

The Case For Cultural Appropriation: Part 2

June 11, 2022 Category: American Culture

Download as PDF

“I am human. I think nothing human is alien to me.”

—African writer, Publius Terentius of Carthage (a.k.a. “Terence”)

When Paul Simon did a collaborative project with Zulu musicians in 1985-86, a strange thing happened—at least by today’s standards. Almost no one accused him of wrongfully “appropriating” African culture. As it so happened, “mbaqanga” permeates Simon’s landmark album, “Graceland”. His trans-cultural effort was lauded by fellow musicians around the globe. Very few people begrudged him for incorporating Zulu music / dance into his repertoire; and—during performances—even donning traditional Zulu garb.

Times have changed. 36 years later, when Gwen Stefani did a collaborative project with Jamaican musicians, Sean Paul and Shenseea, there was outrage amongst a cadre of pettifoggers. Never mind that Jamaican musicians were actively involved in the project—openly celebrating Jamaican culture. Right on cue, Cul-Ap-phobes feigned indignation. {1}

What’s going on here? One wonders what might have happened to alter attitudes toward (what is now often referred to as) “cultural appropriation”. Looking back, we might ask: Did it matter that Teena Marie was not a Black woman? Her avid fans—overwhelmingly African Americans—were flattered by the adoption of soul in her repertoire. Most took it as tribute to their culture; so she was (almost) never begrudged for some sort of infelicitous “appropriation”. In the same vain, we might wonder: Did (non-racist) Country Music fans—overwhelmingly White—take exception to the fact that Charley Frank Pride was Black? No. Why not?

Before explicating what “cultural appropriation” is, we might begin by defining what *culture* is. In terms of memetics, it is a collection of customs and beliefs. In other words: It is a regimen of rituals and the narratives that explain them. However, simply listing a series of STYLES (cuisine, attire, literature, architecture, music, dance, and social norms) seems inadequate. More than a set of practices and ideas, culture is a pattern of meaning—a pattern that is made manifest in everyday life. Culture is how we interpret and give meaning to the world in which we find ourselves. It is how we express ourselves—and how we make sense of things—in a communal manner.

When people at different times and places do this under different circumstances, they end up relating to each other in different ways. Consequently, we can’t help but wind up with different cultures. This outcome is not only inevitable, it is salubrious.

Since we are all human, we can often relate to how people who are different from us go about doing this. So while cultures are different, they’re all doing the same KIND of thing. At the end of the day, we are all just interpreting and giving meaning to the world in which we find ourselves.

What we find, then, is that cross-cultural interaction not only helps us learn more about each other, it helps us learn more about ourselves. And, most importantly, it shows us—irrespective of our culture—what it is to be human.

So how do we get from this to “Gringos making tacos?! How dare you?!” Well, for any marginalized community, defense mechanisms have been built up to protect—that is: preserve—their culture. This is done by maintaining memetic integrity, which involves establishing clear-cut lines as to where a culture begins and ends. It’s about staking one’s claim on what defines one’s community AS SUCH.

The problem is that this stringent demarcation fosters parochialism. Such insularity is never a good thing; as it is counter to the spirit of cosmopolitanism. It makes it far more difficult to relate to anyone outside of the designated in-group, thereby attenuating human solidarity.

That’s where cultural appropriation (hereafter: “Cul-Ap”) becomes a point of contention. By adopting a cultural element of another, we are opting to partake in their way of life. We are putting ourselves in their shoes. This is salubrious so long as it is done out of good will. It is deleterious when it is done to demean / mock. So the issue becomes: Is the cultural participation being done in good or bad faith?

As we survey the memetic landscape of today’s globalized society, we find that elements of one culture routinely intermingle with elements of various other cultures in unpredictable ways. Someone at one location on the planet will invariably encounter a meme from another location on the planet, and—if it strikes their fancy—will incorporate it into their own memetic repertoire. In doing so, sometimes they’ll recognize that it is an exogenous cultural element; sometimes they won’t. Over time, they make it their own, often with little regard for its origins. Few who play chess think of it as partaking in medieval Persian culture. And none of those who deck the halls with boughs of holly consider themselves to be partaking in the pagan traditions of ancient Rome. Why not? Nobody takes umbrage with THEIR OWN Cul-Ap; as they blithely disregard the provenance of whatever they’re doing that they consider to be endogenous to their culture. Hence a phobia of “cultural appropriation” can’t help but involve highly selective grievances.

Those who have compunctions with Cul-Ap qua Cul-Ap (hereafter referred to as “Cul-Ap-phobes”) cavil about imagined improprieties (in one context) even as they invariably partake in analogous improprieties (in virtually every other context). There’s something Orwellian about all this. We might wonder: To comply with their proposed ordinances, what would they have us do?

While navigating the world’s roiling memetic ecosystem, it’s as if everyone were obliged to seek approval from an officially-appointed meme-adoption adjudicator (presumably located at the local Ministry Of Culture) before engaging in any activity that might be construed—by someone, somewhere—as “cultural appropriation”. The message: Be careful what you do; because if others did it before you did, you’re guilty of having illicitly adopted a meme. (For how many things this would disqualify from contemporary culture, see my essays on Mythemes.)

This manufactured imbroglio seems to be especially acrimonious whenever we’re dealing with a cultural element associated with the Orient (read: non-Christian, non-white precincts of the globe) in the event that it crops up in the Occident (read: white Christendom). The grievances of Cul-Ap-phobes, then, are based on a false dichotomy (involving the fetishization of “the West”), as I discuss in my essay on “The Universality Of Morality”.

As we saw in part one of this essay, the meme-sequestration regime prescribed by Cul-Ap-phobes is based on a glaring ignorance of world history; not to mention a fundamental mis-understanding of how culture-in-general works. Cul-Ap-phobes demand that we all pretend CURRENT semiotic schemes were AS IS since the beginning of time. This obliges us to ignore—or even elide—the genealogy that yielded any given meme’s current semiotic incarnation. Such officiousness stems from temporal conceit; as it asks us to

suppose that the way things are NOW is the way they've always been. (African Americans often don't dreadlocks? Well, then, that's the way it must have been ALL ALONG. Proceed accordingly!) Such obtuse thinking is the hallmark of parochialism (i.e. the opposite of cosmopolitanism).

Examples of this blinkered worldview are legion. Take, for instance, the vibrant prints created by the renowned Lebanese clothing designer, Alfred Shaheen, who lived in Hawaii for much of his life. He has been castigated by a coterie of Cul-Ap-phobes. Why? Well, you see, he had the audacity to incorporate Polynesian—as well as Indian—patterns into his outfits. The patterns he used paid homage to some of the world's most beautiful cultural achievements.

Shaheen wasn't using the patterns as a gimmick (which would have been a problem); he was honoring a cultural legacy (a good thing). He wasn't trivializing the patterns in a cheap gambit to monetize them (which would have been a problem); he was expressing a deep and profound aesthetic appreciation for them (a good thing). He wasn't taking credit for others' sartorial attainments and passing them off as his own (which would have been a problem); he was paying tribute to another culture's contribution to the world of fashion (a good thing). Indeed, everything he did was laudable.

