

Considering Trans and Queer Appropriation

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Abstract

Within the activist circles I run in, I routinely hear people accuse others of appropriation, or claim that certain behaviors or endeavors are appropriative. I myself have written about how certain people (e.g., cisgender academics and media producers) sometimes appropriate transgender identities and experiences (discussed more below). So I am certainly sympathetic to the concept. [...]

Article

Within the activist circles I run in, I routinely hear people accuse others of appropriation, or claim that certain behaviors or endeavors are appropriative. I myself have written about how certain people (e.g., cisgender academics and media producers) sometimes appropriate transgender identities and experiences (discussed more below). So I am certainly sympathetic to the concept.

At the same time, however, I have seen the concept of appropriation used (or misused) in order to undermine marginalized groups as well. For instance, cisgender feminists have long accused trans women of “appropriating female dress” or “appropriating women’s identities”--indeed, if you click the link you will see that this was part of the justification for why Sylvia Rivera was kicked off the stage at a 1973 Pride rally in New York City. On Cathy Brennan’s anti-trans-dyke website “Pretendbians” (which I refuse to link to), the byline at the top of the webpage says: “We don’t hate you, we hate appropriation”--the implication being that trans women cannot ever be actual lesbians, but rather we can only appropriate lesbian identities and culture.

Recently, on several occasions, I have heard trans people claim that cisgender people who perform drag, or who crossdress as part of a Halloween costume, appropriate trans people’s identities and culture. Such statements surprised me, in part, because they are so eerily similar to the aforementioned accusations of appropriation that trans-exclusive radical feminists have levied against us. But what struck me even more was how such claims represent a complete about face from the direction that transgender activism had been taking during the ’90s and early ’00s. During that era, we tended to celebrate binary-shattering activities. Trans activists didn’t merely discuss our own gender-non-conformity, but we emphasized the fact that most of us (whether trans or not) transgress gender norms at some points in our lives. Indeed, trans activists often encouraged forms of gender transgression in the cisgender majority, as it was generally believed that such expressions would help undermine binary gender norms throughout society.

And suddenly now in 2013, some trans people are essentially taking the exact opposite approach by discouraging cisgender people from transgressing gender norms (via accusations that such actions represent an appropriation of transgender identities and culture).

In the wake of all these claims, I have done a lot of thinking about appropriation over the last year. And I have come to the conclusion that the issue is way more complicated than the cut-and-dried “appropriation-is-always-bad” perspective that seems to predominate in activist settings. While we should be concerned about appropriation (especially certain manifestations of it), we should also be cognizant of some of the negative ramifications that can arise from the indiscriminate or overzealous use of the concept. In this essay, I will share some of my thoughts on this matter.

For the record, my main focus here will be accusations of appropriation with regards to gender and sexuality, and what they mean for transgender and queer (e.g., LGBTQIA+) communities and activism. Some of what I say may have import for thinking about other instances of cultural appropriation (e.g., with regards to ethnicity, class, religion, nationality, etc.). However, LGBTQIA+ identities and cultures are unique in a number of ways (which I will address toward the end of the piece), and this may limit the usefulness of applying what I say here to other such instances of appropriation.

What is “appropriation,” and why (or perhaps when) is it bad?

In the most general sense, appropriation occurs when we take something that somebody else has created and use it for our own purposes. For example, I can appropriate a certain chord progression others have previously used in order to create a new song. Or I could appropriate another person’s theory and apply it to a new problem. If I like your fashion-sense, I may appropriate your style. Humans beings are highly social animals: We are imitators, and we learn language, fashion, traditions, expressions, and ideas from one another. As the saying goes, there is nothing new under the sun. Almost everything we create has its origins elsewhere--we are constantly adopting, adapting, and repurposing other people’s past creations and reconstructing them in novel ways. So appropriation--in the most general sense--is an everyday part of human life.

Within social justice movements, we typically use the word “appropriation” in a more specific sense: to describe instances where a dominant and/or majority group takes up some tangible or intangible aspect of a marginalized and/or minority community. Sometimes it is the marginalized/minority group’s identity that gets appropriated--for instance, members of the dominant/majority group may claim that identity for themselves, or create their own depictions of members of that group (which typically resemble the dominant/majority group’s assumptions and stereotypes rather than the marginalized/minority group’s lived realities). Other times, it is the minority group’s culture (e.g., their language, art, beliefs, religions, traditions, rituals, and fashions) that gets appropriated. Often cited examples include when Western countries appropriate art and artifacts from nations they have colonized, or appropriate their spiritual practices and traditions (as seen with the popularity of Yoga and Buddhism here in the U.S.). Or in how white America has historically appropriated musical styles that had their origins in African-American communities (e.g., jazz, rock-n-roll, hip-hop). And so on.

