

Regurgitating Culture

Culture is a unifying element and a core component of one's identity. When it is “borrowed” or stolen, it is the oppressed who suffer the generational consequences. University of Toronto professor Karina Vernon is credited with the line, “appropriating is not appreciating. There is a way of appreciating a culture that respects that it’s off-limits.” This is a concept the United States is still internalizing, as shown by both Frantz Fanon and Gloria Anzaldúa’s commentary on the racism of their times. In his book, “Toward the African Revolution” (1964), Fanon, a French West Indian psychiatrist and political philosopher, delves deep into the frustration of systematic racism. To use the vocabulary of the book’s editor, he “diagnoses” racism through psychological evaluations of modern history and society.

Anzaldúa’s works were published after her passing in 2004, in a book titled “Light in the Dark/Luz en Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality.” While she discusses everything from her writing process to her queer Chicana identity, she does so while incorporating her takes on oppression and xenophobia. She provides a seemingly unfiltered viewpoint, which is what is so valuable about her work. She does not question recounting the intangible meetings she had with her “la víbora” snake spirit or other unexplainable visions. In a way, the very Western constructs she is negating are those that have oppressed her culture and others.

Both Fanon and Anzaldúa come from minority backgrounds, providing the typical white-heavy discussion of colonialism with an alternative perspective of painful relatability — or “una herida abierta” (an open wound) as Anzaldúa puts it. It is my opinion that Fanon’s analysis is an essential means of understanding Anzaldúa’s observations and serves as context for a greater understanding of the ramifications of generational cultural appropriation.

In the third chapter of her book, Anzaldúa paints a picture of her visit to the Denver Museum of Natural History. She describes the surreal experience of seeing the history that was “stripped” of her people, now simply hanging on a wall. She introduces the phrase “las vendidas,” to mean “the sellouts” when describing those who wrongly profit off of indigenous images. “The process of “borrowing,” she writes, “is repeated until the images’ original meaning are pushed into the unconscious, and the images more significant to the prevailing culture and era surface.” The value of the works is still present, thus the oppressed must search for it under the layers of altered significance. The seemingly unattainably simple “appreciation” is lost when the oppressor — white in this case — have an active role in it’s layering, and profit as a result.

Fanon makes the interesting argument that the oppressed are innately urged to be accepted by the oppressor, writing that even after every element of personal identity has been robbed of them, the “oppressed *flings himself* upon the imposed culture with the desperation of a drowning man.” While this may be alarming to some readers, it is important to remember the psychological viewpoint that Fanon possesses. He is not arguing that it is a desirable fate, only that it is the reality minorities face when colonizing groups take hold. When the alternative is so psychologically damaging — questioning “raison d’être,” or “means of existing” — it makes sense that those who are put down would want to be comparable to the idealistic standard thrust upon them.

Fanon ends his essay with unanticipated optimism, suggesting that despite the damage done to appropriated cultures, collaboration can still be formed. He writes that the interiorized groups should dissect their denounced culture and maintain the positive components. Then the “two cultures” — oppressed and oppressors — “can affront each other, enrich each other,” improving both cultures as a result, allowing them to “really become brothers.” Anzaldúa made a

point to use the word “borrowing” rather than homogenizing as Fanon suggests. In fact, she condemned the possibility of consolidation, let alone fraternization, as she wrote “until we live in a society where all are equal and no labels are necessary, we need them to resist the pressure to assimilate.”

What does this mean in regards to the connection between the two author’s arguments? While it may seem that Fanon and Anzaldúa are at odds with each other, it is my opinion that the two share the same philosophy, just at different levels of progression. Fanon argues that the oppressor is rewriting the oppressed’s history. Anzaldúa observes the same in her day-to-day life, only she maintains a deeper level of connection to the artifacts. She is unable to dissociate herself from her passions as Fanon has, in order to convey professionalism in his academic analysis. Fanon can envision the connected future of both sides of the story, as he spent the majority of the essay describing their pasts.

This is not to suggest that Anzaldúa is “behind” Fanon in any way, or that the two were participating in a race that Anzaldúa dropped out of halfway through. Simply, their perspectives are linked in substance and impacted by their literary intentions. Anzaldúa is armed with the knowledge of her people and own experiences, while Fanon is able to articulate *why*. Both agree that minority cultures are “off-limits,” only Fanon provides historical instances where the oppressors ignored the warning signs.

Therefore, when reading Anzaldúa’s works, or even visiting a museum, approaching the topic with Fanon’s psychological analysis in mind allows for a comprehensive understanding of the effects of racial appropriation on inferiorized groups. We are still able to recognize the labels (*Latina* artist, *Native American* writer) Anzaldúa argued are still necessary but are able to anticipate a future in which we won’t have to. When viewing a piece of indigenous work, we are

able to peel back the layers of modified meaning (as with the blues or with the painting of “La Malinche”) and *appreciate* the artifact for what it is, and what it was, as both Fanon and Anzaldúa intended.

Notes

Anzaldúa, Gloria, and AnaLouise Keating. *Light in the Dark =: Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality.* , 2015. Print.

Fanon, Frantz, and Haakon Chevalier. *Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays.* , 1969. Print.