

Cultural Appropriation: A Review of the Literature in US Folklore Studies

Jason Baird Jackson

Indiana University

Abstract: In support of a companion article (Jackson 2021), this paper surveys the most prominent US English-language journals in folklore studies to identify the nature of the extant peer-reviewed literature dealing with the issue of cultural appropriation and its disciplinary conceptualization.

Keywords: acculturation; assimilation; circulation; cultural appropriation; models (representations); social change

Note: Readers of the companion paper may wish to re-associate this manuscript with the "Introduction" of that paper, from which it derived. It is based in content originally prepared for a note in Jackson (2021). Because this essay needed to be posted permanently prior to the finalization of the Journal of Folklore Research article that it is intended to support, page numbers to relevant parts of that article are not provided here.

The following literature review was prepared in conjunction with the publication of a conceptual paper dealing with the subject of cultural appropriation in folklore studies. That paper, to appear in the *Journal of Folklore Research*, is unduly long. To decrease its length while still providing *particularly* interested readers with access to a fuller survey of the topic in the folklore studies journal literature, this review is offered as a companion to the conceptual manuscript.

In "On Cultural Appropriation" I note that this is a topic that has long been prioritized in informal discussions among folklorists and their allies, but that it has received surprisingly little formal discussion in our peer-reviewed scholarship. The gap between the frequent and animated discussions on appropriation taking place in my adult circle and the paucity of formal scholarship on the theme motivated my interest in working on this project (Jackson 2021). I do not offer here a full bibliographic analysis to sustain this assertion, but I can use the *Journal of American Folklore* (JAF) as an indicator.

Cultural appropriation is taken up to some degree in seven JAF papers of which I am aware, having searched the journal's full run. I present the JAF data in more detail as a means of illustrating my sense of usage in folklore studies. At the conclusion of this note, I summarize comparable data for *Western Folklore*, *Journal of Folklore Research*, *American Ethnologist*, and *Ethnologia Europaea*. I have used full-text search techniques to scan the literature. Such techniques are imperfect, but they can usually reveal trends.

The oldest evocation of cultural appropriation in JAF is from 1999. In their important discussion of cultural hybridization, Debra Kapchan and Pauline Turner Strong make observations directly related to my intentions in my JFR article. Citing work (1999, 247)

that is anxious about the hybridization framework, they underline the way that characterizations of cultural influence that are framed as hybridization “may obscure more coercive forms of cultural mixture.” In addition to citing work suspicious of hybridization, they cite Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao (1997) for the issue of cultural appropriation. I touch on this key source in my article (Jackson 2021).

In a review essay discussing albums associated with the revival of the so-called Child ballads in England, David Atkinson (2001, 371) evokes cultural appropriation in passing in relation to the social gap separating revivalists and the tradition bearers from whom the older song tradition was documented.

Cultural appropriation appears as a working concept at several points in a study of ethnic restaurants in Quebec City by Laurier Turgeon and Madeleine Pastinelli (2002). While central to their discussion, the authors do not offer a definition of the concept, presenting it in a taken-for-granted way that is common in our literatures.

In his early and important discussion of international heritage and property regimes vis-à-vis folklore, Valdimar Tr. Hafstein (2004) cites several key works touching on cultural appropriation, but does not himself address this neighboring issue in his own paper.

In a 2006 reflection on, and survey of, the current practices of public folklorists in the United States, Patricia Atkinson Wells notes, at two points in her essay, circumstances in which transformations of local culture are at risk of constituting instances of cultural appropriation. At issue is when local cultural forms are transformed by outsiders in ways that are contrary to the wishes of the source community (2006, 12, 14).

In a discussion of internet-disseminated visual folklore hostile to US President Barack Obama, Margaret Duffy, Janis Teruggi Page, and Rachel Young (2012) rely heavily on a broader notion of appropriation that is related to, but not the same as, the kind of cultural appropriation at the center of my article (Jackson 2021). In their uses of appropriation, at issue are the ways that participants in a vernacular cultural practice take, and transform, aspects of the popular or elite levels of their own culture. (This is a sense also evoked in Noyes 2009 and Coombe 1998, discussed below.)

