According to James O. Young and Conrad G. Brunk, editors of *The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation*, cultural appropriation is a term describing the process and consequences of one culture adopting the objects, content, and/or voice of another. It most often denotes the adoption of language, music, art, systems of thought, values, or behaviors that are meaningful characteristics of a particular culture by another. It is most negatively connoted when objects, content, and voice from a subordinate, minority, or disenfranchised culture are volitionally acquired by an empowered, majority, or controlling culture, with the majority, consciously or not, attempting to emulate the minority culture through art, music, attire, and a range of other symbolic behavior.
The cultural appropriation of voice could be considered when the affluent—in particular, those who have never struggled economically and whose connection to poverty is only tangential through reports or secondary contacts—flourish, prosper, and are accepted as the predominant voice of the impoverished. In egregious cases, the alternative voice is disparate from and/or an ecologically invalid representation of the initial concerns and experiences of the impoverished.

Additionally, music, a powerful and often spontaneous expression of emotions reflective of cultural experience and then consolidated with lyrics and sounds (i.e., Negro spirituals developed during slavery) that is consumed often within a culture can be the target of cultural appropriation. Examples, internationally, include the popularization and then adoption of rap music by a large proportion of the majority. Initially the reflection of suffering experienced by the impoverished and the disenfranchised in urban settings, rap music lyrics have often been considered sexually explicit, sexist, derogatory, and offensive to many members of majority populations. Over many years, young Caucasian, Asian, and other populations, including the affluent, have embraced rap music and adopted its rhythms and lyrics as their own.

Words about poverty, struggle, and victimization by police and figures of authority spoken by non–inner-city affluent youth from around the world have frequently diluted attention from the suffering of those who have experienced those obstacles to success, and in many cases, have served only to highlight and enrich a class of musicians and promoters who exist as multimillionaires, frequently disconnected from the reality of the words they sing, and who seek to emulate for the purposes of monetary gain those whose lives are ingrained in suffering. In addition to rap music, many other culturally appropriated expressions, such as locks as a hair style along with Caribbean garments, use of American Indian names for sports teams (i.e., Redskins), and body art have become ubiquitous expressions, really representing almost no one.

Culture by its very nature is difficult to operationalized; its boundaries are unclear, and its use in research and practice is very often cumbersome. The distinctions and nuances between communities, cultures, and even societies are difficult to articulate; yet, most trained and even untrained observers can identify a culture when they see it. Unfortunately, the term *culture* has been so heavily used to describe consistencies in the lives of so many groups of people that, on some level, it has lost its definitional utility (Edwards, Feliu, Johnson, 2003). Culture as a construct, because of its overuse, has become simultaneously everything and nothing. For academic and research purposes, however, culture is most often described and measured by its products and behaviors.

Many consider the products of cultures as denoted in three areas: (a) objects, (b) content, and (c) voice (p. 242). *Objects* are the physical products of culture and can be represented by physical structures, meaningful objects, or social and religious artifacts. *Content* is representative of the substance of thoughts, ideas, and styles that may be associated with a particular culture. *Voice* refers to those cultural stakeholders who speak for
the experiences of a culture. These individuals are often icons within a culture and may guide or simply reflect the value and experiences of a subgroup of people in a society.

As these examples highlight, the products of cultural appropriation are often altered in a fashion, as a function of the differing experiences of the dominant culture, such that they no longer serve to accurately give voice to the experiences of the subordinate culture. Removed from the context of the original experiences, these targets of cultural appropriation often take on lives of their own and in many cases are so exaggerated by the acquiring culture that they become caricatures of any reality. A culture shared by everyone is ultimately owned by no one.

Young and Brunk present an extraordinarily cerebral and thorough exploration of cultural appropriation as it is experienced in the arts, religion, and archaeology. Seemingly diverse and even disparate areas that are the targets of cultural appropriation are intricately woven together with the thread of the transmission of information from one culture to another. Several chapters are devoted to articulating cultural appropriation in a manner consistent with the introduction of this review and based on similar notions of culture. This edited volume is representative of the expertise of philosophers and others who are at the forefront of this field.

Each of the 11 chapters of the book struggles with a particular case of cultural appropriation. Chapters are efficiently and logically presented with an initial view of the history of cultural appropriation and evidence for its existence in archaeology, continuing through modern-day instances. Chapter 2, for example, focuses exclusively on archaeological evidence for cultural appropriation, concluding that even archeology itself has been appropriated (p. 22). Early chapters lead to subsequent discussions in which religion, music, and even genetics are discussed as examples of appropriation.

The intrachapter structure, however, is somewhat different. Chapters begin and end with a complex, cerebral, and thought-provoking presentation of concepts that are relatively easy to follow if this was your dissertation topic or an area where a researcher has significant and established expertise. However, for the novice in this area of study, the chapter structure can seem frustrating and difficult to follow. More relevant, however, than any one chapter alone or the structural and content complexity of individual chapters is the idea that, collectively, chapters in *The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation* challenge the idea of cultural appropriation as universally negative.

Based on the premise that culture and its products are difficult to define, the book questions whether culture can be appropriated or stolen, and further whether, when appropriation does exist, it is always bad. Using examples representative of international cultures, Coleman, Coombe, and MacArailt in Chapter 8 acknowledge, in relation to music, One irony of the artistic appropriation of Indigenous music is that, although the musicians who appropriate the music declare their “fundamental respect, even deep affection for the
original music and its makers,” their music focuses on a small sample of the repertoire of
the originating culture, in turn misrepresenting its musical achievements. (p. 175)

The authors further acknowledge that the original music may be diminished by
subsequent and changed iterations, but they also note that when one explores the “conflict
between a right to freedom of expression in artistic practice and a right to restrict the use of
content based upon proprietary claims” (p. 175), the absolute interpretation of cultural
appropriation as negative may be challenged. Throughout the book, the contributors do a
good job presenting their opinions but also present enough empirical data and logic to allow
readers to draw their own conclusions.

We believe that “involuntary automotive acquisition” is to Grand Theft Auto as
cultural appropriation is to theft of a culture’s identity. In the same fashion that a rose by any
other name is still a rose, theft of culture by the names of acquisition or appropriation is still
theft. We further would have appreciated a less-cerebral presentation of the thesis of the
book, particularly at the end. In the last chapter, “‘Nothing Comes From Nowhere’: Reflections
on Cultural Appropriation as the Representation of Other Cultures” and, in
particular in its conclusion, authors Young and Haley explicitly note that because a
circumstance is an example of cultural appropriation, it does not in and of itself translate to
that circumstance being morally objectionable. This use of normative theory, or the process
of evaluating, beyond scientific value, whether a circumstance is right or wrong, moral or
immoral, adds value to the complicated constructs discussed in the book and makes the book
more accessible to nonacademicians.

The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation is a good read with a complicated message. We
would recommend the book for an academic setting or in environments where intellectual
debate is appreciated. It is not clear that the average lay reader would appreciate the nuances
of the significant examples of a thesis that could have more efficiently been presented in a
single chapter.

Reference