

Why appropriation of words like 'finna' by non-black people is wrong

BY STAFF WRITER

Part of the culture of living at this school is adapting new NCSSM lingo into our vocabulary. From all the three letter abbreviations, to euphemisms for the "sketchy" behavior we exhibit after school hours, the language at this school is particular to the students here.

However, recently there has been a wave of words entering in our vocabulary through social media and casual exchange through conversations - words and patterns of language use that are more harmful than we assume at initial glance. For reference, one word you might often hear in conversation is "finna." These types of words and phrases actually belong to an English dialect referred to as Ebonics.

In 1996, the Oakland, California school board officially recognized the legitimacy of Ebonics. Note that no modern linguist embraces the term "Ebonics"; the more accurate—and less politically charged—label is African American Vernacular English (AAVE).

With that out of the way: When the school board in northern California issued its decree on AAVE, controversy erupted, mostly because people didn't actually understand what was going on.

The educators in California weren't hoping to teach kids AAVE; this wasn't an attempt to get "ain't" in the grammar books. Rather, the Oakland school board's ruling was meant to stop unfairly punishing kids whose first instinct was to speak the way they were taught to at home.

To those of us who don't use terms like "finna" in our everyday language or the English they were taught: there are reasons why we shouldn't adopt AAVE into our speaking patterns if we did not grow up with it in our culture:

1: 99% of the time when we acquire standard English and can speak standard English, our ability to code-switch into the dominant, accepted standard as set by white norms is something that a lot of black people who grew up speaking and currently speak AAVE don't have the luxury of doing—which is doubly harmful when you consider...

2: When non-black people use AAVE, we get all the positive associations (being cool, quirky, tough, masculine, snarky, etc.) and few or none of the negative associations (perceptions of deviance or criminality, perceptions of being less classy, perceptions of being uncultured or uneducated, etc.) that black people who speak AAVE get.

3: Black cultural productions, including language, are constantly stolen and blanched

of meaning and origin without any sort of credit or respect for their original sources and to appropriate AAVE contributes to that theft.

Essentially, if you are not African American, or if African American Vernacular is not part of the culture you grew up in, using words that belong to or are rooted in AAVE is a form of cultural appropriation, and that's wrong.

You might ask, "Well, if my black friends are okay with it, and nobody is getting hurt, then why can't I say these words?" This is exactly the kind of attitude that people exhibit towards other forms of cultural appropriation: but we aren't causing any harm! We're simply appreciating the culture, or a weaker, this is educational! Ebonics is a legitimately recognized dialect of English, etc.

The problem with this so-called "appreciation" is that the dangers of cultural appropriation go beyond offending people: appropriation continues patterns of disempowering groups that are already marginalized.

A deeper understanding of cultural appropriation also refers to a particular power dynamic in which members of a dominant culture take elements from a culture of people who have been systematically oppressed by that dominant group.

Engaging in cultural appropriation does a number of problematic things: it trivializes violent historical oppression, lets people show love for the culture but remain prejudiced against its people, makes things 'cool' for white people while deeming them 'too ethnic' for people of color, lets privileged people profit from oppressed people's labor, spreads mass lies about marginalized cultures, perpetuates racist stereotypes, prioritizes the feelings of privileged people over justice for marginalized people, etc. The list goes on.

One of the reasons that cultural appropriation is a hard concept to grasp for so many is that Westerners are used to pressing their own culture onto others and taking what they want in return. Many a white person sporting dreadlocks or a bindi online has taken cultural appropriation to mean the policing of what white people can or can't wear and enjoy. But white people freely doing what people of color were actively punished for doing is a form of disempowerment of the oppressed. The fact is, Western culture invites and, at times, demands assimilation. Not every culture has chosen to open itself up to being adopted by outsiders in the same way.

And there's good reason for that.

