



Facultad de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales

Bachelor in Global Communication /  
Grado en Comunicación  
Internacional

Trabajo Fin de Grado

# Cultural Appropriation of Immigrant Minorities in the United States

Apropiación Cultural hacia Minorías  
Inmigrantes en Estados Unidos

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Madrid, 25 de marzo de 2021

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# **1. WHAT IS CULTURAL APPROPRIATION?**

## **1.1. METHODOLOGY, OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS**

For the development of this bachelor's thesis, a deductive method will be used. No hypothesis will be posed, and a final conclusion will be reached based on the different sources consulted.

The sources used for the elaboration of this thesis are various. For this first chapter, dedicated to the state of the question of the topics discussed and the theoretical framework on which the project is based, only academic sources have been used. For the second chapter, focused on the first part of the analysis and centred on the topic of immigration in the United States, also academic sources have been mainly utilised as well. Most of this information has been adequately collected from different academic research-dedicated portals.

However, the third chapter, which has the objective to study how cultural appropriation occurs and affects immigrant minorities in the United States, mostly informal sources have been used. In this case, the most important aspect to consider has been how these minorities have reacted to acts of cultural appropriation perceived as offensive. Such being the case, on the basis of the previous academic foundations, Tweets, Instagram posts, YouTube videos or opinion articles will conform framework of this second part of the analysis. Some of the citations found in social media have been grammatically or orthographically corrected to ensure a better understanding.

The main objective of this bachelor's thesis is to study how, in which particular manner, to what extent and why cultural appropriation affects immigrant minorities in the United States.

Although no formal closed timeframe has been chosen, one of the objectives of the thesis is to present a discussion on the consequences of cultural appropriation for migrant minorities as contemporary as possible. What is more, since, as it will be later explained, the United States is a country experiencing constant flows of migration, this thesis will exclusively focus on recent migrant flows. The examples presented in the analysis only affect these immigrant communities and all of them prior to 2010.

Another main objective in this paper is to distinguish between cases in which cultural appropriation is performed adequately and cases in which it is not. Therefore, cultural

appropriation here will be judged from a moral scope. For the definition of morality, we will use a Kantian perspective of the concept: moral judgements here, as Hare (1986) defends, will be regarded as rational, prescriptive and universal.

## **1.2. CULTURES AND CULTURAL APPROPRIATION**

### **1.2.1. CULTURE VS ETHNICITY**

Before getting into the concept of cultural appropriation, the several characteristics that define what a culture is should be narrowed. As we will explain later, ethnicity and culture are two intertwined concepts that, however, are not always regarded as going hand in hand.

Ethnicity is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as: “The fact or state of belonging to a social group that has a common national or cultural tradition”. (Oxford Dictionary, 2020). Following this definition, ethnicity and culture could be treated almost as synonyms in some cases. In terms of common national background, ethnicity could be treated as a synonym for race, focusing almost solely on geographical origin and physical features. When the ethnic group is defined by its cultural tradition, both could be treated as synonyms.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary contemplates in one of its definitions of *ethnic* highlighting the minority aspect: “associated with or belonging to a particular race or group of people who have a culture that is different from the main culture of a country” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2020). It means, in contrast with a “standard majority”, an ethnic group would be significantly different from the rest in their values, beliefs and customs.

UNESCO would define a culture as “the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional characteristics of the society or social group, which includes not only art and literature, but also lifestyle, value system, traditions and beliefs” (UNESCO, 2002). Some authors highlight the importance of the first years of life in the acquisition of all aspects of a culture, which would shape their perception of reality during their whole lives. Culture would entail a fundamental part of one’s individual identity (Gajic,

Popovic & Vujadinovic, 2017).

In most definitions on culture, accuracy is seen as needless because, above all, cultures are not considered homogeneous and members within the culture itself are diverse. A culture is composed of many social and anthropological elements that, although interdependent to a certain extent, may not always be fully met. Wittgenstein's concept of "family resemblance" could be of use here to understand what a culture is: in a culture, a group of people share a set of characteristics, all of which are not always necessarily fulfilled in each individual case. Cultures do not have an essence, it is the mixture of many aspects of the daily life of a community what make them distinguishable from others (Oxford Reference, 2020).

In this regard, Young (2008) sees a culture as composed by many characteristics: beliefs, customs, practices, artistic expression... enough to easily differ it from other cultures. This also means that, in order to belong to a specific culture, an individual does not have to fulfil a concrete set of characteristics: it is enough to meet some of them, all being equally important.

Another important aspect this author highlights is the constant change at the mercy of which cultures are. Cultures are permeable and adaptable. This means, this constant evolution results in the existence of different cultures belonging to the very same ethnic or social group, albeit different stages of history. For instance, modern Greek culture and classic Greek culture are completely different from one another, although they take place in the same place and by people of the same racial background (Young, 2008). To identify a culture, the time span to which we are referring must also be appropriately enclosed.

A last aspect on a possible definition of culture that sets it apart from an ethnic group is its origin, which is not necessarily the ethnicity of its members. There also exist social cultures, which merge people of different ethnic characteristics according to separate features, for example gay culture (Young, 2008). This also means an individual can belong to more than one culture, as in "Spanish" culture and, at the same time, gay culture.

Finally, both culture and ethnicity are considered highly intertwined with identity. While examining the different impacts culture and ethnicity have in an individual's

identity, some of the differences between both can also be highlighted. Cultural identity would be inherent to human nature and always present, even in a marginalised society with almost no contact with other cultures. Ethnic identity is related to the perception of “us” as the counterpart of “others”. Strong ethnic identification is usually found in minority or marginalised social groups, who are more conscious of their inescapable differences (Jensen, Arnett, McKenzie, 2011).

Narrowing down to the essential, an ethnicity would refer to groups sharing common characteristics due to their common national or cultural background, usually referring to the (self)awareness of a minority group that is easy to distinguish from the majority. On the other hand, a culture would compose the common features of a group, shaping both the community and the individual’s identity.

### **1.2.2. CULTURAL APPROPRIATION: STATE OF THE QUESTION**

The term “cultural appropriation” is a relatively new one in academic study, first emerging during the 1970s and 1980s as a critical response to what was called “Western Expansionism”. Although the term used was not yet “cultural appropriation”, concepts such as “cultural colonialism” or “class appropriation” – related to the existence of a higher-class culture and the imposition of such – (Coutts-Smith, 1991) started to take shape.

To begin with, there is no consensual definition on what cultural appropriation is. In fact, many scholars just consider its common implied meaning and usage and give no definition their work (Rogers, 2016). Many definitions of cultural appropriation start by explaining the etymological origin and meaning of both words, culture and appropriate. The definition of the word “culture” has already been explored in depth before, wherefore we should turn to the word “appropriate” now. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as “to take exclusive possession of”, “to set apart for or assign to a particular purpose or use” or “to take or make use of without authority or right” (Merriam-Webster, 2020). Therefore, a possible definition for cultural appropriation would be to take or make use of features of culture expression without authority or right. Consequently, by definition cultural appropriation could give a first impression of something intrinsically negative, like theft or expropriation.

Nevertheless, there is no real consensus on whether cultural appropriation implies an immoral action or not. On the one hand, a school of thought would consider it as something negative and always implying lack of respect, knowledge or permission while copying aspects of foreign cultures. On the other hand, cultural appropriation is also sometimes defined as something neutral: each specific situation would be classified as “good” cultural appropriation and “bad” cultural appropriation depending in multiple factors.

As an example of this first perception, we have Vepachedu (2018), who links cultural appropriation with misappropriation: it always implies a dominant group mimicking cultural traits of a dominated group, enhancing racist stereotypes, stealing economic opportunities or damaging in many other ways.

When cultural appropriation is not considered intrinsically bad, there are many ways by which this concept may be judged. For example, Young (2008) sees appropriation between cultures as something impossible to avoid –cultures are in constant contact with each other and influence one another– and differentiates two ways of cultural appropriation: innovative and non-innovative appropriation. The first would be taking influences from other cultures to create something genuine, while the latter would be a mere copy. Young would also highlight the importance of aspects such as contact and documentation on the culture or accurate portrayal.

Cultural appropriation, although it implies lack of permission from the “owner”, can be considered neutral since this process has happened throughout history. I previously stated that cultures are neither static nor impermeable: cultures evolve, are influenced and, at the same time, influence others. This means, for many authors, we cannot suddenly start considering cultural appropriation –something that has been happening for centuries– as something immoral (Young, 2008).

In this regard, the problem that most authors state arises when cultural appropriation is part of power relations. Cultural appropriation is neutral as long as the two cultures involved in the process have similar power in terms of influence or power in the system, be it a regional, national or international regime. When a dominant culture – in this case, mainly the Western world – appropriates from a dominated culture – any other cultural community – the situation changes, since the dominant culture can enhance negative

stereotypes, steal economic opportunities or quieten “the voice” of the dominated culture (Matthes, 2016).

For example, according to this idea, Rogers (2006) identifies four main types of cultural appropriation: exchange –between equal partners –, cultural dominance – when the dominated culture appropriate aspects of the dominant culture to not feel left out –, cultural exploitation –when the dominant culture takes the aspects they “like” of the dominated one and make use of them without respecting the dominated culture’s voice– and transculturation, when a cultural trait belongs to two or more cultures and its origin is difficult to trace. The ethics of each of these situational alternatives are very different.

