

The Case for Cultural Appropriation: A Polemic Against Political Correctness

by Christopher DeGroot (April 2018)



Day of the God (Mahana No Atua), Paul Gauguin, 1894

Imagine you had the power to transform the Olympics in a progressive sense. Instead of fiercely prideful competition, nations would get together every four years and, with all the self-importance and insincerity of a cocktail party after an academic conference at an Ivy League university, give out awards celebrating the universal athletic achievements. All nations being, like all people, equally deserving of respect, the awards would be the same. Like certain little league baseball teams, everybody would win, and

no one would be unhappy.

This thought experiment, we quickly see, fails because it destroys the very idea of achievement. For, like all ideas of value, achievement is necessarily comparative. Tolstoy's highly nuanced characters would not be as striking as they are without the mere types we find in writers like David Foster Wallace. Floyd Mayweather's unmatched defensive skills would not be remarkable if he did not make even elite punchers look ordinary. The extraordinarily vast erudition of a man such as Leibniz would not be so impressive if it was not in stark contrast to a modern specialist. Sarah Vaughn would not deserved to be called "the voice" if singers like Britney Spears were not dreadful. And so on, endlessly.

Meanwhile, our human nature consisting of contradictions, many of us naturally, and rightly, feel sympathy for those who are, as it were, lesser than others. Indeed, though all too often mixed up with resentment, and though taken so far as to negate the idea of value *per se*, there is a certain moral value in the increasingly common desire that others not be "excluded," because this endeavor aims to make people believe that they matter, a belief that, being a universal need, is a universal good. Those who most ardently affirm this—multiculturalists on the Left—are also characterized by an awareness of the past oppression of women and minorities. The problem is that this fundamentally moral and compassionate turn of mind is frequently applied in an incoherent fashion.

Consider, for example, the common charge of cultural appropriation. Of course, for multiculturalists, it must go without saying that cultural influence is a good thing; after all, there can be no multiculturalism if a culture cannot use

another culture's aesthetic practice, for example. And in principle, this is true whether it's Ezra Pound or Kenneth Rexroth drawing on classical Chinese poetry, Duke Ellington drawing on classical European music, Jimmy Page drawing on the black blues tradition (which, given its Gospel influence, is itself much indebted to the "white man's religion"), Gwendolyn Brooks drawing on Anglo poetic forms, or Akira Kurosawa drawing on the plays of Shakespeare, who was himself a great appropriator of Plutarch, Boccaccio and others. And yet, so-called cultural appropriation—a childish, resentment-driven misinterpretation of the complex phenomenon of influence—has become a moral evil for many on the Left.

It is a hollow and senseless notion. Christianity is growing in China because the Chinese, like so many other peoples on this unhappy, burdened planet, evidently feel a need for that religion. Nor is it reasonable for a person to think, for instance: "Well, despite my dead husband and sick child and monotonous life of laborious poverty, I had better not practice this religion, since it did not begin in my own time and place!" Those who champion human rights and democracy—European inventions, as it were—don't feel obliged to explain why these do not become moral evils when "appropriated" by non-Western nations. No one in Africa would reject a vaccine because it was devised in, say, the United States or England. Worst of all, cultural influence is not only well-nigh impossible to prevent (in any free state); to condemn it because it involves so-called appropriation is essentially authoritarian, like the old Soviet tyrants who would not allow artistic works, many of them from abroad, which were not plainly in favor of communism.

A typical product of academic resentment, the concept of cultural appropriation, having made its way into the general

culture, is now discussed in such lowbrow publications as *Cosmopolitan* and *Teen Vogue*. It thus joins simplistic academic concepts like “patriarchy” and “rape culture” as a surefire way of displaying your virtuous opposition. Quite an effective form of marketing for our academics and intellectuals! And, like the revisionist history that is now common even in secondary schools (yet another unfortunate consequence of the influential academic Left), it helps the young and impressionable learn the wisdom of hating their own culture, of being exceedingly fragile, and of being reluctant to do or say anything that might upset the ever more sensitive and therefore intolerant PC police.

