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Semiotic Perspectives on Cultural Appropriation in the Music Industry

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Introduction

- 1 This paper will examine the phenomenon of cultural appropriation within the context of artist image in the music industry. The definition and extent of cultural appropriation have been the subject of a considerable amount of research in recent times¹, with the central issue being the demarcation line between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation. Richard Rogers distinguishes four subtypes of cultural appropriation (exchange, dominance, exploitation, and transculturation²) and defines each according to the relationship between cultures:
- 2 1. Cultural exchange: the reciprocal exchange of symbols, artifacts, rituals, genres, and/or technologies between cultures with roughly equal levels of power.
- 3 2. Cultural dominance: the use of elements of a dominant culture by members of a subordinated culture in a context in which the dominant culture has been imposed onto the subordinated culture, including appropriations that enact resistance.
- 4 3. Cultural exploitation: the appropriation of elements of a subordinated culture by a dominant culture without substantive reciprocity, permission, and/or compensation.

- 5 4. Transculturation: cultural elements created from and/or by multiple cultures, such that identification of a single originating culture is problematic, for example, multiple cultural appropriations structured in the dynamics of globalization and transnational capitalism creating hybrid forms.
- 6 Within the music industry context, we can identify cases of cultural dominance and cultural exploitation with a strong emphasis on the latter. In this paper, I will argue that the semiotic method can reliably distinguish between cultural dominance and cultural exploitation on one side and cultural exchange and transculturation on the other. Rogers observes that “cultural exploitation focuses on the commodification and incorporation of elements of subordinated culture³”. Commodification is the main objective of constructing an artist’s image: to create a product or persona which is commodified and sold to consumers.
- 7 I will present the corpus of musical artists as brands diachronically, the starting point corresponding to the late 1950s and 1960s when most critics trace the origin of popular music⁴. As pointed out by Roy Shuker, the term “popular” is somewhat ambiguous and eludes rigorous definition. Still, for this study, I will use Shuker’s definition of popular music involving the “main commercially produced and marketed musical genres, primarily in a Western context⁵”. This definition follows Rogers’s subtypes of cultural appropriation since Western culture has historically been a dominant culture, and the origins of its dominance in the music industry can be traced to the 19th century. Reebee Garofalo writes that as early as the 1870s, technological innovation, chiefly the invention of the Edison cylinder phonograph has put the United States at the forefront of music distribution⁶. The idea of Western dominance is closely related to the notion of imperialism, and, for the purpose of this paper, cultural imperialism. Tanner Mirrlees further corroborates such centralization of media distribution:

The most powerful producers of entertainment media are transnational media corporations (TNMCs). Most of these firms—Time Warner, Walt Disney, News Corp, amongst others—are based in but not contained by the territorial borders of the United States. They

straddle the globe, doing business in almost every country and selling entertainment media to consumers everywhere⁷.

- 8 The semiotic analysis of the corpus will demonstrate that musicians belonging to this Western cultural circle, which is defined by the aforementioned advantages in production and distribution as the sphere of the United States and areas of its economic and political influence, have regularly borrowed and appropriated elements of marginalized cultures and that this removal of signs from the cultures that produced them semiotically empties the signs of their meaning. Starting in the 1960s, Elvis Presley emulated elements of Afro-American culture in his image, resulting in the birth of rock and roll⁸. This genre is now credited almost exclusively to White Americans. One of the most popular music genres today is rap music, which originated in the African American community, particularly on the West Coast during the 1970s. The genre initially depicted the “Black experience” and the historical struggles of Black people in the United States. However, with the emergence of Marshall Mathers, professionally known as Eminem, who adapted rap music to depict class struggles in his hometown Detroit, a new era of White rap music commenced and hip-hop became associated with a culture which had very little to do with the genre’s origins. Contemporary pop musicians such as Katy Perry or Ariana Grande have also borrowed numerous times from marginalized cultures such as East Asian or “oriental” cultures⁹. In the case of Katy Perry, not even history is safe: she has been criticized numerous times for cultural appropriation of past cultures, namely Japanese and ancient Egyptian¹⁰. The imagery of her music videos and dressing as part of her artist identity and expression includes elements borrowed from other cultures, hence giving her a sense of originality and novelty in the West, which is a key component of the artist's unique selling proposition. In the next section, a semiotic analysis of the instances of cultural appropriation in the artists mentioned above will reveal how cultural appropriation empties the sign of its original meaning and causes the disintegration of the culture from which it was taken while simultaneously serving as a unique selling proposition for the appropriator’s (artist’s) brand.

