

# H-Net Reviews

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James O. Young. *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts*. Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2008. xiv + 168 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4051-7656-9.

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## Appropriation without Representation

This short treatise, by the head of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Victoria, is part of the New Directions in Aesthetics series by Blackwell Publishers. For this reader, however, the textbook did not provide a new direction; rather, it felt like a return to my undergraduate courses in aesthetics in the 1960s. James O. Young is not without qualifications for writing on this subject; his previous book, *Art and Knowledge* (2001), was published by Routledge, and he has edited with Conrad Brunk an anthology titled *The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation*, also published this year by Blackwell. Written in straightforward prose, unencumbered by jargon, the text is, in my opinion, also unencumbered by complex argumentation. Young favors common sense arguments based on personal reflection, but his logic is that of a white male academic, which provides larger blinders than he might care to acknowledge.

The first chapter—"What is Cultural Appropriation?"—sets out the definitions and terminology that guide the rest of this work. Young asserts that his book is distinctive from the vast literature on the subject of appropriation, because it is "a philosophical inquiry into the moral and aesthetic issues raised by reflection on cultural appropriation" (p. 2). Thus, from the outset, he makes clear that this essay contains little, if any, empirical research or theoretical inquiry. He then turns to his definitions. First, he defines "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" (p. 3). In a book about cultural appropriation, should not the limitations of applying such a definition to the artifacts of non-Western cultures be self-evident? He does add that objects appropriated by artists for aesthetic ends may not be considered art in their home culture, but may be valued for other reasons. However, he does not carry this reasoning further. For example, he does not even refer to the obvious: James Clifford's semiotic diagram of the art-culture system in his authoritative essay from 1988, "On Collecting Art and Culture," where the mutability of the terms "art," "non-art," "culture," and "not-culture" are presented as a continually interchanging movement.[1]

The productive research in the fields of cultural studies and postcolonial studies are ignored. Young neither cites nor mentions prominent writers, such as Clifford, Stuart Hall, or Arjun Appadurai, in the index. Further, despite the fact that postmodern theory has transformed the academy over the past quarter century, Young elects to rely on such aestheticians as R. G. Collingwood, whose arguments I could recall if I were able to disinter my notes from Philosophy of Art at Pembroke College in Brown University, circa 1964. He quotes Collingwood with enthusiasm in the book's concluding paragraph: "This fooling about personal property must cease. Let painters and writers and musicians steal with both hands whatever they can use, wherever they can find it" (p. 158). From this point of view, any claim that a work of art is bound in any intrinsic way to the country or culture in which it was produced and therefore should

remain its property makes no sense. For instance, in chapter 3, "Cultural Appropriation as Theft," Young argues that "art" and "culture" have no logical or legal relationship to "land" or "nation". Quite evidently, according to Young, "a painting is not a 'piece of land'" (p. 86). Because, in his opinion, the cultural property argument is supported by current anthropological theory, Young concludes that "one might doubt the usefulness of postmodern deconstruction. If acceptance of deconstructionism requires abandonment of the laws of non-contradiction, few philosophers would be willing to accept it" (p. 86). This wince-inducing neologism, deconstructionism, is the sum total of his acknowledgment of the paradigm shift in intellectual inquiry that occurred from the 1960s to the 1980s. Moreover, he fails to note that his enthusiastic endorsement of Collingwood contradicts the arguments he makes that are based on the concept of personal (as opposed to cultural) property.

