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Lauren Michele Jackson – White Negroes

There are no easy answers, there are no quick solutions. So sums up Lauren Michele Jackson's forceful, nuanced, and timely essay collection, *White Negroes* (Jackson, 2019). Turning her critical back on kneejerk reactions to cultural appropriation claims stemming from (mostly) "white people…paranoid that people of colour see appropriation in everything" (p.2), Jackson recentres the discussion around questions of power, from where it should have never strayed. Appropriation, according to Jackson, is both everywhere and inevitable, "so long as peoples interact with other peoples, by choice or by force, cultures will intersect and mingle and graft onto each other" (p.2-3). The idea that artistic of cultural practices be shut off to outsiders in the age of the internet is ridiculous, "the act of cultural transport is not in itself an ethical dilemma" (p.3).

And yet, Jackson, argues that when the socially dominant appropriate from the oppressed, "society's imbalances are exacerbated and inequalities prolonged" (p.4).[1] Focussing on America, Jackson argues that the history of capitalism has and does run hand in hand with racism, and appropriation. From the appropriation of land, crops and cuisines from Native Americans, and the mass expropriation of the labour of the enslaved has grown a country in which there exists a wealth gap so large that whiteness is the largest predicter of success. A social and cultural landscape exists to support this wealth gap in which white people are rewarded economically, artistically, socially and intellectually from their continued appropriation of the cultural products of people of colour, or as Jackson puts it, "everybody wants the insurgence of blackness with the wealth of whiteness. Everybody wants to be cool without fearing for their lives" (p.6).

Each essay in the book explores an area of popular culture. (Jackson's writing on pop culture is so beguiling that the reader is almost guaranteed to spend as much time surfing the web for footage of awards show controversies, music videos and Instagram furores as reading the book itself).

"The Pop Star", reckons with what happens when white artists make black sounds. Jackson centres the brunt of her analysis on Christina Aguilera and her "transformation of aesthetic, sonic, and ethnic proportions" (p.10), from Mickey Mouse Club member to flagrant appropriator. Jackson's analysis is not blind to gender. She argues that white women, too, are tied up in a matrix of sexual domination, but that this oppression is not compounded by racial violence. In fact, the trappings of white female identity create the context in which appropriation is all but inevitable for white songstresses attempting to establish their maturity. Jackson contends that they "need to go "primitive" to be sexual in ways whiteness doesn't afford" (p.21). Recognising that racism does not allow innocence and blackness to work together, Jackson argues that white pop stars appropriate black culture in order to emulate maturity, featuring black artists and hiring black writers as props to ease their access into this new cultural world.

"The Cover Girl", deals with the appropriation rife within the beauty and fashion industries. The aesthetic, but not economic, investment in blackness by the Kardashian's and Co. is her jumping off point – think Khloé's "thicc cosplay" (p.34), Kylie's lip fillers, Kim's surgical enhancements and so on. But, crucially, Jackson emphasises that "they only do what fashion and beauty allow them to do" (p.35). Trends in fashion and beauty appear to come from on high, but these same trends trickle up before they can trickle down. The industry relies on sourcing inspiration from the social bottom but concealing the dark queer hands responsible.

"The Artist", argues that whilst the art world insists it does not have a race problem, black aesthetics only prove innovative as long as they are not attatched to black artists. Jackson begins by discussing artists who combine their artistry with minstrelsy – Rachel Dolezal and Joe Scanlan. Scanlan is a particularly interesting case since his black woman alter-ego, Donelle Woolford, is an entirely

[1] This avenue of argument has been recently explored in philosophy by Erich Hatala Matthes (Matthes, 2019)

fictional creation on the part of Scanlan. Jackson locates the problem here not in the shoe-polish of minstrelsy, but in the desire. Scanlan seeks novelty in his occupation of black womanhood but in doing so perpetuates a long history of white artistic inhabitation of blackness. All with no acknowledgement that if Donelle were real, she "would be as discounted by the world as he himself is overvalued" (ibid). Jackson then turns to artists who make black pain their subject – the poet Kenneth Goldsmith who 'remixed' Michael Brown Jr.'s autopsy report for poetic effect, and Dana Schutz who painted the open casket of murdered teen, Emmett Till. In such instances Jackson argues that concerns over 'censorship' are wielded to assert a right to display black remains to the public. She persuasively introduces here the concept of *colonial aesthetics* to denote "a method predicated on theft without citation, theft without remorse, theft without ethics, without the barest acknowledgement of race…and therefore history" (p.60).

"The Hipster", explores the pillaging of black (and feminised) vernaculars. Many appropriated words are denigrated when they achieve common status, but Jackson convincingly argues that this would not happen "were it not for the curse destined to hound black culture wherever it goes – the curse of capital-C Cool" (p.71). She continues, "the curse is cyclical…for the desires that drive acquisition also immolate the object of desire. Cool isn't *Cool* if everybody does it" (ibid.). Some appropriated words are so overused as to be completely de-raced (think "cool" or "chill"), but again, Jackson emphasises that simple transmission is not the issue, but rather the vacuous want behind it. Intimated is a suggestion that white cultures have never truly needed to innovate. Once their near-global domination was established, their generational wealth entrenched, they were able to appropriate at will, a salve to a hollow determined existence. The language of hip seemingly rescues white people from their upbringing and destiny, providing a patina of interest.

