

Working Through Appropriation (1993)

FUSE SUMMER 1993

V. XVI n 5+6, 16-24

Working Through Appropriation by Richard Fung

Whereas cultural appropriation is an area of sensitivity in many arts communities, we recommend that the Canada Council develop guidelines which are sensitive to the complex issues surrounding cultural appropriation including differing needs of communities, the need for written permission in certain instances, the need to maintain respect for cultural tradition, the importance of training/background for artists working in cultural traditions other than their own. This policy will be consistent throughout sections and evident in application as well as jury procedures.

FROM 1990 TO 1991, I was a member of what eventually came to be called the Advisory Committee to the Canada Council for Racial Equality in the Arts. When first convened by the director of the Council, the committee lacked a clear mandate. After intense discussion amongst ourselves, however, the members agreed to focus on the issue of systemic racism at the Council. This, in itself, was a miraculous feat given that we were a group of nine artists, writers, and performers with widely varying backgrounds, experiences and practices, and sometimes profoundly differing political perspectives as well. By the end of our term, we had developed a series of recommendations relating to twelve aspects of Council functioning, including human resources, communications and board appointments. The fourth item in the section pertaining to juries and advisory committees was a recommendation about cultural appropriation. It was a short and rather general statement because we felt that the issue would receive more thorough consideration in the committee of aboriginal artists which was

meeting simultaneously (and with which our membership over-lapped). When the report was released to the public, however, the media focused almost exclusively on this recommendation, and virtually ignored all others. In a major piece on the issue of cultural appropriation at the Canada Council, Globe and Mail writer Stephen Godfrey did little to illuminate the issue of systemic racism and, in fact, failed to report that the Canada Council had rejected the recommendation.

This sensationalist article nevertheless triggered a frenzy of correspondence and opinion pieces, in which some of Canada's most prominent writers ranted about what they perceived as the threat of censorship at the Council. As someone who had spent many hours formulating and reworking the recommendations, I was, needless to say, frustrated by the way our work, and the racism that made it necessary, had disappeared from the controversy. (It was hard to call it a debate, since The Globe chose to print very few letters offering an alternative framework—including my own). At the same time, the incident made me pay special attention to how the issue of appropriation was being framed.

The media often reduces issues to dualisms: a convenient mechanism for introducing conflict or demonstrating balance. Most media accounts therefore featured an opposition between an alliance of Canada Council bureaucrats (in the person of Joyce Zemans, then director of the Council) and "philistines" (mainly Native artists and artists of colour) and a number of "independent" writers such as Timothy Findley, Heather Robertson, and Neil Bissoondath, who were presented as defending artistic liberty from the tyranny of "political correctness." These writers did nothing to challenge the shocking Eurocentrism and systemic racism that characterizes Canada's cultural establishment; at the time the committee began its work, the Council had no non-white staff (except for cleaners), nor had it ever included a non-white member on its board. They were nevertheless quick to evoke the spectres of fascism and racism as the sure consequence of seriously taking into account the issues raised in the critique of cultural

appropriation. In an opinion piece in *The Globe and Mail*, for instance, novelist and anthologist Alberto Manguel compared those concerned with "appropriation of voice" to German Nazis. Citing what Goebbels called the *Rassengeist*, or "spirit of the race," he concluded, "this fantastical nonsense, reminiscent of tales of sword and sorcery, would merely be foolish and elitist were it not also profoundly racist—as well as intrinsically ignorant about artistic creation."

So here was a situation in which those opposed to the critique of cultural appropriation—for the most part white, successful males, who possessed easy access to the mainstream media—implicitly accused Native artists and artists of colour of racism (and explicitly of lacking artistic sensibility). It's no wonder that there was little real dialogue or debate. Yet it would be a mistake to be sucked into the binary polemics fostered by the media, to dismiss out of hand the concerns raised by writers such as Manguel, or to ignore the complexities and contradictions inherent within the critique of cultural appropriation.

...if I want to write in the voice of the tea cozy sitting in front of me, believe me, I'm not going to ask for its permission.