Theoretical framework for the semiotic analysis of cultural appropriation

- 9 The Russian semiotician Juri Lotman was one of the pioneering thinkers on the relationship between symbols and culture:

As an important mechanism of cultural memory, symbols carry over texts, plotlines and other semiotic formations from one cultural stratum to another. An immutable set of symbols passing diachronically through a culture assumes to a significant degree the function of unifying that culture; as a culture's memory of itself, symbols prevent a culture from disintegrating into isolated temporal strata¹¹.

- 10 Lotman suggests that cultural symbols are the adhesive elements that make a culture a distinct and self-contained structure. Conversely, any displacement of a symbol, especially if borrowed by a socially dominant culture, presents a risk where the symbol is no longer associated with the subordinated culture. Its meaning becomes distorted by widening or narrowing its semantic field or removing it altogether and replacing it with new meaning. Aleksei Semenenko, a prominent Lotman scholar, states that “the concept of semiosphere first appeared in the 1984 article ‘On the semiosphere’¹²”, in which Lotman envisioned the semiosphere as a “semiotic continuum, which is filled with multi-variant semiotic models situated at a range of hierarchical levels¹³”. Since all models in the semiosphere are organized hierarchically, the artist brand as a semiotic model must compete with all other sets which represent rival artists and propagate along the same temporal and spatial continuum. The essence of a brand is its unique selling proposition, or USP, which serves two main functions: a discriminatory one, illustrating how a particular brand differs from all others, and a value one, which posits that due to one specific difference, the brand is superior to its competitors. I hypothesize that this integral aspect of branding is what gives way to cultural appropriation within the music industry. The difference is achieved by appropriating elements of subordinated cultures.

- 11 The pioneer of the American school of semiotics, Charles Sanders Peirce, proposed a triadic model of the sign, which takes into account the additional layer of semiosis as the signs move from one semiosphere to another. This model of the sign, consisting of a representamen, an interpretant, and an object, lends itself an extremely valuable tool for the wider, semiotic analysis of cultural symbols. According to Peirce:

A sign... [in the form of a representamen] is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of the representamen¹⁴.

- 12 The corpus analysis will demonstrate how the interpretant, or the idea of an object which is present in the human consciousness when exposed to the sign, is extremely malleable and subject to cultural influences exerted upon it. It is this part of the sign which undergoes a transformation as the sign moves from one semiosphere to another. To echo Rogers, if a dominant culture adopts a symbol from a subordinate culture, but as the symbol passes from one semiosphere to another, it is emptied of all the contextual and referential meaning it had in the subordinate culture and replaced with a stereotype, the process is deemed cultural appropriation. If, as the symbol passes from one semiosphere to another, at least some or all the contextual and referential meaning is retained, even if an additional layer of semiosis is generated, then the process is cultural exchange or transculturation. In the next section, the semiotic analysis will show how the shift in meaning due to the generation of interpretant signs either results in cultural appropriation or cultural appreciation.

Cultural appropriation as the basis for a unique selling proposition

- 13 The music industry represents a unique combination of both artistic and corporate elements. The corporate features include branding, marketing, and sales, which generate revenue. Jonathan Schroeder states that “art is a commodity, subject to market forces and consumer behavior processes¹⁵” and branding creates a strong mental image of the artist in the consumer’s mind. The artist becomes a symbol, usually of a specific set of values. This process of codifying the brand is very deliberate and is typically the task of recording companies that finance the artist’s endeavors. Rita Clifton, John Simmons and Sameena Ahmad enumerate the positive effects of branding on the consumers. Two are vital for artist branding: on the one hand, “brands foster customer loyalty leading to more reliable company earnings and therefore higher and more sustainable levels of employment and wealth creation,” and on the other, “brands promote social cohesion, both nationally and globally, by enabling shared participation in aspirational and democratic narratives¹⁶”. Echoing Lotman’s assertion that symbols extending diachronically foster a sense of cultural cohesion, it is evident that the social cohesion resulting from branding stems from the deliberate creation, via semiosis, of a novel system of symbols with the artist’s brand and image representing its center.
- 14 Today rock music, alongside pop, is the most recognizable music genre¹⁷, and even though over the years it has gone through many transformations, it retained some stable symbols which are unique to the genre to the present day: notably electric guitars, black leather clothing and a very aggressive singing style¹⁸. Studwell and Lonergan trace the early development of rock music to American country and blues music of the 1940s and 1950s. Blues as a genre was very strongly tied to African-American minorities in The United States¹⁹, and it remained largely confined to local Afro-American communities until the emergence of Elvis Presley. Wesley Morris of the *New York Times* writes that:

Black American music was the architecture to create a means by which singers and musicians can be completely free, free in the only way it could have been possible on a plantation: through art, through music – music no one “composed” (because enslaved people were denied literacy), music born of feeling, of play, of exhaustion, of hope²⁰.

- 15 Blues was a symbol that reflected the struggles of African-Americans. Elvis Presley started his career in Memphis, inspired mainly by blues and gospel music. His first songs were covers of popular blues songs such as “Baby, Let’s Play House” by Arthur Neal Gunter or Otis Blackwell’s “Don’t Be Cruel.” He auditioned for a band in front of Sun Records’ agent Sam Phillips in 1953, which marked the beginning of his career. Phillips was keen on Presley mainly because he was sure if he could “find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel²¹” he could make a billion dollars. Due to the difference in power, the only way Black music could “make it” on the radio was by being appropriated by a White artist. Furthermore, as Lockhart points out, Presley’s unique selling proposition was a voice and style that belonged to the Black community²². Still, in Peircean terms, they were devoid of all other interpretant signs associated with that particular voice and style, such as “slavery,” “suffering,” “despair,” “melancholy” or “hope.” As mentioned earlier, a musical style is a sign. As it entered a new semiosphere, in this case, a White, middle-class American community, it had its meaning reduced in accordance with what the White audience was expecting. The “Negro feel” became a prop, a unique selling proposition that repackaged the ideas of Black creators and underscored the power imbalance between the Black and White artists in the United States, while simultaneously erasing all the experience that created the symbol.
- 16 According to Rogers, the critical precondition for cultural appropriation (i.e. cultural dominance) is a power imbalance²³. A few decades after Elvis Presley, Black music was once again appropriated by White artists for a White audience. This time the genres were rap and hip-hop music which originated in New York²⁴, specifically in the down-trodden Bronx borough during the 1970s recession²⁵.
- 17 Just as blues was strictly local and tied to the Black community, rapping evolved from street parties (called “block parties”) and the cul-

ture of MCs (masters of ceremonies) who talked over the musical beat and introduced the DJ (disc jockey) who played the music²⁶. Alongside the music, a unique fashion style characterized by tracksuits, sneakers, and golden jewelry developed and it became a defining characteristic of rappers. Malcolm Barnard recognizes the symbolic function of clothing in the assertion that it reflects the cultural system the garment belongs to: “fashion, clothing, and dress are signifying practices, they are ways of generating meanings, which produce and reproduce those cultural groups along with their positions of relative power²⁷”. In this passage, a “cultural group” is semiotically equivalent to Lotman’s semiosphere. Barnard goes on to explore the relationship between fashion, social power, and ideology, and all three are present in rap fashion. Rap fashion combines sports styles characterized by tracksuits and sneakers and high-fashion styles reflected in oftentimes exceedingly expensive gold and diamond jewelry.

18 The combination of “high” and “low” fashion styles reflects the unique experience of being Black in the United States. They are symbols of “the rags-to-riches²⁸” path many rap stars took as they moved from the bottom of the socioeconomic scale to the top. Semiotics has extensively dealt with the symbolism of gold and golden hues. Due to the rarity of mined gold the color has historically been connected to power and abundance, and evokes interpretants of “radiance, cheerfulness, energy and the sun²⁹”. The thickness and massiveness of the gold worn as hip-hop jewelry functions as a symbol of Black power and ability. Rappers are often seen making gestures that emphasize their jewelry such as American rapper Fabolous.