Never mind all that. Cul-Ap-phobes have seen fit to engage in carping—and, of course, calumny—against the late Shaheen; and those who promote him. To get their campaign of obloquy seem to seem to have merit, they conflate memetic adoption, with something they call “appropriation” (with an emphasis on exploitation). Such legerdemain is used to rationalize a program of contrived indignation; thereby telegraphing to like-minded compatriots that they're somehow “woke”. So far as they can see it, being churlish is the optimal way to showcase their intrepidity.

Of course, whenever presenting a new outfit, Shaheen gave full credit to the source-culture; as the entire point was to celebrate it. But no matter. Those who make a sport out of being “insulted”—that is: pretending to be aggrieved—feel justified in claiming “harm” or “injury”...in some ethereal sense that only THEY seem to understand. The contention is that they are harmed / injured whenever anything causes them even the least bit of psychological discomfort. In doing so, they can assert victim status. Victim of WHAT? Of “cultural appropriation”...re-conceptualized as “assault” or “theft” or “violence” or “oppression”.

Trans-cultural affinities are thus seen as a thought-crime. There is something palpably Orwellian about the faux outrage expressed by the more unctuous Cul-Ap-phobes. This is a feature, not a glitch. Indeed, the excoriation of Shaheen (and those who have donned his outfits) is straight out of the Cul-Ap-phobia playbook—replete with demands for piety; and, of course, shunning for heresy. Alas, such hyper-censoriousness is indicative of p.c., which sees the clutching of pearls as a valiant act.

Think all this is a tad bit nutty? You'd be correct. Like p.c.-mongers in general, Cul-Ap-phobes turn being “offended” into an avocation. Their puritanical mindset is misconstrued as a sign of rectitude. Make no mistake: There is a method to their madness; as each blasphemy law serves an important purpose. By feigning “offense”, participants in this daffy charade can accuse their targets of some irredeemable transgression—be it “assault”, “theft”, “violence”, “oppression”, or some form of exploitation. Why? So that they can then claim to feel “unsafe”. Unsafe from what, exactly? Well, from the perils of being “offended”.

Is there any assault / theft / violence / oppression / exploitation ACTUALLY occurring? Of course, not. But that's not the point. It is the INDICTMENT ITSELF that does all the work. The trick is to engage in maudlin theatrics whenever experiencing a fleeting moment of discomfort...as a result of whatever frivolous transgression can be conjured from the ether. (They're standing up for cultural integrity, after

all.) Benefits to the source culture? Zero. But no matter: They have seized the opportunity to virtue signal. And that's all they're really interested in.

After all, the fundamental maxim of p.c. is quite straight-forward: The rest of the world is responsible for ensuring that *I* never feel the least bit unsettled by anything. Ever. Other than stemming from a high degree of narcissism, this tendentious psychological orientation seems antithetical to the spirit of pluralism.

In witnessing these oleaginous proceedings, it's difficult to say what motivates any given Cul-Ap-phobe. It's certainly not human solidarity; as they aim for division at every turn. Some are simply hungry for attention. Most are seeking some sort of validation. ALL of them are a combination of egregiously misinformed, horribly insecure, and tremendously dishonest...with some neuroses and histrionics thrown in for good measure.

This is all part of the grievance-industrial-complex, fueled by an abiding p.c. mania propounded by battalions of Potemkin Progressives. Cul-Ap-phobes' only contribution to the public discourse is finger-wagging. Their charge is to cavil about imagined crimes...while ignoring anything that might actually promote the Progressive cause.

There are myriad contexts within which we might assess the moral status of Cul-Ap. Let's consider literary influences across cultures. My contention is that we should be grateful that Chaucer (an English writer) riffed off of Boccaccio (an Italian writer). The Canterbury Tales are, in part, a literary appropriation of the Decameron. And to that, we should say, "Bravo!"

Shakespeare lifted his plays from myriad sources—most of it not from his native England. And thank god he did. The bard from Stratford-upon-Avon did not have to be a Moor himself to write the compelling Moorish character (Aaron)—a man who was romantically involved with a Gothic queen (Tamora). Why not? "Titus Andronicus" captures a universal theme: the tragedy that lurks behind all vengeance—irrespective of ethnic background. The fact that the play's key characters are Roman, Arab, and German reminds us that human nature transcends tribal affiliations. As is the case with ALL great literature, the point is to put oneself in another's shoes. The same cosmopolitan spirit undergirds ANY Cul-Ap that is done in good faith: wanting to walk in the shoes of those who come from another walk of life. In the end, we're all human. Shakespeare recognized this, which is why his stories were not limited to his fellow Englishmen.

So why all the fuss over Cul-Ap NOW? Well, there is good reason for the concern—broadly speaking. We are now more cognizant of—and thus sensitive to—power disparities between ethnic groups, and the incidence of domination / marginalization / exploitation concomitant therewith. Be that as it may, it is possible to get carried away with establishing prophylaxes against social injustices. When we encounter some of the more obstreperous caviling on the matter of Cul-Ap, we find that there is typically some sort of neurosis (regarding cultural transmission) involved. Hence the neologism: Cul-Ap-phobia. As it turns out, many Cul-Ap-phobes are simply looking for something—ANYTHING, no matter how frivolous—to complain about. This is in keeping with the social pathology known as "political correctness". Others are downright racist THEMSELVES—as with those who castigated Awkwafina for using a "blaccent".

The mantra of identity politics amounts to something rather anti-social: Instead of celebrating diversity, we should be wary of it. This is a message from which genuine Progressives recoil; as it is an explicit repudiation of cosmopolitanism. Rather than embracing our shared humanity, it admonishes us to ignore it in favor of a divisive framing. It prescribes a way of seeing the world based explicitly on demographic categorization schemes. This is incongruous with the cosmopolitan ideal.

It might be noted that there are social phenomena that are, indeed, highly problematic; yet have nothing to do with Cul-Ap—namely: people of one ethnicity **PRETENDING TO BE** someone from another ethnicity (invariably according to a commercially viable stereotype). This is sometimes referred to as “X-fishing”, where X is the ethnicity being simulated. (There is a crucial distinction to be made between simulation and emulation.) The most notorious examples of this are blackface, brownface, yellowface, and redface. But that’s not Cul-Ap. Done in good faith, Cul-Ap is not a cheap caricature. It doesn’t mock others; it engenders human solidarity.

When it comes to Cul-Ap, the only grievances worth taking seriously concern either **(A)** improper—or lack of—**attribution**; or **(B)** according insufficient gravity to the meme. Let’s briefly look at each:

(A) is a matter of giving credit where credit is due. Shall we indict Elvis Presley for re-doing Big Mama Thornton’s “Hound Dog”? Yes and no. The sin wasn’t the Cul-Ap; it was the lack of attribution. With respect to the first (white) practitioners of rock ’n roll, credit is due to Chuck Berry and Little Richard. But, then again, even those (black) men were influenced by an exogenous culture—namely: hillbilly / country music; as well as the folk music (black **AND** white) that predated them. And as for “Hound Dog”... As it turns out, the song was written by two Jewish guys: Leiber and Stoller.

(B) involves a flippant use of a meme that has been sanctified in some way by those in the source culture. For example, one might cavalierly don a piece of clothing that commands a deep meaning for those hailing from a certain tradition—treating the item as a nifty yet dispensable accessory. This grievance pertains to those who heedlessly partake in an exogenous cultural element without regard for the role it plays within its native milieu. When we engage in Cul-Ap in a frivolous manner (merely to attract attention, to make a profit, or to get a laugh), we are—at best—being petty. Otherwise, we’re just being jerks.