The issue of cultural appropriation is especially difficult for artists, who are incessant appropriators, all for their own glory. Imagine Dante electing not to write his great epic poem because the genre, for him, began in Greece rather than his native Italy. The thought is ludicrous, for Dante was not a precious ideologue. The writer Suki Kim is. In a September 15, 2016 [easily found online](#)—there are a number of arguments about why political correctness is bad for everyone, and not just in aesthetics. Kim does not engage any of them, though she unsurprisingly says, “it was hard to pinpoint exactly what was so offensive about this spectacle—there was so much to choose from.” An exceptionally confused mind, Suki Kim struggles to make a coherent argument, but possessing the now standard intellectual self-righteousness, finds that “there was so much to choose from,” a smorgasbord of outrage for her insatiable appetite.

Kim feels it was “alarming . . . that there seemed to be no way for anyone who had not really experienced that kind of exclusion firsthand to truly understand any of it.” In the absence of a positive display of Leftist resentment, it is

assumed that no one could understand Kim's terrible plight. Perhaps, for Kim, the Brisbane Writers Festival was supposed to be a kind of group therapy session. In any case, if she is vexed because she believes the non-excluded cannot understand precisely what she and other minorities have been through, then it is not coherent to blame Shriver or any other non-excluded person (that is to say, white people, who, being white, do not suffer as deeply as other races, we must presume) for this. If I have not fought in war, then it is idle to upbraid me because I cannot understand those who have. If you have not been robbed at gunpoint, as I myself once was, then it makes no sense for me to be upset that you don't know what that experience was like for me. There is no moral failing and nothing "alarming" in literally not having walked in another's shoes.

It is plain that Kim did not understand most of Shriver's arguments, perhaps because she was unwilling to try, or perhaps because she is a generic PC type who insists on perceiving the world through an ideological lens, with all its unexamined assumptions. After all, these days we should expect as much from someone educated at an institution such as Barnard College. Kim resembles the human resources bureaucrat who, having been "offended" by a colleague's direct language, works up a lawsuit on account of the "hostile work environment." In short, she is a weak person who thinks it would be a virtue if everyone shared her vice. The world is found to be otherwise, and now she is a victim.

Again, Shriver had told the audience of many book reviewers and correspondents who had reproached her simply for writing about people unlike herself. Nevertheless, Kim could write: "She asked, obtusely, if a crime writer should have criminal experience to write authentically in her genre." In her

neurotic touchiness, Kim seems unable to see the aptness of the analogy. Nor did Kim grasp Shriver's point about a failure of rounded characters. "She chastised an unnamed writer for including 'mostly Chinese' characters in his novel: "That is, that's sort of all they were: Chinese. Which isn't enough." Indeed, if a character is flat, there just because of his race, then, *qua* fiction, he is a failure *ipso facto*. Here, as elsewhere, it is Kim who is obtuse.

"I worry," Shriver says,

that the clamorous world of identity politics is also undermining the very causes its activists claim to back. As a fiction writer, yeah, I do sometimes deem my narrator an Armenian. But that's only by way of a start. Merely being Armenian is not to have a character as I understand the word.

We should be seeking to push beyond the constraining categories into which we have been arbitrarily dropped by birth.

Membership of a larger group is not an identity. Being Asian is not an identity. Being gay is not an identity. Being deaf, blind, or wheelchair-bound is not an identity, nor is being economically deprived. I reviewed a novel recently that I had regretfully to give a thumbs-down, though it was terribly well intended; its heart was in the right place. But in relating the Chinese immigrant experience in America, the author put forward characters that were mostly Chinese. That is, that's sort of all they

were: Chinese. Which isn't enough.

I made this same point in relation to gender in Melbourne last week: both as writers and as people, we should be seeking to push beyond the constraining categories into which we have been arbitrarily dropped by birth. If we embrace narrow group-based identities too fiercely, we cling to the very cages in which others would seek to trap us. We pigeonhole ourselves. We limit our own notion of who we are, and in presenting ourselves as one of a membership, a representative of our *type*, an ambassador of an amalgam, we ask not to be seen.

