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PHIL 33

Short Essay 1

Prompt 4: Are there any moral injunctions against cultural appropriation that you accept? Why? Why not?

In "Cultural Appropriation Without Cultural Essentialism," Erich Hatala Matthes explores how cultural appropriation can cause harm by oppressing and silencing. His account of 'appropriative harms' (instances when cultural appropriation, as employed in the morally neutral sense, should be considered harmful) argues that cultural appropriation is harmful because of how it "interacts with dominating systems so as to silence and speak for individuals who are already socially marginalized." (349) I will first analyze his claims of appropriative harms, which I generally accept with some caveats. Then, I will evaluate the extent to which Matthes' claims applies to voice appropriation in the arts, wherein I will argue that the moral injunctions he makes against appropriative harms can be relaxed. For the sake of clarity, I will also use cultural appropriation in the morally neutral sense as Matthes does and use 'appropriative harms' to refer to the morally objectionable instances of appropriation.

Matthes claims that appropriative harms are systematic in nature, which is a shift in focus from prior literature. Responding primarily to Young's skepticism and hesitancy about the harms of cultural appropriation in the arts, Matthes argues that appropriative harms are reasonably widespread and neither marginal nor benign. How so? He draws attention to the "mechanisms" (348) through which appropriation can cause harm as well as the "power dynamics" that the mechanisms depend on — two areas which he believes that Young has paid insufficient attention

to. By framing appropriative harms as part of a broader category of harms connected with social marginalization (365), Matthes sets forth the proposition that acts of cultural appropriation interact with preexisting social injustices in the backdrop to compromise and distort the communicative ability and social credibility of members of marginalized groups (353-354).

This focus on mechanisms and the systematic nature of appropriative harms allows for Matthes to bring in interesting philosophical work on epistemic injustice. Under such a schema, the harmful effect of cultural appropriation on an individual manifests as such: namely, a speaker's "inability to communicate as a knowledgeable person" because "prejudice and ignorance" render the audience "incapable" of hearing her as such (350). Matthes highlights two main ways through which such prejudice and ignorance — the ones that lead to an audience's failure to hear a speaker — are constructed. Firstly, stereotypical misrepresentations of an oppressed group are often invoked by acts of cultural appropriation due to ignorance, misunderstanding, and bias. Often, such misrepresentations will construe the group's members in ways that undermine their epistemic credibility, conditioning judgments that generate harmful credibility deficits. Secondly, the voice (subject) appropriation that members of dominant cultures engage in can constitute an exercise of their 'credibility excess,' which can contribute to the judgment that the members of the marginalized groups have "no special credibility with respect to their experience." (351) In other words, this means that voice appropriation can contribute to a social environment that inappropriately conditions unequal societal understandings of expertise.

Having established the harmful effects of cultural appropriation in the form of silencing, Matthes complicates his claims at several points, which adds to the positive features of his systematic account. Firstly, he makes an interesting claim that unwarranted credibility 'excesses'

can also occur for marginalized peoples. Individual members of socially marginalized groups can be burdened with "speaking for" the group, inflating their epistemic authority and the importance of their actions even when they are neither meant to be representational nor testimonial. I find this a compelling harm similar in extent to misrepresentation by members of the dominant cultural group: instead of a failure on the audience's part to hear the speaker, harm can similarly be caused when the audience is listening intently even when the speaker does not intend to speak to them at all. Though the specific use of 'excesses' in this context is slightly misleading, Matthes' point is sound. In his rendering, credibility excesses for marginalized peoples do not necessarily counteract the harm caused by their credibility deficits. Indeed, such credibility excesses often leads to instances of 'insider misrepresentation' — that is, when the idiosyncratic and individual conduct of a member of he socially marginalized group is incorrectly taken to be representative of the group as a whole. I accept this claim which successfully points out that underlying social inequalities can be evinced and intensified through cultural appropriation in a complex network of interwoven credibility deficits and excesses, which mutually reinforce each other instead of contradict.

Secondly, Matthes specially notes the harmful effects in the form of credibility deficits can occur even when the member of the dominant cultural group engages in an accurate representation. On this view, the mere fact that a member of the dominant cultural group is representing the marginalized group may interact with background injustices in ways that reinforce those injustices — even when engaging in accurate representation, members of the dominant cultural group are often deemed to be more knowledgeable about the experiences of the oppressed group than actually oppressed peoples. This is a strong challenge to Young's claim — insofar as cultural misrepresentation is wrong, it is not wrong qua act of cultural appropriation

because it would be "as wrong" if it were produced by an insider — by indicating that the *source* of the representation can lead to credibility deficits just as misrepresentation can. (352) Matthes is thus arguing that the acts of cultural appropriation are morally problematic when they lead to the "creation and exacerbation of credibility deficits," which can happen regardless of representational accuracy. (353)

In addition, Matthes' account is particularly persuasive in one aspect: it is able to explain the asymmetrical, widely accepted claim that appropriation enacted by dominant social groups against oppressed social groups is regarded as morally problematic whereas the reverse situation is not. Under such an account, cases of cultural appropriation that do not result in the creation and exacerbation of credibility deficits will not be identified as harmful. In this vein, appropriation by oppressed groups of the cultural materials of dominant groups will not have this effect. Similarly, acts of cultural appropriation in the culinary realm seem to be generally exempt from charges of harm because they tend not to contribute to credibility deficits. This is because food lacks representational content, as Matthes points out. Yet, the representational content that Matthes wants us to apply to the artistic context is not logically necessitated by his argument. However, before I delve into the rejoinders against his account when applied to voice appropriation in the arts, I would like to first acknowledge the strength of his account when applied to the political arena.