The qualm with neither **(A)** nor **(B)** is with Cul-Ap per se. Rather, the issue is whether or not the Cul-Ap is being done in good faith. Felicitously, such (legitimate) grievances can be remedied in relatively straightforward ways. Give credit where credit is due; and avoid supercilious participation. In other words, give appropriate recognition and don’t be disrespectful. It’s not rocket science.

We might think of it this way: The problem with people being ignorant is ignorance. The problem with people being shallow is shallowness. And mischaracterization is always wrong because it is dishonest. Nobody likes to be caricatured by bystanders who do not have a full understanding of them. Recognizing this prompts a call for common courtesy, not for cultural segregation.

When considering these matters, it’s helpful to bear in mind that cultural sharing is not a zero-sum game. Often, **EVERYONE** benefits when Cul-Ap is done in good faith. Little Richard himself observed of Elvis that “he was an integrator. Elvis was a blessing.” How so? He correctly noted that the white-male-dominated American music industry “wouldn’t let Black people through. [Elvis] opened the door for Black music.” There is a lesson to learn here. Cultural integrators bring people together by elucidating shared sensibilities; by exploring affinities that may have otherwise gone un-noticed. By engaging in Cul-Ap, they enable us to see the humanity in those who are different from us.

So are we to begrudge artists for stylistic preferences culled from cultures other than their own? We might pose this question as follows: Was Eminem a good thing or a bad thing for rap? Dr. Dre provided us with a decisive answer.

Alas. Cul-Ap-phobes decry all trans-cultural adoption—as with, say, the Chinese-American performer, Audrey “Nuna” Chu adopting a certain musical idiom pioneered by African Americans (R&B); or the

British chef, Jamie Oliver preparing his signature “punchy jerk rice” (a Jamaican flavor). In assaying such cases, what we discover is that there is no trans-cultural appreciation without some form of trans-cultural participation.

When it comes to culture, EVERYTHING is—effectively—a remix. Ben E. King incorporated Gospel and Latin-American music, as well as classical German orchestration and Jewish composition. Meanwhile, Spyro Gyra brought together Jews, WASPs, Latinos, and African Americans. Such developments should be applauded by musicians of ALL stripes.

When transmitted between cultures, cultural elements invariably undergo some sort of metamorphosis—salutary mutations that result from (what is effectively) memetic synthesis. Rarely is this by design. It is the result of an organic process of human interaction across cultural lines—something we should ENCOURAGE. Meanwhile, entire cultures THEMSELVES undergo a metamorphosis—part of which is due to cultural hybridization. In terms of memetics, we behold an organic process by which a new meme is grafted onto an older, extant meme—yielding a novel meme. This is how ANY culture is formed from constituent elements.

It helps to assess all this from a temporal perspective. Cul-Ap is an on-going process. It has no discrete beginning; and it is forever open-ended. Using Cul-Ap as an indictment only makes sense if we take a snap-shot at a specific place and time; and pretend that it represents a timeless truth; some immutable exigency that we tamper with at our peril. When it comes to our most hallowed cultural elements, this impression is tempting but erroneous. Upon recognizing this, we find that Cul-Ap-phobia is based on a misconception of what cultural elements are and how they work. As I showed in part 1 of this essay, the notion of meme-ownership (by a delimited group) is a dubious one. For to lend it credence, one is forced to disregard how the meme came to be as it is in the first place. This invariably obliges us to honoring arbitrary (read: self-serving) timelines.

“Dreadlocks, you say? Oh, well that began with African Americans!” One may as well contend that Catholic schoolgirls invented pigtails. As discussed earlier, dreadlocks had been used by Native Americans, Indians, and Norsemen for CENTURIES before they became a staple of African-American culture. And they were used in ancient Egypt, Greece, Mesopotamia, and Persia long before even that. It almost makes one wonder who in the world HASN’T donned them at one point or another. So who owns the dreadlock? Well, nobody. And everybody. One may as well ask who owns braided hair or eye-liner.

Such gratuitous acrimony is a reminder that cultural segregation divides us. By stark contrast, Cul-Ap—done in good faith—highlights our shared humanity. This is especially so when it comes to artistic expression. The cosmopolitan ideal doesn’t merely allow for the latter; it demands it.

Human solidarity entails going beyond the provincial mindset of delimited ethnic commitments. We might ask: How many who have contributed to the Western canon in the past four centuries have borrowed from Cervantes...often without having cited the iconic Spanish author? That Don Quixote was composed in Spanish is important; but it is not a BOUNDARY CONDITION. *Creativity transcends ethnicity*. It has always been that way. The ancient Romans riffed off of the ancient Greeks. The ancient Jews riffed off of the ancient Assyrians. The earliest Christians riffed off of virtually everyone they encountered; and the first Muslims did the same.

The world is festooned with such examples. We typically think of kefir as coming from Russian culture, but it was actually started by the descendants of the [k]Hazars—namely the Karachai and Balkars. So it was originally Turkic, then re-branded as a staple of Russian culture.

Shall we begrudge EVERYONE IN HISTORY for having engaged in some sort of Cul-Ap? Of course not. But WHY not? In part 1 of this essay, I called out the self-appointed arbiters of cultural transference for betraying the spirit of cosmopolitanism. It is worth noting that the inverse of Cul-Ap-phobia is a fear of cultural contamination. Both neuroses stem from conceit; as both involve delusions about maintaining (a chimerical) cultural purity.

Says the Cul-Ap-phobe: Who is better positioned to ward off those pesky bugaboos than a cadre of captious litigators—charged with routinely monitoring who is using what memes? (We might note that one thing that INGSOC was missing was a Ministry of Cultural Purity.) Whether it's alarmism about cultural appropriation or about cultural contamination, we are forced to contend with these commissars of culture. Both kinds mandate a regime of cultural segregation—though from opposite perspectives: one to prevent memetic egress, the other to prevent memetic ingress. For the Cul-Ap-phobe, such egress is not seen as sharing; it's seen as a kind of theft. And such ingress is not seen as pluralism; it's seen as a kind of infection.

As discussed previously, the notion of cultural purity is illusory; as all culture is derivative—the result of a long process of Cul-Ap from different sources at different times for different reasons, going back to time immemorial. To find a culture that did NOT form from Cul-Ap, one would be forced to go back to the Sumerians.

Recall the example of spring-tide. The Assyrian celebration of the vernal equinox, Akitu[m]—dating from the Iron Age—made its way into the Aramaic / Syriac vernacular. It makes sense that this occasion was later designated for Passover in Judaic lore—that is: during the month of “Nisan[u]” (an Assyrian term based on the Sumerian term, “nisag”, meaning “first fruits” or “rebirth”). Appropriated from the Babylonians during the Exilic Period, the Aramaic was later rendered in Classical Hebrew as “Arah Nisanu”. It is now simply known as “Aviv” (“abib” was early Semitic for the first ripening; i.e. rebirth).

Meanwhile, the ancient Persian holiday, Nowruz—also dating from the Iron Age—was appropriated by most of the world's Turkic communities—each of which made it their own. There even came to be Afghan, Georgian, Albanian, Kurdish, and Bengali versions. Later on, practitioners of the Baha'i Faith adopted a version for their creed. What we find, then, is a veritable Saturnalia of cultural appropriation across the globe. According to Cul-Ap-phobes, every one of these communities is “guilty” of Cul-Ap. So we must ask ourselves: Is this something we should condemn?

