

# Cultural Appropriation and the Arts

James O. Young



## Cultural Appropriation and the Arts

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... appropriation is what novelists do. Whatever we write is, knowingly or unknowingly, a borrowing. Nothing comes from nowhere.

– Margaret Drabble

Bad artists copy. Good artists steal.

– Pablo Picasso

For Julia and Piers



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# Preface

This essay is bound to be controversial. Passions run high when cultural appropriation is under consideration and many of my views are contrary to those with the most currency. Cultural appropriation is particularly controversial since, in the contemporary world, individuals from rich and powerful majority cultures often appropriate from disadvantaged indigenous and minority cultures. Cultural appropriation is seen as inherently bound up with the oppression of minority cultures. Nevertheless, in this essay I will argue that cultural appropriation is often defensible on both aesthetic and moral grounds. In the context of the arts, at least, even appropriation from indigenous cultures is often unobjectionable.

In arguing for this conclusion, I may leave readers with the impression that I am insensitive to the plight of indigenous and minority cultures from which members of majority cultures have appropriated. Indeed, my defense of much cultural appropriation may make me seem worse than merely insensitive. I believe, however, that I am not. I am aware of and deeply concerned by the position in which members of indigenous cultures often find themselves. In the course of writing this essay, I have met and talked extensively with Native North Americans. I have read a great deal by indigenous writers from North America and Australasia. I have become increasingly aware of the legitimate grievances of indigenous peoples. I have found the stories of Sherman Alexie to be particularly moving. Alexie is a member of the Spokane nation, whose traditional lands are just across the Strait of Georgia from where I live.

I am acutely aware that I live on the traditional lands of the Songish people, lands that were never relinquished by a treaty. Almost every Sunday morning I go for a run that takes me along Willows Beach in Victoria and past the site of a Songish village, now occupied by a

playground (where my children have often played). Millions of other people are like me and live on appropriated or, rather, misappropriated land. This misappropriation of land is the source of much of the oppression of indigenous cultures. No part of this essay should be seen as a defense of the European appropriation of the lands of indigenous peoples. I do not think that it can be successfully defended. I am similarly aware of and appalled by the treatment of non-indigenous minorities in many contexts. While I am sensitive to these facts, I will still defend a wide range of instances of cultural appropriation, including appropriation from indigenous and minority cultures. I hope that my arguments will be evaluated on their merits. Any argument against my views that alleges that I am unsympathetic to disadvantaged cultures would commit the ad hominem fallacy. It would also contain a false premise.

This essay is the product of about 15 years of reflection on cultural appropriation. Only slowly and gradually have I become aware of how complex and interesting is the issue of cultural appropriation. My interest in the subject began in the early 1990s, when I read in the *Globe and Mail* newspaper a column on cultural appropriation by Thomas Hurka. Although Tom is a distinguished philosopher for whom I have great respect, I disagreed completely with what he had to say and I quickly produced my first essay on the subject. I thought that I had, in that first effort, said pretty much everything that needed to be said about cultural appropriation in the arts. I presented my paper at the Northwest Conference on Philosophy in Boise, Idaho, published it in the *Journal of Value Inquiry*, and then for a time I did not give the subject much more thought.

A year or two later, Paul Tate, who had heard that paper when I gave it at the conference in Idaho, invited me to participate in a conference on cultural appropriation that he was organizing. It was to be held in Mysore, India, in February 1996. I could not resist the opportunity to visit the subcontinent for the first time. So I thought about cultural appropriation a bit more and found that I had some things to add to my first essay. I learned a good deal from the conference in India and I learned even more about cultures and appropriation from being in India and talking to Indians. I subsequently presented a version of the Mysore paper at the American Society for Aesthetics Pacific Division meeting held at Pacific Grove, California, in April, 1997. Then I neglected the subject again as I focused my attention on the research program that culminated in my book *Art and Knowledge* (2001).

In early 2001, my good friend Sheldon Wein invited me to visit Halifax, Nova Scotia, and to give the Inaugural Public Philosophy Lecture

at St Mary's University there. The Public Philosophy Lecture series was founded by Rowland Marshall, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at St Mary's. The series is intended to bring philosophical scrutiny to bear on issues of public concern. I was an odd choice to give the first lecture in this series since I had contributed very little to public debates. Indeed, until that point, my philosophical orientation was almost exclusively quite theoretical. Having been invited, however, I began to think about the topics I could address. I was aware that the debate over cultural appropriation had continued to rage, and this was an obvious choice of a subject. A little investigation and reflection was enough to show that much remained to be said on the subject.

