

### ***Bitesized Belonging: What's the deal with cultural appropriation?***

Our handy-dandy dictionary tells us it's "the unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the customs, practices, ideas, etc. of one people or society by members of another, and typically, more dominant people or society". Phew, a lot of five-dollar ideas in there but let's break it down.

When we think of cultural appropriation some math usually needs to take place. Does this "thing" (action, custom, clothing, word, phrase, etc.) come from my own culture? Do I understand the entire background or am I engaging with it because it's seemingly mainstream? Did this thing start with a group of people before being broadly incorporated?

Let's examine a quick and easy example: slay. You've likely heard it, seen it written, and maybe even shouted it yourself. But do you fully grasp the roots of the word as used in contemporary contexts? Do you understand the community—in this case the queer community and very specifically the drag community—and the history of this word? Do you understand the relevancy of its connection to ball culture? Most folks don't and say 'slay' out of context. So, by our math, this would be cultural appropriation.

Well, that kind of sucks, huh? How can we be expected to navigate the landmines of cultural appropriation on a daily basis? How can we possibly understand the full history, societal impact, and context of the things we take for granted every single day?

There's some good news. You aren't. You can't. That's right, your Director of DEIB is telling you that you're not expected to know absolutely every aspect of every culture and ensure you stay in your own demographic lane. Language, customs, and ideas can permeate cultures and change them entirely. Rather, what we need watch for are harmful and disrespectful instances of cultural appropriation. Saying 'slay' for instance, out of context, won't usually warrant you more than a strong eye roll. And some queer identifying folks might even see non-queer use of this word as progress; it wasn't long ago that a large majority of straight, suburban men were doing everything in their power to avoid gay culture, let alone engaging with it

(<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1097184X211017186>).

With the increased use, many folks see this as cultural engagement, whereby cultural appropriation by the mainstream symbolizes acceptance and integration (even while often lacking in context). But there are forms of cultural appropriation which are harmful and downright cruel.

As we enter the Samhain and Halloween season, cultural appropriation often comes in as a topic of great discussion. Examinations of people's costumes have highlighted the offensive and inappropriate nature of cultural appropriation. Take, for example, dressing up as a Native American, complete with headdress and polyurethane "buck-skin" outfits. It should go without saying that every aspect of this is offensive. From the wearing of a sacred garment to the overly racialized idea that it's okay to dress and perform as another race or

culture. So too are costumes of other people's religions, identities, or backgrounds.

**Exercise**

Take some time to think about areas in which you might be culturally appropriating another culture. Are there opportunities for you to shift from appropriation to engagement? For example, if you've been using 'slay' often, you might consider spending some time reading literature which informs you of the background, usage, and importance.

Still not sure? It's always okay to connect with an ally, ERG Co-Chair, or even your ever-present Director of DEIB to ask 'Is this cultural appropriation?'