



Cultural Representation and Appropriation Policy
Young Audiences of New Jersey and Eastern Pennsylvania
Updated: 9/10/2021

Developed by: Joseph Ahmed, Artist Services and Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Access Manager
Collaboration and edits by: YA's Arts United Working Group

YA's Arts United values

YA's Arts United Statement describes our commitments to diversity, equity, inclusion, and access: "YA continually strives to create spaces that are diverse, equitable, and inclusive to all children. YA is committed to providing children of all identities, backgrounds, and experiences with arts education in which their creativity, cultures, abilities, and identities are validated, included, and nurtured."

Understanding the nuances of cultural representation and appropriation in YA programs is integral to creating these kinds of environments and learning opportunities for students. This document is designed to support staff, board, and teaching artists in building towards positive cultural representation in all operations and programming. To do this, a working definition and set of tools for unpacking harmful cultural appropriation are needed.

What is cultural appropriation?

"Taking intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artifacts from someone else's culture without permission. This can include unauthorized use of another culture's dance, dress, music, language, folklore, cuisine, traditional medicine, religious symbols, etc. It's most likely to be harmful when the source community is a minority group that has been oppressed or exploited in other ways or when the object of appropriation is particularly sensitive, e.g. sacred objects."

Susan Scafidi

Author of *Who Owns Culture? Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law*

YA defines cultural appropriation in accordance with the above definition. Understanding that whether an artist has "permission" can be difficult to establish, so YA also investigates whether a given element of a program has implicit/explicit roots in racism, stereotype, or misinformation, or has been historically white-washed and separated from its roots in BIPOC communities. We find that cultural appropriation and related issues of inaccurate and harmful cultural representation can be present in, but not limited to, the following elements:

- Communication of inaccurate or white-washed historical facts.
- Use of "general" accents, costuming, and language which necessarily draw upon stereotypes in representing people, traditions and dress outside of the artist's direct cultural experience,

particularly when a historically marginalized group is portrayed by an artist with a less marginalized identity.

- Inclusion of program elements with roots in racist ideology, even when those roots are not widely known to modern audiences.
- Separating an artform founded in BIPOC communities and culture from its historic roots through omission or revision of context and/or failure to communicate the artist's background and connection to the original context.

OUR STANCE

Young Audiences (YA) believes that arts education experiences are most effective when delivered from a place of cultural authenticity and transparency. To this end, YA is dedicated to maintaining teaching artists with deep connections to their artforms, programs that provide accurate historical and cultural context, and internal processes that continually review and communicate the accuracy and authenticity of language, images, and programming. YA acknowledges that cultural appropriation is most likely present where there is historic oppression of a marginalized culture. We will review all services with the understanding that artforms created by people of color are uniquely susceptible to being stripped of their original context and meaning.

Questions to ask:

- How is the artist sharing the history and cultural context of the artform, practice, or artifact being presented?
- Is the artist's cultural background aligned with the cultural origin of what is being presented?
- What is the artist's personal relationship, training background, and understanding of the artform, practice, or artifact? How is the artist telling the story of that relationship in the program?
- Is there a historical power imbalance between the artist's racial and cultural background and that of the people from whom the artform, practice or artifact is sourced?
- Has the permission or consultation of experts from the cultural group on display been sought? Were they compensated for their expertise, and is there an ongoing economic relationship?

Best practices and contingencies:

All teaching artists should share their connection with their artform. For culturally specific programs where the indigenous culture of the artform differs from the artists' own background, this is especially important. Does the artist have a deep relationship to the culture in question, and the authority to speak as an expert in it?

- If an artist is an expert in an artform but does not share that connection, or the artform's original cultural context in the program, YA staff will guide the artist in how to do so.
- If an artist is NOT an expert in an artform that differs from the artist's cultural background, YA staff will point the artist towards a different programmatic choice or consider no longer presenting the program.
- In the event of more egregious racial or cultural presentations of stereotypes and offensive imagery (eg. blackface) YA reserves the right to immediately cancel any upcoming bookings of the program and remove the program from active presentation until the issues are addressed.

Some signs of an artist practicing positive cultural representation:

- Clear communication of personal and cultural connection, permission, and ownership.
- Accurate historical context given, respectful language used.

- Willingness to non-defensively engage in critique and adjustment of content.
- Strong relationships with members of the cultural group being represented and with the artforms, practices, or artifacts on display.
- Past or ongoing payment or sharing of proceeds with the group being represented.

Artists sharing expertise from their own cultural, racial, and/or national backgrounds are also for the most part considered by YA to be in the space of positive cultural representation.

Marketing:

As much as is possible in each given marketing medium, YA will present clear language and images that reflect both the artform being presented and the story, expertise, and identity of the individuals presenting it.

- Marketing images will be up to date and feature depictions of the program that mirror what the school will see. (eg. a program on Latinx musical traditions will not have a photo of three Latinx performers when the actual make-up of a group performing in a school might be two White and one Latinx performer.)
- Language in program and artist descriptions will make clear the relationship of the artist to the artform. If an artist has studied deeply in a culturally specific artform that is not their own, YA will communicate that history. YA will avoid tacitly implying in its language that a performer is of the same cultural background as the origin of their artform when this is not the case.
- Language will be examined to avoid exoticizing phrasing when describing programs highlighting non-white cultures such as “exotic” and “colorful”.

Recruitment:

YA will prioritize connecting with expert teaching artists who share the same cultural background as the artform they are presenting. If this is not possible, YA will diligently investigate the artist’s expertise in the artform and their ability to share authentic cultural context during a program. If YA is not satisfied in either the artists’ expertise or ability to communicate context, they will not pursue adding the artist to the roster.

Professional Learning:

- YA will make available professional learning opportunities to artists, whether en masse or in focused one-on-one sessions, to continue to educate about how to avoid cultural appropriation and seek authenticity in programming.
- YA staff will continue, with the help of the staff Arts United Working Group, to redefine and hone its understanding of how cultural appropriation can appear in YA’s programs. Best practices are periodically examined and redefined.

For questions, contact: Joseph Ahmed, jahmed@yanjep.org.

Sources:

Thoughtco.com - [A Guide to Understanding and Avoiding Cultural Appropriation](#)

National Art Education Association – [Position Statement on Use of Imagery, Cultural Appropriation and Socially Just Practices](#)

A main source for this document was the [Anti-Oppression Resource and Training Alliance \(AORTA’s\)](#) worksheet on cultural appropriation. This document has since been removed from public access.