Therefore, cultural appropriation can essentially, on the one hand, be considered inherently bad or not and, on the other hand, a broad neutral definition of cultural appropriation can be treated as either moral or immoral depending on the situation, for many authors depending on the difference of powers between both cultures.

### **1.2.3. DEFINITION OF CULTURAL APPROPRIATION**

After considering the different possible interpretations for cultural appropriation and a possible definition of the term, the understanding and usage of this concept in this thesis will be stated. Since cultural appropriation is an abstract concept that deals with morals and identity, most aspects of its perception hinge upon each person’s interpretation.

A first important aspect worth noting is that, despite being able to be interpreted as either “wrong” or “neutral”, cultural appropriation is always legitimate. It is not a synonym for plagiarism. While plagiarism means copying the artistic or intellectual property of an individual, cultural appropriation means copying or reflecting the aspects of a culture as a whole: it is difficult to trace the line between “belonging” and “not belonging” to a culture, while plagiarism is easy to trace since the “owners” of the intellectual property can be usually clearly differed. Therefore, since cultures belong to “no one and everyone”, nobody has the authority to “forbid” others to appropriate (Young, 2008).

Knowing this, the only judgement that can be made upon cultural appropriation is purely moral and depends on subjective perceptions. For our purpose, cultural

appropriation as a whole will be considered as something neutral, the morality of the act depending on the specific situation.

Power relations will be fundamental for the interpretation on the morality of any act of cultural appropriation. Following the four types of appropriation mentioned by Rogers (2006), the most “morally neutral one” is cultural exchange: two cultures of approximately equal power reciprocally influence the culture of the other. In such case, ideally there would be no imposition, no power relations, and no theft or commodification.

However, it is difficult to find examples of clear-cut cultural exchange. In most situations, one culture has the ability to impose over the other. It is easier for a culture with more power – either due to military power, greater influence or a wider population – to steal or disrespectfully copy aspects of another one. Nevertheless, “more powerful” cultures have the potential to appropriate from one another without forcing their own or disrespecting the other as well (Rogers, 2006).

Most of the time, morally wrong cases of cultural appropriation will involve situations of unequal relations between cultures, the “powerful one” being able to impose and appropriate indiscriminately (Nguyen, Strohl, 2019).

Not only disrespect is to be regarded: when a dominant culture appropriates from another, it may indirectly harm the voice or economic chances of those native to the other culture. For example, in the case of belly dancers in the US, respectful and informed performers can still steal the economic opportunities of the minority population – casting Caucasian women for performances instead of ethnically Middle Eastern ones – and the increasing popularity of the dancing style can provoke the stigmatisation of the culture by the less-informed public (Bock, Borland, 2011).

The second aspect of cultural appropriation to consider is the level of offence. David Young relates to cultural appropriation the concept of “profound offence”: to offend means to create a state of displeasure. Profound offence would be to create a state of displeasure due to an attack on one’s morals (Young, 2005). Culture involves a wide range of aspects: knowledge, tradition, customs... some of which have more spiritual or moral importance than others. For example, both religion and gastronomy are aspects of a culture, but appropriating religious symbols creates a much bigger offence than appropriating a dish. In this case, cooking a curry dish with beans instead of lentils will

not be deemed a great offence to the Indian culture, but mocking or copying Hinduist symbols would.

Nguyen and Strohl refer to this concept as “cultural intimacy”: some aspects of the culture that may not be touched due to the intimate level at which it links the members of the culture together. They present the example of an atheist taking the Holy Communion in a Catholic Church as an act of “tourism”. It is immoral because the Holy Communion is a very intimate and fundamental aspect of the Catholic religion –linked to many national and regional cultures, and to a global religious culture–, and it would cause a profound offence (Ngyen, Strohl, 2019).

According to Young, the only exception which can be made in a case of profound cultural offence is when it implies high artistic value. He sets the example of Shakespeare’s plays *Othello* or *The Merchant of Venice*’s portrayal of Moors and Jews, or Gauguin’s exotic paintings of different Polynesian cultures. Either are clear examples of cultural appropriation, but both have an undeniable artistic value that may lead to the “forgiveness” of the inadequate portrayal of non-dominant cultures (Young, 2008).

This leads to the next two aspects that question the morality of cultural appropriation. The first is authenticity and comprehension. Cultural appropriation can be excused if it is performed after an exhaustive study of what will be appropriated in its cultural context. For instance, a sculptor is allowed to copy the techniques and mottos of another culture if they understand the origins of the style, why it is performed that way or what is the spiritual or traditional meaning of motifs, in the same way a native to the culture would (Young, 2008).

Another fundamental aspect of cultural appropriation is the time and place it takes place in. For instance, Shakespeare and Gauguin can also be forgiven for their acts of cultural appropriation because their moral contexts allowed them to do it. If a current British writer portrayed Jews in a similar way as in *The Merchant of Venice* they would not be easily forgiven, and the same would happen if a contemporary French painter depicted Tahitian women in an orientalist and exotic manner following Gauguin’s style.

Not only is the moral compass of the time and space of the perpetrator to be considered. Cultural appropriation is never disrespectful if it “offends no one”. This means, acts of cultural appropriation portraying cultures that exist no more and hold no influence in current cultures are perfectly admissible. For example, jewellery imitating an ancient

Egyptian eye of Horus implies no offence because no one nowadays feels part of that culture. A different thing happens when an act of cultural appropriation involves old practices that however still affect stereotypes or marginalisation of certain minority groups. Such is the case of inaccurate portrayals of 17<sup>th</sup> Century native American peoples, which can still damage current native American communities because it either enforces many old stereotypes which are applied nowadays to marginalise, diminish or misunderstand native American cultures, or it offends the memory of mistreated ancestors (Young, 2005).

To conclude, to narrow down good examples and bad examples of cultural appropriation, the factors to take into account are power relations between the culture of origin and the appropriating culture, the level of offence the act implies, comprehension of the culture and the significance of the appropriated act, or the historical context of the appropriation act and the culture appropriated from.

### **1.3. WESTERNISATION**

#### **1.3.1. GLOBALISATION AND WESTERNISATION**

Before reaching a definition for globalisation, a first discussion about its perceived impact at the international or national level should be tackled. Siljanovska (2014) distinguishes three possible approaches experts and scholars can use to measure the impact of globalisation: a globalist one, which perceives this process as a non-stopping global order; a sceptic one that enhances the relevance of national politics in the international order and diminishes the integrating role of globalisation, and a transformer one, making national autonomy and interdependence compatible. Depending on which approach is taken, the perceived repercussions globalisation would have in cultural identity of ethnic minorities will be very different.

A possible understanding of globalisation is as not merely an economic phenomenon. For example, a definition agreeing to this description would be Gajic, Popovic and Vujadinovic's. These three scholars consider globalisation to be "complex social processes that involves a wide range of economic, political and cultural trends in the modern world" (Gajic, Popovic and Vujadinovic, 2017). Gracious and Sibanda perceive

it as a “trans-national circulation of ideas, languages and popular culture or the increasingly global relationships of culture, people and economic activity”. It can be seen in the mass information and technological exchange, the domination of English as the language of the media and the alienation of people from their local cultures throughout the spread of pop culture (Gracious, Sibanda, 2013). According to these understandings of the term, globalisation is regarded as an amalgam of economic, political or cultural factors resulting on the creation of a completely new global system due to mass communication, the opening of the global market or the integration of global politics in international organisations.

Turning now to the broad definition above contemplating the process of globalisation, a new disagreement arises on whether globalisation and westernisation can be treated as synonyms or not.

“Western” is considered by Samuel Huntington as “Europe and North America” and one of his seven major civilisations. His division of “Western” Europe – the root of the Western culture – and Eastern Europe is marked essentially by religion in the 1500s: Catholic and Protestant states on the West, and Christian Orthodox and Muslims in the East: The Ottoman Empire and Russia marked the limit of the traditional West. The “West” would have experienced the Peace of Westphalia, the Enlightenment, the consequences of the French Revolution, or the Industrial Revolution at a similar pace, influencing one another and sharing common general cultural traits (Huntington, 1993). The United States or Canada would also become imbedded in such values, since its initial population and cultures were essentially of “Western” immigrant peoples (Thompson, 2014). Therefore, *westernisation* would imply transforming a state, a region or a community for it to become similar in its customs, beliefs or values to the western European and American ones.

The relation between the concepts of globalisation and westernisation can be referred to in diverse fashions. The most extreme option, defended for instance by Turkish professor Cengiz Karagoz, is to treat them as complete synonyms: the global system that is being created due to a new international order is, in essence, Western. The new customs, values or practices that are becoming more and more international all come from this culture from the West, which strives to homogenise all cultures into one, resulting in the imposition of Western ideas and the erasure of everything that does not

cope well with the new global regime (Karagoz, 2020).

Other less radical alternatives perceive westernisation as a consequence of globalisation, but not necessarily as an absolute synonym for it. Globalisation would be a process of global connection, later resulting in global transformations among which westernisation, due to the undeniable international influence of the US, is rooting specially well. According to this perspective, many sub-categories could be found. For example, the different possibilities of assimilation of the Western culture in non-Western communities. Mel Van Elteren, a Dutch scholar, differentiates five possibilities for “cultural globalisation”, among which he contemplates possibilities of syncretism or biculturalism. He also explains that, although the Western culture is internationally considered as “standard”, non-Western cultures also influence one another, for example at the regional level in South East Asia with the spreading of Japanese pop culture (Van Elteren, 2011).