19 Despite their worldwide success, numerous rappers have been involved in street fights, gang feuds, and drug-related conflicts which have all been the subject matter of popular rap songs so much that an entire sub-genre was named “gangsta rap”. Classic hits include Tupac Shakur’s “Hit ‘Em Up” (1996), The Notorious B.I.G.’s “Ready to Die” (1994), and N.W.A.’s “Straight outta Compton” (1988). On an artistic level, a conflict between rappers from the west coast and the east coast of the United States emerged in the nineties. Since rap grew out of and thematically described the life of African Americans in poor urban centers of the United States, it comes as little surprise that conflict between music artists also spilled over into street fights. The term “drive-by shooting³⁰” was coined to describe the attacks on

rival gang members that were usually perpetrated by four men armed with automatic or semi-automatic weapons who would drive around rival neighborhoods and shoot enemies on sight. These types of conflict eventually resulted in the deaths of Westside rappers Tupac Shakur and The Notorious B.I.G, considered by many to have been the greatest rappers of all time³¹.

- 20 It can hardly be contested that rap lyricism influenced American English like no other music genre before or after. As the Black cultural semiosphere evolved in a constant state of oppression, the language evolved as a reflection of that oppression, characterized by frequent profanity and references to violence. Rap songs are a rich source for semiotic analysis, with their neologisms, symbolism, and metaphors specific to the Black cultural experience in the United States. Additionally, these idioms are regularly the target of cultural appropriators, usually coupled with various types of blackfishing. To illustrate how culturally specific these lyrics are, it's enough to point out the website "Genius"³² (started in 2007 as "Rap Genius"), which was started as a community-driven endeavor to interpret the lyrics of rap songs correctly.
- 21 Some examples of lexical items coined in the Black community through rap music, using the example of Tupac Shakur's "Hit 'Em Up," include "homie" (a member of the same gang – the meaning was later semantically expanded to best friend), "bust" (to shoot a gun), "G" (shortened form of "gangsta" from "gangster") and "wax" (audio recording, usually of music).
- 22 Today rap and hip-hop are the most popular genres of music in the United States³³, and their success can be attributed to the digitalization of music distribution. The barrier of large corporations controlled by predominantly White music executives has been removed. The interpretant signs of the sign "rap music", such as class struggle, oppression, combativeness, persistence, and pride present in the Black cultural semiosphere resonated with many upcoming White artists. One of the most successful cases was that of Marshall Mathers, known as Eminem. Born in Missouri, his childhood was frayed by difficult living conditions, frequent re-locations, and domestic violence³⁴. During his teenage years, his family settled in Detroit, Michigan, in a crime-ridden neighborhood where Marshall was often

bullied. The oppression he felt at home and in public made it easy for him to identify with the interpretant sign of oppression and class struggle present in rap music and extend their meaning to the impoverished White suburban Detroit. His unique selling point largely fueled his rise to fame: he was the first White rapper that gained international traction. But Mathers always openly expressed his indebtedness to Black culture through his lyricism and public appearances. In a line from his song “White America,” he admits: “If I was Black, I would have sold half³⁵”, and in the Grammy-awarded “Without me” he compares himself to Elvis Presley:

Though I'm not the first king of controversy
I am the worst king since Elvis Presley
To do Black music so selfishly
And use it to get myself wealthy (Hey!)
There's a concept that works
Twenty million other White rappers emerge
But no matter how many fish in the sea
It'd be so empty without me³⁶.

- 23 As Timothy Welbeck, a prominent American anti-racism researcher at Temple University states, Eminem has always been careful to show “respect to Black culture by diverting attention from himself when receiving awards and praise for his music³⁷”. Because of this, the Black community largely embraced Eminem and he went on to work with some of the most successful rappers of the 2000s, notably Andre Romelle Young, known as Dr. Dre, who was one of the first members of the Black community to accept Mathers for his talent and offer him a record deal at his label, Aftermath Records, and Curtis James Jackson, known professionally as 50 Cent, who worked on more than a dozen of singles with Mathers³⁸.
- 24 Both Elvis Presley and Eminem have used elements from Black culture in order to set themselves apart from other upcoming artists and made these elements a key aspect of their unique selling proposition. The difference was that Elvis transformed jazz and blues into rock and roll music while never giving credit to Black musicians, whereas Eminem always paid tribute to the culture from which he borrowed by openly admitting his indebtedness to Black culture as in the song “Without Me” and by supporting the wider Black community causes

in the United States³⁹. This is the difference between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation: appropriation causes the erasure of culture and appreciation assures its continuation and elevation on the social stratum.

