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The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation

CULTURAL OR VOICE APPROPRIATION continues to be a hot topic in Canada and abroad. In Canada the debate has flared up again in the wake of Robert Bringhurst's retelling of Haida legends in his *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*. Debates have also raged in the US, where concern for African-American culture is central to discussions about cultural appropriation. In Australia worries are frequently voiced about the appropriation of aboriginal culture by white Australians. The debate about cultural appropriation has been conducted almost entirely by artists, art critics and advocates of minority rights. Philosophers have had comparatively little to say.¹ This is unfortunate since philosophers have precisely the skills that can contribute to the resolution of the debate. Philosophers are trained to analyse concepts, and little progress can be made in the debate until we have an analysis of the concept of cultural appropriation. Armed with this analysis, we can give a verdict on voice appropriation. Sometimes it is objectionable, on moral or aesthetic grounds. Other instances of cultural appropriation are unobjectionable from a moral perspective and even praiseworthy from an aesthetic point of view. If some cultural appropriation is deplorable, the other extreme, a sort of cultural apartheid, where each artist is confined to an aesthetic homeland, is equally unfortunate.

¹ I have written two previous papers on the subject of cultural appropriation: "Should White Men Play the Blues?" *Journal of Value Inquiry* 28 (1995): 415-24, and "Against Aesthetic Apartheid," *Rendezvous* 30 (1995): 67-77. The later article was written for "Convergence 1996—The Aesthetic, Political and Ethical Issues in Cross Cultural Art" held in Mysore, India in February 1996. For another philosophical perspective on cultural appropriation, see Claudia Mills, "Multiculturalism and Cultural Authenticity," *Report from the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy* 14.1-2 (Winter/Spring 1994): 1-5.

Although cultural appropriation is sometimes treated as a unified phenomenon, the sorts of activities classified as cultural appropriation are quite diverse. The key to the analysis of the concept of cultural appropriation is the identification of the various forms that appropriation can take. Something is common to all forms of cultural appropriation: all involve outsiders taking something from a culture other than their own. (I will frequently speak of members of a culture as *insiders* and non-members of a culture as *outsiders*.) The differences between types of appropriation are, however, crucial in determining whether and how an instance of appropriation is objectionable. By my reckoning, at least five quite different sorts of activity are called cultural appropriation:

1. Material appropriation

Material appropriation occurs when the possession of a tangible object (such as a sculpture) is transferred from members of one culture to members of another culture. The removal of the friezes from the Parthenon by Lord Elgin is often regarded as a case of material appropriation. The transfer of a totem pole from the site of a Haida village to a museum is another case of material appropriation.

2. Non-material appropriation

This form of appropriation involves the reproduction, by a member of one culture, of non-tangible works of art (such as stories, musical compositions or dramatic works) produced by some other culture. A musician who sings the songs of another culture has engaged in non-material appropriation, as has the writer who retells stories produced by a culture other than his own. Robert Bringhurst's versions of Haida myths may count as non-material appropriation. A recording made by an ethnomusicologist could also be an instance of non-material appropriation.

3. Stylistic appropriation

Sometimes artists do not reproduce works produced by another culture, but still take something from that culture. In such cases, artists produce works with stylistic elements in common with the works of another culture. White musicians who compose jazz or blues music are often said to have engaged in appropriation in this sense. Similarly, white Australians who paint in the style of the aboriginal peoples would be engaged in stylistic appropriation.

4. Motif appropriation

This form is related to stylistic appropriation. Sometimes artists are influenced by the art of a culture other than their own without creating works in the same style. Picasso, for example, was influenced by African carving, but his works are not in an African style. Similarly, Ravel was influenced by the jazz of African-Americans, but his compositions are not in a jazz idiom. Rather than appropriating an entire style, such artists have appropriated only basic ideas or motifs.

5. Subject appropriation

Subject appropriation occurs when someone from one culture represents members or aspects of another culture. Many of Joseph Conrad's novels involve subject appropriation, since Conrad frequently wrote about cultures other than his own. W. P. Kinsella's stories about the Hobbema Indian reserve are often cited as examples of objectionable subject appropriation.

Many people who have written on cultural appropriation have not been sensitive to the difference between the various types of appropriation. Reasons may exist for thinking that instances of one sort of appropriation are objectionable. The same reasons may be unable to show that another sort of appropriation is in the least problematic.