Other authors study the situation of specific cases in which, although westernisation and globalisations are a threat to the non-Western culture, they are, on the other hand, an opportunity for the minority culture. For instance, Indian economics professor Bharucha studies the case of her home country: English language or Western business models are taking over traditional ones, but at the same time many Indian cultural expressions are becoming very popular at the international level and more concretely in the West (Bollywood films, dances, food, yoga...), and therefore non-Western cultures are also globalised (Bharucha, 2017). Another interesting case study is South Korea, explained by American Korean professor Jungyun Christine Hur, Korean professor Yonggu Suh, and British scholar Gary Davies and which through the *Hallyu* – Korean wave – is selling dramas, music or food to the Western world (Davies, Hur, Suh, 2015).

### **1.3.2. WESTERNISATION AND CULTURAL APPROPRIATION**

Despite the level at which Westernisation or Globalisation are perceived to influence global patterns, it is an undeniable trend that has shaped changes at the economic, political or social scope for decades (Siljanovska, 2014).

Although I understand Westernisation and Globalisation are not always synonyms, I will discuss the influence of Globalisation in the shaping of a more “western” international arena. As I will later argue, the creation of a global culture of Western traits would consequentially provoke an orientalist perception of all things non-Western and the commodification of many aspects of non-Western cultures through misappropriation.

Globalisation is a consequence of two processes: mass movement, specially through migration, tourism or trade, and an improvement of mass communications (Crozet, 2017). Nowadays, products and ideas from all around the world are at the fingertips of those who seek them. Therefore, this creates a perfect environment for cultural appropriation: exchange of cultural traits is not obstructed by time or space.

This massive flow of cultural features happens nonetheless in an unequal environment. Western ideas, customs and values are becoming standard in more and more spheres, especially for younger generations and in popular culture (Gracious, Sibanda, 2013). Globalisation can enrich cultures at a global level, but also culture at a global level could become homogenised in favour of the most influential one (Gajic, Popovic, Vujadinovic, 2017).

It is also important to highlight that the expansion of Western culture in non-Western regions and the possible loss of national cultural heritage is not caused by mere imposition. As it is the case in Indonesia, sometimes the national or regional governments allow the entrance of foreign cultures while failing to protect or preserve local cultural traits (Fanani, Hastuti, Mulyana, Syarif, 2019). For instance, a government could copy a Western educational system due to a lack of interest in the matter instead of designing one that would teach and encourage the preservation of the local culture.

Moreover, in many cases the expansion of the Western culture as standard should not necessarily be considered harmful; take for instance, the spreading of liberal democracies or the improvement of health and hygiene through western medicine or sanitation (Bharucha, 2017).

However, the global expansion of Western culture brings many problems to local cultures, such as ethical dilemmas –Western culture gives rise to acts perceived as immoral by other cultures, for example sexual liberation– (Kafaa, 2018), or a sense of

loss of one's cultural traits –change of clothing style for a Western one, celebration of Western festivities such as Christmas or Halloween instead of local ones...–, especially in younger generations (Bharucha, 2017).

According to the four cultural appropriation types explained by Rogers (2006), we find ourselves in a situation of cultural dominance: the dominant culture – in this case, the Western culture – imposes their cultural traits on the others.

The context we now find ourselves into is one in which local cultures are becoming more and more marginalised, in many cases by their younger generations, in favour of the more “fashionable” Western culture.

I mentioned before that Globalisation does not merely mean Westernisation, since non-Western cultures can also exert their influence over western ones, as is for example the case of India (Bharucha, 2017), or South Korea (Davies, Hur, Shur, 2015). Nonetheless, non-Western cultures exerting influence over others is sometimes not due to the intention of the culture of origin, but as part of a process of cultural exploitation according to Rogers' (2006) four cultural appropriation categories.

Cultural exploitation comprehends those cases of cultural appropriation in which the dominant culture copies or steals traits of the dominated culture without their permission or compensation, or when commodification takes place. In this case, commodification would imply fetishizing and commercialising elements of the culture (Rogers, 2006). Both these aspects will be key to understanding cultural appropriation in the context of a globalised and westernised reality, since the Western culture is characterised by consumerism and some culturally sensitive acts or symbols can be turned into purchasable products (Yagiz, 2010).

For instance, when aspects of Korean culture influence Western culture, it is not a case of cultural exploitation or morally wrong cultural appropriation. This because the Korean community has the initiative to spread some aspects of its culture – music, food, movies, TV shows... – and thus the culture of origin is the one which willingly shares their traits on their own accord, and the economic benefit that comes from it directly impacts Korean people. Even though the Western culture is dominant over the Korean one, this is a case of reciprocal cultural exchange. The culture of origin is the one sharing their cultural traits – the spreading of the culture is no stereotypical imitation –, and therefore keeps control over what aspects are to be shared and can be imitated or

copied without challenging the culture's morals. The culture of origin's community is also benefitted from this process (Davies, Hur, Shur, 2015).

Something different happens when a Western individual or company sells products that, in one way or another, commodify a dominated culture to which they have no connection: the culture of origin can be misrepresented or stereotypes negatively enhanced, in some cases even changing the significance of some symbols or traits. A very extreme example is the appropriation by Nazi Germany of the Hinduist Swastika: this symbol originally represents fortune and good luck, but due to its misappropriation by a different "culture", it is today perceived very negatively. This symbol cannot recover its previous meaning and Hindu communities in the Western world cannot publicly show it due to its connection to the Nazi ideology (Yagiz, 2010).

As was also mentioned before, cultural appropriation can also negatively affect the culture of origin in stealing or hindering both the access to economic opportunities and the "voices" of the community. Western cultural traits are, in some cases, considered preestablished, especially in Western-majority states or regions. This means, Western traits are the "normal" and non-Western ones are viewed as exotic and sometimes bound to stereotypes. When economic opportunities are stolen from minority cultures – for instance, the previous example of Western women engaging in professional belly dance –, those belonging to the culture of origin also lose opportunities to express themselves: less people are given relevant positions that entitle them to represent the interests of the culture and therefore, the community loses credibility. This creates a snowball effect: the more credibility the culture loses, the less opportunities they are given and vice versa (Matthes, 2016).

Therefore, there exist a clear connection between cultural appropriation at its most negative and the process of global Westernisation due to Globalisation. Due to the dominance of the "Western World" – specially the United States – in the international sphere, Western values become "standard" and any deviance from the preestablished social rules is easily subject to commodification (Karagoz, 2020). In this reality, non-Western minorities are usually silenced, and their values and customs are quieted, ignored or disrespected. As I will later further explain, this affects in a particular manner non-Western migrant minorities in Western countries –in this case, the United States–, who find themselves in an alien environment to which they need to adapt while fighting stereotypes, racism, misrepresentation, or disrespect towards their cultures.

## **2. ADAPTATION OF US IMMIGRANT MINORITIES**

### **2.1. HISTORY AND TENDENCIES OF US IMMIGRATION**

#### **2.1.1. US LEGISLATION ON IMMIGRANT DISCRIMINATION**

The history and shaping of the United States of America is widely influenced by migration. Before its independence in 1776, the thirteen British colonies that would later become the United States of America were already mainly populated by immigrants or immigrant descendants. Since the early 1600, European immigrants from different backgrounds such as British, Dutch or German would travel in search of religious freedom or economic opportunities. Along with them came the hundreds of Africans who, against their will, were taken to America to serve as slaves (Fogleman, 1992).

“Common Sense”, a 1776 pamphlet written by English-born Thomas Paine, reflects the image the United States would have in Europe for many decades. The United States is described as a place of freedom for the prosecuted in Europe: America would harbour civil and religious liberty for the fleeing European people who would be welcomed to come (Paine, 1776).

In 1790, less than 20 years after their independence, the US Congress passed the first law in relation to US citizenship and migration. It was the Naturalization Act, which allowed free white people of “good character” who had been living in the US for two or more years to apply for citizenship (Immigration History, 2019). This meant, any immigrant of European origin could easily apply for citizenship.

In 1868, the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the US Constitution was passed. It granted anyone born in the United States the right of citizenship. This Amendment also included liberated African American slaves and their descendants (Drexler, 2018).

However, reality was not as simple as universal citizenship rights granted as long as a person had been born in the United States. Racial discrimination took shape first with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882: it was the first law to exclude a concrete immigrant group. It suspended Chinese migration and declared the ineligibility of Chinese immigrants already in the US for naturalisation. Only merchants and students were allowed to enter on the basis that their stay in the United States was temporary (Lee, 2002). This Act was revised and renewed every ten years until, in 1943, it was nullified in the context of the US-Chinese alliance in World War II (Lew-Williams, 2014). Other

Asian immigrant groups were also severely discriminated. In 1907, the United States signed the “Gentlemen’s Agreement” with the Japanese government, in which the Japanese authorities committed to control the emigration to America of its own citizens (Thompson, 2014).

In 1924, the Immigration Act worsened conditions for potential immigrants. The United States established nationality quotas from which Northern and Western Europeans were benefitted, getting 70% of visas. Therefore, Southern or Eastern Europeans willing to emigrate were negatively affected. Asians aside from Filipinos – at the time an American colony – were completely excluded (Lee, 2002). Racial discrimination from a legal perspective ended as Asian immigrants were allowed to enter the US again in 1952 with the McCarran-Walter Act (Sohoni, 2007), and the quota system was formally revoked in 1965 (Thompson, 2014).

