Appropriate and Inappropriate Appropriations

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Before you judge a man, you should walk a mile in his moccasins.
Then, you are a mile away, and you have his moccasins!

Elders explain that the knowledge they keep—of the environment, medicines, stories, philosophy and spirituality—does not belong to them. They are keepers, not owners. Because the teachings are true, gifts shared by the Creator, they must be available to those who ask—in the right way! Protocols protect and guide transmission. Teachings are not bundled into packets, transcribed and published, bought and sold. This knowledge is not textual but contextual, a human-to-human exchange shared in special settings; an embodied gift unwrapped over time.

The Traditional Aboriginal worldview is eco-centric rather than economic-centric. It is about the inter-relation of all things and beings. It does not privilege, for instance, just one impulse (gain) over others. When the Indigenous man lends you his moccasins, he does so because of a cultural imperative to be hospitable, and a desire to offer you an intimate, tactile sense of what one small aspect of his experience feels like. Walking in his moccasins gives you a different orientation to the earth than treading in rubber soles. It would not cross his mind that you would steal his footwear and contest his worldview.

The fellow who walks off with the moccasins is also expressing a worldview, an astigmatic one that assumes that relationships are temporary and expendable. Possessing the fancy footwear has more value to him than does a future relationship. This orientation is provisional and nomadic rather than inhabited and communitarian.

It is common for elders to open a meeting with a prayer reminding the gathered that their work has an impact on the absent members whom they represent. A familiar closing prayer ends with the phrase "all our relations;" another reminder of connections and responsibilities. Among the first things Métis and First Nations people ask upon introduction is 'where are you from' and 'who's your mother'. The conversation continues until a connection is found and it is determined that you are cousins. If you understand yourself in continuous relation, you are less likely to engage in shoe stealing and person judging because the victim is likely to be a relation and word will get around the moccasin telegraph.

The moccasin joke reveals a fundamental culture clash. It takes an apparent bit of Aboriginal wisdom and turns it on its head—suggesting that the world is not like that—the Western, Hobbesian, perspective is true, the Indigenous false. The fellow whose moccasins are pinched is pictured as sincere in the first sentence, then naïve in the second. The world is not full of people who want to know more about you. It is full of thieves who want your property.

Indigenous and Settler relations begin with a fundamental anxiety. 'I want to share my culture with you, I want you to share yours with me, but if your perspective is based on possession and

commodification, we have a problem. Knowing your acquisitive drive and experiencing a long history of misappropriation, how can I now trust that you will not steal my moccasins, copy write our stories, or patent our medicines?'

Appropriation is **not** theft. Appropriation is sanctioned taking. The word means making one's own some thing that belongs to another with that person's permission; or, it is a transfer of ownership with cause and state approval. There is a separate word for dishonest taking. Theft is ***mis****appropriation*—the acquisition of property without either the rightful owner's permission or a public sanction.

When artists refer to their practice as *appropriation*, rather than *misappropriation*, they perform an act of will rather than stating a natural fact. Their claim is that their borrowings-without-permission are justified even supported by the State. The argument seems to be that if Appropriation art is an authentic art movement, then all of its products must also be legitimate. Lurking in the woods behind this declaration is the grinning specter, 'artistic license'—the belief that creative people have an inherent right to take and use whatever they require to satisfy their artistic needs. This is not an argument but an axiom, a claim that is only true if we, collectively, agree. This fiat is not valid always, everywhere and for everyone.

Confidence in these claims erodes when the line between appropriation and misappropriation is blurred or when the borrower loses credibility. When an artist's copies are patently motivated more by commerce than higher ideals, appropriation becomes a euphemism for theft. Artists are granted artistic license—or rather, their 'borrowings' are tolerated—under the condition that they generate a social value greater than the rights of the individual whose property is being infringed. The use of a politician's appearance in satire and political commentary, for example, is protected in some, but not all, nations.

According to the "Vanishing Tattoo" website, home of the world's largest online tattoo museum, the search phrase, "*tribal tattoo designs*, accounts for nearly a third of all search requests." Of these, the most popular are Maori, Polynesian, Haida and other Native American designs. Given the relative low numbers of actual members of these communities, it's safe to assume that Indigenous people are not the only ones getting or giving this ink.