Jackson's chapters on internet culture are incredibly compelling, demonstrating the wide reach of appropriation in the modern age, and how new technologies, accessible in theory, simply serve to renew the racial wealth gap. "The Meme" offers up a general (anti-Dawkins) theory of the meme as akin to jokes: "a phrase, often coupled with an image, that follows a certain format within which adjustments are made before being redistributed to amuse others" (p.90). Their joke-ness, she argues, is the answer to why they both thrive, an accessible, replicable humour, and why individual memes eventually retire from circulation, tired and overused. Yet Jackson also argues that due to the relative accessibility of the internet, black people sustain the meme machine by being both the (uncompensated) creators of viral content, or in inspiring the content of others who appropriate black phrases or corporeality in the form of reaction gifs. Jackson's calls for greater recognition here are interesting. The idea of memes as property is antithetical to memes themselves which are organically altered to suit the purposes of those who find them funny. But Jackson, points out white meme creators are allowed to profit off of their creations in ways in which black people are not, and companies mine memes and the innovations of black twitter to sell their products.

"The Viral Star", contends with the desire to consume video content of black pain, whether it be individual nobodies interviewed, and 'songified' in the aftermath of a traumatic event, or executions of black people at the hands of police officers. Jackson writes, "if someone consumes anything at the pace and frequency that the internet consumes trauma with black subjects, we say something is wrong…It seems we only don't consider gluttony a social sin if the thing gorged on is a black person in distress" (p.107). Locating the consumption of this content as akin to trauma porn, Jackson circles back to argue that black people only achieve viral infamy with content they have created when they are twice as good as their white counterparts.

"The Chef", takes issue with the very American practice of appropriating food cultures, mystifying origins and profiting off the work of others. Most white chefs, Jackson contends, fail to consider the racial and cultural implications of their food. White chefs making 'ethnic' foods are given the benefit of the doubt that their food is worth its price, yet "certain *ethnic* food is presumed to be crude, artery-

clogging, less sanitary, and produced by low-skilled workers, and therefore ought to be as cheap as possible" (p.124). Jackson closes this chapter with an abnormally definite suggestion. It is not enough, for white chefs to know the history of the food, but to know their part in it, in the history that allowed them and people like them to achieve notoriety and upon understanding this, perhaps decide to step aside, creating the space for people of colour to take up space in the market. Jackson's proposal, ignores a common argument against the very concept of cultural appropriation, that the market for x ethnic product is not a zero-sum game, that there is room for traders from multiple races. However, such a side-step is unobjectionable given that Jackson's book essentially serves as a rebuttal to this point. Once again, Jackson convincingly argues that as things stand, whilst white chefs trade 'ethnic' foods, chefs of colour will rarely get a similar economic look-in.

"The Entrepreneur", focuses predominantly on the marijuana market. Weed, she writes, "originally criminalised for being too Mexican and too black, now sheds its racial residue without reparation" (p.144). Black and brown people penalised for selling to simply get by are now banned from re-entering the legal market in many places and arrests continue to be racially skewed amid a thriving (white) Green Rush. Whilst not a strict instance of cultural appropriation, again, white people thrive economically whilst people of colour are institutionally barred from partaking.

"The Activist" compellingly lays out the ways in which the very tools that minorities create for their survival and freedom are taken up by those that maintain their oppression; #BlackLivesMatter morphs into #AllLivesMatter and, bizarrely, #BlueLivesMatter, "anti-black counter-slogans that nonetheless cannot escape the rhetorical world black people made" (p.166); self-care, a concept created by Audre Lorde in the late stages of cancer to evince a strategy of political and personal survival morphs into the reification of a bath-bombs, yoga and candles; and anger "the most racialised emotion in American history" (p.167) is made cool, along with protest, with no recognition that anger expressed in public is a privilege.

Jackson, as a cultural critic, for the most part elides questions of prescriptive ethics. For instance, in relation to vernacular appropriation she writes, "surely there exists some ethical method for taking on the words of others – white America has yet to find it" (p.76). But what Jackson's collection lacks in answers, it makes up for in diagnosis, detailing again and again the power that flows through these cultural exchanges, the pilfering that occurs without comeuppance or compensation, the ways in which appropriation exacerbates oppressive social relations. Whilst this may leave some readers seeking answers a little lost or overwhelmed, Jackson tacitly pre-empts this writing that "Good White People don't care so much for reading and listening either, they want to fast-forward to whatever prescribed action alleviates their guilt" (p.100). And the collection is better for this elusion. It is not for the oppressed to detail how others should act. As Jackson puts it elsewhere, "the imperative rests with the ones whose behaviour needs to change if we are to hope for an end to that merry-go-round, talking the talk and walking a whole other walk entirely. Black speech cannot sooth the broken white soul. Only revolution can do that" (p.81).

A recurring theme in Jackson's collection is the contention that for black aesthetics to ever be truly cited the world would have to be made anew. Proper recognition, effective compensation and thoughtful consumption would require such a thorough ungirding of racial capitalism and a radical rehaul of power, that it perhaps exists beyond the boundaries of the imagination. She writes, "complex problems often deserve complex solutions…Our world deserves reordering. Only a transformation on that scale could I ever imagine a society in which black people have options instead of destinies, options instead of statistics" (p.172). Some, for sure, might read this as defeatist, but in fact Jackson is a pragmatist. Appropriation is not a new fad, but rather "part and parcel of [racial] business as usual" (p.173). Those who wish to overcome the problems of cultural appropriation must direct their efforts towards dismantling white supremacy.

References

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