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SOCIAL STUDIES

What Does Cultural Appropriation Really Mean?

And as accusations of improper borrowing increase, what is at stake when boundaries of collective identity are crossed?

By Ligaya Mishan
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IN 1939, SOLOMON Linda, a Zulu musician who grew up herding cattle in drought-prone Msinga in South Africa, improvised a few notes at what was then Johannesburg's (and sub-Saharan Africa's and possibly the continent's) lone recording studio. As the South African journalist Rian Malan chronicled in a 2000 feature for Rolling Stone, Linda and his group, the Evening Birds, were on the third take of a song that had more sounds than words, with the five backup voices split in harmony but one in rhythm, steady and inexorable, and Linda's high, clean falsetto soaring above, until he uttered into being the musical phrase that would soon make its way to every corner of the world, albeit with lyrics he never wrote: "In the jungle, the quiet jungle, the lion sleeps tonight."

Pressed onto a 78 r.p.m. disc and titled "Mbube" ("Lion"), the song sold around 100,000 copies and made Linda a local star. But by the 1950s, after the all-white National Party government had codified segregation into the system of apartheid in 1948, he was working a janitorial job at the record company's warehouse and had signed over the copyright of the song for 10 shillings, roughly the equivalent of $41.80 today. (Whether he understood the terms of the contract is unclear, as he could not read or write.) In the United States, the song was rejiggered for white singers who couldn't quite manage the beat but saw their perky doo-wop arrangements climb the charts nevertheless. Eventually, Disney took notice; Linda's lilting lullaby is arguably the heart of "The Lion King." Record executives interviewed by Malan estimated that, as of 2000, Linda could've earned $15 million in revenues and royalties. Instead, when he died of kidney failure at age 53 in 1962, he was buried a pauper in an unmarked grave. (His descendants reached an out-of-court settlement with Disney in 2006.)

A fairly straightforward story of exploitation, no? It's almost reassuring in its clarity: Someone created something beautiful and someone else took it, passed it off as their own and got rich because of it. The race and class differentials — a poor Black man living under an oppressive regime versus slick white record producers in the booming postwar West — simply underscore the imbalance of power. And yet in the '90s, when a few of these producers were squabbling among themselves over rights to the song, one of them tried to make a case that the original tune was not the product of Linda's individual imagination but a traditional Zulu melody: a cultural artifact, like the Scottish Highlands air behind "Morning Has Broken" (immortalized by the British singer Cat Stevens in a 1972 single) and the Appalachian coal miners' ballad "The House of the Rising Sun" (a hit for the British band the Animals in 1964), that belonged to no one and thus everyone. "After all, what was a folk song?" Malan writes. "Who owned it? It was just out there, like a wild horse or a tract of virgin land on an unconquered continent."

Kaphar's "Shifting the Gaze" (2017). © Titus Kaphar. Photo by Christopher Gardner. Courtesy

