). I would summarise its concerns differently: *White Negroes* provides a richly detailed account black aesthetics without black people, but it is not *about* empty black aesthetics. It is *about* critical reflexivity. Therein lies its immense value.