Why? I suppose they want something they think Indigenous people have and they do not. Call it what you like, the exotic, "Indian" aura. Unable to secure the real thing, they settle for the simulation, they permanently decorate their flesh with signifiers of those admired attributes and peoples. Perhaps tribal tattoos are about signaling one's difference from the society one was born into; a symptom of disillusionment with one's own culture, rather than marking an authentic relationship with another.

In any case, this sort of misappropriation begins with a sense of entitlement, the assumption that everything is for the taking as long as you pay someone (anyone) for it. In the mainstream culture, wanting something, shopping for it, finding it and having the cash is all the legitimation one needs. Why is it that when powerful people recognize value in some less enfranchised culture's objects, it fills them with an urge to collect?

My mother used to volunteer at a penitentiary. She is a calligrapher who taught these tough men delicate lettering. They called themselves the 'pen-pushers'. The inmate artists were popular because, for a fee, they would make exquisite cards for their friends to give to their sweethearts. They were also famous for inventive tattoos. One fellow, whose left arm was missing, told my mother this story of misappropriation and re-appropriation. Years earlier, he was in a San Francisco tattoo parlor, admired some flash and had it reproduced on his arm. He was happy. Life's progress sent him to prison where his ink was much admired. Among the curious were members of an outlaw motorcycle club who noted that the tattoo was one of theirs—and, later that night, they retrieved their property.

People misappropriate because they think they can get away with it. They imagine that they can have gain without expense. Misappropriation is a dare, an exercise of power. Contemporary, non-Aboriginal artists do not "quote" contemporary Aboriginal artists. They copy their less enfranchised cousins, people they assume to be less powerful and less likely to collect their due.

From the moment of contact, Indigenous cultures have sought to cope with Settler cravings for their things by creating screen objects—sculptures, masks and garments that have the patina of the originals but none of the meaning. They created *artifakes* to protect the originals—objects that could be traded without giving anything away. The Haida, for example, carved argillite to look like 'authentic' ceremonial pipes; however, the holes in the bowl and stem did not meet. Visitors bought signifiers of Haida culture but could not enjoy full use. These Indigenous people had a canny understanding of the Settler worldview and strove to pacify the Windegos. They gave them what they wanted, *works of art*, in the European sense of aesthetic things, objects to be looked at rather than used. Settlers are consumers of Aboriginal appearances rather than content.

Old ethnology wants a division between Traditional and post-contact Aboriginal art. This attitude does not see cultures as dynamic and leaves little room for contemporary creators who, under this gaze, could only be either 'authentic', derivative late-comers if they create copies, or contaminated if they devise hybrids and resistive practices that nevertheless extend earlier forms.

But a funny thing happened as the Haida were making their artifakes. They got into it. They liked making hybrids of Traditional and Settler cultures. The pipes started to represent not just their totem poles but ships and white folks. Ethnographers argue that this is a result of trade forces. Sure, it is adaptation, cultural metissage. The artists dealt with the new reality through symbolic manipulation. Traditionalist mourn a loss, Contemporary artists embrace the change.

Mettisage, cultural and genetic mixing, is neither good nor bad. It is inevitable. The desire for pure "Indians" is difficult to resist but must be. It is a logic snare set by old colonialists as a means of clearing the land of its original inhabitants. The strategy was to make living Indigenous subjects impossible. It goes like this: Only the original, pre-contact inhabitants of the Americas are authentic Indians. There are no pre-contact Indians; therefore, there are no authentic Indians. No authentic Indians, no authentic land claims.

In the minds of some, this snare still has purchase. Some Settlers, under the principle of egalitarianism, would prefer to wipe the slate clean, ignore history, especially the treaties, and

position Aboriginal people as just another minoritized group. You can appreciate the simplicity of the argument. It is an amnesic project designed to aid in their assimilation into the melting pot, dissolve them in the multi-cultural stew, or at least suspend them in the cultural mosaic. 'We'll forget your history and you should, too. It's what's holding you back.' A signal difference between the Indigenous and all later arrivals is that Settlers have places they came from. Indigenous peoples are already at home. There is no other homeland. This is it. First Peoples need to constantly assert this fact, remind everyone about the Treaties that made this country possible here, if they are to continue *to be*. The struggle is not to return to pre-contact time, or some Romantic facsimile—it is about finding creative ways to be contemporary Aboriginals.

