

Shaking off the ‘Other’: Appropriation of marginalized cultures and the ‘Harlem Shake’

Abstract

The recent Harlem Shake viral meme points to an intersection between the potential participatory promise of memetic content online and hegemonic appropriation of marginalized culture by the dominant group. The meme, while making use of the name ‘Harlem Shake’ does not draw upon the dance which originated in Harlem in the 1980s which was popularized in the 1990s. This paper traces by means of textual analysis the origins of the dance, the release of the 2012 song, the 2013 memes and the reaction video created using interview from actual Harlem residents. Drawing upon the idea of misappropriation and ‘eating the other’, this internet phenomenon allows us to address the ways in which participatory culture can serve to further marginalize rather than liberate. This case follows similar patterns within the historical legacy of commodification of Black culture and causes us to complicate our sometimes overly optimistic notions of participatory culture online.

Keywords

Memes; marginalization; cultural appropriation; participatory culture; Others

Introduction

Getting ‘a bit of the other’, the British expression made widely known in critical culture studies analyses by scholar bell hooks originally referred to upper middle class British men’s predilection for sleeping with ‘exotic’ women of color in an attempt to elevate one’s status and engage in behavior considered rebellious in their own cultural circles. Hooks traced how this phenomenon is not localized in British culture, nor is it relegated to sexual inclinations. Eating the other describes the tendency of the dominant group to make use of pieces of marginalized culture for their own gain to the detriment of the marginal culture. This happens frequently in media texts when music and visual imagery is appropriated into consumerist culture and commodified to fit the needs of the dominant group. However, in a modern media context which is increasing reliant upon user generated content, appropriation of content becomes even more complex. While commodification of otherness is still present, the ability of the marginalized community to push back and/or participate is a possibility. Such is the case with the viral video ‘Harlem Shake’. Beginning as a techno song produced by Baauer in 2012, the song and eccentric dance has become an internet meme spreading globally as crowds recreate their own ‘Harlem Shake’ for online distribution on social networking sites. Recreations of the dance are in no way linked to the actual ‘Harlem Shake’, a dance originating in Harlem in 1981 that became popular among African Americans in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Literature Review

Participatory culture is defined as the way in which fans and viewers are able to participate and collaborate in mass culture, sharing their own perspective and experience of the content (Jenkins, 2003; 2007). Conceptualized as a means to react to the corporate controlled mass media, this mechanism of contemporary media culture can enable average citizens to participate in the archiving, annotation, appropriation, transformation, and recirculation of media content. Participatory culture is studied as a radical alternative to dominant media content which provides space for minority groups to tell own stories/question hegemonic representations of their culture and a push back against an increasingly convergent landscape where ownership and production are in the hands of the elite few (Jenkins, 2003).

Memes are units of cultural transmission which make use of copying and/or imitation (Dawkins, 1976). As Shiffman (2011) explains, memes should not be considered as units in isolation, rather, they are “the building blocks of complex culture, intertwining and interacting with one another” (p. 189). While memes have always existed within oral culture in the form of jokes, urban legends and

fables, the internet and social networking sites have made the distribution of memes much easier and more readily accessible to a wider number of people over a shorter period of time. Memetic videos 'lure extensive user engagement' and include either imitation or re-mixing. We see imitation and re-mixing in the spread of memes like "Shit White Girls Say" and or "This is what my [blank] thinks I do". Memetic videos differ from viral videos in that viral videos are spread without much alteration by the user. The term viral relates more to the way in which the video is spread and the size of the audience (Burgess, 2008; Jenkins et al., 2009a; Knobel and Lankshear, 2007). Participating in the release of memetic videos sheds light on users as not only having the ability to interpret media but to be creative in its distribution. Successful internet memes tend to have some salient qualities including: humor, simplicity, repetitiveness, whimsical content and flawed masculinity (Shiffman, 2011). All of these traits are present in the recently successful Harlem Shake internet meme. Beyond simply fitting into the category of internet memetic video, the Harlem Shake meme presents a unique act of cultural appropriation at the hands of a group unfamiliar with the historical and cultural significance of the dance or community from whence the memetic content gets its name. Because of this, this cultural artifact, while containing elements of participatory culture, is not liberating or rebellious against the dominant group, rather is an act that can serve to further marginalize a community of people.

Method and Analysis

This paper examines the evolution of the 'Harlem Shake' from the original dance made popular in the 1990s, original music video produced by Baauer in 2012, user generated memes of Harlem Shake videos in 2013 and the 'Harlem Residents Respond to Harlem Shake' interviews produced by SchleppFilms via means of textual analysis. Textual analysis allows for a close examination of authorship, authenticity and meaning construction. The analysis emphasizes the way in which meaning is highly subjective for the audience and interpretation of content carries different meanings for different subcultures.

The analysis therefore yields a discussion of both the intention of users and the potential impact the video has in a larger examination of cultural appropriation using hooks' idea of eating the other. The Harlem Shake meme serves as violation of the 'Other' much in the sense that hooks describes regarding British men's sexual fantasies about women of color. She explains (1992), "unlike racist white men who historically violated the bodies of black women/women of color... they see themselves as non-racists who choose to transgress racial boundaries... not to dominate the 'Other', but rather so they can be acted upon, so that they can be changed entirely" (p. 368). The appropriation of the dance and the proliferation of the meme is not a conscious act of dominance rather a subtle act of privilege which allows for the dominant group to re-imagine the 'Other' and participate in acts of appropriation of culture for the purpose of changing themselves. In this case the change that the dominant group experiences through participating in the 'shake' is three dimensional. Imitation and distribution of the Harlem Shake online provides the user with attention (Lanham, 2006), affinity (Lange, 2009) and serves as means of cultural production. In this case the culture being produced/ re-produced again leaves out the marginalized 'Other', supplanting their culture for the whimsical imaginings of the dominant group.

Discussion

This appropriation of the legacy of dance and art in Harlem parallels the appropriation of African American culture more widely in the U.S. The reaction video featuring Harlem residents captures the frustration of this community with a privileged mentality that allows the dominant group to ignore, use and misuse cultural artifacts for their own purpose. However, the act of 'eating the other' also forms, within the marginalized community, a "resurgence of essentialist culture nationalism" (hooks, 1993). This forces the marginal community to see themselves within the lens of the primitive, thus keeping intact the imperialist nostalgia that makes the meme possible in the first place. While new media is not responsible for this kind of cultural appropriation, it both widens the scope of participants and perhaps creates the potential for the reaction from the marginalized community to be more widely received as well.

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