_ Timothy Findley

Does this mean I cannot borrow from a Bach cantata because I am not Catholic, I am Jewish?

-Linda Rabin

Those who advocate against cultural appropriation often assume the definition of this term to be self-evident; those who disparage the formulation make it into something ridiculous. The critique of cultural appropriation has suffered precisely due to a lack of clarity which leaves it open to misapplication. Initially propounded as a concept to explicate and justify cultural self-determination, the term has itself been appropriated by opposition to discredit any attempt at redefining the status quo through anti-racist activism. Thus, in discussing cultural appropriation, it becomes

necessary to unpack the various meanings, emotions, and agendas with which the term is invested, and to sift through and foreground the different contexts within which positions have been drawn up.

The primary dictionary meaning of the verb appropriate is "to take and use as one's own." Despite the rhetoric of various nationalisms, there are no unique, pure cultures today; people have steadily learned the ways of others and taken them as their own. By this definition, most of what we think of as culture involves some degree of appropriation. Foods, religions, languages and clothes all betray contacts with a larger world, which includes our closest neighbours, as well as distant imperial centres. There are no clear boundaries where one culture ends and another begins. But while some of this fusion may be celebrated as exchange, a larger proportion is the result of domination. The task of establishing cultural hegemony in the colonial context, for instance, entails the supplanting or harnessing of the social, economic and cultural systems of the subjugated, by those of the dominant power. For Native people in Canada, this has meant an often violent process of assimilation, coupled with the marketing of superficial difference either for profit (the tourism industry), or political gain (official multiculturalism). Those who raise the issue of cultural appropriation see it as a process that is not only wrong, but also incomplete—thus as one which is necessary and possible to organize against. The critique of cultural appropriation is therefore first and foremost a strategy to redress historically established inequities by raising questions about who controls and benefits from cultural resources. In this context, Linda Rabin's question is improperly framed, and Timothy Findley's caricature, irrelevant.

Again and again, papers have been written, careers built, tenure granted, royalties issued, and yet the people upon whom this is based are left behind on the reserves with nothing.

-M. T Kelly

Appropriation occurs when someone else speaks for, tells, defines,

describes, represents, uses or recruits the images, stories, experiences, dreams of others for their own. Appropriation also occurs when someone else becomes the expert on your experience and is deemed as more knowledgeable about who you are than yourself.

-Loretta Todd

Although Loretta Todd writes specifically from an aboriginal context, the process she describes is a common, if not defining, characteristic of oppression. Does this mean, therefore, that the proscription against cultural appropriation should apply to the representation of all oppressed or marginalized groups—should whites not represent Blacks or Asians; heterosexuals not depict lesbians and gay men; should men not write in the voice of women?

Gay men and lesbians have decried the media's homophobia and heterosexism, but only on occasion has it been suggested that the way to resolve this issue is to ensure that only queers are able to represent ourselves. Similarly, feminists concerned with the depiction of women do not usually call on men to desist from representing women in their work. Most lesbians and gay men don't grow up in exclusive queer cultures, but rather in the heartland of heterosexuality, where our existence is denied and our realities disfigured. Hence, in the arena of representation, the priority is usually put on reaffirming queer identity and presence through visibility, rather than preserving cultural integrity. Similarly, although we may point to feminist cultural expression, there is no women's culture existing outside of patriarchy.

Neither feminist nor lesbian and gay cultures have genealogies for which cultural self-preservation make sense. When it comes to race and ethnicity the logic to self-preservation seems more clearly defined; however, it is in a sense even more complicated. For example, reporting on cultural appropriation and the way it was handled by The Writer's Union, journalist Val Ross confidently defines it as "white writers using stories of other

cultures." This common interpretation of cultural appropriation was taken even further during the 1988 dispute at Toronto's Women's Press. Amidst a range of anti-racist considerations, the issue arose as to whether white women had the right to write in the first person voice of non-white or Third World characters, or to work in the form of "magic realism," a term used to describe the work of a wide range of Latin American writers including Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez, and Isabel Allende. The latter part of this proscription was premised on the assumption that magic realism represented a unique pedigree, quite apart from the European traditions of the North. But such a position overlooked the vital role of French surrealism in the development of what is called magic realism, and the fact that the term was itself appropriated from European art criticism of the 1920s. The admonition therefore ignores the cultural hybridity and creolization integral to the style, and at the heart of the mestizo cultures that it aims to express. As M. Nourbese Philip commented on the debate, the effect was to assign Latin America the role of "the exotic, kinky Other to the straight, realist realities of the affluent West."