No sane person would answer in the affirmative. If Jews, Christians, and Muslims were forced to jettison every part of their religious tradition that had pagan origins, there would be almost nothing left. If the United States purged itself of every cultural element that originated in a foreign land, the only parts of Americana remaining would be basketball and hamburgers. (Apple pie? Nope. Brought overseas by the Swedes and Dutch. Cowboys? Nope. That's from Mexican vaqueros. Baseball? Nope. Started as rounders in Ireland.) Negate all Cul-Ap going back to the Iron Age, and human civilization would be still be comprised of the Maya (in Meso-America), the Celts (in Europe), the Copts (in Egypt), the Mycenaeans (in Greece), the Assyrians (in Mesopotamia), the Kedarites (in Arabia), the Achaemenids (in Persia), the Vedic peoples (in India), and the Zhou Chinese (in the Yellow River Valley): all of them culturally segregated for the rest of eternity.

As mentioned earlier, we all like to believe that OUR OWN consecrated memes are unique to us; scoffing at the idea that they might be derivative. We insist on seeing novelty where it doesn't exist; then decry Cul-Ap the moment we disapprove of an isolated instance of memetic transference. Consider the twelve days of Christmas. “Zagmuk” was the Sumerian celebration of the winter solstice. It was comprised of 12

days. As the tale goes, the primary god, Marduk was slain...and was then resurrected on the spring equinox. (This should sound rather familiar.) That was during the Bronze Age. {2}

A rudimentary knowledge of history is all that is needed to disabuse Cul-Ap-phobes of their peculiar gripe; as the gripe only seems credible to the most obtuse thinkers. I submit that a basic understanding of how culture-in-general works is all that is needed to attenuate this daffy neurosis. Caviling about Cul-Ap, one may as well hem and haw over the fact that all the world's peoples happen to breath oxygen.

How, then, shall we think about memetic transference?

Consider "cumbia". Since this dance style eventually migrated to other Latin American cultures from Columbia, do all other Latinos owe a debt to Colombians? Perhaps. But wait. Cumbia is essentially just a Latin take on belly dancing...which was popularized by Arabs, Turks, and Persians during the Middle Ages. Even THEY were not the originators, as the dance style likely originated in Pharaonic Egypt. (In Arabic, the style is referred to as "raqs sharqi", meaning "Oriental dance". In typical Latin American fashion, it was rendered a partner dance.) As it happens, belly dancing also led to "flamenco" dancing (also a partner dance) in Andalusia—first amongst the Romani, before eventually catching on with Spaniards. So what are we to make of all this? Is there something sinister afoot?

Let's answer that (absurd) question by posing another question: Shall the Belgians and Swiss thank the Aztecs for chocolate? (The name derives from the Nahuatl "cacahuatl".) If so, they presumably owe a massive debt to all Meso-Americans. Bear in mind that when Coenraad Johannes van Houten created Dutch cocoa, he was engaging in Cul-Ap. After all, he co-opted a hallmark of Native American culture from a people. Was Coenraad being iniquitous? Don't be ridiculous. His adaptation was largely the consequence of him sharing the same planet as Native Americans.

When Morgan Bullock (an African American from Richmond, Virginia) pursued her passion in Irish Dancing, it is disingenuous to contend that she was pilfering from the Celtic legacy. She wasn't extorting Irish culture; she was paying tribute to it. Indeed, the DANCING may have been Irish, but SHE didn't have to be.

The question remains: Might it be said that Morgan was "appropriating" something from an exogenous culture? Sure. Should the Irish feel slighted by this? That would be a peculiar reaction to what she was doing. It would be like begrudging Yo-Yo Ma for performing a concerto on his cello that had been composed by Bach for the harpsichord.

Cul-Ap sometimes involves black dancers performing Irish dances; and sometimes it involves Chinese musicians performing German music.

Perhaps Morgan will adapt Irish Dancing to hip-hop, creating a novel (hybridized) style...as occurred with belly dancing (Middle Eastern) to flamenco (Andalusian) to cumbia (Colombian). Appropriation is—after all—the engine of emerging culture. That's how older cultures got there themselves. We mustn't begrudge these cultural mavens for doing what our progenitors did in the first place.

Demanding that Cul-Ap be proscribed is opposed to the cosmopolitan spirit. Indeed, to have a problem with Cul-Ap is to have a problem with CULTURE ITSELF. Memes propagate across cultural lines because no meme is tied to any given culture by some immutable law of the universe. It's why the British don't take umbrage when Americans say, "It's as American as apple pie." (The pie is originally from England; apples originated in Kazakhstan.) And it's why Americans don't take umbrage when culinary maestros from Africa or Asia create their own ethnic variation on the scrumptious dessert. After all,

EVERYONE loves apple pie.

The indemnification of memes does not preclude ACTUAL exploitation; it simply diverts our attention from the structural inequalities (power asymmetries) that REALLY account for the more privileged exploiting subalterns. Cul-Ap no more contributes to marginalization than the world's Muslims were denigrated when Colombians inaugurated "cumbia".

Cul-Ap-phobia ends up being a huge distraction. It is no secret that there are far more important things to concern ourselves with than who "owns" apple pie...or chocolate...or belly dancing. We live in a world with massive structural inequalities, in which certain communities are marginalized... and oppressed... and exploited. Socio-economic injustices run rampant throughout society. So we might ask: At the end of the day, does it really matter whether this or that teenage girl celebrates a "quinceañera" (Meso-American) or a "sweet sixteen" birthday? Answer: No. Heck, she may as well do both. And we may as well throw in a Bat Mitzvah-style candle-lighting ceremony while we're at it.

In what other contexts might we illustrate the salutary nature of Cul-Ap? Let's look at ethnic cuisines, and see how culinary practices have affected one another. Why? Sharing food is a time-honored way to engender comity between different communities. Indeed, "breaking bread" with one another is one of the oldest ways to forge bonds with wayfarers. Our shared humanity is exemplified by EATING together; and this is especially so when we treat each other to our most hallowed recipes from days of yore. Cordial culinary transmission is yet another reminder that trans-cultural exchange ATTENUATES alterity; and is one of the first steps in eliminating the marginalization of minority communities (who are often seen as "other" by those in a position of privilege).

Today, many cuisines are drawn from what is effectively a global pantry—a process whereby culinary practitioners use ingredients from around the world, and do so at their own discretion. There's nothing sinister about this. For it is just humans in one place appreciating things traditionally used by humans in another place. In assaying this phenomenon, we may wish to bear in mind that...

- **Chervil** is originally from **France**.
- **Dill** is originally from the **Slavic region**.
- **Dukkah** and **thyme** are originally from **Egypt**.
- **Tahini** is originally from **the Levant**.
- **Cumin** is originally from **the Eurasian Steppes**.
- **Rosemary** is originally from **Mesopotamia**.
- **Saffron** is originally from **Persia**.
- **Turmeric** and **mustard** are originally from **India**.
- **Ginger** and **coriander** (a.k.a. "cilantro") are originally from **China**.
- **Basil** and **lemon-grass** are originally from **Southeast Asia**.
- **Yuzu-kosho** and **kimchi** are originally from **Japan**.
- **Sambal** is originally from **Java**.
- **Nutmeg**, **mace**, and **cloves** from the **Maluku Islands** of the South Pacific

And don't forget: **paprika**, **vanilla**, and **chocolate** are originally from **Meso-America**.