So if appropriation (in the most general sense) is a basic human tendency, why is it considered to be bad when dominant/majority groups appropriate from marginalized/minority groups? I would argue that there are at least three non-mutually-exclusive reasons why this is so:

Erasure: Marginalized/minority groups have little power or voice in society. Therefore, when the dominant/majority group takes up their identities, ideas, and other cultural creations, it tends to undermine or erase the context in which they were created, and the original meanings and symbolism that

underlie them. In other words, the dominant/majority typically takes up the marginalized/minority group's creations while disregarding their perspective. Sometimes the fact that the appropriated items had their origins within the marginalized/minority group (rather than the dominant/majority) gets overlooked or forgotten.

Exploitation: Sometimes members of the dominant/majority group will materially profit from aspects or acts that they have appropriated from a marginalized/minority group without ever giving anything back to that community. This tends to further exacerbate economic disparities that may already exist between the two groups.

Denigration: This can refer to a couple different things. Denigration can mean "to treat or represent as lacking in value or importance; belittle," which applies to instances where important or sacred aspects of the marginalized/minority group's identity or culture are appropriated by the dominant/majority group in an irreverent or disrespectful manner. Denigration can also mean "to speak damagingly of; criticize in a derogatory manner; sully; defame: to denigrate someone's character," which applies to instances where the dominant/majority group appropriates some aspect of the marginalized/minority group's identity or culture in order to purposefully ridicule, parody, or insult members of that group.[1]

As I mentioned earlier, in my past writings (specifically in *Whipping Girl*), I have critiqued the way in which cisgender media producers and academic researchers have appropriated trans people in their art and theories, for instance, when they hold us up as examples of gender ambiguity or liminality.[2] Such instances are problematic because:

- They erase the marginalized group's voice and perspective (as trans people are depicted as merely symbols or metaphors, while our real-life circumstances and issues as a marginalized population are completely ignored).
- They exploit the marginalized group (as many a cisgender media producers have made lots of money capitalizing on the exoticness of gender variant lives, and some cisgender gender theorist have garnered success and built their careers upon interpreting trans people's bodies and identities, without giving anything back to the trans community).
- They denigrate the marginalized group (in that cisgender media producers and academic researchers often outright dismiss or discount trans people's self-accounts, fail to take trans people's struggles seriously, and sometimes even blatantly ridicule or demean trans people in the process).

I believe that these three phenomena--erasure, exploitation, and denigration (or "EED" for short)--encapsulate most, if not all, of what typically concerns activists when they critique instances of appropriation.

Once we recognize EED, it becomes clear why dominant/majority groups' appropriation of marginalized/minority identities and cultures can be a bad thing, but not vice versa. After all, marginalized/minority groups have relatively little power or voice in society, and thus are not in a position to erase or exploit the identity and culture of the dominant/majority group. And while marginalized/minority groups may choose to denigrate the dominant/majority group, it will only have a limited effect, as the dominant/majority group is already taken for granted, respected, and viewed as the norm throughout society.

Non-EED appropriation

Thus far, I have argued that appropriation is a bad thing when it leads to erasure, exploitation, and/or denigration of the marginalized/minority group. And most activists (including myself) would agree that instances of EED appropriation should be challenged and critiqued. However, there are other occurrences where appropriation (in the most general sense) occurs, but it does not necessarily erase, exploit, or denigrate the marginalized/minority group--I will refer to these instances as non-EED appropriation.

