

SUNY Purchase College

Appropriation Of African American Culture in Korean Popular Music:  
A Case Study on BTS and The Negative Impact of the “Black Aesthetic”

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Senior Capstone - CAP 4800

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December 8, 2021

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## **Introduction**

This Capstone Project will both examine and analyze the appropriation of African American culture, specifically in the Korean music industry. This paper will narrow down Korean Popular Music by focusing on K-Pop sensation BTS. This paper will be focusing on BTS as they are the largest K-Pop band in the world at the moment. The group is the best example of the Appropriation of African American culture in K-Pop because of their powerful international fanbase and their overall influence over their fans as a group.

The main issue that will be addressed is how African American culture has been stolen and stripped down into what the Kpop industry deems as appropriate and/or acceptable. This issue is important because it erases all of the authentic culture that African Americans have created and cultivated. Throughout history, African American culture has struggled to prosper because of racism and stereotypical ideals forced upon them by societal pressure and discrimination. This is where the concept of Cultural Appropriation has the utmost importance.

This paper will be analyzing the appropriation of African American culture through qualitative research. Some examples of research that will be incorporated into this paper are as follows: peer-reviewed articles, social media posts/dialogue, photographic evidence, and interviews. The research questions that will be answered are: “In what ways has African American Culture specifically been appropriated in Kpop?” and “How is Cultural Appropriation detrimental to African Americans?”.

Cultural Appropriation can be defined as taking parts and elements from a culture that is not one's own and adopting them into behavior and customs within society, usually in a very insensitive way. African American culture has been both Westernized and whitewashed for centuries. The culture has been deconstructed and picked apart, only to be left with what society has deemed as acceptable or useful. In the case of K-Pop, Cultural Appropriation is applied into concepts, appearances, stereotypes, and aesthetics. This paper will specifically be focusing on K-Pop, BTS, and their inappropriate use of the "Black Aesthetic".

It is harmful when a group of people's culture is used for profit, exploitation, and/or exposure. This topic is important as it sheds light onto the everlasting issue of racism against African Americans embedded in Western culture. This issue directly affects African Americans in various ways such as emotionally, psychologically, and even physically. To present this, this paper will be focusing on three main themes which are as follows: Defining Cultural Appropriation, Understanding Identity, and Recognizing Power.

The first theme titled "Defining Cultural Appropriation" will go into a detailed explanation of what Cultural Appropriation is. It is crucial for the reader to understand the overall term Cultural Appropriation. In order for the reader to understand the negative effects that appropriation creates, they must begin with defining and understanding what Cultural Appropriation is and its impact on those affected.

The second theme titled "Understanding Identity" will go into a detailed discussion of a few examples of Cultural Appropriation. This section includes photographs of BTS participating in Cultural Appropriation. In showing these photos, the researcher explains why appropriation is an issue and how it negatively impacts African Americans and their culture as a whole. This

section focuses on African American hair and explains the history and trauma that comes with it for African Americans. This section also discusses how K-Pop views African Americans and then uses the “Black Aesthetic”. This is done through the inclusion of social media dialogue from members of BTS.

The last theme titled “Recognizing Power” acknowledges the various types of power that should be considered when discussing Cultural Appropriation. This paper specifically focuses on the power of social media, as it is the most important type of power when examining Cultural Appropriation. The research in this paper shows the power of influence and how it should be acknowledged as a legitimate form of power. This paper goes into a detailed discussion of BTS’ fandom, titled “ARMY”, and how they also play a crucial role in recognizing power.

## **Literature Review**

In recent years, the concept of Cultural Appropriation has become one of the largest discussed topics in the media. Furthermore, the discussion on Cultural Appropriation has expanded its reach to the Korean music industry. The appropriation of African American culture in Korean music in particular has been the subject of both intense conversation and debate. The significance of this analysis is to help the reader gain a further understanding of African American culture and how it has influenced the Korean Popular Music genre. The research will be following three main themes: Defining Appropriation, Identity, and Recognizing Power.