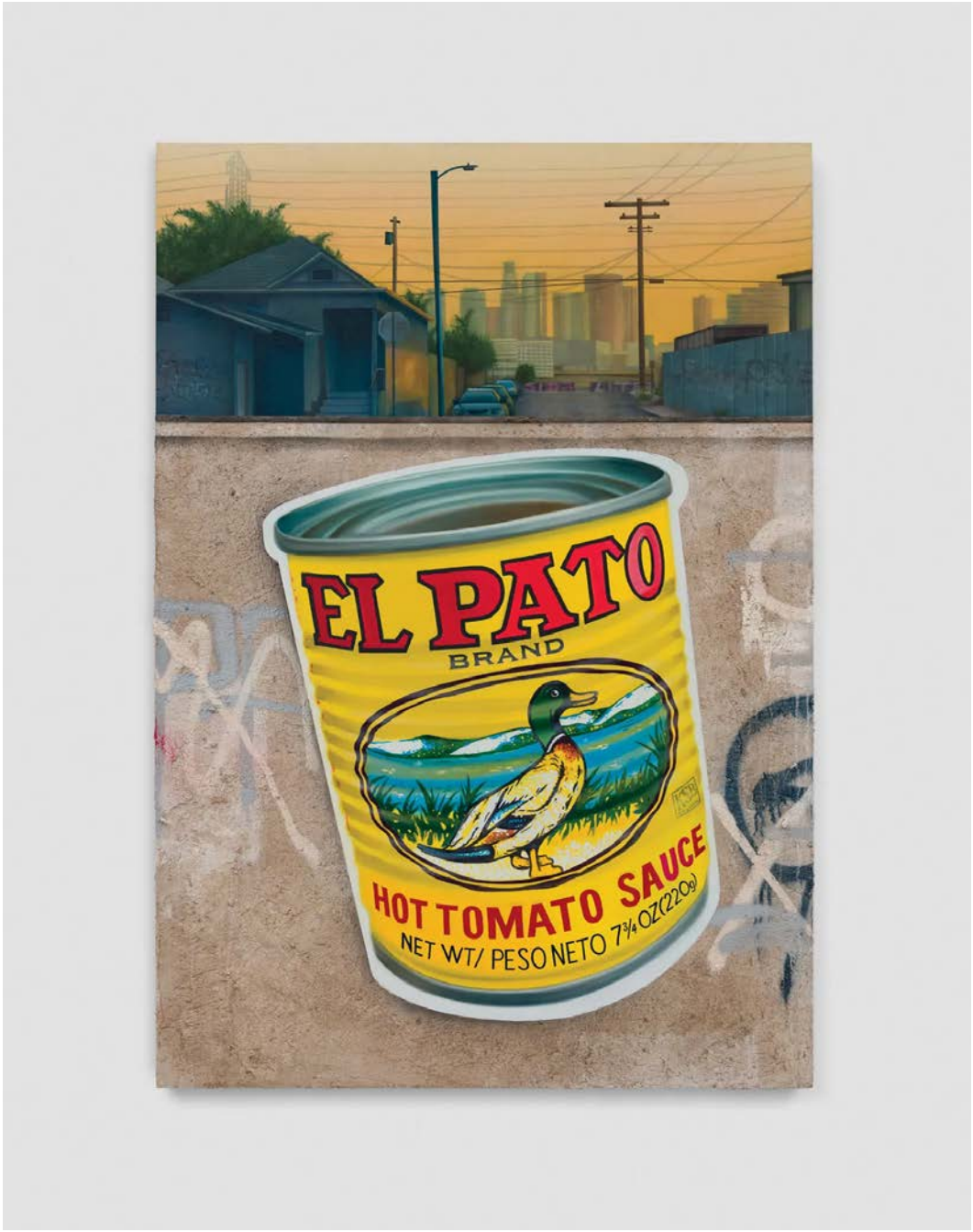
of the artist and Gagosian

In the case of “Mbube,” there was proof that Linda wrote the notes. (English lyrics were added in 1961 by the American songwriters George David Weiss, Hugo Peretti and Luigi Creatore.) But what if it had, in fact, been a traditional Zulu song? Should that have made it fair game, even though it came not from the Western traditions that these producers shared but from a culture of which they and much of their audience likely knew very little — from a people who were suppressed and dispossessed under colonialism? Copyright law (within human history, a fairly recent development) tells us that individuals have ownership over what they create and are harmed when others copy from them without permission, attribution or compensation. But can a more amorphous collective, a *culture*, likewise be harmed?

“CULTURAL APPROPRIATION” IS one of the most misunderstood and abused phrases of our tortured age. Such a slippery verb, “appropriate,” from the Latin *ad propriare*, “to make one’s own.” It doesn’t carry the forthrightly criminal aura of “steal.” Embedded in it is the notion of adapting something so it is particular to oneself, so that it no longer belongs to or is true to the character of the original source — is no longer *other* but *self*. The British sociologist Dick Hebdige uses the word in his 1979 study “Subculture: The Meaning of Style” to describe how fringe groups transform the most mundane objects into emblems of resistance, like punks with safety pins — household items stripped of their practical function when stabbed through the cheek, ornament and weapon at once. These objects are deliberately mishandled, misappropriated, so they become, Hebdige writes, “a form of stigmata, tokens of a self-imposed exile.”

