

# Right-wing racialists mount campaign against Asian entertainer Awkwafina's use of a "blaccent"

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A racist witch-hunt has been mounted in recent weeks against Asian-American rapper-actress-social media personality Awkwafina over her use of what has been called an African-American or "black accent" in her performances.

The entertainer (real name Nora Lum, born 1988, Long Island, New York), daughter of a Chinese father and Korean mother, has been the subject of controversy since her breakout song "My Vag," a comedic and vulgar brag-rap, went viral in 2014.

Lum has transitioned since then into a multi-talented performer, producing several hip hop albums, appearing in films (including *Ocean's 8* and *Crazy Rich Asians*) and an award-winning television series and more. She won a Golden Globe best actress award for *The Farewell*, a Satellite award (also for *The Farewell*) and has received dozens of nominations, including for a Screen Actors Guild award for Outstanding Performance in a Motion Picture.

Lum's success has been dogged by claims that the multi-talented entertainer has been engaged in "cultural appropriation" for her noticeable use of an accent in her speech associated with African-American urban culture (a "blaccent").

"Awkwafina's current success has relied on questionable forms of cultural appropriation," argues a 2020 Vice News article on the subject. "Questionable" in whose eyes? According to the publication, Lum "became known for brash speech inflected with Black slang and foul-mouthed raps, eventually catapulting her to a role on MTV's *Girl Code* in 2014."

The campaign reached fever-pitch this week after the entertainer posted a several-page statement on Twitter addressing the claims of appropriation. "There is a

sociopolitical context to everything, especially the historical context of the African American community in this country," she states.

Lum acknowledges that while blacks in America have "historically and routinely seen their culture stolen ... by the *dominant* culture," she has never intended to "mock, belittle, or to be unkind" to anyone. Lum attributes her way of speech to "the movies and tv shows I watched, the children I went to public school with, and my undying love and respect for hip hop" (emphasis in original).

Of course, what Awkwafina should have done was tell her critics to get lost. There is no satisfying the race-obsessed crowd. Inevitably, no sooner had Lum published these comments than her Twitter feed, followed by the entertainment media, lit up with accusations that she had failed to demonstrate the proper contrition for her actions.

"Awkwafina could have just said: 'You were right. I did use a blaccent to make a name for myself and that was wrong. I wholeheartedly apologize, and I'll do better from now on,'" stated Britni Danielle, whose Twitter profile describes her as a "Writer. Editor" with bylines at "Essence, Glamour and the Washington Post."

Danielle's comments and others were picked up and circulated in media publications. "People Aren't Buying Awkwafina's 'Blaccent' Apology," reads hip hop website Okayplayer. In short, the braying for Lum's head only increased following her perceived "non-apology" on the issue.

The present media spectacle aside, what is at stake in the debate over "cultural appropriation"? First, there is no such thing as distinct "black" or "white" speech.

Such claims are historically the property of racist and fascist theorists of the extreme right.

As a 1997 statement (“Who is promoting Ebonics and why?”) posted on the WSWS explains, “From the standpoint of science, the claim that any language is ‘genetically-determined’ and racially-based is charlatanry. Against racial theorists of every stripe, biology long ago established that genetic differences between supposed racial groups are far smaller than those existing within each group. Language, moreover, originates not from the genes, but from social interaction. Languages develop and change. Over the course of human history ancient languages have become extinct and new languages have taken their place.

What is one to make of comments such as those by Mikki Kendall, an author and “diversity consultant” on CNN? Kendall declares that “‘Blaccent’ is a term describing the fake accent racists and cultural appropriators use when they mimic Black people.” Kendall introduces her own stereotypes, asserting that while blacks “don’t all have the same one [accent],” whites and other non-blacks somehow do. “Those two groups always use the same accent when they imitate Black people,” she says. This is incomprehensible nonsense.

The effort to segregate means of expression along racial or ethnic lines when applied to art is equally destructive. “Distinct music genres have specific (sometimes specific ethnic) roots,” the WSWS remarked previously on the issue of “cultural appropriation.” But, we noted, “that has never stopped the mixing and evolution of styles and trends, which is an entirely healthy and often quite spectacular feature of pop music in particular.”

What manner of speaking would be acceptable to the puritanical, repressive anti-cultural appropriation crowd? Art itself would be rendered dead on arrival if artists were forced to submit to the preapproved standards of their given genre or art form, or national background. A sort of racialized “code system” setting down what can and can’t be shown, written or performed is being created in the entertainment industry. This has a sinister logic.

Money is inevitably involved in the squabbling over cultural appropriation. CNN includes a comment from Nsenga K. Burton of Emory University. According to

Burton, “[c]ultural appropriation... is when you appropriate someone’s culture for financial gain and influence without acknowledging the origins of that cultural practice or reinvesting your financial gains into the community from which the culture was taken.”

As the WSWS has commented in the past, “a whole cottage industry” has been dedicated to creating “diversity” and “racial equity” in the business world. It has come complete with “self-flagellating ‘self-help’ books... for the alleged benefit of white people” and “corporate leadership seminars and diversity workshops.”

Add to these the lucrative business opportunities available in social media. According to a complaint by Okayplayer, “Only white influencers are on Forbes’ Top-Earning TikTok-ers list,” published in January. “With their TikTok clout, white influencers have pulled beauty campaigns, record deals and multi-film deals,” it states. Okayplayer adds that the *Forbes* list of influencers “collectively hauled in \$55.5 million last year, a 200% increase from 2020.” How to get a piece of that lucrative pie is the big question.

Amid threats of armed conflict against Russia, a nuclear-armed power, and the callous effort to end all public health measures in the pandemic, the promoters of racial identity politics have absolutely nothing progressive to say. They are engaged in a selfish, money-driven campaign. Awkwafina is merely collateral damage.



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