Cultural appropriation as cultural erasure through stereotypization

- 25 As a sign moves from one semiosphere to another its meaning can either be widened or narrowed; in other words, the interpretant signs are either added or removed. The extent of these processes is what differentiates cultural appropriation from cultural appreciation. The most frequent cause of interpretant removal in cultural appropriation is stereotypization. The existing research on the production of stereotypes within a culture has been scarce⁴⁰ but it can be described as a type of semiosis. Within the Peircean semiotic framework, the sign becomes a stereotype when it becomes tied strongly to just one specific interpretant sign, for example *blonde hair* (sign) – *stupidity* (interpretant sign) while all other interpretant signs are discarded. The research in social psychology found that some degree of simplification is necessary because it saves time and energy⁴¹ when identifying social groups. Lenard and Balint equate stereotypization with cultural misrepresentation and see it as a problematic form of cultural engagement because it involves “presenting caricatured versions of cultural minority practices⁴²”. As hip-hop music became widely popular, the Black cultural semiosphere underwent stereotypization.
- 26 The most controversial case of stereotypization is the artistic image of rapper Danielle Bregoli, known as Bhad Bhabie. Bregoli became famous after her mother applied to the talk show Dr. Phil in 2016, claiming that caring for her thirteen-year-old daughter became impossible due to her confrontational behavior⁴³. During the show Bregoli uses an accent which was described by reporter Jamie Lauren Keiles as “part Florida, part Brooklyn, part misconceived Black Vernacular English⁴⁴” or a deliberate mimicry of Black accent, later dubbed “blaccent⁴⁵”. In order to depict her persona, Bregoli has embraced the interpretant signs present in hip-hop culture to which she was exposed through the Internet and social media, and applied them

to her public image. Signs like “toughness,” “defiance,” “aggressiveness” become stereotypes when removed from the experiences that created them such as oppression and racism. Hip-hop and the Black experience were reduced to mindless and provocative aggression, or “attention-seeking”. The show caused global outrage and propelled Bregoli to international stardom. She signed a multi-million record deal with Atlantic Records and started releasing rap music, again due to the stereotypization of rap music as “gangsta” and “tough”, while disregarding the socioeconomic factors that lead to the formation of gangs. It could be argued that the brand of Bhad Bhabie is centered around cultural appropriation, or that cultural appropriation is the unique selling proposition of Bhad Bhabie. After her career took off, Bregoli began adjusting her image to fit Black beauty standards. She braided her hair and darkened her skin, which caused accusations of “blackfishing”⁴⁶.

- 27 After decades of oppression due to skin color, oppression that is still at large today, it is only once “blackness” has been commodified through rap culture that it becomes desirable. It becomes a prop or a style that can be used and discarded once it inevitably becomes unfashionable. Once racial, largely immutable characteristics such as skin color, lip size, or body shape enter the fashion system, they are subject to trends and commodified.
- 28 Australian rapper Iggy Azalea has also been accused of cultural appropriation and blackfishing⁴⁷, especially in her music video for the song “I Am The Strip Club”⁴⁸ in which she appears several skin tones darker than usual. Critics were also fast to point out that the dancers she chose were all Black. A comparison between her image for the music video “Fancy”⁴⁹, in which she portrays the luxurious lifestyle of upper-class White Americans, and the music video for “I Am The Strip Club,” demonstrates the idea that blackness can be summoned to express morally questionable behaviors.
- 29 Following Lisa Rosenthal and Marci Lobel, one of the most pervasive racial stereotypes is that of a “Black female” who is assertive and sexually aggressive⁵⁰. This is reflected in the fetishization of Black physical features. Since hip-hop became widely popular there has been a sharp increase in surgical procedures based on the stereotypization of Black features which spilled over into wider media culture.