Willful ignorance is required to not realize that, when it comes to the culinary arts, these are just INGREDIENTS, not marks of divine ordinance. Such items have been culled from various flora, which—surprise, surprise—tend to grow in some places rather than in others.

To recognize the fatuity of decrying Cul-Ap whenever signature elements of "ethnic" cuisines intermix,

one need only concede that every ingredient that has ever existed originally came from SOMEWHERE.

When the Japanese adopted “concha” from the Portuguese, rendering it “melonpan”, was this a crime? Probably not any more than when the Portuguese started eating sushi. Meanwhile, curry ended up becoming a big hit in Japan (as with currypan), with a distinct style that barely resembled the Indian version. Do Indians hold this against the Japanese? Nope. Meanwhile, the Japanese are perfectly fine with Indians eating sashimi.

When it comes to assaying how cultural interaction influences the dietary predilections of respective peoples, indigenous botanical exigencies are historically relevant. (Bordeaux comes from the soils of Bordeaux, Champaign comes from the soils of Champaign, Burgundy comes from the soils of Burgundy, and Cognac comes from the soils of Cognac.) Morally, though, such exigencies are entirely beside the point.

Culinary styles that were, at one point, the signature trait of a particular culture end up migrating across cultural lines. Such memetic dispersion is only natural—which is why fajitas, quesadillas, and chimichangas have become ubiquitous throughout the Occident...in spite of the fact that they happen to be offshoots of Mexican fare. Stylistic choices affect one another, whether it’s food or clothing or anything else. (Imagine if Cajun food were limited to New Orleans.)

The salient issue is proper attribution—something Cul-Ap-phobes tend to know—or care—very little about. Trans-cultural adoption is about giving credit where credit is due; and THAT requires one to know something about world history (how cultures have interacted over the course of centuries—nay, over the course of millennia). Such inquiries can be tremendously edifying.

Alas. Cul-Ap-phobes are not interested in edification; as they are too busy with “call out” culture to concern themselves with such frivolous endeavors as, say, generating awareness and forging global human solidarity. They’d much rather segregate cultures than appreciate them.

There is a valid concern about those who are mendacious enough to adopt a meme from elsewhere, then pass it off as their own. In such cases, the problem isn’t the adoption per se; it is the dishonesty. Incorporating “exotic” ingredients is not some sort of “cultural theft”. It is, in fact, the way that the culinary arts have worked since time immemorial. Any given item is invariably going to be a novelty to someone somewhere at some point in time; as every place on Earth has social norms from one historical period to the next (of which certain things are NOT a part). It is no crime to find something “foreign” if it is, indeed, unfamiliar. After all, what is and isn’t familiar is a matter of historical accident.

The key is how people treat—and react to—such encounters: with conceit and superciliousness...or with an open mind and open heart. A genuine appreciation for the new meme’s origins makes Cul-Ap MORE appealing; not less. If we’re truly concerned about empowering marginalized communities, unabashed cosmopolitanism is what matters. This means giving credit where credit is due; and according respect wherever it is warranted.

Can one purloin a cultural element? As discussed earlier, barring I.P. (which is simply a legal construct), memes cannot be pilfered. And so it goes: Where Cul-Ap-phobes see some sort of memetic heist, cosmopolitans see cultural enrichment. The latter recognize that instances of cross-pollination are a salutary development for mankind; not something to be denounced.

Calls for cultural segregation are indicative of hyper-provincialism. Undergirding this act of censure is a myopic way of seeing the wider world—a mentality that hampers efforts to forge universal human

solidarity. Never mind the fact that the cultural elements Cul-Ap-phobes purport to be “protecting” were—in almost all cases—THEMSELVES appropriated from antecedent cultures; the declaration is: “Now that these memes have been declared OURS, nobody else shall be permitted to adopt them ever again!” So much for “as American as apple pie”; as apple pie was British before it was American.

But wait. The kind of dough known as short-crust pastry was developed by a Norman (Guillaume Tirel) in the 14th century, during the Capetian epoch; and THAT was adopted by a Lombard (Bartolomeo Scappi) in the 16th century. Meanwhile, apples originally came from Kazakhstan / Kyrgyzstan, likely planted by the Uyghurs in the Early Middle Ages. So apple pie is REALLY a fusion of medieval Frankish and Turkic cuisine! What in heaven’s name is an American Cul-Ap-phobe to do?

Let’s suppose, then, that apple pie is heretofore off-limits to WASPs. Perhaps we could just have some yogurt instead. Well, only if you’re GREEK; as “oxygala” (rendered “xynogala” in modern Greek) was originally Hellenic fare. Ok. Well, then how about some custard? Such a choice is permissible; but only if you’re FRENCH. So what about just having a cookie? That’s fine...if you’re PERSIAN, that is. Everyone else is outta luck.

Enjoy Bavarian cream? Well, as it turns out, the delicious confection is off-limits if you’re Bavarian; because the desert was mis-named after being developed by a French chef (Marie-Antoine Carême). Where’s the outrage? (While we’re at it, we need to clarify whether the nifty plait used the world over is really a Dutch braid or a French braid. Who appropriated whose culture THERE? Either way, be careful which hairstyle you use.) We already know that vanilla and chocolate were developed by the Meso-Americans; so for those who aren’t indigenous to the region, don’t get any ideas.

When the Catalanian musical artist, Rosalia hybridizes Flamenco and hip-hop, is she engaged in memetic theft from Andalusian Roma and African Americans? How about when Bosnian / Kosovar musical artist, Dua Lipa incorporates disco and R&B into her repertoire? How about when ANYONE engages in ANY music ANYWHERE, and their influences are not from their own culture?

Taking Cul-Ap-phobia to its logical conclusion, we quickly find how silly it becomes. Cultural segregation has never been a good thing. Indeed, prescribing such memetic cordons is antithetical to the cosmopolitan ideal. Cosmopolitanism is predicated on an (unabashed) embrace of our shared humanity; which—by definition—transcends ethnicity. It is therefore unconstrained by this or that historical accident. After all, any and every cultural demarcation—as with national affiliation—is an accident of history. While such demarcations serve a practical purpose in everyday life, they do not entail some eternal cosmic law—as if discrete boundaries written in the stars—to which we must all accede. So go ahead, weave your hair however you’d like; make whatever music you’d like; and—while you’re at it—treat yourself to some apple pie.

Decrying “cultural appropriation!” accomplishes nothing (barring, perhaps, stirring pointless resentment). In a misguided attempt to uplift marginalized communities by “protecting” their cultural heritage, such interlopers end up amplifying alterity.

Once more, we are reminded that the aim of Cul-Ap-phobes is the segregation—rather than the appreciation—of cultures.

So what of the cockamamie fixation on CUISINE exhibited by “foodies” who’ve become afflicted with Cul-Ap-phobia? Their first mistake is to suppose that they have identified a phenomenon that is unique to the Occident. Since the Middle Ages, turmeric and cumin have commonly been used in Arab dishes. Are we to suppose, then, that Arabs are somehow guilty of illicit Cul-Ap from Indians? (Arabs adopted Indian

numerals as well. Another outrage?) Ever put mustard on your hot dog? Well, then, you're ALSO stealing from the Indians.