Let us begin by considering material appropriation. Here the issues are reasonably clear. Some cases of material appropriation are obviously wrong and others are obviously completely innocuous. Suppose I break into a Tibetan temple, make off with an image of the Buddha and sell it to a European collector. Plainly we have a case of immoral material appropriation. If I buy a mask from a Songish carver and hang it in my living-room, I have equally transferred possession of an artifact from one culture to another. In this case, however, no wrong has been done. Between these two cases lies a grey area. We need a principle for deciding when a case of material appropriation is objectionable.

Fortunately, a satisfactory principle is readily apparent. A cultural product may be transferred from one culture to another, so long as the transfer is freely sanctioned by a competent authority within the culture that produced it. This competent authority could be the artist who produced the artifact. In some cultures, however,

cultural artifacts are communal property. This may be the case, for example, when artifacts are products of a tradition or a group of artists, or when artifacts have religious or ceremonial significance. In such cultures, the competent authorities might be religious authorities, or some governing body. In any case, without the free sanction of a competent authority, material appropriation is theft. With such sanction, we have fair dealing.

These reflections might suggest that material appropriation is not the source of puzzlement, but this is not so. Sometimes it just is not clear whether the transfer of an artifact has been freely sanctioned by a competent authority. Consider, for example, cultural artifacts produced by Canadian aboriginal peoples. In many cases artifacts produced by these cultures were not simply stolen. They were bought and paid for, or given as gifts to early colonists. A question may still exist about whether the transfer of the artifact was freely sanctioned. One might reasonably hold that the relationship between native peoples and the dominant culture made any transfer of artifacts suspect. Contact with European cultures corroded the institutions of native cultures. Arguably, no one in a culture under such external pressure could freely sanction a transfer. At very least, material appropriation is suspect when artifacts are transferred from one culture to another that dominates it in certain ways.

Puzzles about material appropriation also occur when doubts arise about the existence of an authority competent to authorise the transfer of an artifact. Should Atlantis be discovered, everyone from any culture ought to be free to help themselves to Atlantean artifacts. The culture has perished and with it anyone with authority over its artifacts. The case is less clear in such instances as the Parthenon Marbles. Many people maintain that the sculptures from the Parthenon ought to be returned to Greece. Their argument ought to be that the sculptures were transferred without the approval of a competent authority within Greek culture. The charge is that, although Lord Elgin did not steal the marbles (he had a *firman*, or permit, from the Sultan), he took them with the permission of someone who did not have the proper authority. He was like someone who purchases stolen property. Such a purchaser does not acquire ownership. It seems to follow that the British Museum, which acquired the Marbles from the Elgin family, ought to return them to Greece since the transfer was not properly sanc-

tioned. I do not accept this argument since I am not persuaded that the proper authority any longer exists.

The Parthenon Marbles were not produced by a culture found anywhere in the world today. Contemporary Greeks have a culture very different from the culture that flourished in fifth-century Athens. Consequently, it is not obvious that present-day Greeks have any proprietary right to the Marbles. Presumably the people with the authority to transfer the Parthenon sculptures were the priestesses of Athena, or perhaps the *Ekklesia* (General Assembly) or the *Boulé* (Council) of ancient Athens (the Parthenon was a civic building). One could argue that contemporary Greeks are the inheritors of ancient Greek culture and that, as such, they have the authority to dispose of its products. Since nineteenth-century Greeks did not appropriately sanction the transfer of the Marbles, one might conclude, they ought to be returned. I am not persuaded by this argument. There is a sense in which ancient Greek culture survives, but it has become the inheritance of all Europeans (and many beyond the borders of Europe). A Nova Scotian might have as good a claim as an Athenian to share the culture of Socrates and Sophocles. If this is the case, no solely Greek authority has inherited rights over the products of ancient Greek culture.

Let us turn now to the consideration of non-material appropriation. This form of appropriation raises again some of the issues foregrounded by material appropriation. In particular, questions arise about the sanctioning of non-material appropriation. Non-material appropriation is, I think, morally unobjectionable when it has been properly sanctioned. Unsanctioned non-material appropriation, however, might be thought to be a sort of theft of a culture's property. The question of whether unsanctioned non-material appropriation is theft is a complex one. There are questions about what sort of things a culture can own. As well, we must address questions about who has the authority to sanction the use of non-tangible works by outsiders. On some occasions, genuine puzzles exist about who has this authority. Consequently, sometimes it is not clear whether an instance of such appropriation has been properly sanctioned.