Here are a few examples of non-EED appropriation of trans people:

- A cisgender academic could carry out a research project that focuses on issues and obstacles that trans people are most concerned about. This project could be done in a way that respects trans people's perspectives and opinions, and portrays us in a realistic manner (rather than relying on stereotypes or reducing us to metaphors). The final product (e.g., an article or book) could be described as appropriative in that it uses trans people's realities, ideas, perspectives, and experiences, despite the fact that it amplifies trans voices and has the potential to create positive change for trans communities.
- There have been several instances in which cisgender students have attended school crossdressed in order to show support for a transgender classmate. Such acts could be described as appropriative, yet they are done out of respect and in support of trans people. Much like students who shave their heads in support of a student who is going through chemotherapy, such acts can help de-stigmatize and lend legitimacy toward the marginalized/minority group in question.
- Over the years, I have met a number of cisgender people who appreciate transgender perspectives and culture. For instance, they might have learned a lot from trans authors, and they may recommend those books to others. They might enjoy performances by transgender spectrum artists or patronize transgender film festivals. They do this out of genuine respect, and their actions do help to promote trans voices and to put money into the hands of trans performers and writers. Yet the person in question could be described as appropriating trans culture in a non-EED sense.
- Cisgender people who are partners of trans people sometimes start their own support or discussion groups. While such groups may focus a lot on partner-specific issues, they will also discuss how to be supportive of the trans people in their lives and how to challenge societal cissexism. Such groups may have a net-positive effect on trans communities, by directly supporting relationships in which trans people are involved, and by demystifying and de-stigmatizing trans sexualities and relationships. Despite these benefits, some trans people may claim that the group members appropriate trans identities (by positioning themselves as "trans partners") and/or appropriate the oppression trans people face by discussing how it impacts their own lives.

Now it is quite likely that these four examples have evoked a range of feelings among trans people who read this. Some may have positive feelings about the cisgender people in question--they may be described as allies or advocates, and their actions (while arguably appropriative in the most general sense) may be welcomed with open arms. Other trans activists might have a negative view of said people, dismissing them as "tourists" who are privileged in ways that trans people are not, and who are reaping the benefits of a marginalized/minority population while not having to endure the harsh realities of actually being trans themselves. (Indeed, I have heard these latter critiques made with increasing frequency lately.)

In other words, while most activists would agree that EED appropriation is a bad thing, there is significant disagreement about whether non-EED appropriation is bad, neutral, or good. In thinking through these differences of opinion, it seems to me that whether a marginalized/minority group member has a positive or negative view of non-EED appropriation hinges on two interrelated axes: stigma-versus-acceptance, and integration-versus-separatism.

Stigma versus acceptance

The more highly stigmatized a group is, the less likely it is that the dominant/majority group will even attempt to appropriate aspects of their identity or culture, as doing so will only lead to them becoming tainted by said stigma. However, if the marginalized/minority group becomes more accepted over time, there will be less of a social price to pay for associating oneself with that group. Thus, as acceptance of the group increases, so do the chances that others will engage in non-EED appropriation.

From the marginalized/minority group's perspective, non-EED appropriation is often welcomed when the group is highly stigmatized, as the group appreciates any genuine outsider interest and support they can get. But as the group becomes more established and accepted in society, such appropriation starts to feel more like an invasion, as more and more dominant/majority members seemingly want to associate with their identity and take part in their culture.

When I was a young adult (e.g., in the '80s and '90s), there was a ton of stigma associated with being trans--way more than there is today. Because of that stigma, very few cis people would have dared to go to a transgender event or taken part in a trans-related demonstration, as the cisgender majority would likely have viewed them as suspect as a result. The rare cis people who were willing to associate with trans people back then were often viewed in a positive light and welcomed into the community. For instance, the first transgender spectrum support/social group that I belonged to had the phrase "and friends" tacked onto the end of the title, and partners, family, and friends were regularly welcome to attend meetings.[3] Even in the early '00s, when I was active in the San Francisco Bay Area's trans community, there was a sense that cis partners and close friends of trans folks were a part of our community too, and they would often take the stage at trans events. I'm sure today that some people would dismiss this as "cis people using their privilege in order to take up space at trans events," but that would overlook the very different reality of that time. Back then, very few people supported trans people, and those that genuinely did were embraced as part of our community.

Things are very different now. There is still quite a lot of cissexism out there, but in certain segments in our culture (e.g., especially in queer, feminist, and social justice circles) there is an acknowledgement that trans people are legitimate, and that cisgender people should be good allies to gender variant folks. In such settings, being aware of transgender politics and culture may be seen as a sign that a person is a good progressive or activist. Indeed, this may lead to an increase in what might be called "faux allies"--people who are not especially concerned with trans people and issues, nor personally invested in trans communities, yet who nevertheless regard themselves as allies of trans people because to do otherwise would potentially garner disdain from other progressives or activists.