The Kardashian-Jenner clan pioneered a look of exaggerated lips and bottoms, both racially conditioned physical attributes, and attached to them the interpretant signs such as “femininity” and “femme fatale”. Kim Kardashian appeared on the cover of the Winter 2019 issue of *7 Hollywood* magazine with darkened skin, over-exaggerated hips and an Afro hairstyle, mimicking the natural texture of Afro-American hair. The Kardashians created their business empire around beauty products. Similar to Rogers⁵¹, Lenard and Balint emphasize that cultural appropriation is characterized by a power imbalance⁵² without adequate reciprocity, and this is especially problematic when it leads to large monetary gain by the appropriator. Kylie Jenner recently became one of the youngest billionaires in the world, although the real extent of her wealth has been disputed⁵³. Due to the popularity and media presence of the Kardashian-Jenners, the plastic surgery revenue surged, led by the potentially dangerous “Brazilian Butt Lift”, which was the most sought procedure according to the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery⁵⁴.

30 Although Afro-American culture has been subject to the most cases of cultural appropriation in recent times, any minority culture can become a source of symbols that are appropriated. American pop singer Katy Perry has regularly borrowed from American Indian, Asian and even Ancient Egyptian cultures. During the 2013 American Music Awards she performed her song “Unconditionally⁵⁵” dressed in a geisha-like attire which was coupled with a performance that catered to Western stereotypes of Asian women as shy, subservient and devoid of agency equivalent to “skimming a Wikipedia page, not a tribute based in any deeper understanding or desire for accuracy⁵⁶”. As the Japanese geisha moved from the Eastern to the Western cultural semiosphere, the symbolism of a learned court entertainer was reduced to a “shy, subservient mistress” and the traditional kimono dress transformed into a stage costume, a garment with no cultural significance and used only for aesthetic appeal with considerable deviations from the original kimono⁵⁷.

31 The fact that Perry sees cultural symbols as a commodity that can serve to enhance her artistic image is visible in her 2013 hit “Dark Horse⁵⁸”. The music video is constructed entirely out of decontextualized Egyptian imagery. In order to construct her artist image as a “powerful” and “fatal” woman, Perry renamed herself into “Katy Patra”

as a reference to Cleopatra VII Philopator, an Egyptian queen and the last ruler of the Ptolemaic Kingdom of Egypt⁵⁹. In ancient Egypt a pharaoh was considered not only a ruler but a representation of the divine on Earth, as each pharaoh was a descendant of the sun god Re and was responsible for maintaining the divine law *ma'at*⁶⁰.

- 32 Perry appears wearing classic Egyptian make-up with winged eye-liner. However, she is seen wearing both a black wig and a white-blond wig, a hair color that could never have existed in Ancient Egypt and which is more commonly found in Caucasians.
- 33 Black and white have in Western culture often symbolized good and evil⁶¹; therefore, the image of an Egyptian pharaoh is subordinate to the symbolism of the music video. Furthermore, with the lyrics “Make me your Aphrodite/Make me your one and only⁶²” Perry is referencing the Greek goddess of beauty, Aphrodite, while dressed as Cleopatra. In the video, religious symbols such as the ankh and the eye of Re are juxtaposed to her servants who appear with caricatured cat heads as symbols of the goddess Bastet. Her blonde wig is also sprayed with blue eye of Re symbols. The colors and mood of the music video are very vibrant, with pink walls and columns (femininity), blue court men (masculinity) and gold-robed cat servants (royalty). However, all the symbols of Egyptian culture are presented in an overly childish, borderline cartoonish way. One example is the pyramid, an ancient tomb of the pharaohs, which is brought to “Katy Patra” and her court in the form of American confectionery pastries.
- 34 The music video caused outrage in the Egyptian community and in the Muslim community due to a scene in the music video where “Katy Patra” burns a suitor to dust using her supernatural powers⁶³. The suitor was wearing a pendant of the Arabic word for “Allah”, and a member of the Muslim community in Great Britain, Shazad Iqbal, started an online petition for the removal of the symbol from the music video. The petition amassed over sixty thousand signatures and the production team behind the music video removed the pendant from the clip on Youtube⁶⁴.
- 35 When faced with accusations of cultural appropriation, music artists often resort to platitudes of artistic freedom or apologies out of supposed ignorance⁶⁵ to justify their exploitation of minority cultures for their branding and artist image, when in fact it is very often a lack

of imagination and creativity that prompts them to borrow. From the semiotic analysis of the corpus it is evident that very little, if any, interpretant signs associated with the cultures they borrow from are present in their artistic expression. This leads to further stereotyping and marginalization of already oppressed cultures.