The first point to make is that questions about the morality of non-material appropriation cannot be decided by appeal to copyright law. Non-tangible works of art are a kind of intellectual property, but they are often not protected by copyright. This will be the

case when a non-tangible artwork does not have an identifiable author or authors. Copyright law is designed to protect the rights of individuals, not of cultures. It is not suited to the protection of stories that have been passed down in an oral tradition, or songs that have been sung since time immemorial.

Nevertheless, many people want to say that, at least in some cases, the members of a culture have certain rights over the traditional artistic products of their cultures. Such people will hold that, if outsiders wish to use a traditional story or song from another culture, they ought to seek the permission of a competent authority. Two questions can be raised about this claim. The first question concerns whether, in fact, outsiders ought to apply for permission to use traditional artistic products. The other concerns who has the authority to sanction the use of such products by members of another culture.

Let us briefly consider the first of these questions. One could hold that traditional artistic products of a culture are in the public domain and available for use by anyone. Just as copyright expires after seventy-five years, so one might think a culture's control over its traditional artistic products eventually lapses. This is a plausible enough line of argument, but a telling consideration counts against it in at least some cases. This consideration arises from reflection on the nature of an oral tradition. When an artwork is transmitted by means of an oral tradition, it is always changing and forever new. If something like a moral (as opposed to legal) copyright protects new works, then artworks transmitted by an oral tradition are perpetually protected. This strikes me as a plausible argument. While protected by moral copyright, non-tangible works may be used by outsiders only with the permission of a competent authority. I am inclined to say that the status of non-tangible artworks changes when they are published and recorded in a permanent form. Once recorded in a permanent form, the control of these works, like the control over copyrighted works, expires after a suitable term.

Let us turn now to the question of who has the authority to sanction an outsider's use of a non-tangible artwork. This is a difficult question. Let us consider a specific case. In October 1900 the linguist John Swanton systematically recorded stories told by an elderly Haida poet, Skaay. The Haida poet seems not to have been coerced by Swanton. Skaay was paid for the stories and he was

well aware that Swanton was writing them down. Let us suppose that no coercion was involved. Let us also suppose that Skaay granted Swanton the right to share the stories with others. Many years later, Bringhurst translated these stories into English and published them.² The Council of the Haida Nation then complained that Bringhurst had not asked for permission to translate or publish the stories recorded in Swanton's notebooks. Permission to use the stories may not be retroactively rescinded, but perhaps Skaay did not have the authority to permit the use of Haida legends by outsiders. Perhaps this authority is vested in the Council of the Haida Nation or some other body. The case is complicated by the fact that no one in 1900 seems to have objected to the recording of Haida legends, and the fact that the Council did not exist at this time. This is a difficult case to adjudicate. Moreover, even if a satisfactory solution can be reached, we are a long way from a general solution to questions about who has the authority to sanction the use of traditional stories and songs. A lot will depend on details of the individual cases.

All of this said, focusing on the question of the proper authority is possibly unproductive. Perhaps the most important point has been overlooked. This important point is that no one, neither an individual nor a culture, has the right to control a general idea. Only particular workings-out of general ideas are protected by a legal or moral copyright. Suppose I were the first person to tell the story of Romeo and Juliet. Copyright would protect my telling of this story, but anyone would be free to tell a story of star-crossed lovers from feuding families. I suggest that when a culture has a moral right to some story, it has a right to a particular version of the story. An example will illustrate this point. The Greek government does not have, nor did any Greek authority ever have, the right to control stories about a musician who descends into the underworld in an attempt to reclaim his spouse. On the other hand, Ovid had (at least for a term) a right to control use of his retelling of the legend of Orpheus and Eurydice. Similarly, Skaay had a right to his version of the Haida myths, and could sell it if he wished. (The right to control use of some version of a traditional story or song could, under some circumstances, be vested in a community body.)

² For Robert Bringhurst's account of this, see "Since When Has Culture Been about Genetics?" *The Globe and Mail* 22 November 1999: R3.