The experience of presenting the St Mary's Public Philosophy Lecture contributed a great deal to my awareness of the full richness and philosophical interest of the debate surrounding cultural appropriation. I gave the paper first (as a sort of warm-up) at the University of New Brunswick. There I received some very useful criticisms from the members of the Philosophy Department, particularly from my former student, Keith Culver. The next day, I flew to Halifax and gave the paper at St Mary's. Again, I received excellent feedback from the philosophical community in that city, both from the philosophers at St Mary's and from those at Dalhousie University. Particular mention should be made of Duncan MacIntosh, John MacKinnon, Steven Burns, and Jennifer Epp, then a graduate student at Dalhousie.

The questions of Culver and Epp led to me recognize that there was a whole dimension of cultural appropriation that I had overlooked. I had concentrated on the question of whether cultural appropriation is harmful. I had not thought that it could be wrong because it was offensive. Culver pointed me in the direction of Joel Feinberg's writings on offence and harm. These have had a huge impact on how I have thought about cultural appropriation. My essay, "Profound Offence and Cultural Appropriation," published in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, was an extended attempt to answer the questions Culver and Epp asked. Chapter 5 of this volume is an expanded and corrected version of this essay.

Even at this point it was not, perhaps, inevitable that I would write more about cultural appropriation. However, in 2002 Conrad Brunk came to the University of Victoria as the new director of the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society. He also accepted an appointment in the Department of Philosophy. Shortly after his arrival, Conrad invited me to lunch at the University Club. Conrad wanted to talk about lots of things as a

new member of the department that I chair, but one of his questions was, “Do you have any good ideas for a multidisciplinary group research project?” Well, as it happened, I did. By that point, I knew that only a multidisciplinary research group would have the expertise to address all of the dimensions of cultural appropriation. We decided to put together a proposal to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC ) to fund such a research group.

The next step in the evolution of this book occurred when Julie van Camp invited me to participate a session on cultural property at the 2004 American Philosophical Association Pacific Division meetings in Pasadena. I learned a great deal on this occasion from the other panelists in the session, particularly Elizabeth Coleman, Geoffrey Scarre, and Daniel Shapiro. The audience at the session was small but the standard of questions asked was remarkably high. It was at this point, I think, that I realized that only a book could do justice to what I had to say about cultural appropriation, and even then I would only be able to talk about cultural appropriation in the context of the arts. I presented another version of the paper I wrote for Pasadena at the Canadian Philosophical Association Congress, held at London, Ontario, in June 2005. Here I crossed paths again with Jennifer Epp, now a doctoral candidate at the University of Western Ontario, who was the commentator on my paper. Her commentary was very helpful as I continued to revise my ideas. The paper was published as “Cultures and Cultural Property” in the *Journal of Applied Philosophy*.

At about the time that van Camp invited me to Pasadena, Geoffrey Scarre invited me to contribute to a volume that he and his brother Chris were editing. This became *The Ethics of Archaeology* (2006). My contribution to this volume, “Cultures and the Ownership of Archaeological Finds,” developed some of the ideas I first presented in Pasadena, and applied them to the specific case of archaeological finds. Echoes of this paper are found in Chapter 3 of this essay.

In 2004, Conrad and I received news that our application to SSHRC had been successful. This enabled us to bring together a group of about 20 scholars for two meetings in Victoria. The experience of being a part of this research group was richly rewarding. I have learned from everyone in the group. Allow me to list them all, even though it involves some repetition of earlier names: Laura Arbour, Michael Asch, Kelly Bannister, Conrad Brunk, Elizabeth Coleman, Rosemary Coombe, Anne Eaton, Ivan Gaskell, Susan Haley, Sa’ke’j Henderson, Travis Kroeker, Dominic Lopes, George Nicholas, Daryl Pullman, Geoffrey Scarre, Maui

Solomon, Andrea Walsh, and Alison Wylie. Paul Teel served as a helpful and efficient research assistant to the research group. I want particularly to thank Susan Haley, with whom I worked on a chapter in the volume that emerged from this project. As a novelist, she is a practicing appropriator of culture and her wealth of first-hand information has been invaluable. (Her novels about North American First Nations include *The Complaints Department*, 2000, and *The Murder of Medicine Bear*, 2003.) I am grateful to Susan for permission to incorporate ideas from our essay into this volume.

