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Stuff White People Like...To Keep: Re-Appropriation and Whiteness in America

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Trevor Schmitt is graduating this year with a major in communications and a minor in political science from the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. Trevor wrote this paper as a study of intercultural communications and is especially interested in Racial Construction Theory. In the future, he plans to continue research in the field of communications.
Abstract

This paper evaluates the effect of Whiteness on the re-appropriation of cultural traditions through the blog Stuff White People Like. It is the contention of this research that the dominant racial identity in U.S. culture appropriate cultural traditions to re-enforce its cultural control. The manner in which this process occurs is evaluated through the two separate cultural traditions of Yoga and Natural Medicine as highlight by the blog. The resulting conclusion of this research finds that Whiteness erases marginalized cultural tradition meanings through popular culture and consumerism in order to apply new meanings which are more accessible to the dominant (White) culture.
Introduction

In 1999 popular pop idol Madonna was awarded a Grammy for her widely popular album “Ray of Light”; one of the acclaimed tracks of that album titled “shanti/Astangi” is a rendition of a Sanskrit chant utilized by authors of yoga sutras. That particular song along with several other factors began a revolution. In the following years young White hip suburbanites drawn by the promise of a clear mind and bragging rights regularly attended the thousands of shiny new yoga institutions popping up in sub-developments across the nation. Housewives, business executives, and fitness trainers alike flocked to enjoy the newly adopted trend in which they could not only embrace a mystical and alluring “culture” but also improve their status at the local neighborhood barbeques. Celebrities such as Madonna, Sting, Ricky Martin and Meg Ryan—to name just a few—publicly announced their embrace and approval of the newly middle class practice of “yoga.” Although practiced amongst small communities across the nation since its introduction almost a century ago, from 1999 to 2003, over 15 million Americans (mostly White middle class) also embracing yoga (Yoga Journal) Yoga had finally “made it” in America, but what many hoped would bring a new understanding to the Hindu religion actually brought about the erasing of a cultural tradition with a history of over 2000 years. Although the rich history of Yoga, and further Natural Medicine is somewhat acknowledged by public discourse, their meanings have been distorted to serve the dominant racial group.

It is the contention of this research analysis that the concept of Whiteness is an active hegemonic system of domination which uses its unearned privileges to re-appropriate cultural traditions, norms, and artifacts through popularization and redefinition in order to maintain its influence over mainstream society. Thus, for the purposes of this research as well as a widely accepted function, Whiteness will serve as the dominate or hegemonic actor “taking” from the subordinate or “other” cultures present within the U.S. Whiteness essentially captures these concepts and redefines their meanings, which serves not only to enforce the hegemonic power of White culture but also remove the minority cultural influence on society. In order to further understand the dominant power of White culture within the U.S., I will examine how, and to what extent, this re-appropriation occurs. To do so, I analyze the popular Internet blog-turned-book Stuff White People Like. Culturally captured practices such as yoga and natural medicine are presented in the blog, making it ripe for this analysis. These notions of re-appropriation will be addressed through Oetzel’s (2009) layered approach, which explores how transformation occurs not only on a national level through celebratory popularization and media relabeling, but also on a individual basis as well through pervasive connotation...
change in meaning and practice. This analysis intends to expose the systematic removal of cultural practices by opening a new avenue of research on the concept of Whiteness. By examining the unseen cultural control, communicative research may be able to re-establish the cultural implication of these symbols.

Methods

This analysis utilizes three thematic processes in order to evaluate the nature and extent of the re-appropriation. First, I examine the culturally historic roots of the tradition itself and how deeply it is ingrained into the minority culture that it originates from. Second, I focus on the deconstructive manner in which Whiteness strips these tradition’s meanings and heritage. Finally, I explore how Whiteness as a system attaches new meaning to the traditions in order to maintain influence over them. These interpretive levels are crucial to understanding not only the process itself, but also the implications of authority over these traditions and the cultures they originally represented. In order to study these processes I conducted a textual analysis of the widely popular blog “Stuff White People Like,” in addition to peer commentary on the subject traditions by readers of the website. As with all textual analysis, the question of validity of the text must be addressed as prescribed by Lindolf and Taylor (2002) as they state, “The question of validity has to do with the truth value of observations: whether a research instrument is accurately reporting the nature of the object of study and variations in its behavior” (p. 23).