However, neither Skaay nor the Council of the Haida Nation has a right to control use of the general ideas embodied in Haida myths. Let us not forget that *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* is an original work of art. It retells Haida stories. It does not simply repeat some version of these stories. Consequently, I do not see Bringhurst's work, or similar examples of non-material appropriation, as morally objectionable.

The discussion of non-material appropriation is complicated further by the fact that cultures are constantly changing and evolving. Sometimes they come to an end, as did the culture of antique Greece. The cultures of Skaay and his contemporaries, on the one hand, and their descendants, on the other, are quite different. I am aware that I am courting controversy when I say that the culture that produced the Haida legends no longer exists. Nevertheless, European colonialism effectively destroyed many cultures, including the traditional Haida culture. Although Haida legends were produced by their ancestors, I am not certain that today's members of the Haida nation have inherited rights over a perished culture. We need also to bear in mind that cultures, like languages, can be acquired. As an outsider becomes conversant in a second culture, one might think, the outsider acquires the right to use the products of acquired culture. In this context, it is worth remembering that Bringhurst probably knows more about the Haida culture of a century ago than many of that culture's biological descendants.

Let us turn now to a consideration of stylistic appropriation. If non-material appropriation does not violate a moral right with something like the force of copyright, stylistic appropriation is unlikely to do so. Still, questions can be raised about this form of appropriation. Often these questions are aesthetic rather than moral. One frequently hears the suggestion that artists cannot successfully employ the styles developed by cultures other than their own. So, for example, one hears the suggestion that white men cannot sing the blues. I will call this suggestion the *special skills thesis* since it claims that only members of some culture have the skills necessary to execute works in a given style.

Although the special skills thesis is an aesthetic claim, it has moral and public policy implications. Perhaps the clumsy use of a style can give a misleading and harmful impression of a culture. I will call this the *cultural harm thesis*. Moreover, if the special skills and cultural harm theses are true, a body such as the Canada Council

ought not to fund work by artists who employ a style not developed by their own culture.³ Some evidence can be adduced in favour of the cultural harm thesis. One cannot drive up Vancouver Island without seeing dozens of perfectly horrible totem poles, many of them probably carved by non-natives. One might reasonably maintain that whoever has so clumsily appropriated the styles of the various West Coast First Nations has given a misleading and harmful impression of the cultures of these nations.

Even though the cultural harm thesis has a *prima facie* plausibility, it is not indubitable. Let us evaluate the special skills thesis on which the thesis depends. The first point to make is that the special skills thesis is an empirical claim. I have already noted that some empirical evidence supports the thesis. However, not all stylistic appropriation is unsuccessful. Consider, for example, Bix Beiderbeck's appropriation of the Dixieland style from African-American culture. He was certainly one of the great jazz musicians of all time. A similar point could be made about Benny Goodman and countless other white jazz musicians. No one will think poorly of jazz, or the culture that produced the style, who has heard these musicians. The case of Ray Beamish is also worth considering. In Australian art circles he is best remembered as one of the figures at the centre of a scandal. His (former) wife Kathleen Petyarre (an aboriginal woman) won Australia's most prestigious award for indigenous art. Subsequently, it was revealed that Beamish had executed the prize-winning work. For present purposes, the noteworthy fact here is that a white Australian could successfully master a style of aboriginal art. I conclude that, as a general claim about the results of stylistic appropriation, the special skills thesis is false.

One might grant that outsiders can sometimes successfully master the styles of other cultures, but hold that they nevertheless ought to avoid appropriating these styles. Even if the appropriation of a style will not always be clumsy and harmful, the cultural harm thesis might still seem to be true. Since artists cannot be sure that their appropriation of a style will not be harmful, one might

³ The Canada Council has considered restrictions on funding artists who engage in cultural appropriation. See its *Recommendations of the Advisory Committee to the Canada Council for Racial Equality in the Arts and the Response of the Canada Council* (Ottawa, 1992).

think they ought not to appropriate styles from another culture. If artists ought not to appropriate styles from another culture, their liberty is constrained. Perhaps, however, the constraint is a reasonable one. Sometimes we place constraints on everyone's liberty, even when we know that we have no need to so limit everyone's liberty. For example, we say that no one may own fully automatic weapons. Most owners of fully automatic weapons would discharge them in a perfectly harmless manner. The few people who would misuse them would, however, cause so much harm that we say that no one may own such weapons. We just cannot know, in advance, who the dangerous people are. Similarly, one might think, we cannot know, in advance, whether an artist's appropriation of a style will cause harm to the originating culture. Perhaps, therefore, one ought to say that no one ought to appropriate cultures. At least, no one ought to appropriate from vulnerable minority cultures.