### **Theme 1: Defining Appropriation**

The first theme is titled “Defining Appropriation”. In order to understand the issue of Cultural Appropriation of African American culture in Kpop, the reader has to understand the term Cultural Appropriation. The section begins with the Merriam Webster definition of what culture is. The section continues by incorporating the Dianne LaDonde article, “Does Cultural Appropriation Cause Harm?” and Charles Taylor’s definition of culture. The section continues with the basic Merriam Webster definition of “appropriation”. In Nicole Cocuy’s paper “Cultural Appropriation is not Cultural Appreciation”, Susan Scadafi defines Cultural Appropriation as a whole. The section states the difference between Cultural Appropriation and Appreciation by incorporating the Nicole Cocuy article. There is a clear difference between paying homage to a culture and/or deliberately stealing. The larger issue is when the person continues to speak over a group of traditionally marginalized people. LaDone’s article further adds to this idea by introducing terms such as “nonrecognition”, “misrecognition”, and exploitation”. These terms directly tie into the next theme which is titled “Identity” .

### Theme 2: Identity

Identity is another concept that is integral in understanding the appropriation of African American culture in Kpop music. As the definition of “Cultural Appropriation” was defined, you must also define what “Identity” is. According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, Identity is defined as “the qualities, beliefs, (etc) that makes a particular person or group different from others.” (Webster) Identity is an important part of understanding Cultural Appropriation as having identity comes with being a part of a culture. When someone takes from a culture that is not theirs, they are using someone else’s identity instead of using their own. When someone appropriates, they are stripping a person of what makes their culture their own. The issue here is

erasing a person's identity and only taking the parts that are deemed worthy of being taken. Specifically speaking on African American culture, there is both extensive history and trauma that further prove this point. In Marian Liu's Washington post article "Black Culture Inspired Kpop Faces a Racial Reckoning", Ex Kpop Star Alex Reid speaks on Black Culture in Kpop music. She discusses how Kpop profits off of African American culture, but continues to mistreat African Americans. African Americans still face racism and discrimination in Korea even though their culture is popularly sought after. This article also discusses how Korean entertainment companies reacted during the Black Lives Matter movement. The narrative of colorism is important as it affects how POC (People of Color) are viewed by the public. The use of the "black aesthetic" in Kpop perpetuates harmful stereotypes.

In the ED Times article, the author discusses the history of African American hair and the trauma that comes with hair. The researcher explains the importance of Cultural Appropriation of African American hair and how it affects African Americans as opposed to Non-African Americans. This idea of how Cultural Appropriation maintains harmful stereotypes is continued in a Twitter thread titled "Problematic Things BTS has Done". The researcher uses photographic evidence and tweets from this thread to show examples of how BTS has participated in the Cultural Appropriation of African American culture. There was an uproar on social media over the use of AAVE and box braids/styling in the music video. This evidence enraged many fans as they saw how it made a mockery of African American culture. In the article "Black K-Pop Fan Videos and Polyculturalism", David Oh incorporates African American fan reactions. This is important as it opens a new dialogue in the concept of Identity. The theme of Identity directly connects to the last theme which is "Recognizing Power".

### Theme 3: Recognizing Power

Recognizing the concept of Power is also crucial in understanding Cultural Appropriation as a whole. There are various forms of power that intertwine with each other and directly affect our understanding of appropriation. The different types of power that should be considered when discussing the appropriation of African American culture are Social Media, White Activism, Education, and Capital. In this section, the researcher will be focusing on the power of social media because it plays an integral role in how BTS rose to their status of power. Social Media has become influential as a main factor in deciding public opinion. The Dazed Magazine article “How K-pop is Responding to Its Longstanding Appropriation Problem” also adds to this idea by discussing how K-Pop fans have taken action when idols and companies have failed to do so.

### **Analysis**

#### **BTS**

As of 2021, The South Korean K-Pop group “BTS”, also known as Bangtan Sonyeondan, are the largest boy band in the world. The group made their debut on June 12th of 2013 and consists of seven members: Kim Seokjin (Jin), Kim Namjoon (RM), Min Yoongi (Suga), Jung Hoseok (JHope), Kim Taehyung (V) , Park Jimin (Jimin) , and Jeon Jungkook (Jungkook). The group originally debuted with a strong Hip-Hop concept, but gradually shifted to the typical K-Pop oriented concept. BTS stands out from the typical K-Pop genre because of their focus in



their music. The group sheds light onto topics that are usually put aside in the Korean music industry. The topics include, but are not limited to mental health/illness, debt, coming of age, and self love. Making music about these topics has also expanded their reach to the international market. BTS has broken into the American music market by topping US music charts and setting new records. By breaking into the international market, BTS have built a new bridge between Korean culture and various cultures. BTS have paved the way for international music becoming “mainstream” in the US.