Transformation is more profound than theft, which can make appropriation a useful tool for outsiders. Still, what most people think of today as cultural appropriation is the opposite: a member of the dominant culture — an insider — taking from a culture that has historically been and is still treated as subordinate and profiting from it at that culture’s expense. The profiting is key. This is not about a white person wearing a cheongsam to prom or a sombrero to a frat party or boasting about the “strange,” “exotic,” “foreign” foods they’ve tried, any of which has the potential to come across as derisive or misrepresentative or to annoy someone from the originating culture — although refusal to interact with or appreciate other cultures would be a greater cause for offense — but which are generally irrelevant to larger issues of capital and power. (The law, too, draws a distinction between

commercial and personal use: For years, the song “Happy Birthday” was under copyright — until a 2015 legal decision invalidated the claim — which meant that people had to pay thousands of dollars in licensing fees to include it in a play, movie or TV show or to publicly perform it in front of a large audience; but anyone could sing it to family and friends for free.)



Gonzalez’s “El Pato” (2021). Photo by Ed Mumford. Courtesy of the artist and Matthew Brown, Los Angeles

Some argue that cultural appropriation is good — that it’s just another name for borrowing or taking inspiration from other cultures, which has happened throughout history and without which civilization would

wither and die. But cultural appropriation is not the freewheeling cross-pollination that for millenniums has made the world a more interesting place (and which, it's worth remembering, was often a byproduct of conquest and violence). It is not a lateral exchange between groups of equal status in which both sides emerge better off. Notably, champions of cultural appropriation tend to point triumphantly to hip-hop sampling as an exemplar — never mentioning the white bands and performers who in the '50s and '60s made it big by co-opting rhythm and blues, while Black musicians still lived under segregation and, not unlike Solomon Linda, received dramatically less recognition and income than their white counterparts and sometimes had to give up credit and revenue just to get their music heard.

The American cultural theorist Minh-Ha T. Pham has proposed a stronger term, "racial plagiarism," zeroing in on how "racialized groups' resources of knowledge, labor and cultural heritage are exploited for the benefit of dominant groups and in ways that maintain dominant socioeconomic relationships." This is twofold: Not only does the group already in power reap a reward with no corresponding improvement in status for the group copied from; in doing so, they sustain, however inadvertently, inequity. As an example, Pham examines the American designer Marc Jacobs's spring 2017 fashion show, mounted in the fall of 2016, in which primarily white models were sent down the runway in dreadlocks, a hairstyle historically documented among peoples in Africa, the Americas and Asia, as well as in ancient Greece but, for nearly 70 years, considered almost exclusively a marker of Black culture — a symbol of nonconformity and, as a practice in Rastafarianism, evoking a lion's mane and spirit — often to the detriment of Black people who have chosen to embrace that style, including a number who have lost jobs because of it. Jacobs's blithely whimsical, multicolored felted-wool locs, Pham argues, "do nothing to increase the acceptance or reduce the surveillance of Black women and men who wear their hair in dreadlocks." Removed from the context of Black culture, they become explicitly non-Black and, in conjunction with clothes that cost hundreds of dollars, implicitly "elevated."

Kaphar's "Rapture" (2011). © Titus Kaphar. Photo by Rob McKeever. Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian

Pham wants to move away from the emphasis on feelings in discussions of cultural appropriation, both the anger of the copied and the perhaps good-faith intentions of the copier — Jacobs initially responded to his critics, in a since-deleted comment on Instagram, that "appreciation of all and inspiration from anywhere is a beautiful thing" — to pinpoint more tangible harms. Racial plagiarism, she writes, "is never just about being inspired by but rather improving on an unrefined, unsophisticated,

incomplete and, most crucially, unfashionable racialized form," reinforcing a system of value in which the originating culture continues to be seen as "unrefined." Thus the frustration last year when a white-run company in Oregon started promoting congee with marketing language that framed it as a modernized version designed, in a statement on its Instagram, "to delight the Western palate," which apparently meant adding blueberries in lieu of dried shrimp or jellylike, sulfurous century egg preserved in slaked lime.

