

POSITIONS

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Cultural (Mis-)Appropriation: A Reply to James O. Young

JAMES YOUNG OFFERS a careful analysis of the concept of cultural appropriation, and we agree in general with his main conclusion: some cases of appropriation are morally objectionable while others are not. We take issue, however, with his method, and thus with some of his particular conclusions.

Young's method is to think of appropriation as a two-party property relation: a work or a style, etc., is one person's property, and can be transferred to someone else. Appropriation is wrong when it amounts to theft. For a transfer to be legitimate, the property must either be given or sold fairly by the owner or by a "competent authority" (303) who is in a position to make such a transfer.

There is a non-commercial dimension to the moral question which this method overlooks. Grave-robbing, for example, is not just theft of another's property. The offence is against the dead, and the desecration is of not just one corpse but of a universal state that humans in some sense consider sacred. That cultural appropriation can have this dimension rather than that of a commercial transaction is shown by Young's own example of the discovery of Atlantis: "Should Atlantis be discovered, everyone from any culture ought to be free to help themselves to Atlantean artifacts" (304). On the contrary, the world would be humbled by the discovery of such artifacts. International agencies would propose guidelines for the exploration, preservation and presentation of the discoveries. On Young's account, this would be a grab for wealth by a self-appointed and illegitimate 'authority,' but in fact it would be a recognition of the discovery's importance for all of humanity. Respect for the integrity of the lost civilization would be a central

value in the discussion that ensued, and property rights would properly be a side issue.

Let us allow Young his method for the moment. Coercion, he claims, does not occur when members of the culture from which something is being borrowed are made aware of the appropriation and are paid to allow it. The fact that someone is paid, however, does not ensure that coercion has been avoided. Even 'authoritative' people from an oppressed community might be in a financial situation where they have little choice about whether to sell the object or story or style in question. Economic need, often created by a network of oppressive social relations, can act as a coercive force. Monetary exchanges then, do not ensure that coercion is absent from cases where appropriation is sanctioned through a sale.

A second problem is that Young offers a very strong account of cultural identity. He claims that current Greek culture differs from one that might once have had authority over the Elgin Marbles, and that the Haida culture from which Robert Bringhurst arguably appropriated stories no longer exists. However, the Haida of today do not need to live as their ancestors did in order to be the cultural heirs of their legends. Culture is not something frozen; it changes and develops in social and political space. That the Haida now differ greatly from the Haida of centuries and millennia ago does not mean that their culture has died, or that they do not have a stake in the appropriation of their artifacts and legends. To think otherwise suggests that there is an unchanging 'essence' of a culture that determines whether it has the authority to defend or to sell or give away its creative work.

The Haida have maintained a sense of group identity that has grown out of their historical, social, and political interactions. The legends of their ancestors are part of this history, current culture, and self-understanding in ways that they cannot be for Bringhurst, regardless of his sensitivity and extensive knowledge. Knowledge alone cannot make an outsider into an insider as Young suggests (309). Legends form part of a people's 'remembering,' and "memory is not deeper than culture but is culture, the historical narrative of a society."¹ What Young should be asking is whether

¹ Avery Gordon and Christopher Newfield, "White Philosophy," *Critical Inquiry* 20 (1994): 750.

or not a given appropriation will cause harm *in the social and political context in which it takes place*. Art is not created or viewed in a political vacuum. Who creates it, using what material, who views it or does not, how viewers react, and the consequences of these interactions are all elements of artistic exchange that can either reinforce or resist oppressive social and political structures.² Since he does not attend to the ways in which appropriation may contribute to oppression, Young fails to give an adequate account of the responsibilities incurred by artists who make use of material from other cultures. In more of those cases than Young allows, those responsibilities will entail that an artist should refrain from engaging in appropriation.

² For a discussion of this point, see Linda Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," *Cultural Critique* 20 (1991-92): 5-31.

JAMES O. YOUNG

Cultural Appropriation Revisited: A Rejoinder to Epp and Burns

THE ESSAY TO WHICH Epp and Burns reply ought to be regarded, at best, as a first approximation of a satisfactory treatment of the ethics of cultural appropriation. Consequently, I am grateful to Epp and Burns for their criticisms of my piece. They raise issues that must be addressed by any satisfactory treatment of the ethics of cultural appropriation.

I agree that my treatment of the artifacts of perished cultures is flawed. My comment on Atlantis was flippant and ill considered. If Atlantean artifacts were to be discovered, people ought not to help themselves. If I were to find an Atlantean mosaic, I ought not to take it home and hang it in my den. The mosaic would have great cultural importance and ought not to be confined to my den. I do not believe, however, that “respect for the integrity of the lost civilization” would be central in the ensuing discussion of what to do with the mural. Rather, I think discussion would and ought to focus on how humanity as a whole can benefit from the discovery. The mosaic I discovered ought to be in a public institution where scholars from around the world might examine it. In determining where artifacts ought to be housed we should ask who has the knowledge of how best to preserve and display the artifacts. It is not a matter of finders keepers.

This said, I do not believe that the existence of non-commercial factors, such as the good of humanity or respect for other civilizations, undermines the approach I adopted in my original essay. In my essay I focused on the rights of cultures and authorities within cultures since, at least most of the time, the crucial issue is whether a competent authority sanctions a case of appropria-

tion. Moreover, producing cultures do have certain proprietary rights and these should not be lightly overridden. Still, nothing I wrote should be taken to suggest that other factors ought not to be taken into account when considering the ethics of cultural appropriation. As I have indicated, in adjudicating cases of cultural appropriation, a crucial factor is the good of humanity as a whole.

I agree entirely with Epp and Burns when they write that coercion can occur even when “appropriation is sanctioned through a sale.” In my original essay I stated that when an aboriginal culture is corroded by contact with an imperial culture, transfers from the former to the latter are, minimally, ethically suspect. Of course I would grant that other factors (such as financial need) could render a monetary transaction unfree.

Epp and Burns raise some important and difficult questions when they ask about the criteria for the identity of a culture. In a draft of my essay, I attempted to provide such criteria. In the end, I decided that necessary and sufficient conditions for membership in a culture cannot be specified. The concept of a culture is, in Wittgenstein’s sense, a family resemblance concept: a culture is shared by a group of people who have enough of some characteristics in common. So I certainly do not believe that cultures have essences. I must give far more thought to this matter and its implications for the ethics of cultural appropriation. I believe, however, that membership in a culture is not identical to membership in an ethnic group. A culture, like a language, can be acquired. I also remain convinced that once some threshold of change has been reached, a culture ceases to be identical through time. I doubt that Epp and Burns would wish to defend the claim that the culture of contemporary Greeks is numerically identical to the culture of the Athens of Socrates’ day.

Epp and Burns follow up their comments on the identity of cultures by saying that I must pay more attention to the social and political harm done by cultural appropriation. I can only assure them that I have reflected on these matters at length. In my original essay I expressed skepticism about the claim that significant harm is done by appropriation of culture. Since Epp and Burns do not indicate any of the “ways in which appropriation may contribute to oppression,” I do not feel compelled to revise my position. I understand how residential schools and the Indian Act harmed Canada’s First Nations. I do not see how the art of Emily Carr or Robert

Bringhurst does so. Epp and Burns must do more than simply assume that cultural appropriation causes oppression. To do so begs the question against me. Of course, if they can give a sound argument for how cultural appropriation is unjustly harmful, then I will happily amend my views. Surely the burden of proof lies with them: they must show that harm is done.