Shriver tells us that to be a type is not an identity, a view with which Kim agrees. But how very vexing be told that by a white woman! In her outraged response, Kim reveals herself to possess a wildly unbalanced mind, and a reflexive desire to assert feelings of resentment. For Shriver, "being Asian is not an identity. Being gay is not an identity. Being deaf, blind, or wheelchair-bound is not an identity, nor is being economically deprived." The point here, to state the obvious, is that there is far more to people, and therefore also to rich literary representation, than what is evident at a glance. Now, if this is true (as it certainly is), the reception of this truth should not be changed because the person who expresses it is a white woman, just as the earth orbits the sun whether you are white, black, or brown.

Shriver thinks "we should be seeking to push beyond the constraining categories into which we have been *arbitrarily dropped by birth*." (The italics are mine.) We don't choose those categories, but there is an empowering freedom—though hardly simple or easy—in taking control of our lives instead

of just dumbly going along with the customs of our time and place. Shriver's is a call for agency, both of aesthetic practice and living generally. Kim, however, will not let herself see this. "Race had polarized the festival," she cries melodramatically, "and it became us against them," *us* meaning the other Asian person in the room.

Happily for Kim, she found the victimhood she sought, as cliché as her language ("straight though like a bullet"). And yet it is her own way of thinking that is the problem, nor could it be more divisive. If personal responsibility is a good, then it should not be considered "racist" for a white person to say that black men must stop abandoning their children, but reasonable if Thomas Sowell or Walter Williams makes the same point. We shall never be able to deal with our most difficult problems if we have to play the cowardly game of allowing only approved races and genders to express certain opinions. Moreover, in Kant's words, "whoever makes himself a worm cannot complain when he is then trampled underfoot."

Kim was much bothered by Shriver's manner—her "arrogance" and "casualness"—but it is likely that the satirist was having a bit of fun at the expense of those who are exceedingly touchy, like Kim. *Contra* Kim, it is plain that the actual problem is the confused thinking whereby she herself is "playing the victim," and in that singularly cheap manner which is sure to afford a powerful feeling of "connection and belonging" with a lot of smug dullards in our age of resentment. In asserting that "the various ways in which cultural appropriation—the idea that white artists and communities have stolen elements of minority cultures in ways that are oppressive—was harmful to people everywhere," Shriver is setting herself against a kind of groupthink that is both imaginatively and culturally limiting. The great literary critic William Empson taught us

that it is the special power of literature to take us beyond ourselves by showing us what the lives of people who are very different from us are like. In Shriver's words, "the spirit of good fiction is one of exploration, generosity, curiosity, audacity, and compassion."

Like Empson, Shriver affirms literature's special power, via the imaginative writer's empathy, to depict all sorts of people, including those whose experiences are unlike our own: like Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, with its powerful representation of war, of which Crane himself had no experience, or Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina* describing a young woman's strange mix of fear and love upon falling in love for the first time. In *Corregidora*, Gayl Jones explores human contradictions with stunning acuity; we are presented with the politically incorrect idea that there is actually love between black slaves and their white masters. The novel is a work of great courage and originality, but would it have been a moral evil—or perhaps thought a justification of slavery—if written by a white person, as Jones is not? To answer "yes" is to show that you are not a disinterested artist and thinker, but an ideologue à la Suki Kim. Empson also believed that writers are necessarily critics of their time. Striving to question ignorance and to criticize injustice, and challenging in general what J.S. Mill called "the tyranny of the majority," they are outcasts by definition—which is by no means to say, mere political crusaders. Such vital work is not possible if, like Suki Kim, we bind ourselves with PC chains. Art is not just a matter of creation, but of principle as well.