The blog itself is valuable as a social commentary on the discrete workings of White Culture. Much of the racial discourse present within academia and greater society is primarily focused on the minority experience. The blog serves as a reflexive mirror to that which is often ignored. Likewise to examine the validity of a blog the website’s popularity serves as an indication of its validity. As internet users find the web blog interesting or relevant they spread access to the website itself, inviting more users to evaluate it and in turn give them the opportunity to offer validity by showing it to others and thus one can loosely draw a correlation between popularity of the blog and its validity. This process of evaluation through popularity is also present in the academic world as Paquet notes “these dynamics mirror those of academic publishing: articles that are cited more often are more visible and are read more. This is useful in two respects: it encourages quality, and it makes it more likely that people will find the most relevant documents. Obviously, in both cases, relying on the number of citations as a reliable indicator of quality requires that one trust the community” (p. 5). “Stuff White People Like” had been visited over 16 Million times by 2008 (Jones, 2008). This statistic, paired
with its eventual success as a non-fiction book, makes it clear that the blog may be considered for the purposes of this research paper as a viable academic source. Once the reliability of the blog itself has been established, it is necessary to turn the focus to the peer commentary of the website visitors. These comments cannot be considered as academic sources in the classical sense due to the nature of them being opinionated and anonymous. Having already established the nature of this analysis as qualitative it is important to note that I take a paradigmatically critical perspective in structure and thus will focus primarily on the dominance and power of Whiteness as a hegemonic system over less influential minority cultures.

**Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations**

*Whiteness*

In recent years the academic community has embraced the theory of Whiteness as a dominant system throughout American culture. Whiteness is generally accepted to retain three basic characteristics; Whiteness is invisible, socially constructed, and grants unearned privileges to members of the culture it represents. Modern privilege as a concept of power is difficult to define, often the method in which society evaluates the relationship of negative influence or control from one individual or group on another is found in the legal justice system. The legal system in which this society operates fails to fully understand privilege as Stephanie Wildman in Privilege revealed: how invisible preference undermines America notes that the law strives to achieve fairness in equity between all individuals, unearned privilege undermines that (Wildman, 1996 p. 8). Legal authority is based on an active and apparent transgression on one group or individual upon another and thus is ill equipped to properly address privilege. When privilege operates within the system of justice and arguable as a part of that system, Whiteness can continue to remain unseen.

One of the most fundamental claims of research on Whiteness is its ability to remain unseen by society. This is probably best accentuated by McIntosh (1989) in her classic work The Invisible Knapsack, which is a self-reflection of the benefits bestowed upon herself by nature of her race. She aptly states, “I have come to see White privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious” (p. 1). These privileges are generally unacknowledged by society as a whole and must by actively realized in order to appreciate and comprehend the extent to which the status of being White is inherently dominate to other minority groups.

The invisible nature of Whiteness plays a major roll in its hegemony
within U.S. society, the majority of its members cannot perceive its existence and therefore access its granted privileges unabashedly. Also, by remaining in the shadows of cultural reflection it can continue to thrive without suspicion of having racially unequal aspects. Whiteness utilizes cognitive fallacies in order to maintain this invisibility; As Frankenberg’s (1996) puts it, “Whiteness comes to self-name...simply through a triumphant ‘I am not that’ “ (p. 7). Whiteness fails to exist without the presence of another group or idea which can serve as a reference point for self-description. It only occurs when White is compared to that which is not White, and thus can easily be integrated with a dominating force such as that which is American and that which is not. This self/other discourse is present within media and political studies on racism. Much of the media aid in the invisibility of Whiteness; “Focusing on discriminatory outcomes against people of color hides the White privileges being dispensed through institutional structures and consequently produces little to challenge those institutionalized privileges” (Chubbuck, 2004, p 304). This discourse of attribution becomes a normalizing force within U.S. society. Installing Whiteness as a standard center in which to compare marginalizing others so the status of being becomes normal and all other non-White is perceived as the abnormal (Apple, 1998; Winant, 1997).

