



Cultural Appropriation, Futbol Lady, and Soccer Man

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If one were to rank the concepts of political correctness in terms of their capacity to drive people nuts, near the top would surely be the idea of cultural appropriation; it even drives my wife nuts, and she's a liberal. It doesn't make any sense, she says. People take from each others' cultures all the time, especially in America, where there is no culture *except* what is appropriated. I'd dispute that, but I admit that you couldn't find much evidence against it in the New York neighborhood where we live.

In 2017, the linguist John McWhorter looked at this issue in the case of Elvis Presley, with whom he said it began. In the early days of rock and roll, white musicians picked up black musical styles and were very nicely rewarded for doing so; far better than the black musicians from whom these styles were appropriated.

McWhorter's sense of it cannot be faulted when he says that this was a legitimate grievance. "But", he asks, "what does it mean to 'steal' someone's culture when we're not talking about money? . . . We now use the word *steal* in an abstract sense, separated from any kind of material value." In response to a *Time* magazine editorial in which a black woman excoriated gay white men for imitating their gestures and expressions ("you go girl!"),¹ McWhorter writes "it's not as if the black women are being left without their culture after the 'theft,' or as if gay white men are somehow out there 'out-blackening' the women they 'stole from.'" McWhorter is flummoxed that imitation has so swiftly gone from

¹Sierra Mannie, "Dear White Gays: Stop Stealing Black Female Culture," *Time*, July 9, 2014.

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being the sincerest form of flattery to a kind of cultural dismissal, but he insists that such a shift represents a serious misunderstanding. “If one is seen, and seen in an approving light,” he writes,

one will be imitated. This is what human beings do. The very faculty of language is, to a large extent, a matter of imitation . . . Every language in the world is shot through with words and grammatical patterns from other languages—that is, signs of people in the past doing what we would call “appropriating.”²

If McWhorter is right—and I suspect that he is—that human association itself consists of cultural appropriation, it has surely been around since the beginning. So when did the idea that it is a sin or a crime emerge? And where did it come from?

I want to approach this question through consideration of a case that occurred at Oberlin College a few years ago that I ran across while I was doing research on a racial hoax that was making news. I was looking at a student blog called *Oberlin Microaggressions*, the first entry of which was titled “Futbol, and WHITE PEOPLE.”³ This caught my attention and the attention of many others as well.

The post began as a response to an invitation by a male student, whom we’ll call “Soccer Man,” to play soccer. He and the woman, whom we’ll call “Futbol Lady,” were part of an intramural team called Pussy Whipped. The game was being offered as an alternative for those team members who would not be going to hear a presentation by Arlene Davila, a professor at New York University, as part of Latino Heritage Month.⁴

Hours before the event I got an email from a member of my soccer team (Pussy Whipped, that has way too many white people on it for me to ever show up again). Aside, I already learned last semester when I failed co-ed indoor soccer that I would never play soccer with white people when I couldn’t even bear it enough to show up for half a credit. (aprox. Worth \$1,000). Anyway, the email said: **“Hey that talk looks pretty great, but**

²John McWhorter, “You Can’t ‘Steal’ a Culture: In Defense of Cultural Appropriation,” *Daily Beast*, April 14, 2017.

³Anonymous, “Futbol, and WHITE PEOPLE,” *Oberlin Microaggressions*, September 19, 2013, <https://obiemicroaggressions.tumblr.com/post/61719471286/futbol-and-white-people>

⁴In what follows, I am copying the text directly from the blog, without changing spelling or grammar. In some cases the text is in boldface. This must have been added by the author, but its logic is not always clear.

on the off chance you aren't going or would rather play futbol instead the club team wants to go!!"

Futbol Lady responded:

Ok. 1. Thanks for you thinking that the talk is "pretty great". I appreciate your white male validation. I see that it isn't interesting enough for you to actually take your ass to the talk. 2. Who said it was ok for you to say futbol? It's Latino Heritage Month, your telling people not to come to the talk, but want to use our language? Trick NO! White students appropriating the Spanish language, dropping it in when convenient, never ok. Keep my heritage language out your mouth. If I'm not allowed to speak it, if my dad's not allowed to speak it, then bitch you definitely are not supposed to be speaking it. Especially in this context.

This sets the tone for her part of the exchange and begins the charge of cultural appropriation. Futbol Lady, having grown up speaking Spanish, evidently feels that it is her language. It is, of course, but she also seems to feel that she has an ownership stake in it, to the extent that she can decide who can speak it and who cannot.