What's going on here?

To illustrate the neurosis involved, let's consider a recent case of umbrage. Some of the more fanatical Cul-Ap-phobes have criticized the renowned chef, Rick Bayless for his expertise in—and passion for—Mexican cuisine. Why? Well, you see, he is WHITE. The irony here is mind-bending; as anyone who levels such a criticism is racist. This holds whether or not the target of opprobrium (in this case, Bayless) happens to be from a marginalized ethnic group. Bigotry is bigotry, regardless of who's doing it and to whom it is aimed. Bayless is a champion of Mexican culture, not a thief. If only MORE gringos had the appreciation that he exhibits.

No matter. Those who are determined to demonize Cul-Ap persist in their caviling, heedless of how culture actually works. According to their (laughably obtuse) logic, the entire planet is complicit in some perfidious scheme of culinary cooptation. So far as they're concerned, anyone using fennel, parsley, sage, marjoram, or oregano—who does NOT have ancestors from the Mediterranean basin—is engaged in a memetic heist; and so must be excoriated. The same goes for those using nutmeg, mace, or cloves who don't have ancestors from the Maluku islands of Malaya.

Heaven forfend you happen to prepare a vanilla or chocolate dessert without paying tribute to the Aztecs, sip a coffee without paying tribute to the Abyssinians, or drink some beer without paying tribute to the Egyptians. And be careful not to ever use sambal without first securing permission from the world's Indonesians.

Welcome to the wacky world of Cul-Ap hysteria. Cosmopolitans are forced to contend with a cadre of ornery schoolmarms who, pretending to know anything about international cuisine, are determined to tsk-tsk-tsk their way into paroxysms of indignation. They engage in such acrimony even as they sprinkle some basil onto their dinner...without having thanked those of East Asian descent.

After all, Cul-Ap is only iniquitous when OTHER people do it.

The logic here can become so convoluted that a persnickety commentator once indicted a novel chickpea-based stew in which turmeric was used as an ingredient. Wherefore? Because many curries ALSO use turmeric. Therefore said stew could be considered a kind of curry (even though it did not contain the key element of curry—namely: CURRY LEAVES), and so was IPSO FACTO a case of cultural appropriation from Indian culture.

This is bonkers.

The upshot of this bizarrely censorious attitude is actually quite simple: Limit your diet to only the things that your ancestors likely ate centuries ago.

We regret to inform all mankind: If you aren't English, marmite is forever off-limits to you. Meanwhile, if you ARE English, you're stuck with mutton and haggis for all eternity. (On second thought, haggis is Scottish, so that's off-limits as well!) It seems not to occur to Cul-Ap-phobes that virtually everyone on the planet engages in culinary appropriation on a daily basis, because that's how FOOD works. Rare is the recipe that does NOT involve the cooptation of ingredients / motifs from other ethnic traditions.

And what of broccoli? This nutritious, green delight is a Sicilian vegetable; and did not become a part of the American dietary repertoire until the 19th century. (That's right. The Founding Fathers did not know

what broccoli was.) Are we now ALL guilty of purloining Sicilian cuisine?

Culinary Cul-Ap: We're all doing it, even when we don't realize it.

The same goes for etymology; because that's how LANGUAGE works. The same goes for religious beliefs; because that's how DOGMATISM works. Etc. Memes that subsist, subsist because they propagate; and they propagate because they resonate with different people at different times and places. We're all human, which means that accident of birth does not make any of us exempt from this all-encompassing dynamic. We're all a part of a global memetic ecosystem, so we're all complicit.

The key, then, is to recognize the malleability of culture. Memetic transference across cultural lines (which THEMSELVES are fuzzy, and perpetually fluctuating) is a function of socio-psychical resonance. Such resonance is, in part, explained by our shared humanity; but it is also dictated by historical contingencies (incumbent power structures, exigent social norms, prevailing sensibilities, etc.) This cultural gradient exists simply due to the fact that certain people, under certain circumstances, have affinities for some memes rather than others. Some people like curry (many of whom are not Indian); others don't. And that's fine. Begrudging people for their culinary choices (i.e. when those choices happen not to coincide with their ethnic identity) is antithetical to the spirit of cosmopolitanism. Would we do the same with literary choices? Musical choices?

Human interaction entails memetic transference. Whenever in close proximity, cultures do not ABUT; they BLEND. Their boundaries are rarely discrete and static; they are blurred and fluid. Consequently, demarcations become fuzzy...and even illusory. Now that we live in a globalized world, such proximity is not limited to geography. And that's wonderful. Thank heavens for memetic dispersion—be it culinary, sartorial, mythological, or anything else.

Tracking the cross-currents of culture is like tracking any other winds. Trying to predict how one culture will interact with another is comparable to predicting the weather. In either case, one is contending with highly-complex, open systems—which, when they meet, are bound to inter-penetrate in idiosyncratic ways. Memetic zephyrs impinge upon a given locality, and do so SPORADICALLY. This is the case whether we are talking about cuisine, architecture, literature, folklore, attire, music, dance, sport, or anything else. It is asinine to begrudge anyone who opts to participate in this on-going dynamic.

Cosmopolitanism requires that one eschews Exceptionalism; and recognizes that one's own culture is—in the grand scheme of things—nothing ontologically special. All cultures are a concatenation of social constructs; and all social constructs are accidents of history. No singular culture was determined by divine Providence; and no memetic ownership was written in the stars. So it is important that we come to any evaluation NOT as members of any particular tribe, but simply as fellow HUMANS.

In the early 1930's, the renowned social anthropologist, Ruth Benedict noted that “there has never been a time when civilization stood more in need of individuals who are genuinely culture-conscious, who can see objectively the socially conditioned behavior of other peoples without fear and recrimination” (“Patterns Of Culture”, p. 10-11).

Benedict's approach was to assay the world's widely-variegated cultures NOT through the lens of one's own culture, but from an impartial perspective. As Edward Said would four decades later, she rejected the Occident-centric way of seeing the world (see my essay, “The Universality Of Morality”). Surely, Benedict AND Said would have recoiled at the thought that people would one day vilify those engaged in Cul-Ap; and do so in the name of social justice.

In order to make their case, those who decry “cultural appropriation” need to point to a scenario in which Cul-Ap occurred between a purported source culture (A; i.e. the alleged victim) and a destination culture (B; i.e. the alleged culprit); then show that there was harm done to A—or members of A—as a result of said Cul-Ap.

One would find that the only injustice is that of B not giving proper attribution to A (with regard to the element in question). This problem cannot be explained by Cul-Ap PER SE. Rather, it implicates those engaged in the Cul-Ap who happen to be ignorant or dishonest.

Granted, Cul-Ap may sometimes be concomitant with (actual) exploitation / derogation. However, in such cases, the Cul-Ap accompanies, but does not FACILITATE, said exploitation / derogation. More often than not, when members of B seek to dominate or marginalize members of A, the members of B force members of A to adopt cultural elements of B. In other words, they do the OPPOSITE of Cul-Ap—which is to say that they impose rather than appropriate cultural elements.