Re-appropriation

Re-appropriation occurs when a previously established cultural meaning is taken or appropriated by another, dominate culture and assigned new meaning. This generally occurs along the hegemonic ideology of maintaining dominance over the subordinate culture by removing fundamental beliefs in relation to the subordinate culture. It has been loosely defined as “the taking -- from a culture that is not one’s own -- of intellectual property, cultural expressions or artifacts, history and ways of knowledge” (Ziff &Rao 1997, p. 1). Due to the nature of appropriation, this notion connotes some form of taking from one culture to another and with any relational activity, a boundary line must be acknowledged between the “in-ness” or “out-ness” of a particular culture (Ziff &Rao, 1997).

Analysis of Cultural Re-appropriation

Yoga

As I asserted within the introduction of this analysis, yoga has been one of many cultures affected by Whiteness within U.S. society. Although yoga contains strong religious ties, its popularity within the U.S. has largely ignored its religious meaning. Containing opposing connotation as the blog “Stuff White People Like”
aptly notes “Although its origins are from India, one can find more yoga studios in White neighborhoods such as Kitsilano or Orange County than in Kolkata” (Lander, 2008). This defies the original context of the use of yoga as a cultural tradition.

The spirituality of the yoga tradition is a practice in which the practitioner strives to free his mind and body by creating Union between them. It is an act to achieve transcendence in order to leave the current reality. “The Hindu universe is a kind of four-dimensional Mobius strip, finite but unbounded, negatively curved…. If there is a final level, it is the level of the Godhead…..This is the level of the universal soul, the source of all mental images that assume material form” (O’Flaherty 241). Yoga was created as a means to achieve this transcendence. To escape the initial level required not only the physical action of performing yoga but additionally a mental/spiritual state and lifestyle devoted to spiritual freedom. Yoga results in the unconditioned state of samadhi or of sahaja, in the perfect spontaneity of the man “liberated in this life.” This historical discourse of yoga goes unnoticed by the numerous participants in American society. The perception of the practice of yoga through “basic” terms is simply stretching for one hour belies the intention and meaning of this activity from the marginalized culture, which created it. The act of stretching is not an inherently negative activity but its use in replacing the spirituality of yoga is a violation of Hindu culture. There is an intrinsic physical benefit to the practice of yoga, but in cultural terms revoking it’s spirituality defies it’s meaning.

This re-appropriation is complex and occurs through multiple factors. The first is through commercial attachment of values held by the culture of Whiteness. The nature of U.S. market economics provides that products which can be sold to the greatest amount of consumers, can provide the most profit for that industry, thus products must appeal to the targets of these industries. The popularization of yoga followed by the re-appropriation of yoga as a cultural activity fell along these economic lines. Business promoters took the Hinduistic nature of yoga, which was entirely inaccessible to the majority of leisure communities in the U.S., which consists of the White middle class, and replaced it with an ideographic meaning. An ideograph is a constructed concept which is consistently upheld as an ideal shared value in a society (McGee, 1980). The effect is to consider yoga outside its original cultural reference frame. When one thinks of yoga it is often in the context of middle class suburban activities and less a deeply spiritual event. It is this reference augmentation that provides for the ideograph. In the case of yoga, the physical benefits were reinforced as the primary focus of the practice. As one yoga promotion website states: “The most important benefit of yoga is physical and mental therapy. Practicing yoga can slow the aging process, which is largely
an artificial condition, caused mainly by autointoxication or self-poisoning, down. By keeping the body clean, flexible and well lubricated, we can significantly reduce the catabolic process of cell deterioration” (Life Positive, 2010). This description employs the hegemonic White ideals of a healthy lifestyle and extends this notion to the extreme point of “slowing” or even “reversing” death. Thus in order to create an economically viable yoga studio, yoga’s purpose is actively transferred from a deeply religious experience to a primarily healthy activity.

The economical inference is demonstrated further by the blog, highlighting that “Participation in this activity requires large amounts of money and time, both of which White people have a lot of” (Lander, 2008). The expense of yoga as presented by U.S. businesses also serves to influence the exclusion of other minority groups being that middle and upper economic classes have a considerably unequal proportion of White membership. One commentary on the blog notes that “I didn’t realize how true this was until I moved to California...How many yoga studios can you put into a block (in an upscale neighborhood in California)?! And why the heck are all these White people walking around in yoga pants with their cute, decorated yoga mats?” (Lander, 2009). The depiction of a yoga culture is noted by the outwardly apparent display of yoga-oriented clothing outside of its accepted forum by White people. This display connotes a considerably different, though inherently linked, method in which whiteness transforms yoga.