But it would be a mistake to suppose that her grievance with Soccer Man is simply due to his speaking Spanish. Actually, he only used one word of Spanish, "futbol." It is that term that establishes the context within which the theft has taken place and wherein the charge of appropriation is made. Futbol Lady continues:

So I thought it would be a good moment to tell this guy off, and also get some things off my chest about why I will never show up to intramural again, why during our first game I was completely blown that he [Soccer Man] was not passing the ball, stealing at the wrong times. Learn how to play like a community member! Why I am being pushed out of another space in Oberlin. I even quit last year too!

So here is what I said:

This email is rude. I organized this talk. Thanks for undermining a good attempt to get people out.

1. Your not latino, call it soccer. You don't play futbol. Futbol is played with people (LATINO) who know how to engage in community soccer, as

somebody who grew up on the cancha (soccer field) I know what playing futbol is, and the way you take up space, steal the ball, don't pass, is far from how my culture plays ball.

2. I'm not playing intramural once again this semester because you and your cis-dude, non passing the ball, stealing the ball from beginners, spanish-mocking, white cohort has ruined it (for the second time).

The aggrieved Futbol Lady goes on to tell us that she received a response from Soccer Man "full of white guilt and really boring white liberal shit." He begins by apologizing for detracting from her event, and goes on to talk about his family's ties to Latin America, including his having grown up with a family in Costa Rica, which he considers his "second family" and with whom he remains quite close.

But she's having none of it:

(WOWWWWWWWW SO YOUR NOT RACIST BECAUSE YOU HAVE A "SECOND" LATINO FAMILY, SECOND! We need to talk about tokenizing brown friends/family and taking them in to identify with POC's (or avoiding accountability for being racist).

Futbol Lady goes on in this vein, condemning Soccer Man for racism at every turn, but then he moves from defending to flagellating himself, and acknowledging that her "anger at the white male patriarchy . . . and the social system of America [that] perpetuates injustice by giving unfair advantages to white people, to wealthy people, and to men" and so on, is justified.

From there, Soccer Man moves into apologizing for his privileges, and speaking, very touchingly, of how he has felt guilt about them all his life. But it gains him no sympathy, only mockery. Finally, he tells her that he is trying to pay off his moral debt through the work he has chosen to do:

My area of study is Environmental Studies, a field dominated by white males. But also a field whose main work is building equality and dealing with the geo-spatial injustices of our present world. I am going to use what I've been given . . . to do the most good for the most people that I possibly can. This sounds absurdly hokey, but honestly that is what motivates me. Would you prefer that I do something else?

But Futbol Lady does not care whether or not he does something else. And that is a matter of importance. He has acknowledged his debt and planned his life as a way to pay off that debt. There is nothing more that a human can do. But it is clear that, in her eyes, he is beyond the possibility of redemption. None of what he has said has mollified her in the slightest.

OKOKOKOK. So white people with “brown” associates can’t be racist, or appropriating, or take up space, and make space uncomfortable and unsafe for people of color and women. BASIC. Second, did you once address how you take up to much space and make this space unsafe? Did you once consider leaving this space? I’m glad you’ve recognized your not latino, how hard was that? Did you ever think that you shouldn’t speak or advertise your Spanish because your white. How hard is it to understand when a member of the latino community comes out and says, DO NOT APPROPRIATE AND FETISHIZE OUR LANGUAGE. GET OFF MY CANCHA!

What we learn from this is that his sin is not to be understood in terms of something he has done. If it were, it would be apparent that making amends is all he can do. The problem, I suggest, is not something he has done, but who he is.

As noted before, the charge of appropriation of language revolves around the word “futbol.” What is there about that term that drives her sense of grievance? I am going to offer an explanation that is speculative, in the sense that I am trying to determine what is going on in Futbol Lady’s mind and will lean on psychoanalytic theory to do so.

When Futbol Lady says, in essence, “He has appropriated my culture,” it is a mistake to focus our attention on the term “culture.” The term that is central to the meaning is “my.” For psychoanalytic theory, her claim has an important resonance, since it refers to a critical phase of psychological development that, in one way or another, we all go through.