In a 2018 *JAF* paper on “Fake Vets” (people falsely claiming to be military veterans), Kristiana Willsey touches incidentally on cultural appropriation in a consideration of the value and authenticity of personal narratives and how they can be “stolen.” I would observe that the kind of identity fraud at issue with fake veterans is akin to widely discussed problems of Native American identity appropriations, a canonical and extremely painful and complex cultural appropriation phenomena (Sturm 2011).

These are valuable works of folklore scholarship, but with exception of the brief mention given in Turner and Strong (1999, 247) none of these works in *JAF* take up the task of defining or conceptualizing cultural appropriation. An unspecified, but probably widely accepted, folk definition of cultural appropriation active among folklorists is being used in route to other scholarly ends. I hope that this survey, while very partial, suggests the need

that I am identifying in my article (Jackson 2021).” A briefer survey of other key US journals may provide additional justification.

Peer-journals to *JAF* reveal similar patterns. For *Western Folklore (WF)* in the period 1947 to 2012, cultural appropriation appears in passing four times (three articles, one review) and is a substantive matter in one article (Kenny 2007) and one book review (Deshane 2005). In the substantive instances, a specific ethnographic case is under discussion. In a review of a book focused on a specific rich instance of cultural appropriation dynamics, Deshane (2005, 139) makes an interesting observation that may relate to the dearth of formal studies in folklore studies journals. He characterizes cultural appropriation as a “*bête noire*” (i.e. something particularly disliked) for many scholars.

The *Journal of Folklore Research (JFR)* parallels *JAF* and *WF* in scale and scope, with four articles directly addressing cultural appropriation. The earliest article relates to practices of musical repatriation as a response to the cultural appropriation that one might recognize in colonial field recording of local music (Lancefield 1998).

In an important assessment of the concept of tradition by Dorothy Noyes, the author cited appropriation as a recasting of “invention” in the “invention of tradition” literature. Noyes notes how the term is used “to recognize the agonistic dimension of the handover of tradition: power takes over the symbolic forms of the subaltern, while individuals borrow from the larger culture and make it their own (2009, 244).” Here she is evoking both the kind of cultural appropriation under discussion in my article (Jackson 2021), and the kind of textual poaching (Jenkins 2012) that happens in vernacular engagements with elite and popular (especially media) culture in their own societies (see Coombe 1998 and Duffy, Page, and Young 2012).

Two more *JFR* studies address the theme directly. Sheila Bock and Katherine Borland (2011) offered an ethnographic research article that (like Kenny 2007, cited above) characterizes the experiences of dancers involved in dance forms originating outside their own social setting, acknowledging that such practices have been characterized as cultural appropriation, Bock and Borland combine their ethnographic data with a marshaling of important theoretical arguments about cultural innovation and change to argue forcefully against framing such circumstances as cases of cultural appropriation, focusing instead on healthy dynamics of self-fashioning and cultural growth. I touch on Bock and Borland’s arguments briefly in my article in *JFR* (Jackson 2021).

Curiously, dance seem to take the lead when it comes to elaborated discussions of cultural appropriation in the folklore studies literature, as Daniel C. Swan and Michael P. Jordan’s (2015, 66, 74 n. 23) discussion of cultural appropriation in *JFR* (to which I also turn in concluding my article) highlights the concerns of an Indigenous group deeply concerned with preventing, if at all possible, the cultural appropriation of their own dance practices. Swan and Jordan’s interlocutors are intimately familiar with the appropriation of other indigenous dance practices (especially those of their own Kiowa community) and they are passionate about hindering such occurrences (Jackson 2021).

Scanning the ethnology journal literature for treatments of cultural appropriation is too large a task, but I note that I found one article making direct, but passing, evocation of the concept in *Ethnologia Europaea* and three central (Lagos 1993; Castañeda 2004; Myers 2004) and three passing uses of the concept in the *American Ethnologist*. Of course, the journals surveyed here, while key to ethnology and folkloristics, represent only a small fraction of the literature in these fields. My intention here is mainly to demonstrate the relatively small number of works in relation to the prominence of cultural appropriation in popular media and informal discussion among scholars and activists.

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