### **2.1.2. US IMMIGRATION FLOWS**

As it was mentioned before, the United States was characterised by its influx of immigrants way before its independence. Some in search of religious freedom, such as the Pilgrims and Puritans, and some in search for economic opportunity. Along with the thousands of African American slaves, they populated the American lands before and after its independence. They came mostly from the British Isles and Germany, although Dutch, French and Swedish communities had also relevant population percentages (Fogleman, 1992).

The first “major wave” of immigration in the United States took place between 1815 and 1865. Among the newcomers, originally from Northern and Western Europe, the Irish were especially numerous: in 1845, the Irish potato crops failed, triggering a devastating famine that, in five years, killed a million people and forced half a million to emigrate. Most of these settled in cities in the East Coast. Parallely, German immigrants also arrived massively, many of which were Jewish communities fleeing persecution (Thompson, 2014). These newcomers put in jeopardy the homogeneity of the white, protestant homogeneous majority. Catholic and Jewish communities experienced discrimination and hostilities during these decades (Thompson, 2014).

In the far west, Asian – mostly Chinese – immigrants settled in California, an American territory since 1848 to work in gold mines and in the construction of railroads. Before the signing of the approval of the Chinese Exclusion Act, approximately 75 000 Chinese immigrants had arrived in North America by the 1880s, living mostly in San Francisco and other cities of California (Thompson, 2014).

In the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the United States experienced a new large wave of immigrants. In fact, the peak for immigration took place in 1907, when 1,7 million people entered the United States legally (Massey, 1995).

In Ellis Island and the East Coast, flows of people would now come from Eastern and Southern Europe. The strategic geographical position of Germany or the British Isles eased a more regular flow of cargo ships that were also full of passengers willing to immigrate. The introduction of steam-powered ships made travels cheaper, allowing Eastern and Mediterranean peoples to emigrate to the United States in ships destined solely to the transportation of passengers. Before 1882, an 82% of immigrants came from Northern and Western Europe. In 1907, an 81% travelled from Eastern and Southern Europe (Thompson, 2014).

During this same period, many Japanese immigrants arrived in the United States. A significant number of them had emigrated to Hawaii, which became part of the United States in 1898 and allowed them to move freely across American borders. Japanese immigrants were also mistreated like the Chinese had been, which caused the signing of the aforementioned Gentlemen's Agreement (Thompson, 2014).

During this period, a new immigration phenomenon started in the United States. American railroads now reached southern states such as New Mexico and Arizona, bringing job opportunities to Mexican immigrants that, either legally or illegally, crossed the border looking for employment (Thompson, 2014).

After the 1924 Immigration Act was signed, illegal immigration from non-benefitted groups increased. In this situation, Mexicans had the geographical advantage of migration by land, less controllable than migration by sea. By the 1940s, shortages in labour due to World War II fostered the Bracero Program, a temporary program lasting until 1964 to allow agricultural workers from Mexico to enter the United States (Scruggs, 1963).

Before the formal ending of the quota system in 1965, two influxes of eastern European immigrants took place: the first one during World War II: The United States allowed refugees seeking permanent residence to enter the US (Shaw, 2018). Something similar happened during the 1950s, when thousands of Hungarian refugees fleeing repression from the Soviets were allowed to relocate in America. In the course of the 1950s and 1960s, Cuban refugees arrived in Florida after Fidel Castro seized power (Bockley, 1995).

With the end of the quota system, from 1965 onwards US immigration went back to “natural flows”. The 1960s and 1970s marked the beginning of a fourth wave of migration, this time mainly from Latin America and Asia (Population Reference Bureau, 2014). The newest arrivals from South Asia were from countries experiencing war, for instance Vietnamese people after the fall of Saigon (University of Texas at Austin, 2019). Numbers of immigrants would increase with each decade. By the 1990s, over a million people a year were admitted in the United States (Population Reference Bureau, 2014).

By 2019, as we can see in the image [Annexes, Figure 1], Mexico is by far the most common country of origin, with around 25% of all immigrants. South Asia and Latin America continue to be the most common regions for emigrants striving for America, China, India, the Philippines, Korea, Vietnam, Dominican Republic, El Salvador or Guatemala comprising the most common countries of origin (Migration Policy Institute, 2020).

### **2.1.3. CURRENT U.S. ETHNIC AND CULTURAL GROUPS**

After this superficial understanding of the United States history of migrations, what is left is to study how the current American society is shaped today. To do so, I will discuss different elements that frame the different subcultures in the United States.

The first one is ethnicity. The following graphic [Annexes, Figure 2] divides the ethnic background of American citizens in six categories: non-Hispanic white – these are the ones I will consider Western in the next chapters – comprise a 60.1% of the American population: a vast majority. Hispanic citizens follow as a considerable minority of 18.5% of the population and “non-Hispanic black”, this means, African Americans, go

next including a 13.4% of the population. Asian and Pacific communities are a total of a 6.1% and American Indians and Eskimo – native Americans – are the last specific group mentioned, comprehending a mere 0.6% of the American population (Freidel, 2021).

In terms of ancestry, the most common group in the United States is German, with almost 50 million descendants. Secondly, we have African Americans, with more than 40 million people being descendants of West and Central African groups. Sadly, due to slavery, most African Americans' ancestry cannot be adequately traced. The next groups are Irish and Mexicans, with more than 30 million people descendants each. More than 26 million Americans have English backgrounds, and more than 17 million are of Italian origin. The next groups, none of them reaching 10 million citizens of such origin are Polish, French, Scottish, Native Americans, Dutch, Puerto Rican, Scandinavian, Chinese or Russian. Other ethnic groups, from South Asia, the Middle East or Latin America, conform smaller minorities (O'Connor, Lubin, Spector, 2013).

After understanding the ethnic background of all these groups, what is left is to seek for cultural aspects that make them differ from one another. Since there are many that can be considered, I will take into account one that may represent very well the connection to each citizen to their ancestral roots: language. It seems unsurprising that the more commonly spoken language in the US aside from English is Spanish, with more than 35 million regular speakers. The next one is Chinese, followed by some Indo-European languages such as German or French, and some Asian ones, Vietnamese, Tagalog – from the Philippines – or Korean. Some European languages, for instance Italian, have been widely forgotten: one of the most common ancestry groups counts with merely 754 thousand regular speakers, less than, for instance, the 845 Arab speakers, a far less common ancestry group (United States Census Bureau, 2013).

However, it makes sense that, the closer the ethnic group is to the first immigrant generation, the more common will be the use of the language. Therefore, I will make a comparison in terms of second and third generation retaining of the language of origin, it varies among ethnic groups. For instance, in the case of Filipinos, a 79% of second generation and a 95% of third generation children speak only English at home. Since the very beginning, a detachment from the culture of origin is perceived. In other cases, in which the mother tongue prevails in immigrant homes during the second generation, a radical shift takes place in the third generation. In Mexican or Cuban homes, more than

80% second generation immigrants speak the mother tongue at home. However, third generations never reach a 50% of common usage of the mother tongue. (Alba, Longa, Lutz, Stults, 2002). This shows a rapid oblivion of language, which, as one of the many aspects that conform a culture, shows a fast assimilation of the “adoptive” culture. It can also translate into an overall oversight of many other cultural traits: westernisation takes place and minority cultures disappear.

## **2.2. ADAPTATION OF MIGRANT MINORITIES TO THE AMERICAN SOCIETY**

### **2.2.1. IMMIGRANT MINORITIES’ DISCRIMINATION: NATIVISM**

Since the history of the United States is characterised by the constant immigration of peoples from diverse parts of the world, how the American society reacted to these migratory flows would comprise an important feature of the American collective thinking.

A political reaction that has characterised the different mass-migration flow eras is “Nativism”. Nativism is defined by Rachel Kleinfeld and John Dicklas as: “the portion of any population who advocate, endorse, or believe in a racially, religiously, or ethnically defined notion of nationhood. This leads them to both try to keep members of “undesirable” groups out of their country and to grudgingly offer, a best, only second-class citizenship to members of those groups. From the nativist perspective, the groups’ second-class citizenship” (Kleinfeld, Dicklas, 2020).

The idea of Nativism does not necessarily link the idea of “alienism” to immigrants. According to this definition, segregation of African American communities in the southern States of the US could be regarded as a political response to Nativism. However, in this chapter the focus will be on how it has affected immigrant communities.

Nativism is as old as the United States. For instance, the mass mid-19<sup>th</sup> century migration flows of German and Irish peoples caused distress in the established society. The English-speaking, protestant, Anglo-Saxon homogenic majority perceived danger in religion, a fundamental part of their culture, since many Irish and German immigrants

were Catholic, and a general fear over the potential control of the Pope on the votes of Catholic citizens was very present at the time (Curran, 1966).

The idea of Nativism is also linked to “naturalisation”. Although in 1870 the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment was approved, stating that anyone – including African Americans – born in the United States was entitled to citizenship, immigrant access to citizenship meant a real struggle for non-Western peoples, especially Asian immigrants. Until the approval of the 1965 Immigration Act, race was a fundamental aspect in the access to immigration and, therefore, citizenship.