Conclusion

- 36 In this paper I have argued that the semiotic method can reliably distinguish between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation and that within the corpus of the music industry, cultural appropriation serves as a unique selling point for the branding and image of musical artists. The corpus analysis has shown that it has been a systematic and deliberate process since the early beginnings of popular music. It is present across a variety of genres and styles, and the artists accused of cultural appropriation unanimously pertain to the Western cultural circle. This corroborates previous research on cultural appropriation which places it within a social power hierarchy as a form of cultural theft from subordinate cultures. Using Lotman's and Peirce's semiotic theories, cultural communities are understood as semiotic spaces or semiospheres, and the appropriation of symbols as stereotypization which entails the removal of interpretant signs from the borrowed symbol. Due to a power imbalance between the appropriator and appropriated, the result is further marginalization and loss of cultural identity in the subordinated cultures.
- 37 Cultural contact and cultural exchange are in today's digital and globalized world for the most part inevitable and this applies to the music industry as part of the larger entertainment industry. The semiotic method can aid in the process of cultural contact by providing insight into the formation and propagation of cultural symbols and their associated interpretant signs. Potential areas for further research include the film and the fashion industries. By facilitating deeper insight into the formation of cultural symbols and their role as adhesive elements of a culture, nearly all cases of cultural appropriation can be avoided. On the other hand, increasing the visibility of marginalized cultures in the media can present a more accurate portrayal of those cultures and aid in dispelling the misconceptions and generalizations which lead to the formation of stereotypes. Investigation and repres-

entation are stepping stones for the transition from cultural appropriation towards cultural appreciation.

NOTES

1 Patti Tamara Lenard and Peter Balint, “What Is (the Wrong of) Cultural Appropriation?”, *Ethnicities*, Vol. 20, No. 2, SAGE Publications, 9 Aug. 2019, p. 1-22. URL: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1468796819866498>, Accessed 20 Mar. 2022; Mayra Stephanie Monroy, *An Analysis of Cultural Appropriation in Fashion and Popular Media*, Ph.D. Thesis, Baylor University, 2018; Richard A. Rogers, “From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation: A Review and Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation”, *Communication Theory*, Vol. 16, No. 4, Oxford University Press (OUP), Nov. 2006, p. 474-503; James O. Young, *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts*, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

2 Richard A. Rogers, *op. cit.*

3 *Ibid.*, p. 478.

4 See, for example, Roy Shuker, *Popular Music: The Key Concepts*, London and New York, Routledge, 2005, p. xiii.

5 *Ibid.*

6 Reebee Garofalo, “Whose World, What Beat: The Transnational Music Industry, Identity, and Cultural Imperialism”, *The World of Music*, Vol. 35, No. 2, 1993, p. 19.

7 Tanner Mirrlees, *Global Entertainment Media: Between Cultural Imperialism and Cultural Globalization*, London and New York, Routledge, 2013, p. 10.

8 Callum Burke, “Cultural Appropriation and Orientalism: Elvis Presley vs. The Beatles”, *ResearchGate*, 2014. URL:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263279790_Cultural_Appropriation_and_Orientalism_Elvis_Presley_vs_The_Beatles, Accessed 20 Mar. 2022.

9 Ariana Grande’s artist image relies heavily on symbols demoting “youthfulness”, “playfulness” and “innocence”. To underscore these traits she has borrowed from east-Asian feminine imagery, notably Korean. Her eye-makeup, posing and clothing in the 2021 photoshoot by New York photographer Katia Temkin caused backlash for her attempt to emulate racially

determined characteristics, such as Asian monolid eyes. Gino Spocchia, “Ariana Grande accused of ‘Asian-fishing’ with photoshoot”, *The Independent*, Dec. 2021. URL: www.independent.co.uk/life-style/ariana-grande-asian-fishing-photos-b1971420.html, Accessed 9 Jul. 2023.

10 Zaina Hussain, “Understanding Cultural Appropriation: Through Katy Perry’s Music Videos”, 6 Apr. 2018. URL: <https://visualculture.blog.torontomu.ca/understanding-cultural-appropriation-through-katy-perrys-music-videos/>, Accessed 10 Jul. 2023.