Brian Jungen is Dunne-Za and Swiss from the northeastern interior of British Columbia who appropriates the look of Haida masks (not his tribe) and mashes them up with urban sneaker culture. The resulting hybrids are a hilarious commentary on being a hybrid himself.

Some First Nations people decry baseball teams, like the Cleveland Indians, who co-opt Native imagery; others proudly wear their jerseys.

The same jersey means something different when worn by a white fan in Cleveland than when it is worn by a Native youth in Winnipeg. Jungen demonstrates that contemporary urban Indian culture is becoming more hybrid than purist and because many are savvy about visual codes, they can redeploy oppressive images for their own resistive, and ironic uses.

Some wonder why Indigenous artists are applauded when they appropriate and distort Western cultural images, while non-Aboriginal artists who quote Aboriginal images and styles, are pilloried. Contemporary Indigenous artists are bi-cultural. They were raised in the Western tradition as surely as their non-Aboriginal colleagues and so have the same right to speak that visual language—and correct its misrepresentations. Non-Aboriginal artists, on the other hand, if they are not similarly bi-cultural ought not to imitate Indigenous culture because it is not theirs for the taking.

When non-Aboriginal people 'borrow' Indigenous imagery or styles, the intent is rarely critical. It is for gain: financial, social or spiritual. Caucasians are not, for example, in the habit of hijacking unflattering pictures of them by Aboriginals and refiguring them to set the record straight. There is no need. The dominant culture produces innumerable images to reflect their many possible selves—some good, some bad—but there are plenty to either choose or ignore. Indigenous people, however, are represented less frequently, less accurately, less flatteringly and with less range. Until recently, Aboriginals were typically pictured as savages, antiques, or, the ever-popular 'deficient subjects in need of charity or correction.' There is no wonder that some contemporary Indigenous artists make an industry of correcting these mistakes and providing better examples.

As an artist, one who appropriates, constantly, I believe that artists should be unrestrained. As a Métis, I see that the dominant society's drive to make everything available for view and use, at a price, is at odds with Aboriginal worldviews and that rampant appropriation is disrespectful and damaging to our cultures. However, I do not think this *must* trouble the artist. It would be *nice* if artists saw themselves as citizens as well as creators. I would *appreciate* it if they recognized

their privilege and exercised power with care. But I *know* that ethical behaviour is not a necessary condition for being an artist. Ethics *is*, however, a requirement for curators.

In their studios, artists should do as they please. But publication of their work is another matter, a social matter. When cultural misappropriations are shown in public galleries, the work is no longer the expression of an individual artist but becomes a state sanctioned event. In the case of mis/appropriation, the work should only be exhibited if the curator can balance the reasons for its display against its potential harms to the culture whose protocols it may violate. Potentially offended parties are likely to accept such exhibits if they are consulted, a sound argument is presented, and a resolution is agreed upon. If the curator refuses to contextualize the borrowing, one has to wonder if there *are* sound reasons, other if this is just a State legitimized display of power, and if 'freedom of expression' is only a license for the privileged.

A few years ago, I asked two Elders about the role of contemporary artists within the culture. I assumed they would be averse to non-traditional art. But each told me that same thing. Artists are like shaman—not all, not always, not literally. To pursue their research, they may need to violate protocols and piss people off. They are usually granted patience by the community, though, because their products often provide a social good greater than the harms their research may inflict.

Artists must be permitted their madness, their immaturity, their foolishness. For from this mad research can come aesthetic, even moral, breakthroughs. The boon is worth the bane. However, in the Indigenous world, contraries and shaman exist within a society. Protocols, elders and spirit guides shepherd them through their work. In the art world, artists have curators.

An old definition of curator is "one appointed as guardian of the affairs of a person legally unfit to conduct himself, as in a minor, lunatic, etc." Curators stand between artists and the public. If artists are to be unfettered, even to the point of irresponsibility, it is in their studio. New ideas often require messy processes, but that doesn't mean that all messes are worthy of public display and discourse. When a curator elects to exhibit an artist's work, they take on a complex set of responsibilities. The primary one is to understand as many of its intentional and unintentional meanings as possible and communicate them. There is in this relationship something akin to the editor/writer partnership. Both are gatekeepers that do not just open or close but filter. Of course, curators can only do their best. Great art always exceeds comprehension.

David Garneau 2012