As discussed in the introduction of this analysis, several celebrities embraced yoga as a pastime. This onset of celebrity participation although seemingly a product of simple individual preference is, in actuality, a separate, but powerful aspect of Whiteness. Those in the public eye have unseen power over the majority members of the public. Dyer (1986) explains that “Stars represent typical ways of behaving, feeling and thinking in contemporary society, ways that have been socially, culturally, historically constructed...Stars are also embodiments of the social categories in which people are placed and through which we make our lives” (p. 15). Celebrities serve as rolemodels for the society in which they are members of and within that context reinforce a achievable standard of living according to their lifestyles.

The transformation combines the deeply religious tradition of practicing yoga to a literal method to determine how White someone is. The shared meaning of yoga becomes altered, re-appropriation has taken place and the marginalized cultural connotations have been removed in place of the values of health and the narrative of successful White life. This re-appropriation occurs through the systematic notions of Whiteness specifically enacted by celebrities and consumerism; both acknowledged locations of operating power within White society. Some may
argue that many who participate in yoga are not White and therefore yoga is not an exclusively “White” behavior. Whiteness is a system, however, and it works to appropriate cultural norms regardless of minority participation. The participation of non-white individuals acts to further hide Whiteness from societal view. If participation was restricted to only White participation, then it is easily viewed as a biased notion. The participation of minorities allows the key devalue, erase, and re-assignment of yoga’s meaning to continue without raising concern.

*Natural Medicine*

Natural medicine, and its re-appropriation by Whiteness follows the same path of re-appropriation as a cultural function in regards to yoga. The notion of “natural” is difficult to define because it contains multiple discourse of marginalized cultures including, but certainly not limited to Native American, Chinese, and Indian traditions. This ambiguity surprisingly aids the notion of re-appropriation because it allows multiple traditions to be accessed when referring to the artifact in question, thus when the individual refers to “natural medicine” it contains all of the cultural traditions but none specifically. It allows natural medicine to fall under a public space that is not defined by any origin. Its origins become a discourse, which is not western, and thus not “real medicine”. Likewise the notion of medicine in a classic sense of a word varies between cultures. “Chinese Culture Medicine works at restoring balance in various ways including herbal medicine, acupuncture, breathing and movement (Tai Chi and Qigong) and also through diet. ..... The other Eastern Culture that has a long history of alternative medicine is India. Ayurvedic medicine dates back as far as 6000 years ago and like Chinese Medicine also has links with Buddhism” (Alternative Development). The American Indian’s notion of healing is a deeply mystic and spiritual tradition. Grinnel (1935) notes that “All these things which we speak of as medicine the Indian calls mysterious... All Indian languages have words which are the equivalent of our word medicine, sometimes with curative properties; but the Indian’s translation of “medicine,” used in the sense of magical or supernatural, would be mysterious, inexplicable, unaccountable” (p. 180). Medicine in terms of the minority culture, specifically, American Indian in this example, is vastly different than medicine according to the hegemonic White consumer society. In order to “sell” natural medicine to the White middle class, its meaning must be altered to become accessible to the average member of the White middle class.

This alteration begins the re-appropriation of natural medicine (in this case American Indian) to White culture. This notion is perpetuated by the primary promoter and profiteer of “natural” products, which is decidedly nationwide brand
names of whole foods and food co-ops. “Many White people consider shopping at whole foods to be a religious experience, one that allows them to feel good about their consumption, with the use of paper bags and biodegradable packaging, the numerous pamphlets outlining the company’s policy on hormones, genetically modified food, and energy savings belie that fact the whole foods is a profit-driven, publicly traded corporation” (Lander, 2008). The notion of economic support of “natural medicine” parallels the promotion of profitable yoga, in that the culture of Whiteness as consumers access several ideographs held by the culture as a whole.