Nativism in contemporary times is linked to three things according to George T. Sanchez: The first one is language. English is perceived as a fundamental trait in the “melting pot” that is the American culture and the use of other languages in the public life is perceived as threatening. The second one is multiculturalism, that is, white privilege is not acknowledged and conspirations on the influence of lobbies of immigrant or minority groups in the changing of the system are feared. The third and last one is the antiforeign sentiment which considers that immigrants “drain” resources by not working or not working enough for the expense they produce in terms of social and welfare benefits (Sanchez, 1997).

As it was stated before, most immigrants in the US today come from two main regions: South Asia and Latin America. South Asian minorities are perceived under the scope of the so-called “model minority”. This means, Asian Americans are considered to have attained or be able to attain better success than others, for instance the case of Latinos. This concept was first used in the 1960s and it described Japanese immigrants, it would later expand to describe “all” South Asian minority groups in the United States. Asian stereotypes such as being reliable, hard-working or proficient in scientific fields such as Maths or Informatics are part of the “model minority” myth. The origin of this general belief was caused by the 1965 Immigration Act, that favoured Latino immigrants over Asian ones. Skilled Japanese workers were sought over unskilled ones, which means Latino unskilled immigrants were more frequent than those from Japan. Therefore, the average Japanese immigrant was better prepared than the average Latino and, consequently, the stereotypes applied to Asian Americans were – and still are – more positive than the ones applied to Latinos (Cheryan, Bodenhausen, 2020).

Today, the narrative on naturalisation targets Mexican, central American or Muslim ethnic minorities, which entail most of undocumented immigrants, on both the basis of the economic drain immigrants cause to the American society – narratives such as immigrants taking jobs or taking advantage of the welfare system – and, on the other hand, because they are perceived to be dangerous. Nativism attacking Muslim minorities since 9/11 is especially aggressive and resembles the historical ones being directed to Catholic or Jewish minorities (Young, 2017) or those targeting German and Japanese minorities during World War I and World War II respectively as enemies of the state (Chon, Arzt, 2005).

### **2.2.2. HOW DO IMMIGRANT MINORITIES ATTEMPT TO ADAPT?**

In a context of constant migratory flows and of important sectors of the population distrusting immigrant communities, these groups must design adaptations in some aspects of their culture to meet the social demands found in this new environment (Sonn, 2002).

To adapt to the new society, the main alternative for immigrant groups is acculturation. Acculturation is defined by Margaret Gibson as “the process of culture change and adaptation that occurs when individuals with different cultures come into contact” (Gibson, 1970). Acculturation can also happen differently depending on the context. Since current migrant trends mainly include non-Western racial groups, they usually encounter discriminatory and exclusionary social patterns. It also depends on the economic, educational and social backgrounds. Acculturation according to Gibson can happen through different patterns: immigrant groups advance economically and integrate in the middle-class society culture completely or rather acculturate and adapt selectively: in these cases, the ethnic or cultural roots are stronger, and traits of the homeland culture are preserved while adapting to the necessary customs to live in the host country – in this case, the United States (Gibson, 1970).

Complete acculturation and disconnection with one’s cultural roots can have catastrophic consequences for the immigrant community. Losing cultural traits such as language, social structures or values is part of the process of immigration. This feeling of loss of one’s culture can provoke mental health problems related to self-esteem or

stress in minority groups within a larger “standard” culture (Bhugra, Becker, 2005). Immigrants who feel a sense of communion with the culture they have left are proven to have better mental health. Those feeling “protected” by their culture of origin feel supported, accepted and belonging. Individuals therefore anchor one another in minority culture communities (Sonn, 2002).

Adaptation also depends on the capabilities of the first generation. Middle class or better-educated immigrants are faster to adapt to the American society, being able to reach the desired level of equilibrium between maintaining the cultural roots and adapting to the political and civil mainstream society. Unskilled or uneducated immigrants usually find it harder to adapt since they find more hostilities in the host country and their children have less opportunities to improve the family’s economic situation, falling in a spiral of poverty and inadaptation (Gibson, 1970).

Adaptation is also easier when traits considered especially relevant for the host or majority culture are shared with the immigrants’ culture. Such is the case of religion. As it has been previously stated, throughout American history religion has been a key point for discrimination, first towards Catholics or Jews and later towards Muslims. For instance, Turk immigrants had it harder to adapt in the American society than Greek or Armenian ones, who are very similar in many cultural traits but differ in their religious beliefs (Bilal, Ziyanak, 2017).

Adapting partially appears to be the ideal path for immigrants to take. However, this usually works for the first, sometimes second generation of immigrants. The third-generation offspring of immigrants usually loses many cultural traits to the “Americanising” and “westernising” processes. Some of these changes happen in terms of social roles, such is the case of gender roles: second or third generations of immigrant Indian women do not comply with the more “traditional” role they are assigned as housewives and mothers, and individualistic western values also substitute the more “collective” community view the older generations still have (Sinha, 2010). What is more, many important cultural traits that are easier to maintain while adapting to the political and social life in the host country also get lost. Such is the case of language (Alba, Logan, Lutz, Stults, 2002) or clothing (Sinha, 2010).

### **3. CULTURAL APPROPRIATION IN THE UNITED STATES**

Except for Native American communities, every individual in the United States descends from immigrants from no further than 500 years ago. Although until two centuries ago the population was formed by a homogeneous white, Christian, mostly protestant majority, since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century the United States population has become “a melting pot” of merging cultures. This idea of the “melting pot” suggests that immigrants – at the time of the proposition of the theory, ethnically white, European men and women – would merge in the United States to create a “new culture” consisting of a combination of all the cultures of the peoples now existing in the United States. A simple example on how cultures have merged in the United States consists of merely glimpsing its gastronomy: hamburgers and sausages come from Germany, and pizza was popularised by Italian immigrants (Thompson, 2014).

However, according to the definition of western that was given in the first chapter, German, Italian or other European cultures belong to the “Western” culture. Nevertheless, in this case the “melting pot” of western cultures will be considered the point of departure, and current migrant groups, that means, Asian and Latin American communities, as the cultures to be subject of cultural appropriation.

#### **3.1. HARMFUL CULTURAL APPROPRIATION**

##### **3.1.1. DISRESPECT IN CULTURAL APPROPRIATION**

In this chapter, we will regard concrete situations of cultural appropriation that are disrespectful per se due to the inaccuracy of the portrayal, the commodification of a symbol or any other offence to the morality or the fundamental traits of the culture. The examples that have been chosen to explain this type of cultural appropriation involve influential public figures severely criticised by members of the immigrant community in question for the harm towards their culture.

The first example I will set is Lady Gaga’s misappropriation and misinterpretation of Muslim women traditional clothing. Lady Gaga is widely known for her activism in favour of rights for the LGBT community and has a positive public image (Deflem, 2019). However, her 2013 single “Aura”, sometimes also called “Burqa”, unchained a

reaction of disappointment among the American Muslim community. Some of the lyrics of the song are: “Do you wanna see me naked, lover? / Do you wanna peek underneath the cover? (...) Do you wanna see the girl who lives behind the aura / Behind the aura, behind the curtain, behind the burqa?” (Lady Gaga, 2013).

Native Pakistani student at Texas, Umema Aimen, wrote a critical article in the Washington Post in which she claimed Lady Gaga’s depiction of Muslim women modest clothing was misleading her fans, who had converted hijabs in mere exotic fashion statements under the hashtag #burqaswag. Aimen argued her hijab was not, as Gaga stated in her song, a cover under which her sexuality awaits, but a way for many Muslim women to empower themselves, to fight female hyper sexualisation and defy society so that they look beyond their physical appearance. Although Aimen recognises the role of the artist in defending some aspects of feminism, she rejects her misleading interpretation of Muslim hijab and burqa (Aimen, 2013).

Indian culture is also widely commodified. For instance, Kim Kardashian was criticised for wearing a *maang tika*, a traditional Indian jewellery headwear, to church (Kim Kardashian, 2019). A *maang tika* is a “ceremonial head piece traditionally worn by the bride” (Hindustan Times Correspondent, 2019), and Kim Kardashian wore this ceremonial garment as a mere accessory (Hindustan Times Correspondent, 2019).

A Twitter user answered to Kim Kardashian’s tweet wearing the *maang tika* saying “if anyone is defending this because she’s half Armenian – her dad was a third gen wealthy Armenian – Armenians don’t wear bindhis/bindhanis. Not all brown people are allowed to wear the same things. We’re not all the same. bindhis are sacred to Hinduism/south Asian cultures.” (Mama Sanddune, 2020). What this Twitter user explains is key to understanding the morality of cultural appropriation. As was stated before, some actions are related to the intimacy of groups (Nguyen, Strohl, 2019). In this case, the *maang tika* is profoundly linked to Hindu and South Asian cultures as a ceremonial piece of jewellery, and Kim Kardashian wears it to go to Sunday service, one of the most intimate rituals of her culture as a Christian woman. What Kim Kardashian does here would still be cultural appropriation even if we did not consider her a “white woman”, because what she is doing is causing a profound offence (Young, 2005) in the morals of Hindu and South Asian Americans.