For hundreds of years, the West learned of other cultures through the reports of its own emissaries, and the market for "exotic" goods still presupposes that there is comfort, for many, in having a white person translate another culture — to make it less threatening, or to play up its supposed strangeness for a thrill. Members of minority groups are more likely to struggle for opportunities to connect with broad audiences, from securing the loans and investment necessary to open restaurants in prime areas to winning the approval and financial backing of cultural gatekeepers like museums and publishing houses. So when people express concern over, say, novelists creating characters from another culture who merely fulfill uncomfortable stereotypes (which may be just bad writing), it's in part a response to scarcity. The problem is not so much the act of appropriation in and of itself, for what is a writer's job but to imagine the lives of others, even if they fail in the attempt; "to behold the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to behold the hundred universes that each of them beholds," in the words of the French writer Marcel Proust? The problem is the system that limits who gets to do the imagining. A New York Times survey of English-language books published by major houses between 1950 and 2018 showed that 95 percent were written by white authors, and even in the last year of the study, the number was 89 percent — startlingly high, considering that as of 2020 the American population was only 57.8 percent white, per the census taken that year. So few slots are available for nonwhite writers that those who break through are sometimes themselves charged with a kind of self-appropriation: self-Orientalizing or minstrelsy, exaggerating elements of their culture for a white gaze; living up to the image that white writers have created for them, the easier to be packaged and sold.

There is fear, too, that the appropriated form of a culture may supplant the original and become the only version people outside that culture know. In 2017, Nigerian artists called attention to the British art star Damien Hirst's installation "Treasures From the Wreck of the Unbelievable" in Venice, which was so colossal that it filled two

museums and reportedly cost millions to produce, including more than $60 million of Hirst's own money. (He is one of the richest artists in the world.) Among its many pieces, it features a near replica of a brass Ife head (rendered by Hirst in gold) from a set of Yoruba sculptures that date back to the 14th or 15th century. While text accompanying the piece did acknowledge the Nigerian antecedent, it also offered, without critique, an early 20th-century German anthropologist's outlandish and insulting theory that the technical virtuosity of the original heads was so great, they had to be the work of ancient Greeks who swam to Nigeria after the sinking of the island of Atlantis — and not testament to the skills of the Nigerians themselves. The curator noted that Hirst was inspired by one such head in the British Museum's collection, although no mention was made of how the relic ended up there: It was bought by an Englishman in 1938, shortly after it was unearthed in the then-British colony, for the meager sum of 3 pounds 10 shillings.

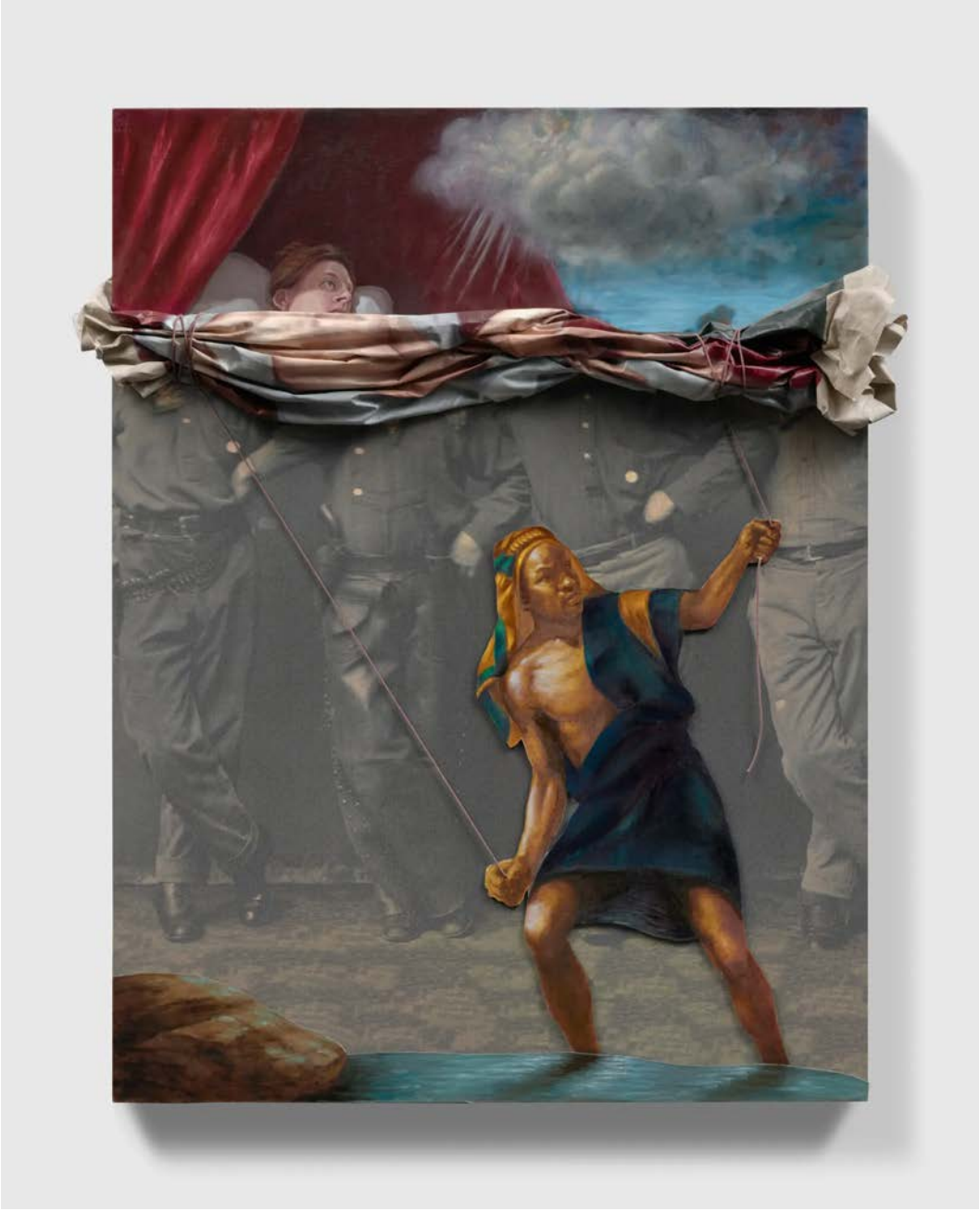
Gonzalez's "Indios" (2021). Photo by Ed Mumford. Courtesy of the artist and Matthew Brown, Los Angeles