A major factor in BTS’ popularity is their strong fanbase. BTS fans are called “ARMY”, which stands for “Adorable Representative M.C. For Youth”. There have been multiple meanings over time, but this still remains the basis for the fandom name. BTS fans are well known because of their dedication to the group. They have helped the band to break records by mass streaming music videos, selling out award shows, and buying albums/streaming their music, etc. As BTS have branched out into the American music market, their music has also changed to fit the international fanbase. The international fanbase has become crucial in BTS’ massive success. With BTS becoming as popular as they have in America, they are always in the public eye. Fans have done extensive research and found some questionable situations in which the group has participated in Cultural Appropriation. This has become a largely discussed topic because of how influential the group is.

In recent years, the concept of Cultural Appropriation has become one of the largest discussed topics on social media. Through the power of social media, Cultural Appropriation has become a popular term widely used in America. Although the term has become popularized in American mainstream media, other countries are not as knowledgeable concerning both the

terminology and concept. Social Media serves as a method of connection between various people. Through the use of social media, a bridge of education and shared knowledge is formed. In this case, the concept of Cultural Appropriation has expanded to other countries outside of the United States. Furthermore, the discussion on Cultural Appropriation has expanded its reach to the Korean music industry. The appropriation of African American culture in Korean music in particular has been the subject of both intense conversation and debate.

The significance of this research project is to help the reader gain a further understanding of African American culture and how it has influenced the Korean Popular Music genre as a whole. BTS has proven to be a significant example of Cultural Appropriation of African American culture in Kpop despite their continuously growing influence. Firstly, they are the strongest example of a successful K-Pop group due to their ever growing popularity outside of South Korea. The second reason is because of their influence in the present day world, the world's situations, and the power they have over their fanbase. The research in this paper will be organized into the same three main themes which are as follows: Defining Appropriation, Identity, and Recognizing Power.

### **Defining Cultural Appropriation**

In order to understand the issue of the Cultural Appropriation of African American culture in the K-Pop industry, the reader must first understand what Cultural Appropriation is. The process of understanding the overall concept begins with deconstructing the term "Cultural Appropriation". The first step is to begin with a basic understanding of what "Culture" is. According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, Culture is defined as "the beliefs, customs, arts,

etc. of a particular society, group, place, or time” (Webster, 2021). In Dianne LaDonde’s article, “Does Cultural Appropriation cause Harm?”, Charles Taylor defines culture as “having a language and a set of practices which define specific understandings of personhood, social relations, states of mind/soul, goods and bads, virtues and vices, and the like.” (Taylor). Culture is the foundation of every single version of society. In addition to this, Culture serves as a means of passing down traditions, folklore, and history. Culture functions as a form of identity and is integral in the foundation of communities.

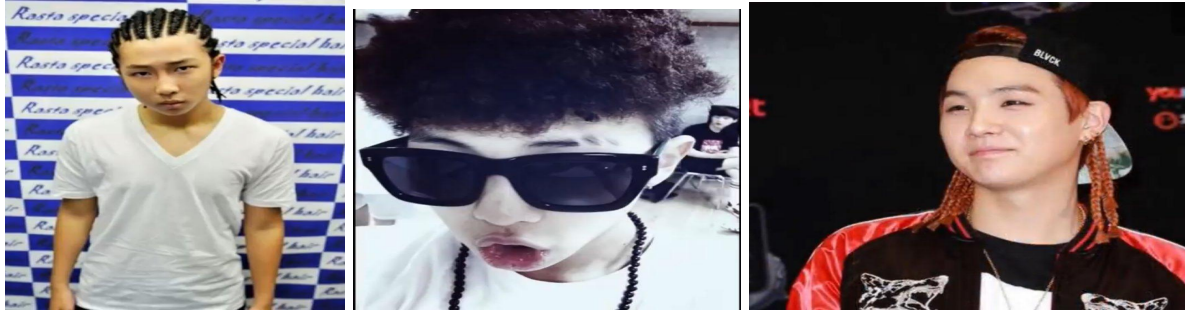
If the reader has understood both the concept and definition of Culture, they can then move to the term “Appropriation”. According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary the term “Appropriation” can be defined as “the act of taking or using something especially in a way that is illegal/unfair, etc.” (Webster). When both of these terms are placed together, you have the term “Cultural Appropriation”. In Nicole Cocuy’s article “Cultural Appropriation is not Cultural Appreciation”, she states that Cultural Appropriation is the “taking of intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artifacts from someone else's culture without permission. Cultural appropriation often involves the adoption of a marginalized or historically oppressed minority's culture.” (Cocuy) The main issue with Cultural Appropriation is that it is harmful towards groups of traditionally marginalized and/or oppressed people’s culture. To put it into perspective, you can find endless examples of appropriation in American pop culture. In “Cultural Appropriation is not Cultural Appreciation” by Nicole Cocuy, she describes American Pop Singer Katy Perry’s 2014 music video for “This Is How We Do”. In Perry’s music video, she perpetuates African American stereotypes in her style and clothing, which included, but was not limited to her use of watermelon, braided/cornrow hair, long nails, and gelled “down edges/baby