Contradictions abound in the distorted racist logic of Eurocentrism. Asia's enduring rich cultural heritage has long been treasured and emulated for its incomparable high aesthetic achievements. And yet, Asian artists who worked in the pluralist contemporary mode are considered by Westerners and often by our own traditionalists alike to be a breed apart, or as strays who trespassed on someone's turf where we don't belong.

- Yong Soon Min

In working through the question of appropriation, it is crucial to remember that all oppression does not express itself through the same means. Even within the category of racism, there are significant differences in the ways that the various racial others of the West have figured, both within representation, and in the economics of cultural production. Colonialism operated differently in Africa, Asia, and the Americas, and varied also

according to the colonizing power concerned. To enslave and uproot the population, it was convenient that Africa be represented as a place without a culture or a history of its own—requiring, of course, the excision of Egypt from that continent. On the other hand, the aesthetic contributions of India, China, and Japan had long been valorized in Europe, and it is the products of their culture and agriculture that motivated and justified colonialism in those parts. Diasporic Africans and Asians in the Americas have different histories from each other and, in turn, from those of Native peoples: slavery is not indentureship is not internment is not head tax is not residential schools. The ways that we various "others" are integrated into and excluded from contemporary commercial culture may be related, but they are also marked by crucial differences.

In my community you walk into a classroom and when you look at the bookshelves, which is something that I always do when I go into communities, in the bookshelves are stories that are written not by our people, but by Anne Cameron, Kinsella, and a whole number of white people. And that is how our children learn about themselves....

-Maria Campbell

As a person of Chinese West Indian heritage, I feel the need to preserve what I know, and to make that knowledge and history an acknowledged component of Canadian identity and Canadian culture; this is, in part, what motivates my work to eradicate the underlying Eurocentrism of our systems of cultural funding. It also forms my interest in developing art that is relevant to the Canadian context. Having a sense that my "source" cultures follow their own paths, that the cultural forms of China and Trinidad can and will accommodate, appropriate, repel and resist the pressures of western cultural imperialism in their own ways, means that for me (here in the Diaspora) it makes no sense to freeze Chinese or West Indian cultural expression according to some nostalgic idea of what it was "truly" like. For one thing, these forms were always changing even as I experienced them in my childhood, and further, this effort to fix and fossilize "other" cultures, in

opposition to the continuously developing modern and now postmodern culture of the West is, after all, the central and most insidious trope of multiculturalism.

There is, however, a special urgency to the preservation and autonomy of aboriginal cultural resources, which I think makes the issue qualitatively different from those of diasporic people of colour. As Tuscarora artist Jolene Rickard said recently at a conference I attended, "this is all there is; if this goes, that's the end!" Aboriginal cultures are cultures deprived of a state; by definition they exist as "minority" cultures within a dominant national context—Thai culture in Thailand is not considered aboriginal, whereas the Dai (Thai speaking) culture of neighbouring China is. Given the systematic attempts by the Canadian state to destroy First Nations cultures, economies and social systems, the desire to preserve and reconstruct them cannot nonchalantly be dismissed according to mechanical and simplistic readings of the critiques of essentialism or authenticity. That is not to say that these ideas are invalid or unimportant. It must however be recognized that the anthropological gaze and the discourse of authenticity is not the only mode of othering Third World, indigenous and non-white peoples. This is accompanied by a total disregard for accuracy in the public images about these people. Further, the critique of cultural appropriation doesn't necessarily require an essentialist understanding of identity. Some critics have explored the avenue of copyright law, for instance. Loretta Todd situates cultural resources within Aboriginal Title. Along with land, environment and education it is part of what needs to be reclaimed: "When negotiations over land resources are undertaken, there is room for sharing once Aboriginal Title is acknowledged and established. This is not simply a seeking of refuge in a new class power, or even the advocacy of an essential 'Nativity.'" "

