Research Inquiry   Writing Dragons: Student Writing Samples

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Illegitimate Control: An Acknowledgement of False White Supremacy (2020-2021)

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"Illegitimate Control: An Acknowledgment of False White Supremacy" Whitman Ives (research inquiry example)

Questions to Consider For Discussion and Reflection

The following research inquiry essay confronts racism, appropriation, and white supremacy. However, rather than arguing that derogatory and racist behavior is encoded in appropriations of Black culture, Ives explores the notion that white people are appropriating their own cultural history, ill-founded on a sense of white supremacy. As you read Ives' essay, consider:

- Ives begins the discussion of false white supremacy by introducing appropriation. Why start with appropriation instead of racism or white supremacy to begin this argument? Are there concepts or ideas that would help to set up your research inquiry topic? How do you decide how to frame or begin a research inquiry?
- One of the main arguments that emerges from this piece is the idea that we need to look deeper to the power-seeking nature of white culture, rather than focusing on individual events of racism as "symptoms" of this deeper cause. How does this assertion create space for continued conversation on more far-reaching aspects of racism (such as systemic or institutional racism vs. individual racist acts)? How can you build space in your own research inquiry to pursue larger connections tied to your topic?
- White supremacy, racism, and cultural appropriation are all very large topics to address within a research inquiry. Ives makes some choices about examples and sources in order to keep the organization and discussion of the argument specific. What examples did you find effective? How do you make choices about your own sources and specific examples in order to keep your argument moving forward?

Illegitimate Control: An Acknowledgement of False White Supremacy by Whitman Ives

Fundamentally, cultural appropriation can be defined as the unwanted and disrespectful use of another culture's heritage in a stereotypical and derogatory manner. In recent years, this has looked like, in most cases, white people wearing blackface, Native American headdresses, costumes, hairstyles, language trends, even musical styles. In 2015, a party at Ithaca College was shut down before it began due to protests from students who claimed the party's theme was "problematic," and "racially charged" (Denning). From the outside, it appeared as though the dress code for the party was designed to differentiate stereotypically white attire, defined as "preps," and black attire, defined as "crooks." Technically, no overt racism was stated, as the description of prep involved polo shirts, and the description of crook involved baggy clothes, bandanas, and 'bling.' The issue is in the assumption of what those definitions imply. In the nineties, baggy clothes and bling was predominantly associated with black men, typically accompanied by the assumption of thuggishness. Let's assume for a moment that the organizers of the party were in fact racist, and intended to appropriate a stereotypical aspect of black culture

in this country. At its most basic level, that appropriation would be an example of the ubiquitous ability of whites to undeservedly marginalize black culture by making the false assumption that being white is inherently superior.

White people's assumption of superiority is unwarranted and false, yet for hundreds of years in this country, that assumption has been marked as fact. Slavery arrived in 'the New World' in the 17th century, as white people imported African men and women as though they were products. From this point forward, it is the nearly 400 years dating back to the early 17th century that will be discussed, and will provide the most obvious examples of false white assumptions of superiority.

Before examining any of these examples in depth, it is necessary to understand why we must look at the darkest moments of this country's history. For most people, cultural appropriation has a grey area where it is arguable that an event may be appreciative instead of appropriative. Despite this grey area, most people would also agree that there are less volatile examples of appropriation that should also be condemned; such as blackface, derogatory costumes, or explicitly racist language. Any action that clearly lacks respect is typically considered appropriative, and often results in public outcry, such as the party mentioned previously, or the reaction to Dana Schutz painting Emmett Till. Herein lies an issue. It is assumed that when white people behave in ways that are deemed appropriative of a culture, (be it a party, a costume, or language), it is being done simply as an insult to that culture. But let's assume, for just a moment, there is a deeper underlying culture being appropriated every time a white person marginalizes black culture for entertainment or frivolity. Let's assume that derogatory behavior is an example of white people resorting to the historical model of their own culture. In order to allow this assumption, it is necessary to understand the structure of white culture. It is inarguable that white people have existed at an undeserved level of superiority for no other reason than their skin color. It began hundreds of years ago, and while there has been progress, there is still much to change. White people still tend to enjoy better jobs, better education, and better societal treatment. The very foundation of white culture is built on the inaccurate ideology that white people are inherently better than any other population, and the resulting effect is a white culture created on falsehoods. Understanding this concept allows us to look deeper into actions of modern appropriation and realize there is always the same underlying cause; white people resorting to the historical tendencies of their own culture of superiority, created when the first African slaves were shipped to the 'New World.' Immediately, there are counter-arguments like 'slavery was abolished in the 19th century,' or 'a majority of white people never had slaves,' or 'throwing a party with racist costumes is not the same as considering black people as 3/5ths of a person.' These are all factual statements, but weak arguments. White people have operated at the highest tier of success in this country since it began, and this happened on the backs of slaves, Native Americans, and other white people considered to be in a class so low they were considered only slightly better than black people. As Harry Watson aptly describes, "To anyone familiar with antebellum [pre- American Civil War] racial stereotypes, the implications were clear: For all practical purposes, the man with the dirty black beard and his family were poor whites whose condition approached the level of slaves, and whose very existence violated all the cultural assumptions of white supremacy" (3). In this sense, it is not exclusively the suppression of black people, but rather any individual that conflicts with the notion of white superiority. Watson's last statement, "...cultural assumptions of white supremacy," effectively defines white culture as a whole. It is impossible to discuss the development of white culture without the

existence of suppressing conflicting ideology. With this idea, it is no longer a simple issue of black and white. The desire for supremacy is what is being sought, and for hundreds of years, that desire was manifested as the abuse and suppression of black people, poor white people, and women.