hair's". Perry's use of AAVE (African American Vernacular English) was also seen as problematic as it also enabled traditionally racist African American stereotypes. The use of these ideas may have seemed harmless to the random viewer, but many fans were outraged by the blatant racist stereotypes.

Another one of the crucial key points in understanding the concept of Cultural Appreciation is how there is a lack of respect and not giving credit where it is due. The idea directly ties into the concept of Cultural Appreciation. Although they sound somewhat similar, they could not be any more different. Cultural Appropriation differs from the term "Cultural Appreciation" as it is harmful towards groups of traditionally marginalized/oppressed people's culture. The main difference between the two terms is the clear difference between paying homage to a culture and/or deliberately stealing, then continuing to speak over a group of traditionally marginalized people. There is a noticeable difference in the power dynamic. Appropriation lacks a balance of power, whereas appreciation creates that balance. Cultural Appreciation is an effort by a person to understand and connect with a culture outside of their own. Now that the reader has a basic understanding of what Cultural Appropriation is, they can move to understand the next theme of "Identity".

## Understanding Identity

### BTS Cultural Appropriation of African American Hair



(Via Twitter “@8363919827bt”)

Kim Namjoon, otherwise known as “RM” (meaning “Rap Monster”), is the leader of BTS. He is also one of the only English speaking members in the group. These photos are from a Twitter thread titled “Problematic things BTS has done: A Thread”. In this thread, photos of Kim Namjoon and other members, including “Suga” (Real name Min Yoon-gi), participating in the Cultural Appropriation of African American culture can be found. African American hair is an integral part of African American identity. There is an extensive history behind African American hair. According to an article by the ED Times,

During the Middle Passage or the period in the Atlantic Slave Trade when millions of Africans were brutally ripped from their homes and shipped to the New World (America), according to sources, the heads of the captured slaves were shaved not only as a sanitary means but also to take away their own culture and identity from them.

The article goes on to state “But perhaps the biggest way that cornrows helped the African slave population was by providing a discreet and easy to hide way to transfer and create maps in order

to leave their captor's place." (Sharma) In a 2017 live stream online with fans, Namjoon also admitted that he had styled his hair to appear "more aggressive". In 2018, an African American New Jersey athlete was given the ultimatum of cutting off his locs or not being able to participate in his wrestling match. When African Americans wear braids, they are seen as "unprofessional" and often discriminated against. There is generational trauma that comes with having African American hairstyles.

Fans are also upset with Kim Namjoon because of his use of a "blaccent" and AAVE (African American Vernacular English). There are videos online of him stating that "Black English is his talent". The other band members laughed along and repeated the way that he spoke. This was painful to African American fans because the other members had also participated in perpetuating racist stereotypes. Blaccents are offensive as they maintain harmful African American stereotypes. Another issue with this is that African Americans have been discriminated against for speaking while using AAVE, typically being called "unprofessional" or even "ghetto".

When Namjoon and the other members were not performing the "edgy" concept, their image was completely different. On Korean television shows they maintained a "classy" and polite image. Although when they performed on stage, they transformed by using this "Black Persona". This is offensive because it further plays into the idea of the "Black Aesthetic" which is often used in K-Pop. The "Black Aesthetic" is Korea's view of African American culture. This aesthetic is repeatedly used when there is a dark/edgy comeback (when a K-Pop group promotes a new song or album). This diluted version of African American culture adds to offensive

stereotypes that have already existed throughout history. This view is offensive as it is a mockery of what African American culture realistically is in everyday life.