The most hackneyed advice to young writers is: Write what you know about, describe what you have experienced. It is good advice—so long as one remembers that there are many ways of experiencing an event. Writing what

you know about does not mean writing only about what you have lived. It includes all that you have come to understand or appreciate through conversation, observation, reading, dreaming, films—the multifaceted channels that feed us as human beings and as writers.

-Neil Bissoondath

The public debate over cultural appropriation has been dominated by writers of fiction, and it is on their terms that the issue is usually argued. This wouldn't be a problem except that the questions thus raised are often carried over into the other arts, without recognizing their specificity. The concept of an imagination free of social constraints and responsibilities, apparently so dear to fiction writers, is near absent in the discourse of documentary film and video, for example. Issues in non-fiction media have traditionally included ethical concerns, into which the central question of appropriation—the relationship of the producer to the subject—easily fits. On the other hand, Native and other actors of colour seem most concerned with the shortage of opportunity to develop and display their talents: and the lack of meaningful roles, the lack of roles for non-white actors generally. The case is different again when considering the circulation of musical forms and motifs. Most contemporary and even much classical music revels in layer upon layer of appropriation—musicians thrive on mixing things up. But that doesn't alter the fact that, in a context characterized by both racism and the commodification of culture, it is primarily white men who have controlled and benefited from the musical forms developed by non-white and Third World practitioners.

This is the contradictory reality of using the voice, sound, image, dance, or stories of another: it can represent sharing or exploitation, mutual learning or silencing, collaboration or unfair gain, and, more often than not, both aspects simultaneously. Most positions for or against the use of the concept of cultural appropriation nevertheless disregard this complexity and promote blanket proscriptions or endorsements—at least on the

surface. For even in attacking the Canada Council recommendation regarding the need for research, Timothy Findley ironically affirms the same principle: "who the hell do they think we are?... No one in his right mind would write in another voice without research and consideration." Similarly, even strong opponents of cultural appropriation who find the term indispensable have their exceptions—discussions of the films *Dances with Wolves*, *Incident at Oglala*, and *Loyalties*, always produce a wide range of responses, for example. A pressing problem for those concerned with appropriation is that the lines dividing "allowable" appropriations from "unallowable" appropriations are not always obvious.

Even if we believe that, despite the exceptions, non-white stories, characters, motifs, or dances in the hands of another generally spell exploitation, there remain two sticky problems. First, where does one draw the lines of otherness: Is a Dene situated to write an Ojibway story; can a Barbadian Canadian fashion a Jamaican immigrant character? Second, who decides whether something is appropriation or not; who is in a position to speak for the community, for the race, for the nation? Let's not forget that while artists raise the question of appropriation, many Native and other non-white community organizations continue to choose white directors to represent their concerns on film and video, perhaps because of a perception of these directors' superior skills, greater access to distribution and media attention, or the fact that, as outsiders, they might be more easily managed. In any case, it's impossible to enforce a consensus on an issue such as this, even within our own communities, which appear homogeneous and unanimous only to an external gaze; they too are arenas of contest and conflict.

Both the practices of inclusion and exclusion revolve around a single issue: the artist's racial background. When included within the institutional framework, contemporary Native arts are generally not accorded a value equal to other collections, which often leads to a token commitment and artistic marginalization. On the other hand, the exclusion of the arts of

Native peoples implies that the artistic and cultural contributions to Canadian history by Canada's First Nations are non-existent.