"For the thousands of viewers seeing this for the first time, they won't think Ife, they won't think Nigeria," the Nigerian artist Victor Ehikhamenor wrote on Instagram. Being displayed in a museum confers value; Nigeria was not invited to present a national pavilion at the Venice Biennale until 2017 and, even then, the Nigerian artists there were overshadowed in the press by Hirst. Because Hirst's version of the

Ife head will be seen by more people, “the narrative will shift,” Ehikhamenor wrote, “and the young Ife or Nigerian contemporary artist will someday be told by a long nose critic, ‘Your work reminds me of Damien Hirst’s ‘Golden Head.’”

NONE OF THIS means that artists shouldn’t take inspiration from other cultures. (What a boring world that would be.) Cultural appropriation doesn’t come down to some quasi-legalistic standard of “is this allowed?”; the unleashing of critics on social media who prefer outrage to nuance — and the panicked retreat by the accused to the nonapology of “I’m sorry if you were offended” — is mostly sound and fury, and a measure of how powerless certain groups feel to bring about actual change. What is gained when a virtual crowd hounds a British Indian former cooking show contestant who makes Chinese and Japanese food, as in 2020, or succeeds in shutting down a pop-up breakfast burrito cart in Portland, Ore., whose recipe was cobbled together from stolen glances at street vendors in Mexico, as in 2017 — although the vendors on whose behalf the crowd bayed for blood may never have known or cared, or even recognized their recipes in the imitation? And what happens when members of nondominant groups borrow from each other: Does it become a competition to see who has less cultural capital and is thus “permitted” to do such a thing, as in 2017 when the Black basketball player Kenyon Martin called out the Chinese American basketball player Jeremy Lin for wearing his hair in dreadlocks, to which Lin responded by pointing out Martin’s Chinese tattoos?

It’s easier to attack individuals than institutions — unless you can disrupt the market: Earlier this year, enough Chinese citizens complained about the similarity between a Christian Dior design and the pleated *mamian qun* (“horse-face skirt”), which dates back to the Song dynasty (960-1279), that the fashion house removed the garment from its website — because China, with its population of about 1.4 billion consumers, has serious bargaining power. (In 2017, Dior produced an embroidered sheepskin waistcoat that was almost identical to a Romanian folk costume; protests by Romanians, whose country is among the poorest in Europe, went ignored but, happily, artisans specializing in the original costume saw a boost in sales after news of the appropriation circulated online.)