Furthermore, the fact that we currently exist in an era where there is a mix of both societal cissexism and trans acceptance--and where the former is viewed as conservative and close-minded, and the latter viewed as progressive and open-minded--means that an awareness of trans culture and politics can allow

a person to be seen by others as worldly, cutting edge, or “hip.” Thus, just as hipster straight folks began to appropriate aspects of gay and lesbian identity and culture during the ’90s and ’00s, more and more cisgender people are now appropriating aspects of trans identities and culture.

It would be relatively easy for someone like myself, who lives in a very progressive part of the country, to pan the influx of cisgender people who suddenly seem interested in trans people and culture. While it may potentially be annoying, it is also a sign of our increasing legitimacy in the eyes of society. And frankly, having lived through the past, I would much rather be in our current situation than where we were several decades ago (or where other trans folks in more conservative parts of the country remain today) where trans people are viewed as pariahs, and nobody wants anything to do with us, appropriation or otherwise.

Integration versus separatism

Activists who have a positive or neutral view of non-EED appropriation often imagine the ultimate goal of their activism as being the complete integration of their group within mainstream society. By integration, I mean that the group’s identity, perspectives, and culture are viewed as unique, but also as a legitimate part of the culture at large.

One can see examples of integration in how certain groups that have immigrated to the U.S. from other countries are now seen as both distinct yet legitimately part of the culture. For example, I am of Italian (father’s side) and Irish (mother’s side) heritage. A century ago, when my grandparents and great-grandparents lived in the U.S., they were highly marginalized. The dominant/majority (primarily Protestants of Northern European ancestry) blatantly discriminated against them with regards to employment and housing, and used derogatory slang terms to refer to them. They were routinely ridiculed for their religion (Catholicism), and stereotyped as criminals, drunkards, lazy, etc. Some of my older relatives have told me about how, when they were young, neighborhood parents wouldn’t let their children play with them because of their ethnicity. Even during my parent’s generation (in the ’50s), many in the dominant/majority wouldn’t have approved of their children marrying someone of Irish or Italian descent.

Nowadays, Irish- and Italian-Americans are generally seen as part of U.S. culture, and this integration is due to both U.S. culture rubbing off on Irish- and Italian-Americans, as well as Irish- and Italian-Americans influencing U.S. culture.[4] Americans of various persuasions eat at Pizza parlors and drink at Irish pubs; we all watch Martin Scorsese films and celebrate St. Patrick’s Day. While such activities are clearly examples of non-EED appropriation, they are not viewed by most people (both within and outside of Irish- and Italian-American communities) as “appropriation” in the negative sense. Rather, they are viewed more as “cultural appreciation” than “cultural appropriation.”[5]

One can also see this integration and growing cultural appreciation in mainstream attitudes toward gays and lesbians, at least in some sectors of the country. The first Gay Pride events in the ’70s were far more like protests or demonstrations rather than celebrations, and the average straight person wouldn’t dare set a foot anywhere near them. Nowadays, Queer Pride parades are (for better or for worse) endorsed by mainstream corporations, covered by the mainstream media, and many (if not most) of the audience members are straight (not unlike the countless people of non-Irish heritage who show

up to New York's annual St. Patrick's Day parade). This non-EED appropriation/cultural appreciation can also be seen in the rise in popularity of gay-themed TV shows and movies, the embrace of gay artists and celebrities, and so on.

As these examples illustrate, when marginalized/minority groups are highly stigmatized (as Irish- and Italian-Americans were in the early 1900's, and as gay people were in the '60s and '70s), they tend to be relegated to their own communities, and there is not much culture permeability between them and the dominant/majority group. But as stigma lessens and integration begins to occur, the marginalized/minority group and the dominant/majority groups inevitably become somewhat culturally permeable. And non-EED appropriation plays a major role in this process, as both a contributing factor to, and the net result of, that permeability.

Of course, not all members within a particular marginalized/minority group will strive for integration, or welcome the cultural permeability that comes with it. Some individuals may feel that their unique identities, language, and traditions are being watered down or made impure by mainstream non-EED appropriation. Such people may want to keep their culture pure via taking a more separatist stance, such as discouraging or limiting the dominant/majority group's access to their culture. Such people are way more likely to critique non-EED appropriation as "oppressive appropriation" rather than "cultural appreciation," and to view it as just as bad as (or as merely an extension of) EED appropriation.