- Lee-Ann Martin

At the "About Face About Frame" conference for film and video makers of colour and from the First Nations, a workshop on cultural appropriation—the most thorough and insightful I've attended—concluded with participants agreeing that the key issues in representing others were respect, accountability, and equal access to the means of production. While it was mainly white producers who were deemed guilty of infraction, these principles were seen to apply to all projects—whether the directors or writers came from the same or different communities. For many critics of cultural appropriation the crucial underlying issues are the overwhelming pervasiveness of racist misrepresentation, distortion and crass commercialization, and the fact that few Native artists and people of colour have had the resources to produce and distribute their work, while others have made lucrative careers by drawing on these same forms and traditions. In terms of the concept of appropriation, there is a desire to see a levelling of the playing field. If there were huge numbers of prospering Native and other non-white artists producing culture in their own terms, a white person's telling of a story or making a film would be insignificant: but as yet, this is not the case.

The thoughts expressed at the "About Face About Frame" workshop represents, for me, an advance over the simple proscription against representing the other, because it moves toward considering a project's merits in terms that extend beyond the fact of the maker's identity, to the dynamics of the work itself. As Neil Bissoondath reminds us, there are many different ways to gain knowledge; identity in itself does not produce insight. Moreover, it is important to recognize that the critique of, and implied proscription against, cultural appropriation can easily lend itself to a bureaucratic regulation of identity. Consider, for example, US Public Law 101-644 of the 1990 Indian Arts and Crafts Act which states that "it is

unlawful to offer or display for sale or sell any good, with or without Government trademark, in a manner that falsely suggests it is Indian produced, an Indian product, or the product of a particular Indian or Indian tribe or Indian arts and crafts organization, resident within the United States." This amendment to an existing law was responding, in part, to the concerns of Native artists and craftpersons about appropriation. But in a panel to discuss the law at the National Association of Art Organizations conference in Austin last fall, there wasn't consensus as to the value of the law. Artist Hulleah Tsinhanjinnie recited a long list of all those who would fail to be recognized as Indian under US federal regulations, including her niece, who, though 100 per cent Native, lacks enough "blood" of anyone tribe to qualify. Another Native artist simply stated, "this is not the Indian way to decide such things."

We must think hard before we allow the state any increased power to define. With so few non-white people in decision-making positions, satisfactory interpretation of strict guidelines about appropriation would in no way be guaranteed. Moreover, such provisions could too easily be twisted to limit the options of the people they were meant to empower; for example, to restrict Haida artists to representing Haida themes, Japanese Canadians to Japanese Canadian topics, and so on. (Of course the commercial mainstream will continue to do as it pleases; that is, to say what is profitable.)

The complexity of the net of concerns raised within the critique of cultural appropriation could not be adequately addressed in a set of fixed rules in state institutions such as the Canada Council. Even the seemingly progressive tenet of accountability to one's subject is not always desirable. For instance, if one were working on racism in a police force or a large corporation, would one demand that the organization approve the project? Hard and fast rules could not possibly anticipate all the exceptions.

While I can't entirely dismiss the fears of writers such as Findley and Manguel, in the controversy surrounding the Canada Council

recommendations, it is important to remember that censorship is a state function, and that those arguing against appropriation have little exercise of such powers. Consequently, it is misleading to talk of their critique as censorship. Neither can the guidelines proposed at Women's Press realistically be described as censorship, any more than their normal policy of publishing only work by women. Once the state acquires the power to regulate voice, however, even if based on the demands of disempowered groups, then the possibility of censorship does arise.

The Butler decision on pornography offers a recent and instructive example of how the intentions of community activists can become distorted by their interpretation and enforcement by the State. Hailed by anti-porn feminists for supposedly replacing a moralistic with a harms-based approach to evaluating obscenity, the first raid immediately after the Butler decision was nevertheless made against a gay book store for a magazine produced by and intended for lesbians. Needless to say, lesbians are not the perpetrators of the violence against women that garnered support for the Butler decision. Rather, they are frequently the subjects of sexist and homophobic violence. Yet, once on the books, laws are available to selective enforcement and interpretation according to the prevailing prejudices of the day.

