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# CULTURAL APPROPRIATION AND LACK OF DIVERSITY IN ENTERTAINMENT AND POLITICAL CULTURES: SIDES OF THE SAME COIN, OR DIFFERENT COINS?

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**Cultural Appropriation and Lack of Diversity in Entertainment and Political Cultures: Sides of the Same Coin, or Different Coins?**

**Synopsis:**

An interrogation of the concept of cultural appropriation in entertainment and political cultures, which also asks whether lack of diversity is synonymous with cultural appropriation, or something else altogether.

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**Cultural Appropriation and Lack of Diversity in Entertainment and  
Political Cultures: Sides of the Same Coin, or Different Coins?**

**Interdisciplinary  
Paper**

An interrogation of cultural appropriation and comparison-contrast with lack of diversity

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Cultures: Sides of the Same Coin, or Different Coins?

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Cultural Appropriation and Lack of Diversity in Entertainment and Political Cultures:  
Sides of the Same Coin, or Different Coins?

In recent years, a matter termed “cultural appropriation” has become a significant issue in discussions of American culture as a whole. Actors and executives in both film and television have been subjects of intense criticism for culturally insensitive or inappropriate casting decisions. Academy Award winners Tilda Swinton (*Dr. Strange*) and Scarlett Johansson (*Ghost In The Shell*) have been criticized for assuming film roles that in their original character formulations were Asian. Benedict Cumberbatch as the character Khan in *Star Trek — Into Darkness* received similar denunciations, as did Matt Damon’s character in *The Great Wall*. In television, the CBS series *Hawaii-Five-O* recently made news when its two Asian stars, Daniel Dae-Kim and Grace Park, left the show over what they alleged were discriminatory salary differences relative to the program’s two Caucasian stars. And in the political arena, NAACP executive Rachel Dolezal left or was relieved of her position over allegations that she had defrauded the organization and the public by pretending to be African American.

Few would dispute that Hollywood has significant shortcomings with respect to diversity. Such shortcomings have been subjects of numerous high-profile critiques, not least being during 2016 Oscar award ceremonies, and a study by media scholars (*INCLUSION or INVISIBILITY? Comprehensive Annenberg Report on Diversity in Entertainment*, Smith, et al) published that same year. This paper argues that it is possible — and necessary — to make distinctions between casting choices and hiring practices. It is reasonable to credit the claim that to cast Tilda Swinton as a character that was originally Asian is to necessarily deny an Asian actor the opportunity that the role would have provided. But the character was reformulated and given a European (British) background for the film, which begs the question whether this change in the character's identity constitutes a mitigation of the putative insult, or an additional one.

Likewise, in *Ghost In The Shell*, the Scarlett Johansson character's brain has been transplanted into an artificial body. The story advances the hypothetical notion of, in effect, animating a robot with a human organ. It is unclear what cultural imperatives should obtain when deciding upon the appearance of a robot. Here again, the argument concerning casting decisions versus the one about the character's appearance are in some sense related but in another, fundamentally different.

And further, in a contemporary socio-cultural environment in which identity is exceptionally fungible, the disapprobation delivered upon one such as Ms. Dolezal might itself be worthy of closer scrutiny. This is of course not to say that Ms. Dolezal's ethnic

repositioning should itself be immune from scrutiny; but rather that not all reasons for criticizing her are by default equally valid.

A single line of analysis (or denunciation), in other words, is not adequate to the interrogation of matters collectively referred to as cultural appropriation. As is generally the case in ethical issues, each instance requires an individuated analysis, as inconvenient – and perhaps controversial — as that may sometimes be.