In the context of political representation, it is easy to accept Matthes' account of appropriative harms. Credibility deficits constitute a real harm of interest for members of socially marginalized groups. The lack of political representation for marginalized groups, the misrepresentation of their present political claims, and the unwarranted epistemic authority either imposed on individuals from the oppressed group or foisted upon the dominant group are all

valid problems that flesh out the appropriative harm that Matthes articulates. Intuitively, the considerations of justice that support remedy for that balance of epistemic justice constitute strong grounds to criticize acts of cultural appropriation that contribute to or sustain these credibility deficits. As such, the focus on the systematic social inequalities that work in conjunction with the silencing of marginalized individuals has genuine political implications. By shifting the foundational moral problem away from what is specifically generated by individual acts of cultural appropriation to the "unjust credibility deficits" and the "systematic inequalities that allow for them," the moral imperative to undermine the background inequalities that make certain acts of cultural appropriation harmful in the first place lends itself to a political reading. (363) With this, Matthes appears to be making the claim that appropriative harm is reducible to the harm of social inequalities and oppression, which are structural or systematic in nature. He appeals to commonly held reluctance to legally regulate acts of appropriation, and advocates that we regulate and improve the background conditions instead. That seems intuitive in the political realm — that is, we should regulate the systematic injustices with policies that improve the existing unequal conditions.

However, in the context of voice appropriation in the arts, how far do Matthes' claims go? Matthes defines voice appropriation as "representation of cultural practices or experiences by cultural 'outsiders.'" (343) The general thrust of his argument seems to be that non-native writers should step back to "let the real Native voices be heard," quoting Lenore Keeshig-Tobias. (351) Given the unwarranted credibility excesses of members of the dominant group, Young's issue of representational accuracy is rendered moot in the face of the credibility deficit generated by the mere existence of "non-native writers." (351) Matthes chooses to focus on Young's arguments against appropriative harms instead of Young's arguments for the moral and aesthetic value of

art. Given that Young argues that the independent value of artistic works countervails the *pro tanto* harm, I would like to evaluate the strength of Matthes' claims of harms of silencing and oppression when put against the unique value generated by artistic forms of appropriation. In the artistic context, Matthes does not provide any argument against the possibility that the moral and aesthetic value of an appropriative work can outweigh the silencing harms that he has put forth. Furthermore, by seeing cultural appropriation as a specific mechanism of oppressing and silencing, Matthes eschews the possibility that cultural appropriation can be more than just the *means*. Someone like Kamila Shamsie will even argue that voice appropriation in the arts, specifically fiction, is a sign of caring and the willingness to even attempt to understand. In Matthes' account, even fiction that tries and enters the psyche of the Other, that writes with nuance about the realities of "the places [America] invades or manipulates, brings [readers] into those stories and lets you draw breath with its characters" will be harmful by default since they will create or exacerbate credibility deficits as acts in general. Under such a schema, no consideration is given to the possible value of the artistic works and all such works are treated in a sweeping judgment of being harmful, as long as they interact in any way with the background injustices. In fact, Matthes' claim that the harms of silencing can occur regardless of representational accuracy (and by correlation, merit) would censure *any* work of art created by a member in a dominant group that represents the experiences or practices of the oppressed group. Such a drastic claim is, however, never given a justification by Matthes despite the *sui generis* context of the arts. Such a lacuna in his account is all the more surprising since his entire paper begins with the words "cultural appropriation in the arts." As such, I believe that Matthes' injunctions against appropriative harms — while compelling as a political argument — should be relaxed in the case of voice appropriation in the arts, which have independent value compared to

other acts of appropriation generally. An in-depth argument for this would, however, exceed the scope of this paper, though Matthes' failure to differentiate the nuance of his claims to apply specifically to voice appropriation *in the arts* detracts from the applicability and explanatory strength of his account.

In conclusion, Matthes presents an account of appropriative harm that focuses on how it depends on background structural conditions and dominating systems. I accept his conceptual scheme of epistemic injustice when applied to cultural appropriation in the political arena, with its focus on voice, marginalization, representation, and equality — all areas that seem to necessitate further justice to be done, pointing to the existence of concrete harm. However, such a schema — with its emphasis on the general, structural, and systematic — falls short when it comes to voice appropriation in the arts, which is specific, individual, and nuanced. As such, Matthes' moral injunctions against certain acts of cultural appropriation provides a cogent argument for the existence of harm, and yet, ultimately falls short of proving that level of harm can apply to voice appropriation in the arts — a specific subset of cultural appropriation.

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Work Cited

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