Before delving further into the idea of white people appropriating their own historical culture, it is important to truly understand what culture is, and how much power it holds. Culture is an elusive construct that often evades measurement and quantification. Culture is the building block on which society functions, and it dictates the decisions made across a community. It can be said that "...culture, influences everything one does, thinks, believes, and feels" (Davis 129). It is important to acknowledge the role culture has on the way society is built, and understand that the suppression of a culture because it does not fit within the desired boundaries of another creates often violent conflicts. Wars have been fought, often under the guise of other rationales, purely because a culture seeking power sought to eliminate an opposing culture. The Crusades were a notable example of this, as it was a war fought under the umbrella of Christianity, when in reality it was an attempt by white Europeans to stop the spread of Islam. Once the importance of culture is established, it is easier to understand just how far white people were willing to go in order to preserve their culture of supremacy. If Davis is to be believed, then it is easy to grasp the idea that once this culture of superiority was established, it truly did influence every aspect of white existence.

Now that it has been established that white culture is one that seeks to accumulate power with no care for the cost of that power, the aforementioned examples of white superiority must be discussed. Moving forward in history to the post- Civil War era, white people altered the methods of maintaining their perceived grasp on power. Jim Crow laws took effect after the war ended in the late 19th century, and they stated the explicit terms of segregation. Black people could not use the same drinking fountains, could not eat in the same restaurants, ride the same buses, or stay in the same hotels. The services and amenities in place for black America were significantly lesser in quality than those for white America, widening the power gap between white America and black America. These laws lasted until 1965, when the Civil Rights movement had reached its peak. Notable historical figures such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. spoke out against the oppression their people had faced for centuries, and when the Jim Crow laws were finally abolished, it marked a turning point in this country.

If the year 1965 is to be used as the beginning of an era of change in America, it is necessary to acknowledge the progress that has been made. In many ways, it can be argued that not much has actually changed. While slavery has been abolished, large percentages of black people still live in poor conditions in low income housing. Black people may be allowed to stay and eat wherever they want by law, there are still instances of black people being turned away because of the color of their skin. Thankfully, these examples are far more uncommon now than ever before, and there are no laws that explicitly discriminate based on skin color. America has improved, and the culture has changed. The discrimination and abuse of the past is condemned, and it is understood that the country will never go back to what it once was.

Even with the undeniable progress this country has made, there are still elements of white supremacy that permeate the culture. Outside of the obvious examples like actual white supremacy movements, there are more subtle examples of how white people have fought to maintain their status as the powerful members of society. Around the time the Civil Rights

movement was ending, the so-called 'war on drugs' was beginning. President Nixon began the process, and it really reached a peak during the presidency of Ronald Reagan. The policies set in place were allegedly designed to curtail the rampant drug use and import in America, but the policies affected minority communities in disproportionally high percentages, resulting in mass incarcerations of minorities and black people. The war on drugs was almost single-handedly responsible for creating the stereotypes of black people as crooks and drug dealers. While mass incarceration and inaccurate stereotypes are still relatively obvious examples of white people oppressing black people to maintain their superior status, there are even more subtle examples that have continued the trend. Academia is one such place where the discrimination is less obvious to a passive observer. In multiple studies, there has been discussion and analysis of academic performance in low-income and minority communities, and the results indicated that while "Focusing primarily on low-income African American students, they reported that because of employment discrimination, these students expect little gain from their effort and achievement in school. As a result, these youth have developed an 'oppositional' peer-group culture that denigrates such effort and achievement as 'acting white,' thereby discouraging academic effort" (Farkas et. al. 148). Again, the status of white people has created a situation, in this case the job market that is almost exclusively controlled by the white elite, and an education system that often unconsciously caters to the status of white students, even extending into the education of teachers. As Christine E. Sleeter suggests, "...the continued production of teachers, large proportions of whom are not well equipped to teach racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students well, is not an aberration. Rather, it is a product of racist systems designed to meet white needs" (157). The 'white needs' that Sleeter mentions can be defined as power and superiority. White culture is built on false supremacy, and the continued desire for power.

