Cultural Appropriation as Levinasian Violence

Augustin Kendall

Seattle University, MA in Psychology

Kendall6@seattleu.edu

203.435.2874

In this paper, I examine the Levinasian concepts of language, totality, desire, dwelling, and interiority as they apply to the sociological concept of cultural appropriation. Cultural symbols signify beliefs, affirmations, and identities and are constructed historically and socially. If “the very project of acquisition presupposes the recollection of the dwelling” (Levinas, 1969), what does it mean for the self to acquire that which is not of its own social identity? In this movement, the self cannot recollect itself. It can only recollect others, and in doing so has totalized others, denying their infinity. An act of cultural appropriation taking place in the therapist’s office may seem a small thing, but holds unexplored potential to damage the therapeutic relationship. For the nonwhite client of a white therapist, such an act may seed distrust and communicate to my client that I claim power over others. Rather than standing below them, I assume I can take and repurpose their meanings. This small act is not simply a happening between individuals, either. As Levinas (1969) said, “Everything that takes place here ‘between us’ concerns everyone, the face that looks at it places itself in the full light of the public order, even if I draw back from it to seek with the interlocutor the complicity of a private relation and a clandestinity.” What happens between two individuals reflects what happens in the whole world. In this sense, cultural appropriation on a small scale reflects the colonial violence carried out by white cultures upon nonwhite cultures of seizing both tangible and intangible cultural products.