As I have just represented the problem, we are faced with a choice between sacrificing the liberty of artists or the security of vulnerable cultures. Empirical data is required before we could decide which option to adopt. We need to know how much harm is done to a culture by the clumsy appropriation of its styles. We also need to have some idea about how much harm will be done to artistic creativity by the adoption of a policy of aesthetic apartheid. An advocate of the cultural harm thesis will maintain that the harm done by clumsy stylistic appropriation is potentially great, and may outweigh any benefits of artistic liberty. My suspicion is that little real harm is done to a culture when its styles are ineffectively appropriated. Certainly residential schools did far more harm to Indian cultures than kitschy totem poles. I am certain, as the example of Bix Beiderbeck demonstrates, that aesthetic apartheid would deny us great works of art. Consequently, faced with a choice of the sort described, I will opt for artistic liberty.

Even if the special skills thesis is false, the cultural harm thesis may rest on other grounds. Perhaps, when the style of a culture is appropriated, the authentic voices of the culture are overwhelmed and distorted. This is a claim frequently made about the appropriation of styles developed by Canada's First Nations. It is also heard in Australia. According to Galarruway Yunupingu, for example, stylistic appropriation is a form of assimilation which will destroy aboriginal culture. "Every week we find that other non-

Aboriginal people are stealing our designs and paintings for decorating T-shirts, dress fabrics, restaurant menus and so on. They are using the same old tactics of assimilation, except this time they are trying to assimilate our culture into their world because it is fashionable in their eyes and will make money."⁴ The suggestion seems to be that aboriginal styles will lose their cultural and religious significance if they become commonplace in the wider community. Aboriginal culture will, on this view, become just another ingredient in a cultural melting pot.

The claim that stylistic appropriation will result in cultural harm in this way is an empirical thesis. To the best of my knowledge, no one has sufficient evidence to decide the question one way or another with complete confidence. That said, let me make a couple of points. Minority cultures, such as the cultures of Canadian First Nations and Australia's Aboriginal nations, are indeed in grave danger of assimilation. Evidence that cultures are fading away is everywhere. Languages, for example, are disappearing at an alarming rate. I am, however, skeptical about the claim that stylistic appropriation is playing any appreciable role in the erosion of minority cultures. The problem seems not to be that majority cultures are adopting minority cultures, but rather that majority cultures are being imposed on minorities. If anything, the appropriation of a style by artists reinforces and legitimizes the culture from which the style is appropriated.

All this said, artists who appropriate styles are under certain obligations. In particular, they should acknowledge the sources of the styles they appropriate. This is particularly incumbent on artists when they appropriate styles from cultures that have been denied the opportunity to fully express themselves in their own styles. I have in mind here the appropriation of the blues by white musicians. White musicians were able to get lucrative recording contracts at a time when many pioneering black musicians could not. Full acknowledgement of the sources of the music could open opportunities for members of the culture from which the style is

⁴ G. Yunupingu, "The Black/White Conflict" in *Windows on the Dreaming: Aboriginal Paintings in the Australian National Gallery*, ed. W. Caruana (Australian National Gallery and Ellsyd Press Australia, 1989) cited in Elizabeth Coleman, "Aboriginal Art: Identity and Authenticity," Australasian Association of Philosophy Conference, Melbourne, Australia, July 1999.

appropriated. Appropriating artists may also have other moral obligations, such as an obligation to speak out against a racism that has denied opportunities to members of some culture.⁵

Let us turn now to a consideration of motif appropriation. This sort of appropriation is quite common. I have already mentioned the cases of Picasso and Ravel. Other examples are provided by the American composer Steve Reich, who has been influenced by the music of Ghana's Ewe people. His music has been undeniably influenced by the Ewe drummers, but no one would mistake his music for that composed by the musicians with whom he studied. The paintings of Emily Carr are also instances of motif appropriation. She was clearly influenced by the bold, angular carving of the West Coast Nations she so admired. At the same time, if only because she painted in oils rather than carving in wood, her works are easily distinguishable from the works that influenced her. Since Carr was influenced by many styles, including European styles of painting, her works are not in the style of any First Nation. All that she and Reich have appropriated are a few basic ideas or motifs.