In "The Genealogy of Dictionaries," the lexicographer Robert Burchfield relates, what is now forgotten, that "Medieval European authors took it as axiomatic that their main purpose was to 'translate' or adapt the great works of their

predecessors. The word plagiarism itself is first recorded in 1621, but the association of plagiarism with guilt and furtiveness came rather later." Why shouldn't those authors have done so? After all, in Emerson's words, "the Originals were not original." An inheritance which we both receive and impart, language is like the air, essential but owned by none. Language is like a broken piñata, its treasures to be snatched before the next hungry creature arrives.

Shriver asks:

Who is the appropriator par excellence, really? Who assumes other people's voices, accents, patois, and distinctive idioms? Who literally puts words into the mouths of people different from themselves? Who dares to get inside the very heads of strangers, who has the chutzpah to project thoughts and feelings into the minds of others, who steals their very souls? Who is a professional kidnapper? Who swipes every sight, smell, sensation, or overheard conversation like a kid in a candy store, and sometimes *take notes* the better to purloin whole worlds? Who is the premier pickpocket of the arts?

The fiction writer, that's who.

This is a disrespectful vocation by its nature—prying, voyeuristic, kleptomaniacal, and presumptuous. And that is fiction writing at its best. When Truman Capote wrote from the perspective of condemned murderers from a lower economic class than his own, he had some gall. But writing fiction takes gall.

As for the culture police's obsession with "authenticity," fiction is inherently inauthentic. It's fake. It's self-confessedly fake; that is the nature of the form, which is about people who don't exist and events that didn't happen. The name of the game is not whether your novel honours reality; it's all about what you can get away with.

Indeed. In order to represent the immensely varied world in which we live, writers must function as "professional kidnappers," holding a mirror up to diverse nature. Nor does *mimesis* purport to be reality itself ("authenticity"). Further, although we may oppose them, language and cultural practices—no less than eating and drinking, sleeping, and having sex—are contingencies we partake of as a matter of course in the thrownness that is human life. No one asks to be born; every person just finds himself alive. And, though we might make it illegal for a person to "get inside the heads of strangers," people will continue to do so; if they don't represent their imaginings on a page or screen or other medium, they will still at least imagine others, including those who are very unlike themselves.

What is strangest of all, perhaps, since she is said to be a novelist, Kim seems not to understand that all serious artists are absolutely devoted to their art, like James Joyce conning his family and friends into giving him funds so that he could have leisure in which to write. As such, they couldn't be more indifferent to what is right or wrong according to political correctness. They are naturally hungry thieves, seizing upon whatever they find for the sake of their own glorious gain. "What joins all languages, and all men," James Baldwin wrote in a letter to *The New York Times*, "is the necessity to

confront life, in order, not inconceivably, to outwit death: The price for this is the acceptance, and achievement, of one's temporal identity." Temporal identity, in literature, means permanent identity, one's name being etched in the literary firmament. The achievement is remembrance, the lasting acknowledgment of one's greatness. Hence the distinctive pride of the great writers, from Pindar and Dante to Milton and Goethe, from Emily Bronte and Emily Dickinson to Yeats and Bellow. Pindar tells us he is "an eagle soaring sunward." Meanwhile others poets "vainly croak like ravens," or "feed low like chattering crows." This spirit of *agon*, this finest art which, like two boxers in the ring, says, in sum, "I am better than *you*," is the supreme goal, and no serious writer will let political correctness hinder its pursuit.

"People evolve a language," according to Baldwin, "in order to describe and thus control their circumstances, or in order not to be submerged by a reality that they cannot articulate. (And, if they cannot articulate it, they *are* submerged.)" In the end, we are all submerged, submerged by death, unless, that is, our words last, or our deeds do in the form of words. From the impulse of pride to prideful written individuation: that is the writer's path. And like many a great spirit in other fields, it is spurred by ferocious competition. As a student V.S. Naipaul said in a letter to his writer father: "I want to come top of my group. I have got to show these people that I can beat them at their own language." And so that driven artist did. "If you can't take the heat, get outta the kitchen," runs the saying. Kim can't take the heat, and the trouble with people like her is that they therefore assume the kitchen is wrong. But the kitchen is life itself, however one may *feel* about that.