In April of 2006 I visited Beijing at the invitation of Professor Liao Shenbai. I presented drafts of Chapters 3 and 5 at Beijing Normal University and a draft of Chapter 2 at Renmin University of China. This last presentation was published as “Art, Authenticity and Appropriation” in *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*. Discussing my ideas with acute philosophers from another culture was an invaluable opportunity and I am grateful to all of those who attended my talks in China. Speaking of cultural appropriation, I was amazed by the extent to which Chinese philosophers have successfully appropriated Western philosophy. Of the philosophers I met in China, I would like, in particular, to thank Professor Liao and Miss Yang Xu who acted as my guide and interpreter during most of the time I spent in Beijing. I am also grateful to Professor Tian Ping for the opportunity to publish in *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*. This opportunity led me to refine and revise ideas that were subsequently incorporated into Chapter 2 of this book.

In March 2007, shortly before I submitted the final version of the manuscript to the publisher, I participated in the Information Ethics Roundtable, held at the University of Arizona. I am grateful to Kay Mathiesen for the invitation to participate in this event. My experiences at the Roundtable led to several improvements to the final version of this book. The opportunity to hear more perspectives of Native North Americans was particularly valuable.

In the course of writing this book I have learned a great deal from discussions with my colleagues at the University of Victoria. Of all members of my department, I am most indebted to Colin Macleod. He is an exemplary colleague who is always ready to discuss a philosophical question. I also benefited from discussions with Jeff Foss, Thomas Heyd, Cindy Holder, David Scott, Angus Taylor, Scott Woodcock, and Jan Zwicky. The University of Victoria is home to an excellent group of philosophers and it is a pleasure and privilege to be a member of this philosophical community. I am grateful to the University of Victoria

## Preface

for the study leave on which the bulk of this book was written. Members of the extended Victoria philosophical community to whom I am indebted include Bob Bright, Mark Tatchell, Karen Shirley, and Sandy Bannikoff. I want particularly to thank Sandy for carefully reading and extensively commenting on a complete draft of this essay. Her comments helped me improve this book in both style and content.

I am grateful to the comments of the two reviewers to whom Blackwell sent this book. Stephen Davies was one and the other remained anonymous. They provided me with the most thorough and helpful comments that I have ever received on any manuscript I have submitted for publication. Between them they provided about 18 pages of comments, suggestions, and criticisms, some minor and some more probing. The revision of the manuscript to take into account the two reviews resulted in a much better book. In this context I should also acknowledge the support of the editors of the *New Directions in Aesthetics Series*: Berys Gaut and Dom Lopes. Without their encouragement, this book may never have been written. I am also grateful to Jeff Dean, Senior Acquisitions Editor for Philosophy at Blackwell, for his support of my project. I thank Claire Creffield for her careful copyediting of my manuscript.

My father-in-law, the Honourable Donald Bowman, Chief Justice of the Tax Court of Canada, read an entire draft manuscript of this essay and provided perceptive comments on it. Having the perspective of a distinguished jurist on my project is a great privilege and the content of this essay was undoubtedly improved. Mr Bowman's comments also helped improve the style and clarity of my writing.

Although I have profited from the advice and criticism of many people, the views expressed in this essay are mine alone. I am solely responsible for any errors that remain.

This book is dedicated, with all of a doting father's love, to my daughter, Julia Laurel Oriana Bowman Young, and to my son, Piers James Isaiah Bowman Young. I hope that they will come to learn from and appreciate many cultures. My children are the most precious gifts I could have been given by my wife, Laurel. That said, a little help with editing the manuscript would also have been nice.

Victoria, British Columbia, 2007



# Chapter 1

## What Is Cultural Appropriation?

### Art, Culture, and Appropriation

Artists from many cultures are constantly engaging in cultural appropriation. Picasso famously appropriated motifs which originated in the work of African carvers. Painters who are members of mainstream Australian culture have employed styles developed by the aboriginal cultures of Australasia. The jazz and blues styles developed in the context of African-American culture have been appropriated by non-members of the culture from Bix Beiderbecke to Eric Clapton. Paul Simon has incorporated into his music elements of music from South Africa's townships. The American composer Steve Reich has studied with a master drummer from Ghana and the rhythms of Ewe culture have influenced his compositions. The poet Robert Bringhurst has retold stories produced by members of North American First Nations. Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan* (1814–19) borrows motifs from Hafiz, a Persian poet of the fourteenth century. Novelists such as Tony Hillerman and W. P. Kinsella have made the native cultures of North America the subject matter of many of their books. A host of filmmakers has done the same in movies. These include animated movies from Disney's *Peter Pan* (1953) to DreamWorks' *Road to El Dorado* (2000). Artists are not the only people to engage in cultural appropriation. Entire artworks have been transferred from one culture to another in variety of ways. Most famously, Lord Elgin transported the friezes from the Parthenon to Britain. Carvings produced in the context of various indigenous cultures have found their way into the hands of museums and private collectors around the world.