It should be noted that people who take on more separatist stances typically look down upon members of their own group who strive for integration, often dismissing them as being "assimilationists." For example, separatist-oriented queers who complain about straight mainstream folks who appropriate Queer Pride and queer culture more generally are also likely to dismiss LGBTQIA+ people who dress gender-normatively, or same-sex couples who seek out legal recognition of their marriages, as being assimilationist. This usage of the word "assimilationist" is meant to be pejorative, and synonymous with the words "sell out" or "traitor."

This conflating of integration with assimilation is rather off the mark. After all, true assimilation would be to completely blend in with straight culture--to be "closeted" or "stealth." In contrast, someone who moves through the world as an out queer person (regardless of how they dress), and who is part of a visibly same-sex marriage, isn't engaging in assimilation by any means. Rather, they are part of an integration process.

So one might ask: What purpose do these accusations of "assimilation" serve? It seems to me that they are meant to undermine members of one's own community who strive for integration, by insinuating that such individuals are traitors, and thus illegitimate or inauthentic members of the group. This sort of identity policing helps to maintain a level of cultural impermeability between the marginalized/minority group and the dominant/majority group. Indeed, understanding this allows one to recognize that accusations of "assimilation" and non-EED "appropriation" are essentially flip sides of the same coin: the latter maintains cultural impermeability by delegitimizing members of the dominant/majority group who cross identity or community boundaries, while the former delegitimizes members of the marginalized/minority group who are perceived as doing the same.

Now, I could make some grandiose claim like, "Integration is the righteous path, whereas separatism will ultimately lead to our doom" (or vice versa), but I am not about to. In my book *Excluded: Making*

Feminist and Queer Movements More Inclusive, I decry such one-size-fits-all approaches to activism. The truth is that both approaches have some negative drawbacks. Separatism generally favors sameness over difference, and in doing so, it leaves behind many members of the marginalized/minority group in question. For instance, separatist-oriented queers who decry assimilationists and instances straight people engaging in non-EED appropriation seem to want to preserve some kind of idealistic notion of queer culture that they have experienced, enjoyed, and/or felt empowered by in the past. That version of queer culture probably resonated with them because they were accepted within that culture. In contrast, while I am politically queer, I have never felt fully welcome in queer communities and spaces, mostly because I am a transsexual woman, but also because I am bisexual and femme--three identities that often lead me to be dismissed as an inauthentic or illegitimate queer in those spaces.

Of course, I could turn around and create (or participate in) femme, or bisexual, or trans woman separatist movements. But even if I did feel welcome and empowered in such communities, there would inevitably be many other members of my marginalized/minority group who would feel excluded from them.

While I tend to fall on the integrationist side of the spectrum, I do understand why separatist tendencies exist. Some marginalized/minority group members may feel irrevocably injured or violated by the dominant/majority group, and as a result, they may not want to have anything to do with them. As a result, they might view people (like myself) who seem to blur strict distinctions between queer and straight (on the basis that I am bisexual, femme, and/or trans), and who strive for integration rather than separatism, as potentially threatening because we “undermine the movement.” (And of course, whenever people refer to “the movement,” what they really mean is “their movement.”)

Furthermore, while I will never feel welcome or relevant in certain queer spaces--such as the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, which explicitly excludes trans women from attending--I nevertheless recognize that such separatist communities do develop their own unique culture, and that the cultural permeability that comes with integration and non-EED appropriation would inevitably change that culture. While I might view such an evolution in a positive light, I understand that others would view it negatively, and perceive any such changes as a loss of the original culture that they very much cherished.

So rather than frame integration and separatism in terms of a good-versus-bad binary, I believe that it is more useful to recognize them as two general tendencies that always seem to arise within marginalized/minority groups. And while we (i.e., integrationists and separatists) might agree that EED appropriation is a bad thing that should be challenged, we will invariably view instances of non-EED appropriation very differently.

The case for cultural permeability with regards to gender and sexuality

While disagreements about integration versus separatism exist within most marginalized/minority groups, there are a few additional reasons why those of us who are marginalized because of our genders and/or sexualities should think twice before enforcing cultural impermeability via accusations of non-EED appropriation.

The first has to do with what I refer to in Excluded as the insider/outsider myth. The myth assumes that some of us (for instance, members of a particular LGBTQIA+ subgroup) are legitimate members of

the group--that is, “insiders”--who are allowed to freely participate in queer cultures, whereas other people (e.g., the straight majority) are “outsiders” who can only appropriate our identities and culture.