Kaphar's "Nothing to See Here" (2021). © Titus Kaphar. Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd. Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian

Culture is not static, and within a country or a community there are countless variations on and innovations in tradition (which might be even more vigorously internally policed than the experimentation of outsiders). In 2016, Bon Appétit published a recipe for halo-halo, a Filipino iced dessert, and was widely decried for adorning it with gummy bears and popcorn. Some called it a "desecration." Certainly these are nontraditional ingredients, but the tradition in this case is only a hundred years old: The Philippines started receiving shipments of ice in the mid-19th century and, as chronicled by the Filipino historian Ambeth R. Ocampo, halo-halo evolved in the 1920s and '30s from a Japanese dessert

of red beans in syrup over ice (itself part of a much longer tradition in Japan, going back to at least the 10th century). The very name "halo-halo" means "mix-mix," and the treat is characterized by exuberant abundance. It's entirely plausible that someone somewhere might try adding popcorn instead of corn or cornflakes, both known variations, and gummy bears to approximate, if poorly, the chewy texture of jellies. As the Philippine-born chef Yana Gilbuena has written, halo-halo is "endlessly customizable." The issue, then, was a lack of history and context; the magazine took liberties without first explaining what it was taking liberties with. (It didn't help that apparently no Filipino was consulted.) Above all, it turned halo-halo into just another commodity — a trendy food that didn't need to be understood to be enjoyed and then discarded for the next big thing. As the Malaysian American artist Shing Yin Khor writes in their 2014 comic "Just Eat It," "Eat, but recognize that we've been eating, too, and what is our sustenance isn't your adventure story."

The harm in appropriation comes when a culture is shrunk in possibility, reduced to a set of disembodied gestures — style without substance, which can verge on blasphemy, as when a non-Indigenous person speaks of having a spirit animal. (Indigenous peoples object to New Age rituals, the American anthropologist Michael F. Brown has written, not because they "are bogus but precisely because they are, in some sense, *real*. … For them, the New Age is a kind of doppelgänger, an evil imitation close enough to the real thing to upset the delicate balance of spiritual power maintained by Indian ritual specialists.") In an ever more connected world, there is the risk that culture becomes, as the Korean-born German philosopher Byung-Chul Han writes in "Hyperculture" (2022), "cul-tour": a sightseeing circuit. Han posits an alternate way of encountering the Other, based "on the friendliness of the AND," and a new morality in which timidity or recoil is replaced by genuine curiosity, and difference "is not determined by an 'either/or' but by an 'as well as,' not by contradiction or antagonism but mutual appropriation" — meaning that both appropriator and appropriated are changed, unlike in "colonial exploitation, which destroys the Other in favor of itself and of the Same."

But how do we get past the hierarchy of colonial exploitation to this utopian "and" in which no one is diminished, with everyone's heart just getting fatter and fuller? "An idea of cultural plurality that took its bearings from the protection of species and could only succeed by introducing artificial enclosures … would be sterile," Han writes, and then concedes, "Having lively cultural exchange means that things spread but also that certain forms of life disappear." Once, Americans

touted the idea of the melting pot, with immigrants shedding their pasts and assimilating, which some of us learned too late can be a kind of erasure. Then a number of white Americans began to fear the very thing Han hopes for, their own transformation in the encounter with the Other, *themselves* melting, and so they beat a retreat. In this they share a bond with other still dominant groups around the world who see in the rise of minorities a diminishment in their own status and so have become determined to reaffirm their identity by "excluding the threatening Other(s)," as the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek has written. And yet this fundamentalism, he suggests, has an eerie solidarity with its seeming opposite, pluralism, the "ever-growing flowering of groups and subgroups in their hybrid and fluid, shifting identities, each insisting on the right to assert its specific way of life and/or culture" — to draw a line; to protect itself.

There is an appeal to the boundaryless world, where we might walk at will, eat and dress, make art, write music and spin stories following whatever whim takes hold, free of the burden of identity. Of course, boundarylessness is a privilege for those who don't have to contend with real boundaries. "Come out and play," they say. "We like what you do." But what might the rest of us lose?

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