It is important not to construe participation in X as annexation of X. Alas. For the Cul-Ap-phobe, any non-Japanese person who creates manga isn't respectfully partaking in a celebrated Japanese art-form; such a person is PILFERING it. Cul-Ap-phobes seem not to understand that cultural appropriation done in good faith is synonymous with cultural appreciation. And that cultural appreciation is a salutary thing—nay, a prerequisite for cosmopolitanism; and an integral part of living in harmony in a pluralistic society.

But what about jerks? It's no secret that sometimes Cul-Ap is done cavalierly. When that is the case, it is typically done to patronize or demean members of the source culture. Thus the Cul-Ap is done for the sake of MOCKERY. Such a gesture may be undertaken as a result of contempt and/or heedlessness. In such cases, the Cul-Ap is done out of ill will. What should be indicted, then, is the ill will; not the Cul-Ap.

When Canadians celebrate “Caribana” and “Cari-fiesta” each year, are non-Caribbean-born citizens obliged to refrain from participating in Caribbean dance, Caribbean song, Caribbean dress, and Caribbean food? Are we to suppose that non-Caribbean-born citizens are only permitted to participate in Caribbean culture for that day? At any given time and place, how do we know what's off-limits to whom? Under what circumstances? What are the criteria by which we determine the existence of Cul-Ap; or, in the cases where we agree it exists, the criteria by which we ascertain its permissibility?

A key factor in the grievance against Cul-Ap is power asymmetry. Cul-Ap-phobes hold that if those who are more powerful force their memes upon those who are less powerful, the meme-adoption must be forgiven; as it is a matter of subjugation. If, on the other hand, the more powerful adopt memes from the less powerful, something iniquitous is afoot.

All reasonable people agree that when colonizers take over a region and impose their culture on the colonized, the latter's use of exogenous cultural elements is no sin. After all, they are typically INCURRING rather than deliberately APPROPRIATING the memes of the imperialists. The meme adoption wasn't their choice. So, as victims, members of the destination culture should be given a pass. The culprits are those of the SOURCE culture.

However, this standard becomes less clear in other scenarios. Consider all the elements of British culture that are of French provenance due to the Normans having conquered England in 1066, and ruled there well into the 13th century. (Modern English is more influenced by Norman French than by either German or Old English.) What if the Normans had never exercised any cultural—or political—influence over England; and English Francophiles had, instead, voluntarily adopted French memes during the High

Middle Ages? According to the logic of Cul-Ap-phobes, that would make the appropriation of French memes illicit. Does this criterion make sense? Or...perhaps the meme adoption would be permissible in such a scenario simply because there would not have been a significant power asymmetry. But what if the English were significantly more powerful than the French during the relevant period in history? Would THAT change things?

We encounter similar questions when it comes to bigotry. Can the member of a marginalized community be bigoted against members of a dominant community? There's no doubt that power asymmetries play a role in how / why bigotries form, and how much harm those bigotries can do. But is bigotry PER SE solely a function of power asymmetry? The answer is no. When the oppressed are bigoted against anyone who falls within the same demographic category as their oppressors, it may be more benign; but it is still bigotry. {3}

Cul-Ap transpires in several media—song, dance, attire, literature, architecture, cuisine, etc. Tracing the genealogy of any given meme is not always straight-forward. As discussed in part 1, there are many illustrations of how iconography undergoes a semiotic metamorphosis as it migrates from culture to culture—from the caduceus to the swastika. Another example discussed was the hexagram. As we saw, throughout the Middle Ages, it was sometimes used in the Islamic world as an insignia. For much of the 19th century, it was used for the emblems of slave patrols in the antebellum South. That was the basis for the earliest sheriff badges across the United States. (After second World War, the shape was gradually adjusted—giving the star either 5 points or 7 points instead; or even transitioning to a shield.) When Jewish people began using the hexagram (as the “Star of David”) in the Late Middle Ages, the Japanese had already been using it for centuries (as the Kagame crest). Granted, medieval practitioners of Kabbalah didn't “appropriate” the hexagram from Shinto practitioners any more than racist Americans “appropriated” it from Muslims; but the occurrence of this shape across cultures illustrates how certain memes (esp. those with some kind of resonance) crop up in different places at different times for different reasons.

Something as simple and catchy as a hexagram might crop up spontaneously in various cultures—each occurring independently of one another. Surely, Hindus in India made use of the symbol for the same reason they made use of the Swastika: it's very cool looking, and quite memorable. But there are certainly instances where one culture adopts a meme from another culture because they find it rather nifty—thereby making it their own. Hence the Nazi hakenkreuz. {4} In such cases, exogenous cultural elements are often re-conceived as endogenous; as nobody likes to think of consecrated items in their cultural repertoire as derivative. As mentioned earlier: When it comes to assessing our own culture, we like to see novelty where it doesn't exist. Consequently, we are apt to deny Cul-Ap when WE do it; even as we are quick to notice it when others do it.

Those who want cultures to be memetic silos are countenancing the most extreme form of parochialism. But cultural segregation is precisely the point; and feigning offense is their stock in trade. Anyone familiar with the cosmopolitan ideal knows that it is difficult to embrace our shared humanity across cultural divides if one is pilloried the moment one dares to sample an exogenous meme. (The idea: Appreciate other's cultures; but you are obligated to do so FROM AFAR.)

A cosmopolitan outlook is predicated on a recognition of universals; which is simply to say that it is based upon that which transcends all cultural divides. Meanwhile, cultural segregation represents everything that cosmopolitanism is against.

There is nothing written in the stars about this or that culture, let alone about ownership of any one of a culture's signature elements; as any given social norm is the product of a long sequence of historical

accidents. Such things cannot possibly define our humanity; for there is nothing accidental about being human.

Irrespective of circumstance, we all have access to the better angels of our nature because we are all human—irrespective of culture. As such, parochialism—whereby one circumscribes one’s sense of humanity according to this or that cultural affiliation—is not consummate with a sincere embrace of universals. Such an outlook is inimical to cosmopolitanism.

A genuinely cosmopolitan zeitgeist demands a broader perspective. (Think of it as the cultural analogue of Rawls’ socio-economic “original position”.) This entails a vantage point that urges us see past our own memetic orbit, to venture beyond the confines of our assigned cultural boundaries, and thereby expand our horizons. After all, those boundaries are nothing more than an accident of history. Human solidarity demands nothing less. Such solidarity is possible only because we are capable of rising above the warp and woof of the social constructs that govern our daily lives.

Any given feature of a given culture—as with any given part of a dogmatic system—is not inextricably tied to a particular ethnic group. As with any social norm, a custom emerges when, where, and how it does by historical accident.

That’s why criticizing an element of a given culture—or of a given religion—is entirely disconnected from bigotry against whatever group might happen to espouse that element. Memes are not people. One can no more be racist against a social norm than one can be racist against a recipe for casserole (which may or may not happen to be affiliated with a certain community).

In fact, suggesting that such criticism is somehow “racist” is ITSELF born of racism. (The ironies never end.) Criticizing a dubious practice that inheres in a particular culture as actually a civic responsibility. For it is based on the fact that we are all fellow humans; and so are ultimately subject to the same moral standards...whether we acknowledge it or not. Our shared humanity is what give us all access to universal principles: standards by which any practice—regardless of when or where it occurs, or how much it is sacralized—can be evaluated. Objective morality is unconcerned with the myriad idiosyncrasies of communal consecrations. We are all human, so we all have recourse to the same moral compass. (I address this topic in my essay: “The Universality Of Morality”.)