Turning to the concept of "appropriation," Young provides the definition from *The Oxford English Dictionary* as follows: "The making of a thing private property...; taking as one's own or to one's own use" (p. 4). So, "cultural appropriation" is defined (however vaguely) as the taking of private property by an individual, presumably a (Western) artist. He elaborates: "Members of one culture (I will call them *outsiders*) take for their own, or for their own use, items produced by a member or members of another culture (call them *insiders*)" (p. 5). With this simplistic terminology, Young removes from the table any discussion of the "other" that might complicate his conceptualization. Apart from the simple removal or theft of physical objects, the two major categories of cultural appropriation he proposes are *content* appropriation, "significant reuse of an idea first expressed in the work of an artist from another culture," and *subject* appropriation, in which "subject matter is being appropriated" (pp. 6-7). As an art historian with the conventional distinction between subject matter and content deeply implanted in my brain, I found this invented terminology totally confusing, and only discerned from later examples that subject appropriation refers to the representation of *insider* cultures by *outsiders*. His example is a mural by white artist George Southwell in the foyer of the Parliament Buildings in Victoria, British Columbia, which depicts "a native Indian" before a colonial judge (p. 131). By avoiding the accepted terminology of current academic discourse, Young sweeps the complex issues around representation off the table.

Young turns to *The Oxford English Dictionary* once again to define "culture" as "a particular form or type of

intellectual development. Also, the civilization, customs, artistic achievements, etc., of a people" (p. 9). While acknowledging that Kwame Anthony Appiah and others have questioned such a binary insider-outsider-based notion of culture, Young insists that the fundamental concept still applies, even though cultures are mutable: "Talk of a specific culture, such as American culture or Navajo culture, is perfectly comprehensible and unproblematic" (p. 11). Apparently he would dispute the claim that Navajo culture might be American in significant ways (p. 11). No, "a culture is simply a collection of people who share a certain range of cultural traits;" moreover, cultures need not be geographically based (p. 15). The example Young provides of a non-geographically based culture is gay culture: "The culture of gay men can be defined in terms of a range of practices, customs, and beliefs, many of which are possessed by each homosexual man. These traits include an unusually extensive knowledge of Judy Garland movies, owning an uncommonly natty wardrobe, being able to tell whether something is chartreuse, owning some spandex, and so forth" (p. 16). This handy description is provided without irony, or, for that matter, any sense of the ludicrous stereotyping involved. A subsequent chapter deals with appropriation that causes offense, but Young's very definition of culture is ipso facto offensive. Surely a philosophical investigation of cultural appropriation should provide the reader with something more rigorous than dictionary definitions and (unintended) caricature.

Young's book is a defense of cultural appropriation as mainly positive for both insiders and outsiders, but he acknowledges that appropriation from an insider culture may cause harm or be offensive to that culture. At the end of chapter 1, he takes care to differentiate his philosophical arguments concerning "harm" and "offense" from legal questions. "I am interested in the question of when cultural appropriation is morally wrong, not when it is illegal. Legality varies from culture to culture. Morality is universal" (p. 22). I find this to be a breathtaking claim, one that he tries to support by severing morality from religious beliefs, which he equates with superstition. Thus, Young dismisses "insider" arguments about the spiritual properties of an appropriated object as, for the most part, unworthy of serious consideration. Further, his definition of "morality" is rooted in classical liberalism's concept of individual property rights. Thus, in the end, his moral justifications are often framed in terms of free market capitalism—that is, issues of ownership of private property, even as he argues that "content appropriation" is a fruitful form of theft (because it leads to the

development of new and interesting products). Young never justifies this philosophical position, even though it frames every aspect of his argument.

Because his goal in this book is to demonstrate that the positive gains of cultural appropriation in the end outweigh the negatives, he proves his point by understating or even dismissing the harm or offence it can and does cause. Again, his definitions are so overgeneralized as to be virtually useless. "Harm can be defined ... as a setback to someone's interests," whereas "profound offence ... strikes at a person's core values or sense of self" (p. 130). Examples of profound offence include "the burning of a national flag or the desecration of a sacred object" (p. 130). If the equation of flag burning with the defiling of an object sacred to a given culture seems a bit arbitrary, he goes on to argue that offensive acts done by autonomous, consenting individuals in private are permissible, though if done in public, they are not. For example, "suppose, however, practicing flag burners or cannibals display invitations to join in their activities on huge neon signs.... Engaging in an activity that profoundly offends others is permissible and morally unobjectionable. Flaunting one's performance of the offending act is another matter. Just as flag burning and cannibalism are wrong in certain places, so are certain artistic acts. [Andres] Serrano did not act wrongly in creating *Piss Christ*. He ought not, however, to display it outside a cathedral after a Good Friday mass.... So long as artists' engagement in cultural appropriation is suitably discreet, the offensiveness of their actions provides no basis for the judgment that their actions are wrong" (pp. 144-145).