At the outset of life, we do not differentiate between ourselves and our environment. That is the stage associated with mother. She is the world to us and she loves us, which results in our feeling like the center of a loving world, a condition that Freud called “primary narcissism.” But as we develop, the outside world makes its presence known to us, in the person of father, who has a relationship with mother that does not revolve around the child. He is in the outside world, but he also represents the outside world, in the sense that learning what he knows is where we begin to learn about how the outside world works and how to get by in it. The ultimate aim of managing the outside world is to

return to the state in which the world was made out of mother's love that we experienced as primary narcissism. Primary narcissism can never be achieved, but it could be sought through any number of sublimations: being "successful," obtaining "enough" money, or enough sex, status, or whatever. However it is imagined, Freud calls it the ego ideal. It is never realized but the idea of being able to realize it is crucial; that is what we call hope, and we know how important that is in anyone's life.

The encounter with the outside world is essential for the development of maturity, but we can also see that there is an attendant loss, which, in Freud's account, is reflected in the child's desire to destroy the father. The loss consists in primary narcissism, our feeling ourselves to be the center of a loving world; or to put the matter in a slightly more manageable form, that we are infinitely worthy of love and cosmically important. This is what Futbol Lady thinks has been stolen by Soccer Man; the white, heterosexual, cis-gendered man is the Patriarch himself, the father. Look at the sins that Soccer Man committed in his soccer games with her: not passing the ball, stealing the ball, not playing "community soccer," "Spanish-mocking," and being white and "cis-gendered." In short, Soccer Man is excoriated for not being a member of the futbol-playing Latino community.

The matter of how her culture plays soccer is interesting to consider here. Googling "futbol Oberlin microaggression," I found a number of comments on her post indicating that her characterization is not widely shared. For example, this is from a woman named Claire Ramsey at a blog called Butterflies and Wheels:

I have spent a certain amount of time viewing "futbol" (*perdoname virgen santisima y que viva Mexico*) in Mexico. Taking up space, stealing the ball, not passing, blah blah blah is pretty much how the game is played. All over the world, to my non-sports-fan eye. This sounds like a very very young person trying on some identity politics and confusing it w/anger at a very very young rude guy.

It is not clear why Ms. Ramsey should think Soccer Man "rude," but her basic observation about how soccer is played is backed up by a blog devoted to "Economic Job Market Rumors":

Just a comment:

I'm Brazilian, so I suppose that guy wouldn't complain about me talking about football/soccer/divegrass.

I don't know any kind of football where you don't take up space and steal the ball. And many Latin American attackers are famous for not passing the ball, which causes many fights.

From these I think we can say that the ways in which Soccer Man plays soccer appear to those who know something about these things to be very much the ways that everybody plays soccer, without regard to culture. But Futbol Lady's idea of the way her culture plays soccer is different, and this is what reveals what she means by appropriating her culture. "My culture," she appears to be saying, "is where people pass the ball to me when I want them to, and they don't steal the ball from me, and they don't take up a space when I am trying to go through it."

In other words, the proper futbol game revolves around her. And that tells us what we need to know about the apparent paradox in which somebody can take a culture even though members of the pilfered culture still possess it. From the outside, it looks as if she is still playing soccer, but in the sense in which soccer is important to her, the sense in which the game of soccer, of futbol, is *her* game, by virtue of the fact that it revolves around her, she is no longer doing so. And the cause of her loss is that futbol was stolen by the white, heterosexual, cis-male; because that is what these people do.

Did she ever have this warm, inviting, and generous kind of futbol? No, or at least not in any lasting way. The ego ideal is a fantasy; but it is a fantasy that is important to her because within it she is the center of a loving world. And this enables us to generalize about the meaning of "appropriating one's culture."

Your culture, in the questionable sense we are concerned with it here, is where the world revolves around you by being, in effect, an expression of your mother; it is the complement, the mirror, of your sense of being central and loved. The way people can appropriate your culture is just that, in the course of doing something that you do, people do not see what *they* are doing in a way that bespeaks *your* lovability and importance. In a word, they treat you as another person.

So, can someone steal someone else's culture? Not in the sense that it is truly important to the aggrieved victim. The culture can't be stolen from the aggrieved victim because he has never had it, or at least not since he separated from his mother.

So if you feel that someone has stolen your culture and you want to be mad at somebody, be mad at life since this is life's structure. But you might find it more congenial to be grateful for what you've got, rather than resentful of others for taking what you don't have, and they don't have, and which neither of you ever could have.

Let me end on a note of irony. All of this tumult is taking place in the mind of Futbol Lady. She thinks it is in the world because she has projected it there. If she had some insight into herself, she could see that it is there that she needs to deal with it. But political correctness has so wrecked many people's sense of what is going on in their minds that, for them, self-insight, which is never easily obtained, has become impossible.