Another scandal in which Kim Kardashian was involved related to cultural appropriation was when she presented her “shapewear” underwear brand and called it “Kimono” (Kim Kardashian, 2019). Only a few months after her *maang tika* mistake, Kim Kardashian presented her underwear line and named it after the traditional Japanese gown. This lit up both Japanese people – it went as far as the mayor of Kyoto writing an open letter to Kim Kardashian explaining why her “shapewear” Kimono was offensive (Bergman, 2019) – and Asian American citizens descending from Japanese immigrants under the hashtag #KimOhNo. This hashtag was introduced by Japanese American Yuka Ohishi, who wrote a twitter thread explaining how Kim Kardashian’s new brand disrespected Japanese traditional culture (Yuka Ohishi, 2019).

In her article for the magazine “Bustle”, Japanese American Mika Doyle explains how kimonos are still today wore proudly in Japan in special occasions, being a traditional gown that enhances their roots: “For me and countless Japanese and Japanese American people, “kimono” isn’t just a word. The garment is a piece of our histories and our identities that date back thousands of years. It’s fabric that weaves the stories of (...) our ancestors who came before us and paved the way for us to be who we are today. When someone like Kardashian West, a white woman with significant socioeconomic power, takes the word “kimono” and applies it to something that has nothing to do with those traditions, it steals a part of us that runs deeper than words or language. That action says your cultural identity and traditions have no value; they are simply playthings that can be used and discarded at leisure. And isn’t that the crux of what cultural appropriation really is?” (Doyle, 2019).

All the examples presented in this chapter are related to clothing or embroidery because clothes are tangible commodities that, nevertheless, trace back to traditions – for instance, the use of kimonos or *maang tika* in special occasions – or are the physical manifestation of cultural ethics – Muslim women wearing hijabs and other pieces of clothing to show their modesty –. In all three situations, these cultural traits have been misunderstood or taken lightly by misinformed people who have great influence over the general population.

Leaving fashion apart, other examples of immigrants misunderstood can be found in literature. Various British authors agreed on their interviews for British newspaper “The Guardian” on the lack of importance of the culture or ethnicity of a writer when

portraying a different culture from their own: what is fundamental is the story told: the authenticity felt in the story and the realism of the portrayal (Kunzru *et al.*, 2016).

However, if a novelist appropriates the experience of a culture that is not their own, it is their responsibility to portray it accurately and respectfully. That is not the example of, for instance, 2020 book “American Dirt” by Jeanine Cummins. The book narrates the journey of a mother and her daughter from Mexico to the United States fleeing from Mexican cartels. It was supposed to be a great success: reviews compared it with John Steinbeck’s “The Grapes of Wrath” (Wheeler, 2020).

Nevertheless, the novel received the criticism of Mexican and other Latino immigrant groups, who claim Cummins has not documented enough and the book is full of stereotypes (Wheeler, 2020). Mexican-American novelist Myriam Gurba wrote a critique for the magazine “Tropics of Meta” in which she very harshly expressed her discontent towards Cummins and her novel: “Cummins plops overly-ripe Mexican stereotypes, among them the Latin lover, the suffering mother, and the stoic man child, into her wannabe realistic prose. (...) and because the white gaze taints her prose, Cummins positions the United States of America as a magnetic sanctuary, a beacon toward which the story’s chronology chugs” (Gurba, 2019).

The literature example is different from the fashion one because in this case, cultural appropriation is not about symbols: it is about the interpretation of the culture as a whole: Cummins expresses her perception of the situation of Mexican immigrants and, according to Gurba and other Latinos in the United States, it instead enhances the stereotypical general image of Mexican immigrants.

### **3.1.2. HINDERING IN CULTURAL APPROPRIATION**

In some situations, appropriation itself might not necessarily offend the culture in question. Nevertheless, what is done may be perceived differently when a person belonging to the culture displays it, either by giving the economic or speaking opportunity to a “westerner” instead of a “pertaining” individual, or because the act appears “exotic” and “innovative” when a westerner performs it, while when a person belonging to the culture demonstrates it, they seem “old fashioned” or “unable to adapt”.

The example set is the Twitter response “my culture is not your prom dress”. In 2018, western American student Keziah posted some pictures of her graduation dress (Keziah, 2018). This dress was designed to imitate the shape of a traditional Chinese qipao. Some of the comments explained why it was wrong for this girl to wear the dress were based on how she gave no importance to the original culture of the dress, many users argued the qipao is an empowering garment for Chinese women, since it symbolises femininity at the same time as confidence and the fight for gender equality (Bell, 2018).

However, that is not all. Keziah did not respond to the critiques. She did not delete the post, nor did she apologise for her unintended act of disrespectful cultural appropriation. She responded, “it’s just a dress” (Keziah, 2018) to comments wondering if she were Asian or what the dress meant to her. Chinese Twitter user “bloop” argued “Chinese people (in China) appreciate when white people participate and learn about our culture. This outrage is purely an American thing.” (bloop, 2018). As an answer to this comment, Asian-American user “Eudicot” reacted by writing “it's an Asian-American thing in my opinion. Because we're specifically taught that we got to hide our Chinese identity and assimilate to white culture and then some white chick with a shallow appreciation of Chinese culture gets to wear a qipao and suddenly it's cool and quirky” ([eudicot], 2018).

These last two tweets highlight the importance of differentiating the impact of cultural appropriation in the culture in its place of origin, where westernisation, although occurring (Van Elteren, 2011) is less radical than in the destination of the immigrating community. “Eudicot” manifests her impotence as an Asian-American woman because she has had to renounce to many ancestral aspects of her culture – it was previously stated, abandoning one’s culture can damage the mental health of the immigrating individuals (Bhugra, Becker, 2005) – to feel accepted in the United States. On the other hand, Keziah, as a western girl, can wear the dress for her prom and feel “original” because she is not used to seeing dresses such as these because, according to “Eudicot”, Asian American girls have been taught to abandon their Asian roots and assimilate western cultural traits.

### **3.2. ACCEPTABLE CASES OF CULTURAL APPROPRIATION**

It has been proven that it is difficult to engage in a culture aside from one's own respectfully and without harming the culture of origin or its members. However, there are acts of cultural appropriation – as said before, something natural in human society – in which a Western individuals or groups can engage.

For instance, author Burcu Yancatarol Yagiz proposes a way in which the kaffiyeh, a Muslim traditional head scarf wore mostly by men, could be popularised as a neckerchief in the West while its cultural meaning would still be respected. This piece of clothing was traditionally worn by Bedouins to protect from the harsh climatological conditions of the desert and is today wore all around the Arabian Peninsula. Apart from protecting from the sun, wind or dust, it symbolises modesty, respect, the strength of the Bedouin ancestry in the Middle East and the overall Arab identity (Yagiz, 2010).

During the 1980s and 1990s, the kaffiyeh was popularised in some social sectors in the United States: it was worn in general anti-globalisation and anti-war protests and worn by subversive and rebel young groups in the neck as a scarf and not in the traditional way over the head (Yagiz, 2010).

In the context of potential popularisation of the kaffiyeh in the western world, the author proposes the sale of the products imitating the kaffiyeh with tags that connect the traditional meaning of the product with the current reality. For instance, as it can be seen in [Annexes, Figure 3], it is portrayed an Arab man wearing the kaffiyeh in the traditional way on the front of the tag, and in the back a woman holding an umbrella with a classic kaffiyeh pattern. Moreover, the text preceding the image explains a clear connection between the ancestral use of a kaffiyeh and the use the customer would make of the umbrella (Yagiz, 2010). This way, the culture is appropriated in an innovative way while understanding and acknowledging the culture of origin.

Another respectful example of cultural appropriation could be found during the MET gala of 2015. The theme of this event was “China: Through the Looking Glass”. The exhibition at the museum was centred in the influence Chinese culture and aesthetics have had on Western fashion throughout history (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2015). During this event, singer Rihanna was praised for being the only guest wearing a dress designed by a Chinese brand, Guo Pei. Rihanna wore traditional Chinese patterns in yellow, a colour traditionally reserved for emperors in China (Casero, 2015).

Rihanna wearing a dress inspired in the Chinese culture is indeed an act of cultural appropriation, but in this case portrayed respectfully. First, the gown was worn in an event that praised the influence of Chinese culture in Western fashion: Rihanna is acknowledging that same influence while wearing that garment. Secondly, her dress was designed by a Chinese woman, who obviously understands her own culture: the culture cannot be misinterpreted here. Third, she wore yellow, a colour reserved for royals in China: Rihanna is expressing “she is a queen”. In this case, since the tradition of reserving yellow for the emperor is a long-lost custom, she is not acting disrespectfully. What is more, she is demonstrating an understanding of a foreign culture and granting economic and voice opportunities for people from that culture – in this case, the designer.

A last example regarding in this case an accurate portrayal of the experience of immigrants is the 2011 film “A Better Life”, directed by Chris Weitz, wrote by Eric Eason and based on the book by Roger L. Simon, all western “white” men (IMDb, 2011).

The film portrays the life of a Mexican immigrant who works as a gardener and who struggles to grant his son a brighter future than he had (IMDb, 2011). The movie received mostly positive critiques: “It speaks well enough about the fate of immigrants everywhere, especially those who want to work hard but end up being exploited.” (Malcolm, 2011). Although some of the critics argue the story does not go far enough and somehow romanticises the situation, most acknowledge the realism in which it is portrayed (Johnston, 2011). “A Better Life” is an accurate-enough film about a situation neither of the creators have ever experienced. Unlike the book presented before, “American Dirt”, the Latino community has not united to cavil this story created by three western men portraying an immigrant Latino family. The film centres in the father-son relationship, something universal, and the features relating to their situation as immigrants are fairly realistic.