So jarring is the pairing of flag burning and cannibalism as (implicitly) comparably offensive acts that it takes a moment to recover sufficiently to address the logic of his argument. As I take it, Serrano's *Piss Christ* is not an offensive act of cultural appropriation as long as not too many practicing Catholics see it, and it remains a private act of personal expression addressed to the subculture of the art world. However, this was not the argument against Serrano (and Robert Mapplethorpe) presented by Donald Wildmon, Jesse Helms, and others in the Senate in 1989.[2] However intolerant their statements, their main argument was that the U.S. government should not be condoning profoundly offensive art through taxpayer-funded National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grants. Because they framed their tirades as a governmental, rather than a private matter, Young would have to agree with the logic behind their call for the banning of the NEA. Should he happen to disagree with their demand for censorship, because of his argument that "art" can-

not be equated with "nation," he would be obligated to address the more complex issue of competing moral values within a multicultural American society. The simple division between public and private that he arbitrarily constructs from his philosophical perch cannot be demarcated so easily in practice.

I have jumped from the first to the penultimate chapter of the book, skipping over the chapters on "The Aesthetics of Cultural Appropriation," "Cultural Appropriation as Theft," and "Cultural Appropriation as Assault," in order to highlight what I consider to exemplify the illogical or simplistic reasoning found throughout this "philosophical" text. As his argument weaves back and forth between "art," as defined in the West as an object created by an individual and having a certain monetary value, and the cultural production of "insiders" that reflect a given culture's belief systems, Young gets mired in contradiction after contradiction. For instance, even though the distinction between law and morality is central to his thesis, he concludes that outsiders who appropriate content (styles, songs, etc.) from other cultures do not hurt members of that culture, unless "outsiders proceed to copyright traditional material from another culture" (p. 97). So, it seems, law trumps morality, and the definition of "harm" caused by cultural appropriation is based in the end on financial loss. The cultural patrimony argument concerning the right of return should be honored only in the case of a work that is of "central importance" to a given culture. (In Young's opinion, the Elgin marbles do not qualify.) Otherwise, artistic creation should be a matter of free market experimentation without restrictions, as "it is likely that outsider books open up new markets for insider books" (p. 116). Capitalism is the one unassailable good, apparently.

Because I have had so little positive to say about this text, I feel obligated to quote Williams College professor Michael F. Brown's review blurb on the jacket cover of *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts*. "Finally someone has cut through the cant associated with cultural appropriation, weighed the issues with care and a keen eye for irony, and clarified the ethical limits of intercultural borrowing." Needless to say, I strongly disagree, but then I do not consider the writings on postcolonialism in the arts to be cant. I argue, instead, that it is irresponsible to ignore the past thirty years of intellectual inquiry, and to write a book that does not even mention the term "hybridity," for example, other than in a brief quote by Salman Rushdie, signals to me that the author has chosen to ignore any stumbling blocks on the way to his "common sense" conclusions. For my conclusion, I will quote

the last two lines of Young's preface: "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 have been nice" (p. xiv). As I pondered his use of the passive voice in this acknowledgment, I confess that I considered Young to be off on the wrong foot from the start.

#### Notes

[1]. James Clifford, "On Collecting Art and Culture," in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 214.

[2]. See Richard Bolton, ed., *Culture Wars: Documents from Recent Controversies in the Arts* (New York: New Press, 1992).

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