In writing about his life and abusive father, Karl Ove

Knausgaard alienated and offended many members of his family who believed he had violated their privacy. You may believe they are right. Indeed, the writer himself is well-aware of the complexity of the matter, that, in a sense, it is morally problematic. But, in any case, for him as for all other serious writers, the primary value is aesthetic, and therefore not to be subordinated to the value of not offending others, on any grounds. "Any story you can make yours is yours to tell," says Shriver; "in the end, it's about what you can get away with." Yes. The reason is that literature is in essence a verbal construction; like composing a symphony, "what you can get away with" is determined by formal craftsmanship. Among the many forgotten truths in our Glittering Dark Age is that the artist is in essence a high artisan. Being a serious writer, unlike Kim, Shriver takes it for granted that literature is a matter of craft. Hence "the casualness" with which she argued for the writer's freedom from political correctness.

It is revealing that Kim should be so distressed by that casualness. She assumes that Shriver should be a "Decaffeinated Other," to appropriate an apt metaphor from Slavoj Zizek. Finding that she is not, Kim, who seems to be a typical damaged millennial, is jolted into offense. A sensibility this delicate would seem to need serious help, yet I fear that even [Jude Butter](#) herself may not do. Nor can I believe that a person who thinks as Kim does could possibly produce fine creative work. Answerable style she could not obtain. Perhaps she could be an adroit screenwriter of Lifetime movies. Certainly she has a talent for displaying superficial emotion and overblown indignation. For the same reason, a career as a feminist academic would seem to be highly promising for the boring bluestocking.

Great writers, it's long been said, show us what no one else does, but like a man who knows what hunger is and who does not refuse a healthy meal, in order to feed on their nourishment you must be willing and able to interpret their work objectively and without bias. And they themselves must be free to write according to their own vision. Joseph Conrad could not have given us a Congo in which native and colonialist alike are savage if he had been censored from representing things as they are. It is a problem today that people are trained to impose *a priori* political agendas on "texts," rather than reading them on their own terms. It is as though upon making a new friend I should insist that he be like all my other friends, or like me myself. In time this leads to a culture of stunted writers who don't want to say the truth, lest they offend some weak type or other. Such an incoherent approach invariably promotes a politically correct kind of perception, and so, a politically correct kind of evaluation. Very regrettable since a person for whom *Bleak House* is just a means to Marx will naturally be no more disinterested when it comes to "arguing" about abortion, climate change, or whatever. But perhaps close reading of a particular book—as with making sense of complex topics in politics—is simply asking too much of most people. Minds like Christopher Ricks and Marjorie Perloff seem no less rare than the great primary writers.

Those who think denouncing cultural appropriation is a moral good often justify the practice by referencing disparities of political power. So, for instance, it's supposed to be a bad thing for the Anglo-Irishman William Butler Yeats to "appropriate" Japan's Noh theatre, because, as the canting Left would have it, he is writing from a "European tradition" of "cultural hegemony" and "imperialism" (as if Egypt and Assyria, Persia and India, China and Japan knew nothing of imperialism and slavery). Now this belief, it should be

understood, merely *assumes* that cultural domination is wrong, while in view of history, it is much more plausible to hold that such domination is the very essence of politics. Indeed, virtually all nations are founded on conquest and maintain themselves only insofar as they have a strong military defense, a reality that flows from the very nature of our animal existence. "What are all the records of history," asks Dr. Johnson in "The Rambler No. 175," "but narratives of successive villainies, of treasons and usurpations, massacres and wars?" Says Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil*: "Life itself is *essentially* appropriation, injury, conquest of the strange and weak, suppression, severity, obtrusion of peculiar forms, incorporation, and at the least, putting it mildest, exploitation..." In a world of unforgiving competition, all geography is itself one long story of cultural appropriation, one people supplanting another, or else commingling with them even as their success bears testament to what was best in the earlier culture. In short, then, a person who is so bothered by cultural appropriation needs to make a cogent *argument*