The main issue with Kim Namjoon and Suga appropriating African American hair and using a “blaccent” is that it is not their own identity. Identity is another concept that is integral in understanding the Appropriation of African American culture in K-Pop music. As the definition of “Cultural Appropriation” was previously defined, the definition of “Identity” must also be defined. According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, Identity is defined as “the qualities, beliefs, (etc) that makes a particular person or group different from others. (Webster) Identity is an important part of understanding Cultural Appropriation as having a sense of personal Identity comes with being a part of a culture. When someone takes something from a culture that is not their own, they are using someone else’s identity. Different parts of different cultures have various significance. The person who takes from an identity that is not their own does not have any personal roots in that culture. They are lacking the emotional connection that comes with the culture and having experienced/lived with it. There is a lack of understanding the cultural significance, therefore that person does not resonate with that culture nor their Identity.

When someone appropriates, they are stripping a person of what makes their culture their own. The issue here is erasing a person’s identity and only taking the parts that are deemed worthy of being taken. Specifically speaking on African American culture, there is both extensive history and trauma that further prove this point.

## **Taking “Inspiration”**

The other issue with this is how K-Pop takes “inspiration” from African American culture. In Marian Liu’s Washington Post article “Black Culture-Inspired K-Pop Faces a Racial Reckoning”, Ex K-Kop Star Alex Reid speaks on her personal experience with Black Culture in K-Pop music. Her view on the Appropriation of African American culture is particularly important as she was one of the only Black K-Pop stars to ever exist in Korea. When discussing Korean music, Reid stated “Their music is Black-inspired, It's one thing to talk, and it's another thing to literally put your money where your mouth is.” (Reid) Reid discussed how K-Pop profits off of African American culture, yet African Americans are still somehow mistreated in Korea. African Americans still face both racism and discrimination even though their culture is popularly sought after and used in Korean music. K-Pop music has been built on the foundation of African American culture and musicianship. Through taking inspiration from African American culture, K-Pop music creates an entirely new environment in which the original culture has been diluted and then transformed to fit a new standard. The culture has been broken down, therefore leaving African Americans who listen to K-Pop music with a strange sense of Identity. They are only seeing the parts of their culture that Koreans have accepted and then decided to use in K-Pop music. African American engagement has been an integral part of how K-Pop music functions as a whole. Whether that is watching a music video then commenting, buying a group’s new album, or even being a direct source of inspiration for a “comeback concept” (When a group is coming back with new music). It is painful for African American fans to see members of their favorite K-Pop groups making racist/colorist remarks and enabling harmful stereotypes.



## **Identity in Community**

In the article “Black K-Pop Fan Videos and Polyculturalism”, there are reactions from Black K-Pop fans that showcase the various emotions and feelings that come with being a K-Pop fan while loving Korean music, concepts, and being in a community. When you are a Black K-Pop fan, you are not only just a fan, but a BLACK K-Pop fan. This comes with its own set of issues and opposing viewpoints from both fans of K-Pop and those who do not listen to K-Pop.

In the article David Oh states

“One criticism from Blacks who are not fans of K-pop is an argument that K-pop is appropriative and, by implication, that Blacks should not support K-pop. Thus, some Black YouTubers argue against appropriation in order to claim a polycultural self that enjoys K-pop while maintaining the values of Black communities.”

African Americans who are fans of K-Pop music often have to justify their reasoning for liking K-Pop. They cannot simply just be fans because of the impact that African American culture has had on K-Pop music. K-Pop music is harmful to the African American identity in various ways including, but not limited to colorism, harmful stereotypes, blatant racism, etc. This creates a separation between African Americans and their own culture, identity, and community. They face an internal war; the first side being that they love K-Pop music and the second side being that they love K-Pop music while knowing how K-Pop culture views them. They love K-Pop music, but they also know that the K-Pop industry does not care for them. The K-Pop industry also does not seem to care for its African American fans unless there is money involved. Additionally, money ties into the last theme of power.

## Recognizing Power

Recognizing the concept of Power is also crucial in understanding Cultural Appropriation as a whole. There are various forms of power that intertwine with each other and directly affect our understanding of what Appropriation is. The different types of power that should be recognized when discussing Cultural Appropriation are Social Media, White Activism, Education, and Marginalization. Perhaps the most important form of power in the case of Cultural Appropriation is social media.