This sort of insider/outsider mentality may make some sense in thinking about cultural appropriation based on nationality, ethnicity, religion, etc., where some people are born into and socialized within that culture, whereas others are not. Of course, even in such cases, there will always be people who are of mixed nationality, ethnicity, religion, etc.--people who Gloria Anzaldúa famously described as living in the borderlands between two identities or cultures.

However, this insider/outsider framing completely falls apart when considering the identities and cultures of gender and sexual minorities. After all, almost all of us grow up in straight families and communities. While we may have experienced ourselves as different from the straight majority in some way as young children, we did not initially have LGBTQIA+ identities or culture to help us make sense of our lives. Rather, we tend to discover these identities over time: We hear someone mention the identity, we seek out books and websites to learn more about them, we try these identities on for size ourselves, we connect with other people who we believe are “like us” in that way, and so on. The first time we enter a particular LGBTQIA+ space (whether it be a gay bar, a trans support group, or an asexual online discussion group) we often feel like outsiders, and we experience a steep learning curve in trying to understand the language and customs associated with the group.

In other words, we discover LGBTQIA+ identities and cultures. And one could say that all gender and sexual minorities are appropriators, as virtually all of us have adopted identities and participate in cultures that others created before us, and which we were not initially socialized into. Indeed, the only people who are immersed in queer cultures from the start of their lives are children of queer parents, and the majority of them turn out to be straight!

Permeability between straight and queer identities and culture is essential for LGBTQIA+ self-actualization and empowerment. Furthermore, when a straight person engages in a stereotypically queer activity, it may be an act of appropriation, but it could also be experimenting or questioning on their part. I have heard queer people accuse straight people who make out with one another of “queer appropriation”--when I do, I often reply, “Well how do you know that neither of them will come to identify as gay/lesbian or bisexual someday?”[6] And even if the people in question do end up being straight, isn’t the fact that nowadays people can engage in same-sex kissing without being ostracized a sign that that heterosexist norm is eroding?

Along similar lines, don’t instances where cisgender people crossdress or engage in other forms of non-EED gender-non-conformity help to deteriorate binary gender norms? Shouldn’t we be celebrating such instances of permeability between genders and sexualities rather than condemning them as appropriation?

And if we do decide to call out certain people’s genders and sexualities as “appropriative,” then where exactly do we draw the line? And who gets screwed as a result? Doesn’t the claim that heterosexuals-shouldn’t-appropriate-queer-culture pretty much leave bisexual/pansexual folks especially vulnerable to accusations of appropriation? And doesn’t the claim that men-shouldn’t-appropriate-women’s-oppression leave trans women especially susceptible to similar

criticism?

This leads us to another crucial point: Accusations of appropriation are essentially claims about authenticity.[7] Specifically, they create a binary wherein certain people (i.e., the marginalized/minority group) are considered to be authentic when they engage in a particular activity, whereas others (i.e., the dominant/majority group) cannot authentically engage in that same act. Rather they can only appropriate it.

This specter of “inauthenticity” isn’t nearly so troubling when it comes to other forms of cultural appropriation. For instance, the implication that white folks/Westerners are “inauthentic” when they perform reggae or practice Yoga is not meant to be an indictment of their natural abilities. After all, nobody is born performing reggae or practicing Yoga--these are learned skills and traditions. Rather, the “authenticity” that is invoked simply refers to whether one was socialized within the culture that originally created these practices versus whether one was raised in an outsider culture and only discovered and took up such practices later in life.

In sharp contrast, there is ample evidence that sex, gender, and sexuality naturally vary in the population, not only because of culture and environment, but also because of biological variation.[8] And all of us are socialized into cultures where there are a multitude of different expressions of gender and sexuality. Some of these expressions may be considered feminine, masculine, or androgynous. They may be described as queer or straight, or as unusual or normal. But regardless of what labels and meanings others might project onto these different gender and sexual expressions, all of these variations exist within the society in which we are raised. They are arguably all a part of our culture.

While sex, gender, and sexuality naturally vary within the population, we live in a world where such expressions and identities are highly policed. And they are primarily policed via the tropes of “authenticity” and “naturalness.”