Ethnic clothes and hairstyles are still stigmatized

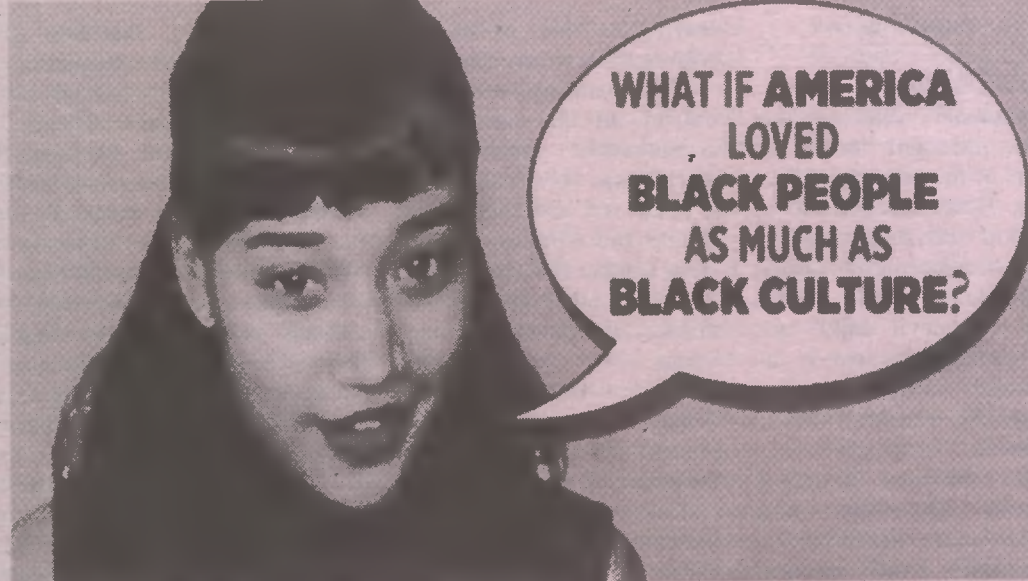


photo courtesy Jessica Yao

Actress Amandla Stenberg addressed cultural appropriation in a viral video.

as unprofessional, cultural foods are treated as exotic pastimes, and the vernacular of people of color is ridiculed and demeaned.

So there is an unequal exchange between Western culture - an all-consuming mishmash of over-simplified and commodified foreign influences - and marginalized cultures. P

people of all cultures wear business suits and collared shirts to survive. But when one is of the dominant culture, adopting the clothing, food, or slang of other marginalized ethnic groups has nothing to do with survival.

So as free as people should be to wear whatever hair and clothing they enjoy, or speak in whatever dialect they want to, using someone else's cultural symbols to satisfy a personal need for self-expression is an exercise in privilege.

For many who have felt forced and pressured to change the way they look, behave, and speak just to earn enough respect to stay employed and safe, modes of self-expression are still limited. In this case, a non-black person speaking the language of a black person, who has been forced their entire life to adapt to a standard of English that is not commonly accessible to them, is an act of cultural appropriation.

It allows for an individual from the dominant culture to receive praise and enjoyment out of a cultural act that has been deemed unacceptable for the cultural minority to practice for themselves.

However, the usage of language that is attributed to people of color goes beyond cultural appropriation - it relates back to an all too frequently recurring theme that has existed in America for longer than it has been a nation: the usage of black bodies as a sight of humor at the expense of multiple realities that contribute to the ways that people of color exist (including language, hairstyle, dress, etc.).

Essentially, if a person is not black and uses AAVE for humor, they're perpetuating the same harmful ideology

that is woven into minstrel performances. The use of a predominantly black cultural practice for the sake of comedy reduces African American culture to a punchline.

The truth of the matter is as simple as this: racist humor is racist humor. It makes people uncomfortable to accept themselves as persons guilty of perpetuating racism, but progress cannot be made until people accept, address and discuss the discomfort. Elsewise, we are caught in an unending cycle of perpetuating toxic and insensitive behaviors.

Youssef Carter, who teaches African Studies at NCSSM, says that "there exists a natural discourse around race, where people are trying to dance around the word 'racism' and the reality for many people in this country, getting people to understand what racism is here is like trying to explain to a fish what it's like being wet. That's how pervasive racism is in this country; that's how endemic it is to our understanding of ourselves, and misunderstanding of other people."

While an act may not seem immediately harmful or dangerous, many nuances within our casual day-to-day exchanges bear much heavier

historical implications that are oftentimes problematic and oppressive.

It is our responsibility to examine the things we say and the actions we perform in detail, and listen when people express sentiments of discomfort towards them.

Otherwise, we engage in the perpetuation of microaggressions and normalization of accepted racist tropes that contribute to the overall reinforcement of harmful practices of racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.

It's an unsettling reality in the current racial climate, where many Americans disavow having any racial prejudice or bias, even if their words or actions reveal otherwise. Such incidents are examples of racial "colorblindness" - the idea that ignoring or overlooking racial and ethnic differences promotes racial harmony.

Colorblindness does just the opposite: people who enjoy racial privilege are closing their eyes to the experiences of others. It is important to be considerate of ourselves in the way we express ourselves in the things we say.

In the end, it is not so much about practicing political correctness as it is merely being a decent person and not discriminating.

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