Instead of attempting to set up bureaucratic constraints for white artists, the terms of which we could never be sure to control, I believe that Native and other non-white artists would be much better served by demanding a wider and more meaningful range of systemic changes. These would improve our access to and control of the means of studying, producing, disseminating and promoting our art, allow us the financial security to address audiences as other than white, and acknowledge our power to define what art means, indeed whether we want to situate our work within an art paradigm or not. This requires an investment in the system of peer evaluation and arm's length funding, a tradition from which the majority of Native and other non-white artists have so far garnered little benefit.

Nevertheless, I believe it is far wiser to demand adequate representation on juries and to educate other artists to our issues rather than to place any hope in bureaucratic or political patronage. It shouldn't be forgotten that after a concerted effort to include adequate numbers of women on Canada Council juries, the percentage of women receiving grants rose dramatically.

...firstly, such a rule or proscription is essentially unenforceable (unless, of course, one is the late Ayatollah) and for that reason should never be made. Secondly, prohibiting such activity alters not one iota of that invisible and sticky web of systemic and structural racism. If all the white writers interested in this type of writing were voluntarily to swear off writing from the point of view of persons of other races and/or cultures, it would not ensure that writers from those cultures or races would get published any more easily, or at all... Thirdly, and, to my mind, most importantly, for those who unquestioningly clasp the rights of the individual writer most dearly to their breasts, such a proscription provides a ready-made issue to sink their anti-censorship teeth into.

- M. Nourbese Phillip

Native people are few in number and mostly dispossessed of political power. We are not likely, like a Conservative government with a majority, to waste our time trying to pass laws limiting anyone's subject matter or opinions.

- Daniel David Moses

The recommendation about cultural appropriation by the Advisory Committee for Racial Equality in the Arts was rejected by the Canada Council administration. In fact, proscriptions against cultural appropriation have not materialized as policy in any cultural funding agency. There are several reasons for the failure of this issue to manifest itself in policy.

Among the most significant is the fact that Native and other non-white artists are rarely given the opportunity to articulate such demands. Also, given the furor over the Racial Equality Committee's recommendation, it's

not surprising that critics of cultural appropriation may now hesitate to raise the issue, because of the potential to distract from other goals. Equally important, though not often perceived or acknowledged, is the fact that Native and other critics of cultural appropriation have not generally spoken to the issue as policy. When First Nations artists have said "don't take our stories; don't steal our images," their objects of address have been other artists, not funding agencies. Their proscriptions against appropriation have been made in a moral and ethical, not a regulatory, arena.

Moral and ethical directives don't easily translate into the bureaucratic language of guidelines and forms. Whereas the various approaches and protocols outlined in the Committee for Racial Equality's recommendation still strike me as relevant, the fixity of guidelines does not allow for sufficiently flexible methods of appraising the merits of individual projects. But even the rejection of official guidelines does not satisfy writers such as Timothy Findley, who object to the mere prospect of the issue arising in jury discussions or any other critical assessment. Nevertheless, it seems that the integrity of the independent jury system is a two way street: if one should not direct jury members to incorporate appropriation as a criterion for evaluation, one should not direct them to ignore it. Literature is judged "good" and "interesting" on more than punctuation, sentence structure and the skilled use of adjectives. Similarly, film and video are not assessed simply on image quality or proficient editing. The reason for having peer juries is to ensure that issues relevant to the practice and the world are brought to bear in evaluating work. Over time, these criteria will change, as will the composition of the jury itself. If the various government agencies are serious about eliminating systemic bias, juries will have to include, and consider meaningful, the contributions of qualified assessors who reflect a range, according to practice, interests, region, gender, language, race, sexuality, ethnicity and so on. The applications being assessed should also reflect this range. Thus, the issues currently communicated by the term appropriation—respect, accountability and access to the means of production and dissemination, will either arise or not. Ironically, as systemic

racism disappears, we may find that the issue of appropriation becomes progressively less significant.

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I would like to thank Lisa McCaskell, Tim McCaskell and Kathleen Pirrie Adams for editorial suggestions, as well as the Ontario Arts Council (Writers' Reserve Programme) for financial assistance.