Each of these sorts of cultural appropriation has sparked controversy and debate. This essay is an investigation of the ethical and aesthetic

## What Is Cultural Appropriation?

issues that arise when appropriation occurs in the context of the arts. Both aesthetic and ethical arguments have been advanced against the practice of cultural appropriation of art. One can argue that artworks that are the product of cultural appropriation are bound to be aesthetic failures. Alternatively one can argue that acts of cultural appropriation are immoral. Aesthetic and moral objections could be combined. The aesthetic failure of certain artworks may cause them to be wrongly harmful to members of a culture. (The work may, for example, misrepresent the originating culture in a harmful way.) Some of these objections are, as we shall see, undoubtedly telling in particular cases. Many acts of cultural appropriation are, however, morally unobjectionable and some of them result in artworks of great aesthetic value.

A vast literature on cultural appropriation already exists. This essay is distinctive in that it is a philosophical inquiry into the moral and aesthetic issues raised by reflection on cultural appropriation. The debate about cultural appropriation has been conducted almost entirely by lawyers,<sup>1</sup> anthropologists,<sup>2</sup> museum curators,<sup>3</sup> archaeologists,<sup>4</sup> and artists.<sup>5</sup> Only a few philosophers have contributed to the debate. Philosophers have been remiss in not participating more fully in this debate. The many difficult and pressing aesthetic and moral issues raised by cultural appropriation cannot be resolved without the contributions of philosophers. They have the requisite knowledge of normative (moral and aesthetic) questions.

Before any progress can be made in addressing the ethical and aesthetic issues raised by the appropriation of artistic products, we need to have a better understanding of the concept of cultural appropriation. The first point to make is that this book is concerned with the cultural appropriation of art. Artworks are only one of a wide range of items that could be subject to cultural appropriation. Human remains, archaeological finds, anthropological data, scientific knowledge, genetic material, land, religious beliefs, and a range of other items have all been subject to cultural appropriation. To the extent that I can, I will discuss the appropriation of art independently of the appropriation of these other sorts

<sup>1</sup> Two law reviews have devoted entire issues to the appropriation of cultural property: *Arizona State Law Journal*, vol. 24 (1992), and *University of British Columbia Law Review*, special issue (1995).

<sup>2</sup> For a bibliography that indicates the size of the anthropological literature on cultural appropriation, see Brown (2003).

<sup>3</sup> See the essays in Pearce (1994).

<sup>4</sup> See Scarre and Scarre (2006), Lynott and Wylie (2000), and Barkan and Bush (2002).

<sup>5</sup> For example, Todd (1990), Keeshig-Tobias (1997), and Bringhurst (1999).

of things. Of course, one cannot adequately discuss the appropriation of art completely independently of the appropriation of other things. Sometimes appropriated artworks are also archaeological finds. Sometimes the appropriation of art has a religious dimension. This is so when appropriated items have ritual or spiritual significance in their original cultural context. Perhaps most importantly, some appropriation of art has to be understood against the background of the appropriation of land. The appropriation of land from indigenous peoples has resulted in their oppression. Appropriation will tend to be morally suspect when it occurs in the context of unequal power caused by the appropriation of land. Still, the appropriation of art can be singled out for special attention. By focusing on the cultural appropriation of artworks, I can avoid certain difficult questions that arise primarily in the context of other sorts of appropriation.

I have said that I will focus on the appropriation of art but I have said nothing about what counts as art. Questions about the definition of art are notoriously difficult. Giving an account of what sorts of items count as artworks is further complicated if not every culture has the same conception of art. It is even more complicated if some cultures do not employ the concept of art at all. Anthropologists tell us that every known culture has a conception of objects appreciated for their aesthetic properties,<sup>6</sup> but there is debate about whether the concept of art is universal.<sup>7</sup> Fortunately I do not have to provide a definition of art in this context or to determine whether it is universal. I only need to say a little more about what sort of items I have in mind when I am discussing the cultural appropriation of art. When speaking of art, I have in mind the modern Western conception of art. Central to this conception of art is the idea that members of a class of artifacts, namely artworks, are valuable as objects with aesthetic properties. (I will acknowledge in the next chapter that the aesthetic properties of an artwork may depend on its context and, in particular, its cultural context.) I am concerned with the appropriation of items regarded as artworks and artistic elements (in a sense to be defined in the next paragraph) in the modern West. The culture from which something is appropriated may or may not regard the item as an artwork or an artistic element. I have already acknowledged that the assessment of an act of cultural appropriation needs to take into account how something is regarded in its original cultural

<sup>6</sup> For a famous statement of this view, see Boas (1955), p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> For an exploration of this question, see Davies (2000) and Dutton (2000).