### **3.3. WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES HAVE MADE CULTURAL APPROPRIATION ACCEPTABLE?**

The three examples presented as acceptable cultural appropriation can be divided in two categories. The first two, related to the kaffiyeh and Rihanna's dress for the MET gala of 2015, are situations James Young would consider innovative cultural appropriation (Young, 2008). The last one about the film "A Better Life", is not the appropriation of a cultural trait: it is a portrayal – in this case, an accurate one – of the culture.

As a brief reminder, innovative cultural appropriation consists on appropriating elements of the culture while not copying them, but adapting them to one's culture (Young, 2008). Kim Kardashian's Kimono or Lady Gaga's representation of Muslim headwear could also be regarded as innovative cultural appropriation: there is an element of deviation and creation in either. Nevertheless, the kaffiyeh or Rihanna's dress share something these two do not. That is, understanding for the culture and contact with the culture. Cultural elements are significant. A kaffiyeh is not merely a headscarf and yellow is, for ancestral Chinese culture, not merely a colour. Material objects symbolise values and customs. A burqa or a hijab are, for Muslim women who wear them, representations of their modesty, a virtue in their culture. A kimono is nowadays still worn in special occasions by people belonging to the Japanese culture, it is a way of resisting a complete westernisation (Tsunagu Japan, n.d.). When Lady Gaga or Kim Kardashian do not take into account the modesty represented in a headscarf or the pride Japanese people feel when choosing a kimono over a western gown or suit, they are disrespecting the culture. Both Rihanna's dress and the kaffiyeh proposal are able to innovate while ensuring a maintenance of the immaterial essence of both.

When teenager Keziah says her traditional Chinese qipao is "just a dress", she is misinterpreting the situation. Keziah is expressing Chinese people traditionally wore dresses that coincidentally have a shape which she likes. However, Keziah is wearing a dress which, on the one hand, is similar to those Chinese women would wear in the past as a symbol of their empowerment and, on the other hand, Asian American women would be judged to wear. It is impossible to know what kind of backlash Keziah would have received if she had worn the same dress while acknowledging it for being a qipao and encouraged non-western girls to also wear traditional garments from their cultures of origin instead of western dresses, but at least she would have demonstrated an

understanding of the culture.

On the economic and voice issues, Rihanna's dress was designed by a Chinese woman, and such an influential celebrity wearing it would give her indirect publicity. On the other hand, although "A Better Life" can be explored under a scope that would provoke rejection due to the cultural and ethnic background of the creators, its movie is almost fully composed of a Hispano cast (IMDb, 2011). On the other hand, Hispano directors are well-recognised in the United States, such are the examples of award-winning Guillermo del Toro, Alejandro González Iñárritu, or Alfonso Cuarón (IMDb, 2018). Hispano directors in the United States are not limited to films about the experience of Latinos in the United States. Therefore, films such as "A Better Life" do not suppose an economic opportunity or voice theft: Hispano directors are fully recognised and "A Better Life" grants both economic and voice opportunity to Latino actors.

In the example of the film "A Better Life", Mexican actor Demian Bichir, who portrays the main role of the father, claims he engaged in tight contact with real Mexican immigrants in the same situation as his character: the situations or the mindset of the average illegal Latino immigrant, he is able to represent them (CBS, 2011). The film has attempted to show the "real life", the "real culture" of an illegal Mexican immigrant father and has succeeded at it. On the other hand, "American Dirt" has been severely criticised for an inaccurate dichotomist portrayal of stereotypes of both "dangerous Mexico" and "the US as a safe haven", while also showing a romantic side to drug capos and cartels. "A Better Life" shows the difficulties of the average immigrant struggling every day to survive and constantly fearing deportation while facing problems that are supra-cultural and universal, that is, his problems to connect with his child and his wish for his son to have the best future possible.

Therefore, what have made these acceptable cases of cultural appropriation can be summarised in respect, awareness and knowledge of the culture and the situation of its members. As long as the culture is known and respected, the individual appropriating will never borrow too intimate traits, either due to an understanding of the significance of merely due to respect. Also, when the voice and economic situation of its members are known, the individual appropriating would rather act in order to not obstruct their access to either of them. Last but not least, when the culture is portrayed as a whole in a book or a film, it is the responsibility of the creator to develop an exhaustive understanding of the overall situation and culture of the members to avoid inaccuracies, stereotypes or misunderstandings.

## **4. CONCLUSIONS**

### **4.1. IMMIGRANT MINORITIES REACTIONS TO CULTURAL APPROPRIATION**

For the development of this thesis, two different types of examples of cultural appropriation that directly affect migrant minorities have been chosen. On the one hand, cultural appropriation that affects the situation of, concretely, the immigrant minority and not the culture of origin as a whole. For instance, the case of the book “American Dirt”. On the other hand, I have regarded at situations in which acts of cultural appropriation affect a foreign culture – for instance, Japanese culture in the case of Kim Kardashian’s Kimono shapewear – of which there exist a significant immigrant minority in the United States that feels offended by the act.

Many alternatives to what takes place when cultures encounter each other can be studied. When referred to a situation where two cultures coexist, the alternatives are syncretism and juxtaposition (Van Elteren, 2011). This means, exposition to a foreign culture, in this case for immigrant minorities, can mean either the creation of a new culture that mixes aspects from both the culture of origin and the host culture – via syncretism – or rather the juxtaposition of both: the community retains unaltered aspects of their culture of origin while, at the same time, assimilating others from the host culture.

I would make that distinction because to study cultural appropriation affecting immigrant minorities in the United States, an important feature must be considered: sometimes – through syncretism or specific experiences – cultural appropriation towards immigrant minorities affects only the immigrant minority and not the culture they supposedly belong to in the land of origin: what is being appropriated are experiences that only the immigrant community knows. It means, a first- or second-generation immigrant may continue practicing their culture’s traditions through juxtaposition, but some experiences become different from their counterparts remaining in the land of origin.

Such is the case of the reaction towards “American Dirt”, a book that has triggered a disgruntled response from Mexican and other Latino ethnicities in the United States, whose experience does not agree with the writer’s interpretation of it. This is even more harmful due to the power the voice of someone belonging to the “dominant speech”

(Matthes, 2016) in this case, a self-proclaiming white woman (Wheeler, 2020), has over the general population. According to the idea of western people dominating the speech, a harmful representation of an individual or a community – in this case, a culture – causes even more damage because the general public tends to believe more easily those they consider “inside” their culture and not the member of the marginalised or minority group (Matthes, 2016).

Secondly, since the 1910s, the United States’ institutions have supported assimilation rather than pluralism. Minorities are coerced to acculturate in order to adapt and become more intertwined in the American society. That is perceived to be the only way to enjoy the benefits that come from better job opportunities, along with socialisation with other sectors of the American community or the enjoyment of pop culture and leisure activities (Healey, 2016). In a situation in which immigrants feel pressured to forget their roots and where they feel their traditions are bound to be forgotten by their descendants, the commodification of the traits they have been pressured to hide can spark a fiercer wave of discontent than in the land of origin, where these exact customs are not stigmatised.

The hashtag #KimOhNo, which was used by both Japanese and Japanese American outraged individuals due to Kim Kardashian’s misappropriation of the word “kimono” was started by a Japanese American woman. In the qipao dress example, native Chinese and Chinese American people could not agree on whether the girl wearing a qipao was or not an offence to the Chinese culture. “Eudicot” expressed very clearly how she, for being Asian, was socially judged and pressured to assimilate by hiding her roots, while any western girl was entitled to frivolously enjoy the cultural traits that, for any Chinese American girl wanting to adapt, are banned ([Eudicot], 2018).

Immigrant minorities in the United States are therefore inherently more sensitive to acts involving cultural appropriation than the members of the culture remaining in the land of origin. The need to assimilate to the host culture and leave behind their culture of origin triggers more bitter reactions to acts of cultural appropriation which, apart from possibly portraying inaccuracies or stereotypical images, may very well reflect how outsiders can freely and frivolously experience a culture that is prohibited for its own members.

#### **4.2. RELATION BETWEEN ADAPTATION AND CULTURE MISINTERPRETATIONS**

It has just been stated that immigrant communities in the United States have traditionally been pressured to acculturate. In the case of the United States, acculturation concretely means “The group learns the culture of the dominant group, including language and values” (Healey, 2016). Therefore, the group – the immigrant minority – has to adapt by assimilating different aspects of the western culture in the United States and forget or hide the traits of their own.

Since they cannot experience it freely, discontent reactions from the immigrant members of the culture being appropriated are normal. However, that is not the only negative impact adaptation through acculturation has on examples of cultural appropriation when portrayed in environments where the experiences of minority cultures are not encouraged.

Acculturation is a fact that has been proven to happen as generations go by. Parents sometimes try to show their children the “best of both worlds” (Sinha, 2010) in attempts for juxtaposition or syncretism, a way to adapt while maintaining some of their most important roots. However, traits of the culture of origin are lost in the process of adaptation, for instance language or clothing (Sinha, 2010).