Looking even further, the broad reach of white people's undeserved supremacy extends into politics and individuals political party affiliations. In 2008, the U.S Census Bureau conducted a study that suggested that the majority of the United States population would consist of minorities by the year 2042, and "...these results offer compelling evidence that making a majority-minority racial shift salient can lead Whites to perceive that their racial group's status is threatened and, in turn, to express greater political conservatism" (Craig & Richeson 1192). What this means is that white people have shifted their political leanings to a party that is more likely to attempt policy-making that slows this shift to a majority-minority population status. On the surface, it merely looks like individuals crossing party lines, when in reality it is a subtle attempt to maintain the status quo of white people in power; and in politics, a majority is power.

With all of these examples, the trend becomes painfully obvious. For hundreds of years, one of the most consistent aspects of white culture has been the oppression of black people. The methodology of this oppression has changed from literally selling and owning black people, to segregation, all the way to current mass incarcerations. It is an undeniable attempt by white people to remain in a position of power over any other population. Logically, it is clear that changes have been made, and oppression is less prevalent in modern society, but it is still imperative that the trend throughout history is understood. Once understood, it is then possible to grasp the idea that white people's appropriation of minority cultures is merely a symptom of the underlying disease.

The challenge lies in defining the disease. As has been discussed above, accepting white culture as having a pervasive desire for power and superiority is the first step in identifying the issue. Once this theory is acknowledged and accepted, then the next step is realizing how every action

deemed 'racist,' 'classist,' or 'appropriative' is, in actuality, a result of holding tightly to the notion of white supremacy as a cultural necessity. For example, in the case of the Ithaca College party discussed previously, the act of creating a party involving stereotypical costume in a 'racist' manner was a result of an unconscious acceptance of preconceived notions of white superiority. The outcry over the cultural appropriation and racial insensitivity was warranted to some, but in reality an outcry over an individual event is illogical, *especially* if that outcry comes from other white people as well. There is a biblical passage that illustrates the problematic existence of many examples of public outcry. As the apostle Luke writes, "How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take the speck out of your eye,' when you yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (Luke 6:42, NIV). White people calling out white people for being marginally insensitive is a massive case of hypocrisy. Granted, in no way should racism and disrespect be encouraged, but without an acknowledgment of the negative history of white supremacy, outcry from other white people rings hollow. Let's assume for a moment that white people do acknowledge their history across the board. It is fair then to assume that their behavior is a symptom of the disease created by power-hungry white elites.. In no way does this excuse the aforementioned behaviors, but it does give a reason for why these behaviors exist, and creates a clearer path to correcting the behaviors.

As far as correction goes, step one is always admitting a problem, as has been done above. The next step is actual correction, which despite having a clearer path, is still immensely complicated. There is no singular way to solve centuries of oppression, but it begins with education. Far more focus on the oppressive nature of white existence needs to be given, starting earlier in the modern educational process, instead of simply requiring a single course at the collegiate level. White people need to learn how detrimental the definition of 'historical whiteness' truly is, and adopt higher levels of respect and humility for a new 'modern whiteness' definition. Part of this process will need participation from the populations previously marginalized by whites. Forgiveness and understanding of the behaviors, instead of simply protesting, will be immeasurably helpful in establishing proper dialogue and catalyzing change. A public outcry and the shutting down of events deemed to be culturally appropriative or racist, while seemingly necessary, does nothing to teach a lesson, but rather sows seeds of discord and causes individuals to become defensive. Again, it does not make these events acceptable, but it will cause actual discussion rather than public argument.

To summarize the ideas discussed above, events like the Ithaca College party or Dana Schutz painting *Open Casket*, are all symptoms. Protests simply treat the symptom, not the underlying disease. Each of the events mentioned are examples of appropriation, but not exclusively the appropriation of black culture for white gain. Instead, it is primarily the appropriation of historically white culture for further white gain; and it is this idea that is the disease. Protests treat the surface, but a deeper understanding and more logical discussion is the initial step in the solution to undeserved and illegitimate white superiority. At its core, white culture is defined by the overwhelming desire for power, either politically, socially, or culturally. The search for this power has been riddled with discriminatory practices designed to suppress opposing cultures in order to advance the white desire for supremacy. In historical contexts, the discrimination looked like slavery, like written laws of segregation, or like violent outbursts. As the years passed, the modern context shifted the appearance of discrimination to mass incarceration, lesser academic opportunity, and stereotypical behavior designed to humiliate. The actions of white people are

often unconsciously designed to maintain their level of perceived power over minority populations. The unconscious actions tend to be viewed as white people acting in culturally oppressive ways, such as the derogatory party costumes, racist language, or utilizing black culture for white gain (hip-hop culture is an example of this). In reality, these unconscious actions are the result of the pervasiveness of the power-seeking characteristic of white culture, a trait that has defined white culture for centuries. This definition allows us to understand that white people acting in ways deemed as appropriative of black culture, are instead an unconscious adoption of historical white culture and an inadvertent attempt to gain power by suppression. The solution begins with white people acknowledging and accepting that their desire for power is harmful, but their attempts to maintain power are more detrimental. White culture was based on the lie that white people are superior, and to break this lie we must promote the truth, a truth that says we are biologically the same, that skin color as the basis for success is fundamentally wrong. Only once this is accepted can we change culture.

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