Motif appropriation should be the least controversial form of appropriation. Since style appropriation is not a violation of a moral copyright, motif appropriation certainly is not. The special skills thesis does not apply to motif appropriation since artists who appropriate motifs do not need to master a style developed by a foreign culture. The works that result from motif appropriation are easily distinguishable from works produced by the culture from which the motif are taken. When motif appropriation results in unsuccessful artworks, no one is likely to think that the culture from which the motif is taken is somehow inferior. When a motif is appropriated from some culture, members of the culture are unlikely to confuse the resulting work with a product of their own culture, and acquire a distorted picture of themselves. Consequently, there is little reason to think that motif appropriation will harm a culture.

I am pleased that motif appropriation is the least controversial form of cultural appropriation since this is the sort of appropriation I most wish to defend. At this point in the history of art, one of the best hopes for the production of new masterpieces is

⁵ I owe this point to Colin Macleod.

the cross-fertilization of cultural styles. Western art music is, for example, in dire need of revitalisation, and appropriation from other cultures is one important source of new vitality. Already, some of the most interesting recent art music has involved the grafting of elements of jazz and world music onto the trunk of the western tradition. I have already mentioned Steve Reich's appropriation of motifs from Ewe music. John Adam is another contemporary composer whose work is influenced by motifs from non-western music and some of the music of the Kronos String Quartet also comes to mind in this context. In literature, several examples of important motif appropriation can also be given. John Thompson (a Maritime poet) appropriated the ghazal form from ancient Persian poetry. The ghazal is now used to great effect by a number of important Canadian poets, including Don MacKay, Phyllis Webb and Jan Zwicky. If anything, artists ought to be encouraged to appropriate motifs from other cultures and turn them to their own ends.

Subject appropriation remains to be considered. This form of appropriation is quite unlike the other forms. In all other forms of cultural appropriation, a cultural product (either an artwork or an element of an artwork) is appropriated. Artists who engage in subject appropriation may employ only the artistic resources of their own culture. Subject appropriation may nevertheless be taken to be objectionable. As already noted, Kinsella's stories about Alberta Indians have proved controversial. A famous stand against subject appropriation was taken by the Women's Press, a Canadian publisher. This publisher states that it will "avoid publishing manuscripts in which the protagonist's experience in the world, by virtue of race or ethnicity, is substantially removed from that of the writer."⁶

At least two arguments can be given for thinking that subject appropriation is objectionable. According to the first argument, only insiders can accurately represent their cultures. Artists are bound to misrepresent cultures other than their own. Consequently, works which involve subject appropriation are bound to be aesthetically

⁶ Quoted in M. Nourbese Philip, "The Disappearing Debate; or, How the Discussion of Racism Has Been Taken Over by the Censorship Issue," in *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers UP, 1997) 97.

flawed. More importantly, the argument runs, the flawed works produced by subject appropriation can cause unjustifiable harm to the foreign culture by giving a distorted picture of that culture. According to the second argument, insiders sometimes have an exclusive right to represent their own culture. Insiders are thought to have this right because, without it, a culture and its artists are unjustifiably harmed. One might think that insiders are denied an audience for their art if outsiders represent their cultures. The idea is that the art produced by members of a minority culture could be overwhelmed by the art of outsiders. If so, insiders are denied the opportunity to represent themselves to the world.

Let us begin by considering the claim that only members of a culture can accurately represent it. Certainly, sometimes people harmfully misrepresent foreign cultures. Edward Said's *Orientalism*, for example, argues that the Islamic East has been systematically misrepresented by the West.⁷ This misrepresentation has occurred in many forms, but western artists have been among those who have provided a distorted picture of the Islamic world. Other examples of the artistic misrepresentation of foreign cultures are easy to find. Think of the representation of North American Indians in classic Hollywood Westerns. We cannot, however, validly infer from the premise that some artists have misrepresented alien cultures the conclusion that all artists must always do so. Moreover, the available empirical evidence suggests that this conclusion is false. (Said, incidentally, never says that westerners must inevitably misrepresent the East.) Although Said would disagree with this claim, Conrad and Gauguin are examples of artists who have had profound insights into cultures other than their own. Among our contemporaries, Michael Ondaatje and Neil Bissoondath surely count as artists who do not inevitably misrepresent cultures other than their home cultures.