Also, minority groups who are perceived through stereotypes that define them to be “less of a threat” – for instance, the model minority perception of Asian minorities as clever, hardworking and reliable (Cheryan, Bodenhausen, 2020) – feel less pressured to reject their culture of origin than others who are observed through less tolerant, stereotypical lenses (López-Rodríguez, Zagefka, Navas, Cuadrado, 2013). That translates in, the more negative the stereotypes a group receives are, the more the group will be forced to hide their cultural traits.

Stereotypes are used by people to connect their environment and create expectations from a concrete reality in a simplified manner (Davies, Hur, Suh, 2015). In this case, an immigrant minority group. However, when these stereotypes are inherently negative in relation to morals, values or attitudes (López-Rodríguez, Zagefka, Navas, Cuadrado, 2013), it is likely for the minority to attempt to forget their cultural traits to avoid being judged through those prejudices.

The lack of accurate examples of members practicing the customs of a disregarded minority culture enhances more and more these stereotypes. There is no other sought evidence on how the group acts than the already widespread harmful generalisations. What is more, people belonging to the negatively stereotyped image are likely to be marginalised or even aggressed (Morin, 2020).

When cultural appropriation takes place in this context, there is no real knowledge of the culture for the uneducated public. The minorities are too inhibited to freely depict their culture, and the western majority represents the aspects of the culture they regard from a far, distorted perspective.

This lack of understanding of the culture which is being appropriated can cause unintentional profound offence (Young, 2005). Adaptation can thus cause misinterpretations of a culture due to social pressures embedded in its members, who, judged through stereotypical images that distort their reality, feel obliged to hide their cultural traits and act according to the majority culture. These coercions to hide enhance even more distorted images to a culture that, although close to those who want to understand it, is well-concealed at first glance by its own members.

The consequences of this in the sphere of cultural appropriation is the unintentional misinterpretation of customs and values and, therefore, the provocation of profound offence to its members, who see religious, spiritual or otherwise meaningful symbols turned into mere commodities that suit the tastes of a very orientalist western society (Van Elteren, 2011) that cannot perceive the complexity of the trait that, willingly or unwillingly, is being distorted and offending a culture that lives in the shadows or is being completely forgotten by its own members.

#### **4.3. FINAL CONCLUSION**

As a conclusion, the United States is a multicultural reality that, however, hierarchises western cultural traits over others. Immigrant minorities who belong to cultural backgrounds which, in one way or another, do not match with western ones suffer the loss of their culture in a society that is supposedly a cultural “melting pot” and that nonetheless has since the beginning of its history favoured Anglo-Saxon and protestant values and, more widely, the western culture.

This western cultural supremacy coerces and pressures immigrant groups to “adapt” by adopting western cultural traits and forgetting their roots. As new generations in these minority groups are born, many ancestral cultural features are left aside in favour of the standard western ones: English becomes the mother tongue, only western clothes are worn and the many characteristics that conform the culture fade away until they have dissolved in the western mainstream.

Parallely to this, cultural appropriation takes place. Cultural appropriation as a general concept has the potential to be offensive when the culture is disrespected or represented imprecisely. For instance, in the previously stated example of Kim Kardashian’s Kimono shapewear brand, both in Japan and the United States, members of the culture got profoundly offended. The United States is a representative of the western culture and its position as the “power culture” helps it submit others by imposing its own traits and appropriating the ones they enjoy from the downtrodden culture. Merely this makes cultural appropriation from the United States especially sensitive: the general perception of the western culture as the “standard one” (Karagoz, 2020) means non-western cultures are nothing but an exotic, orientalist blur to appropriate from.

In this context, cultural traits from non-western cultures are indiscriminately appropriated. As it was stated in the beginning, cultural appropriation is not inherently bad, but the position of power of western cultures, and with it the United States, makes it easier for them to offend or harm in many ways when appropriating.

This situation is nothing but aggravated when it involves immigrant minorities in the United States: these groups experience two circumstances that make them especially sensitive to cultural appropriation. First, the remoteness of their homelands, and with that, their culture. The global feeling of cultural loss to western values and customs is only worsened when the non-western culture community finds itself in an alien land. That sentiment of loss is mixed with the sensing of what little cultural traits they have left are being corrupted and turned into frivolous commodities through misinformed western trends.

Secondly, these same minorities exist in a reality where they are treated based on prejudices and stereotypes that also force them to conceal their traditions, they must fight by becoming “as western as possible”. When a western individual engages in a non-western culture, they are perceived as innovative. When a non-western individual

engages in their ancestral culture, the public judgement they receive is quite different. All the stereotypical images are enhanced and the image they give is that of an individual unable to adapt.

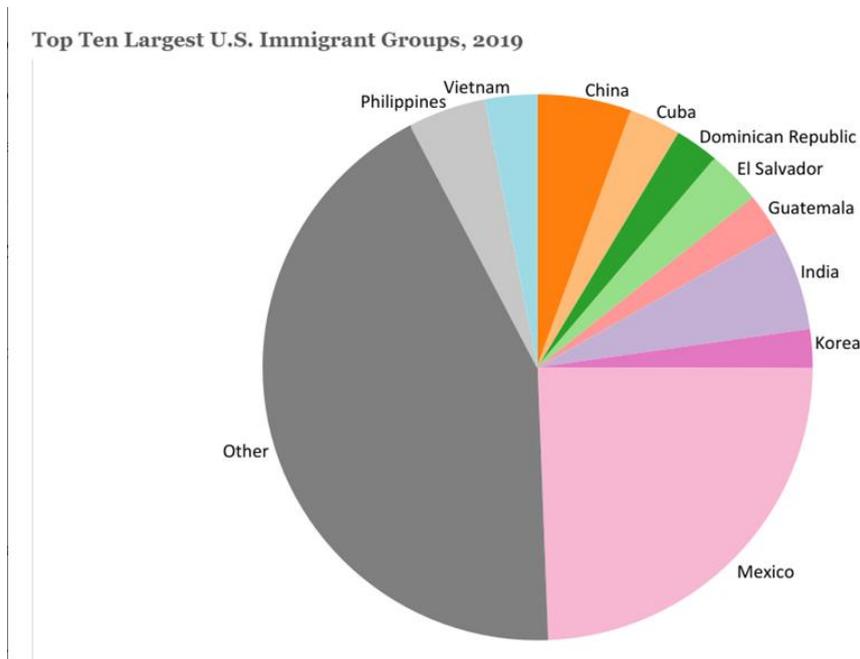
What we grasp from here is a necessity for an even greater sensitivity when the western majority engages in cultural appropriation acts which affect immigrant minorities. One of the first statements of this project was that cultural appropriation was not inherently immoral. On the contrary, it can enrich both cultures when performed in a context of respect, reciprocity and understanding.

The main issue with cultural appropriation arises when, through imposition and hindering, the appropriated cultural community feels insulted and harmed. Since cultural appropriation is part of the natural process of cultural evolution and can therefore not be stopped, what must be ensured is that acts of appropriation happen in contexts where vulnerable minorities do not feel their cultures are being stolen, misunderstood or stereotyped.

If the western cultural majority, in this particular case, the United States, became more conscious of the multicultural environment around them and opted to include that reality in the cultural “melting pot” that the US supposedly is, cultural appropriation would probably take place under better conditions that would not outrage the overly sensitive immigrant groups that would not feel depreciated, prejudiced or forced to forget their roots to adapt anymore.

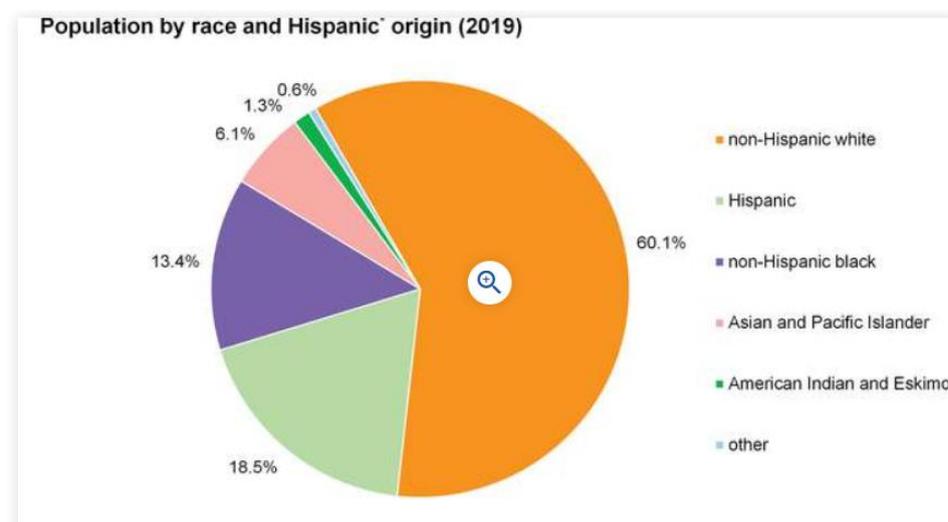
## ANNEXES:

Figure 1:



Source: Migration Policy Institute. (2020). *Largest U.S. Immigrant Groups over Time, 1960-Present*. Retrieved from: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/largest-immigrant-groups-over-time>

Figure 2:



Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica. (2020). *People of the United States* Retrieved from: <https://www.britannica.com/place/United-States/People>

Figure 3:



Source: Yagiz, B.Y. (2010). *Cultural Appropriation in Design and 'The Cipher'*

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