In the culture at large, feminine gender expressions and attraction toward men are viewed as authentic and natural when expressed by women, but not by men. Masculine gender expressions and attraction toward women are viewed as authentic and natural when expressed by men, but not by women. Penile-vaginal penetration sex between monogamous partners is viewed as the only authentic and natural form of sex, whereas most other sexual interests and acts are dismissed as inauthentic and unnatural.

The concepts of “authentic,” “natural,” and “real” lie at the heart of almost all manifestations of societal cissexism. The notion that transsexuals are not “authentic” women or men, or that genderqueer people have not chosen an “authentic” gender, enable the cisgender majority to dismiss our identities as “inauthentic,” and thus misgender us as they see fit. The “trans panic” phenomenon is steeped in assumption that trans people are deceivers who pose as an “inauthentic” gender while hiding our supposed “real” gender. It is commonly presumed that people who partner with trans people do not experience “authentic” attraction to us, but rather that they are driven by some kind of “fetish”--a word derived from the Portuguese word for “artificial.”

The point is that, while gender and sexuality naturally vary, sexual- and gender-non-conformity is rigorously punished in our society via accusations of inauthenticity, whether it be claims that trans people’s gender identities are “inauthentic,” that asexual/bisexual/lesbian/gay people’s sexual attractions (or lack thereof) are “unnatural,” or that straight cisgender people are not “real women”

or “real men” because of some relatively minor gender transgression they may have committed (e.g., not shaving their legs, expressing too much emotion, or having a gender atypical occupation). And calling someone’s non-EED expressions of gender or sexuality “appropriative” is really just another way of dismissing them as “inauthentic” (which is precisely why trans-exclusive radical feminists so frequently accuse trans women of appropriation, as it depicts us as merely fakes, pretenders, impersonators, and imposters).

There are no “authentic” expressions of gender and sexuality. There are merely those that are deemed legitimate in society and those that are dismissed as inauthentic. While I understand why some LGBTQIA+ people might be inclined to describe non-EED acts of sexual- and gender-non-conformity as “appropriation” (especially when the person engaging in them appears straight, cisgender, etc.), I fear that such accusations may only perpetuate the real/fake, natural/unnatural, and authentic/inauthentic binaries that are so often used to undermine our own genders and sexualities.

Conclusion

This essay was intended to illustrate that the concept of appropriation is way more complicated than many people seem to realize, and that non-EED appropriation is not necessarily a bad thing, depending on your politics and perspective. Furthermore, I hope that people will recognize that cultural permeability is an absolute necessity for LGBTQIA+ communities to exist and flourish, and that claims that certain non-EED expressions of gender or sexuality are “appropriative” will only lend support to existing binary gender norms and to the false notion that certain genders and sexualities are more “natural,” “real,” or “authentic” than others.

Moving forward, I believe that we should continue to critique instances of EED appropriation, but it would help if we were more explicit about why such instances are bad. Specifically, rather than simply crying “appropriation” (which often conflates EED and non-EED appropriation, and can also implicate acts that merely resemble those that occur in marginalized/minority groups), we should explicitly discuss how such acts either erase, exploit, and/or denigrate the marginalized/minority group in question.

Notes:

1. Definitions from Dictionary.com.
2. See WhippingGirl, pages 195-212.
3. For the record, the group did occasionally have closed meetings where only trans folks themselves could attend. But many, if not most, of the meetings were open to partners and friends as well.
4. It must also be said that these groups were more easily able to integrate because they are both white and Christian, and thus they did not have to overcome the entrenched racism and Christian-centrism that continue to proliferate in the U.S.
5. I have appropriated the phrase “cultural appreciation” from Susan Scafidi, *Who Owns Culture?: Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005); see pages 6-11.

6. Here is a real life example of this: Way back before my transition, I played in a band. And on a few occasions, a male friend from another band and I would make out on stage during our set. We did it primarily for the same reason that Kurt Cobain and Krist Novoselic of Nirvana famously kissed on national TV--to make homophobes uncomfortable, to challenge heterosexism. I suppose that some people in the audience could have viewed us as two “straight dudes” who were trying to garner “indie-cred” by appropriating queerness, but in reality, both of us had been sexual with men previously and we both eventually wound up identifying as bisexual.

7. This is discussed in great length in Scafidi, *Who Owns Culture?*, especially pages 52-66.

8. See *Excluded: Making Feminist and Queer Movements More Inclusive*, pages 138-168, and references therein.

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