More to the point: The humanity of a given person / group is not dependent on any particular social norm. We are far more than an agglomeration of the conventions we countenance—whatever those conventions might happen to be. For our humanity transcends the memes we espouse. What makes us human is not some historical accident—even one that has been sacralized for eons. Meanwhile, the memes we adopt—and opt to retain—are NOTHING BUT a historical accident. Such affinities are, after all, up to us to embrace or discard; and do so according to that which transcends our memetic proclivities.

As Johann Gottfried von Herder pointed out, mankind is not divided into distinct races with any inherent differences that really matter; mankind is divided by CULTURES, all of which are adopted after birth...and, of course, BY ACCIDENT OF birth. And over time, cultures meld. How so? Well, mediated as they are by human interaction, they CAN’T NOT meld.

Cul-Ap-phobia is the lifeblood of cultural segregation—impelled, as it is, by a fever-dream of cultural puritanism. Like most of those obsessed with political correct-ness, anti-Cul-Ap crusaders are puritanical and authoritarian; which is simply to say that they are the antithesis of the astute cosmopolitans that they fancy themselves to be. Being, as they are, the self-appointed constables of enforced parochialism, we are morally obligated to repudiate their officious decrees.

In the final analysis, we find that nothing was pre-ordained to be a part of any given culture. There is no cultural destiny. It's all open-ended. So a culture, as it happens to exist NOW, is merely a point along the way. Along the way to where? Nobody knows. It's an on-going process in which each of us partakes, at our own discretion. For, in a civil society, cultural participation is a matter of personal prerogative.

What will become of this long, meandering metamorphosis? Only time will tell. But that's part of the fun of it. We're all just trying to evolve; and part of that is adapting our meme-o-sphere to new developments. As fellow humans, we find that certain memes are good for everyone, others are bad for everyone; and ANYONE can point this out. For the only credential required is, well, being human.

So what are we to make of those who deign to assay a specified culture, as if it could EVER be discretely defined? As it turns out, any demarcation between one culture and another is interminably blurry, and perpetually in flux; and—in any case—an accident of history.

Cultures are dynamic agglomerations that are ever-evolving, not static wholes meant to be preserved as-is for all eternity. Moreover, ethnic identities have ALWAYS been amorphous; and don't depend on any given meme for their continued existence. Such is the nature of memetic exchange: the lifeblood of all human interaction. Consequently, embracing our shared humanity requires us to break out of our parochial mindsets; to not be hung up on what we—or others—happen to have inherited *by accident of birth*. The point, then, is to look beyond the cloistered precincts of our own cultural milieu; and survey—with a sense of awe and wonder—the vast, global meme-o-sphere. Only then can we recognize the world—in all its glorious variegation—as our common home.

Cul-Ap-phobes often fashion themselves as the official adjudicators cultural ownership; and thus the arbiters of meme-transference across (what they see as) eternally demarcated, static cultural boundaries. This is based on a grave misunderstanding of what culture is. Any given culture is an amorphous unity of elements that is perpetually in flux (rather than as a rigid assemblage of disparate fragments in stasis). Each element melds with the others in organic ways—blurring the boundaries between them. Cultures are, after all, dynamic; not static; and don't subsist by being hermetically sealed off from the rest of the world. Any given meme has been adapted to occupy a place in the grand memetic repertoire; playing a role the significance of which changes over time.

Those who are affiliated with a given culture often stammer and stumble through the kaleidoscopic cultural milieu in which they find themselves, interacting with exogenous cultural elements as the occasion arises; and they are able to do so without losing their cultural identity—as with, say, Jewish Americans ordering out for Chinese food while playing mah-jong. Unless one is a religious fundamentalist, one recognizes that one doesn't need to relegate oneself to a memetic cordon in order to maintain one's "minhag". (In the meantime, nobody of Chinese heritage feels as though their culture is being pillaged when someone who isn't Chinese partakes in one of their signature games while indulging in General Tso's chicken.)

Cultural differences—nay, all forms of ethnic diversity—can thrive in the midst of a ethnic intermixing. It is the recognition of universal moral principles that ensures harmony is maintained even as different ethnicities interact (a point I explore in my essay on "The Universality Of Morality"). That's why Freethinkers can enjoy—and even perform—Gospel music just as Christians can both appreciate—and even create—secular music. And we can all appreciate Benjamin Millepied's Mexican version of Georges Bizet's opera, "Carmen" (starring Melissa Barrera)...while upholding humanist ideals.

Cultural appropriation? Indeed! We can only hope for more.

What, then, is the key to fostering pluralism? Let's consider the Spanish term, "convivencia", which refers to inter-cultural amity. It makes sense that this is a felicitous ideation; as it literally means "living WITH one another".

Imagine.

Footnotes:

{1 Also of note is Stefani's incorporation of Harajuku motifs into her musical performances. Growing up, she had spent many of her formative years in Tokyo, becoming intimately familiar with the culture. Sure enough, she was castigated by Cul-Ap-phobes. That the artistic choice was made to PAY TRIBUTE to Harajuku culture was entirely beside the point. After all, for Cul-Ap-phobes, *intentions don't matter*. So far as they're concerned, all the Japanese influences in Stefani's life were entirely beside the point; the only factor was her RACE. Ironically, the very people who harangued the musician for this purported travesty understood NOTHING about Harajuku. And none of them stopped to consider how big of a hit Stefani's performance was IN JAPAN.}

{2 What's the deal with twelve? This is a mytheme that crops up in Ancient Greece (gods on Olympus), Hinduism (manifestations of Shiva), Norse mythology (sons of Odin), Judaism (tribes of Israel), Christianity (apostles), Shia Islam (imams), and astrology (signs in the Zodiac). Notably, twelve was the most significant number for the Etruscans. Other numbers have been ascribed significance. I discuss the significance of three (spec. trinities) in part 2 of "Mythemes".}

{3 Can subalterns be bigoted? Of course. Those who claim that racial minorities cannot be racist against racial majorities are broadcasting their own racial bias. Making such a suggestion is the height of perfidy. Misogyny exists; but so can misandry, even in a patriarchal society. Power asymmetry and bigotry are related, but they are independent variables. Even as Palestinians have every right to protest the Israeli government and its heinous policies, there's no excuse for any of them to be anti-Semitic. No human is magically exempt from moral obligation. Bigotry does not necessarily come from a place of privilege; it comes from a place of conceit.}

{4 Examples of this symbol—be it the (Hindu) swastika, the (Greek) tetra-skelion, or the (Nazi) hakenkreuz—are numerous. In the Middle Ages, the [Vai-]Nakh people of the northern Caucuses used the Norse "fiël-fotr" (Germanic "viel-fot"; Anglo-Saxon "fower-fot"; often rendered "fylfot") to symbolize their sun-goddess, Deela-Malkh. Norsemen used it to symbolize Thor's hammer. What's going on here? Was the Nakh's use of this symbol some crime against the Vikings? (Incidentally, during the Malkh festival, the Nakh celebrated the winter solstice on December 25, commemorating the return of the sun. And, yes, it involved decorating a tree. What are we to make of that?) I discuss the history of the swastika at length in part 1 of this essay.}