Like yoga, natural medicine has a discourse of extending life through healthy means, this is a clear value of Whiteness as a culture and therefore can contribute significantly to its consumer appeal once that meaning is attached to it. As one peer commentator argues that corporations may attempt to be perceived as caring for the well being of their customer and the world but in reality are more likely looking to turn a profit (Lander, 2009). These incentives provided by large corporations allow the average White consumer to refute the notion that their active consumerism is perpetuating the hegemonic system of Whiteness through rationalization of benefits to global need. “This helps them shed accountability and lets them feel like they are helping the environment by rejecting the polluting, greedy, awful drug companies and taking natural organic medicine from the earth” (Lander, 2008). This notion of global aid through consumerism re-enforces the understanding that Whiteness is perpetuated in relation to the “other” (see above) as highlighted by the blog “Since White people can’t really blame any race for their problems, they need to blame corporations. In this case, the reason that they are sick or fat or without energy is because the drug companies are in a conspiracy to keep them addicted to placebos” (Lander, 2008). White individuals cannot transcend the invisibility of Whiteness, and so look to others to blame for worldwide issues like large monolith corporations.

It is important to examine the use of natural medicine across demographics both by White majority and minority groups. A series of quantitative studies based on demographic studies of natural medicine find the primary subscribers to alternative medicine are not the minority cultures who introduced them, but the affluent members of the majority; “Without further exploration of alternative medicine use among ethnic minority populations, the conclusion from these studies is that alternative medicine does not play as significant a role in the lives of most ethnic minorities, especially those in lower social economic status groups, as among Whites. This finding is in many ways counter-intuitive and refuted by the anthropological literature on ethnomedicine” (Mackenzie et al., 2003, p. 51). This study is key to understanding that for the majority populace, natural or alternative
medicine is primarily utilized by the White demographic and which entails that the minority groups who have historically cultural relevance to the artifact of natural medicine no longer access this aspect of their culture.

If the artifact does not constitute as a shared meaning within that culture it becomes outside the culture itself. Ethnomedicine (Mackenzie et al., 2003) contends that these remedies are inherently ethnically related, but whiteness provides a forum in which this relation has been severed and redefined to entail healthiness, environmentalism, and a vague notion of spirituality; these newly shared meanings apply to the artifact of natural medicine. Re-appropriation has taken effect in that the primarily promoters, users, and supporters of various forms of Ethnomedicine are primarily White middle class, further the use of these techniques has become an aspect of the narrative of healthy living and therefore do not convey the original meanings created by the culture of their origins. Natural medicine's history has been eclipsed by a trip to the local whole foods.

This analysis does not assume that all forms of therapy outside the western standard falls under this cultural scope. There are many forms such as musical, aquatic therapy, and thought induced healing (Paramore 1997). Some would contend that these forms of medicine are natural and have, to some extent, undergone re-appropriation. Where they differ from the Natural Medicine discussed above is the overall cultural usage of these techniques. Natural Medicine is disproportionately practice in this context by a singular white, upper middle class demographic. Musical therapy and such do not have such a racially used bias.

Conclusion and Implications

Although largely still invisible, the concept of Whiteness as it functions within U.S. society, has been substantially highlighted by the blog “Stuff White People Like.” Several examples of re-appropriation have been analyzed in this research through the blog. Yoga, although originally religious in creation has been over taken by White society and transformed into a profitable standard of White middle class living. Serving as a measurement in which the White individual can maintain their status within the White community by subscribing to the narrative of good health. Natural medicine has also undergone a similar transformation, perpetuated through health food stores such as Whole Foods the concept has largely been abandoned by the marginalized cultures that created it in the first place and adopted by the White consumer as a means to contribute to social functions of environmental benefit and faux-spirituality. The power of Whiteness has manipulated the meanings of these cultural symbols in order to maintain its hegemonic control over U.S. society and ensure the further marginalization of
minority influence.

The quintessence of Whiteness, in being invisible, demonstrates that the progression of study in this area of cultural dynamics is still very much in its infancy. It is my hope that with this research there can be a furthering in understanding of how and to what extent re-appropriation occurs within U.S. society. The blog itself serves to highlight several aspects of White society, which entails unearned privilege amongst the White middle class. By studying this unearned privilege, research can shed light as to the means in which economics, popular culture, and narrative can be influential dually on a society and individual level. Understanding the means in which this re-appropriation occurs may lead to strategies that ensure future cultural traditions secure their rightful position as aspects of the minority cultures from whence they came.
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