BTS' fandom "ARMY" is well known in Korea and America because of the power they hold. BTS ARMY have proven time and time again that they are a force to be reckoned with. This type of power is both positive and negative. The positive being that ARMY would use their platforms to spread BTS' messages of self love and musicality. One example of this is mass streaming music videos and breaking records for the group. On the other hand, this type of power can also be dangerous. There have been multiple instances on social media where a fan has "called out" BTS' wrongdoings and has then been viciously attacked by the entire fandom. This includes being "doxxed" (public revelation of one's personal information such as address, phone number, etc.), being told to commit suicide, or being bullied online. The fan's love for the band blinds them, causing them to lash out at anyone who speaks against them.

In both 2017 and 2018, BTS was named one of TIME Magazine's "Most Influential People on the Internet". The band knows the power of their fandom as they frequently speak on it. In 2020, the death of George Floyd sparked the Black Lives Matter protests in the United States. BTS spoke on the situation stating "We stand against racial discrimination. We condemn violence. You, I, and we all have the right to be respected. We will stand together." (BTS\_twt)

The band donated \$1 million to the Black Lives Matter cause. Seeing this, ARMY decided to come together to match the \$1 million donation. The fandom created the hashtag “#MatchAMillion” and raised the money to bail out protesters who were arrested fighting against police brutality and racism.

This idea of power also works in the reverse. BTS’ ARMY also has the power to hold BTS accountable for their past behavior. Fans were able to come together to speak out against police brutality, racism, and lack of resources for African Americans. If they were able to do all of these things, then they should be able to come together to hold BTS accountable for participating in the Cultural Appropriation of African American culture. They should come together as a community that has respect for one another, not just as a “crazy fandom”. Through the power of social media, fans can educate, spread awareness, and hold people accountable for their wrongdoings.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Research**

While the concept of Cultural Appropriation has become popular in recent years, the world fails to recognize the importance of the effects that it channels. This paper has asked the questions of “In what ways has African American Culture specifically been appropriated in Kpop?” and “How is Cultural Appropriation detrimental to African Americans?”. These questions were answered through a close examination of the K-Pop boy band “BTS” and their past history of the Appropriation of African American culture.

This analysis followed three themes which are integral in understanding how Cultural Appropriation has affected African Americans. The first theme titled "Defining Cultural Appropriation" provided a thorough explanation of the term Cultural Appropriation. The reader has also learned the difference between what makes something Cultural Appropriation rather than a cultural exchange. The second theme titled "Understanding Identity" helped the reader to understand the various ways that BTS' Cultural Appropriation has affected African Americans. This was done through examples of photographs and social media dialogue. This section highlighted the multidimensional layers of how Cultural Appropriation in K-Pop has negatively impacted African Americans. The last section titled "Recognizing Power" introduces the several types of power that should be acknowledged when discussing Cultural Appropriation. The power of social media was labeled as the most powerful in the case of Cultural Appropriation in K-Pop because it has the most impact.

These ideas are important when discussing Cultural Appropriation because of the negative impacts they have on African Americans. Cultural Appropriation is important because it contributes to the larger issue of racism. When discussing Cultural Appropriation through a lens of racism, it is important to understand the range of effects that it has on African Americans. These include, but are not limited to cultural insensitivity, colorism, marginalization, and miseducation. It is crucial that society learns that these racist attitudes and stereotypes should not be continued.

Moving forward, the idea of education must be prioritized. Society has the power to educate on the concept of Cultural Appropriation through various methods. This could include, but not be limited to education in schools, social media, newspapers, or even simply by word of

mouth. Everyone plays a role in the power of education. It is not solely African Americans' duty to educate people of the concept of Cultural Appropriation, as it is both traumatic and exhausting to relive these events. Society needs to understand this is not just an "African American issue", but an overall systemic racial issue. This issue will not just "go away" on its own, therefore it must be addressed.

There is a lack of research concerning this topic, so perhaps there should be further research conducted in the concept of Cultural Appropriation. There should be an in depth study of what Cultural Appropriation is and how it is harmful to other cultures. One suggestion is to study the ways in which everyone can avoid Cultural Appropriation. Another suggestion would be to further study the contrast between Cultural Appropriation and Appreciation. The last suggestion would be to further study the concept of "Accountability" and why it is so important when examining Cultural Appropriation.

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