In spite of the fact that not all artists misrepresent foreign cultures, one might think that artists ought to avoid subject appropriation. The risk of harmful misrepresentation may seem so great that any possible benefits are outweighed. One might think that, since we cannot tell in advance whether a given instance of subject appropriation will distort and harm a culture, all artists ought to refrain from such appropriation. If so, complete abstinence from

⁷ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

subject appropriation may seem to be morally recommended. Once again, we are faced with an empirical question: how much harm is done by subject appropriation? I am skeptical about the claim that subject appropriation by artists results in a great deal of harm. Certainly, subject appropriation does little harm to robust cultures. At best the argument shows that artists ought not to appropriate subjects from vulnerable minority cultures. Moreover, I believe that any harm is outweighed by the value of good examples of subject appropriation, but no one has enough empirical evidence to pronounce with certainty on this matter.

Still, let me advance two arguments for thinking that subject appropriation ought not to be discouraged. My first argument begins from the observation that autobiography is not always the best biography. The authors of autobiographies are sometimes blind to important features of their lives, or choose to conceal aspects of their lives. Similarly, we should not take the art of insiders as the final word on their home cultures. Sometimes we learn a great deal about ourselves when we learn how others see us. Similarly, a culture can potentially learn a great deal when it confronts representations of itself by an outsider. A culture might, for example, be blind to the fact that certain of its practices are racist or sexist. Members of the culture may only become aware of these facts when they are revealed by the art of outsiders. If so, we have a reason not to discourage subject appropriation.

My second argument for the permissibility of subject appropriation begins from the observation that, in a multicultural society, the relations between cultures is a matter that calls out for artistic treatment. When artists address these matters in their art, they cannot avoid representing other cultures. If subject appropriation were banned, a potential source of cross-cultural communication would be lost. One might still want to discourage subject appropriation by members of majority cultures. This too would be a mistake. If subject appropriation by members of majority cultures were banned, audiences would hear monologues instead of a conversation between cultures. The value of good communication between cultures provides us with another good reason for encouraging, rather than discouraging, subject appropriation.

Finally, let us consider the suggestion that subject appropriation can deny members of a culture the opportunity to represent themselves to the world. Minority cultures, such as those of

North American Indians and the indigenous peoples of Australia, may seem particularly vulnerable in this way. The suggestion seems to be that the market will bear only so many works of art about a given culture and that outsiders could acquire a monopoly.

The available information seems to suggest that this is an unnecessary worry. Subject appropriation seems not to have had the effect of denying an audience to minority artists. The market for artworks by North American First Nation and Australian aboriginal artists is thriving. Works by these artists, and members of other minority cultures, are eagerly sought by both private and public collectors. These collectors frequently insist that the works they collect be "authentic," that is, produced by members of a minority culture. In Australia scandals have arisen when works by white artists have been represented as works by aboriginal artists. Moreover, contrary to what the objection to subject appropriation suggests, the market for works with a given subject is not fixed. When Paul Simon appropriated the music of South Africa's townships, the result was an explosion of interest in world music. South African musicians have gained an audience they would never have had but for Simon's appropriation. In part, this is because Simon lived up to the obligation to acknowledge the sources of his music.

In conclusion, I urge everyone to avoid making blanket pronouncements about cultural appropriation. As we have seen, cultural appropriation has many forms. Some examples of certain forms are certainly immoral. At the same time, many examples of all forms of cultural appropriation are morally unobjectionable. Some of these examples of appropriation are valuable works of art. Cultural appropriation is sometimes to be condemned, but equally to be avoided is a restriction of artists to their cultural homelands. Such a restriction is not demanded by morality and it is contrary to the demands of aesthetics.⁸

⁸ A longer version of this essay was delivered as the Inaugural St. Mary's University Public Philosophy Lecture on 1 March, 2001. I am very grateful to Roland Marshall for making this lecture possible. While writing this essay I profited from the comments and criticisms of Laurel Bowman, Colin Macleod and Jan Zwicky.