11 Juri Lotman, Marek Tamm, Brian C. Baer (ed.), *Culture, Memory and History: Essays in Cultural Semiotics*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p. 5.

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RÉSUMÉS

Français

Le but de ces recherches est d'examiner le phénomène de l'appropriation culturelle dans l'industrie musicale dans le contexte de la sémiotique culturelle (J. Lotman, 2019; R. Barthes, 1967). Le présent travail examinera les significations symboliques associées à l'image projetée par les artistes musicaux. Compte tenu de la complexité du problème, on utilisera une approche sémiotique multidisciplinaire. On analysera des symboles, des aspects vestimentaires et des gestes reconnus comme étant des expressions culturellement appropriées de l'image que s'en fait l'artiste en question. Étant donné la rareté de recherches existantes sur l'appropriation culturelle au niveau de l'industrie musicale, nous postulons que la sémiotique culturelle est à même de fournir un aperçu sur les origines et les divers impacts de l'appropriation culturelle (Lenard et Balint, 2019), en rapport avec l'image projetée des musiciens *pop*. La recherche sera d'ordre diachronique, avec des études de cas depuis les débuts de la musique pop (Elvis Presley) jusqu'à des musiciens contemporains (Eminem, Iggy Azalea, Ariana Grande). On entend ainsi prouver l'incidence croissante du phénomène d'appropriation culturelle dans un laps de temps déterminé, conséquence d'une interaction accrue et de changements survenus dans la consommation de musique numérique. L'analyse sémiotique se concentrera sur des aspects vestimentaires (Barthes, 1967), des gestes (Morris, 1971), et sur certains signes physiques

supplémentaires, caractéristiques de chaque artiste, susceptibles d'être rattachés à l'appropriation culturelle (Lenard et Balint, 2019; Mosley et Biernat, 2021). Chacun de ces aspects distinctifs fera l'objet d'une comparaison quant à sa fonction sémiotique au sein d'une culture autochtone donnée par rapport à la culture appropriée. Le symbolisme d'une telle fonction sera mis en relation sémiotique afin d'identifier les détournements de sens occasionnés par le transfert culturel. Les résultats de l'analyse sémiotique du présent travail mettront en lumière les éléments culturels en jeu, en lien avec la tendance croissante de l'appropriation culturelle au sein de l'industrie musicale, et démontreront comment l'appropriation culturelle est devenue une tendance perceptible et installée dans la musique contemporaine.

English

The aim of this study is to examine the phenomenon of cultural appropriation in the music industry within the context of cultural semiotics (J. Lotman, 2019; R. Barthes, 1967). This research paper will examine the symbolic meanings associated with the projected image of a music artist. Given the complexity of the problem, we will use a multi-disciplinary semiotic approach. We will analyze the symbols and signs of clothing and gestures that are recognized as culturally appropriated expressions of the artist's image. Since the existing research on cultural appropriation within the music industry has been scarce, we believe that the semiotics of culture can provide insight into the origins and effects of cultural appropriation (Lenard and Balint, 2019) connected to the projected image of popular musicians. The corpus will be evaluated diachronically, with case studies ranging from the early stages of popular music (Elvis Presley) to contemporary musicians (Eminem, Iggy Azalea, Ariana Grande). We expect to find a rising incidence of cultural appropriation along the temporal axis, which is a consequence of both increased connectivity and the shift to digital music consumption. The semiotic analysis will focus on clothing (Barthes, 1967), gestures (Morris, 1971) and some additional physical aspects of artist branding, which are candidates for cultural appropriation (Lenard and Balint, 2019; Mosley and Biernat, 2021). For each aspect, a comparison between its semiotic function within the indigenous culture and the appropriated culture will be made. The corresponding symbolism of the function will then be assessed from a semiotic perspective with a focus on the shift in meaning as a result of such cultural transfer. The results of the semiotic analysis will shed light on the cultural elements at play in the rising trend of cultural appropriation within the music industry and uncover why cultural appropriation has become a trend among contemporary musicians.

INDEX

Mots-clés

transfert culturel, appropriation culturelle, sémiotique culturelle, symboles, industrie musicale

Keywords

cultural transfer, cultural appropriation, semiotics of culture, symbols, music industry

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