

Problematizing The Issue of Cultural Appropriation

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As a feminist cultural worker, I consider the subject of cultural appropriation a fundamental one for me to address. Yet I do so hesitantly.

First, appropriation continues to be a 'hot' topic in the white-dominated media, and since the discussion often focuses on the imaginative 'freedom' of white artists, there is the danger of perpetuating white concerns and obscuring hegemonic relations (Hill, 1992a).

Second, when cultural workers from non-dominant groups argue for autonomy and self-determination, my political instinct is to immediately support such a demand. To speak simply in agreement with and on behalf of marginalized voices can, however, be an attitude of arrogance, and it does not help me, as a white woman, to question aspects of privilege in my own subjectivity and to challenge colonialist and hegemonic practices in the dominant culture. Furthermore, un-interrogated support neither enhances my project of developing a political cultural practice focusing on transformation nor informs a politics of coalition and collaboration.

Third, questions about appropriation interpenetrate other complex issues that flood the field of cultural studies such as identity, difference, voice, representation, universality, and political correctness. None of these issues, either singly or in relationship—do they ever work singly?—are manifested in theory/practice in a simple way. Trying to problematize appropriation feels like a formidable task; it is a highly contested, and possibly overworked terrain. In terms of my own entry into the issue, I think about what

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complications I will forget, omit, obscure, and have time and/or space for in this paper.

Finally, while I am conscious of trying to avoid closure and conclusions in this essay, I will offer critiques, suggest approaches, and inevitably finish the marks of writing on some page to come. I want and need to insert some lucidity and cogency to my wrestling with the issue of cultural appropriation as I also attempt to make space for continuous/contiguous questioning and an ongoing state of mulling and puzzlement. I want to both hold 'appropriation' still and shake it up and shake it down, avoid it and confront it, and to settle in to an opinion and to hold on to a state of ongoing revisions and shifting perspectives. It is within this arena of contradictory tensions that I begin this paper.

With the above cautions, contradictions, and hesitations shadowing my words, I will discuss two approaches to the issue of appropriation, and then I will consider a third theoretical position that is a more complex reading of the issue in its problematizing of power relations. This latter approach draws on feminist and post-structuralist theories¹ and is implicated in my ongoing revisionings/reversionings of my position as a feminist cultural worker.

THE TERM 'APPROPRIATION' AND QUESTIONS OF RESISTANCE

Before turning to viewpoints on appropriation, I will briefly address a few of the varied understandings of the term as it is used in cultural studies. My intent is to indicate the range and complexity of terminology rather than to catalogue the many contexts and meanings of appropriation. In discussing 'resistance,' I emphasize the importance of an analysis of power relations and demonstrate the imbrication of resistance, subversion, and opposition with issues of appropriation and cultural politics.

My focus is on cultural appropriation as it has been addressed in the past three to four years in the context of Canadian cultural production. There has been an emphasis on issues of race, representation, Aboriginal self-determination, and the concerns of non-dominant cultures whose works and artifacts are appropriated by the dominant culture. In this regard, a number of

Toronto-based cultural studies publications including *FUSE*, *Border/Lines*, and *Parallélogramme*, have foregrounded the concern with cultural appropriation.² Todd (1990), for example, has described appropriation through a strategy of opposition: the 'inversion' of cultural appropriation is cultural autonomy. Her emphasis is on origins and self-determination or unmediated Native cultural production. According to Todd, the appropriation of Native culture is an abrogation of difference and a fetishization of the 'Other' such that Native sources become commodities to be desired and valorized with consequences of profit and acclaim for those appropriating. Similarly, Browning (1992) understands appropriation as taking the experiences of 'others,' interpreting them, and materially benefiting from them. In addition to the ongoing attention to appropriation in the various cultural studies journals mentioned above, Toronto-area newspapers have also focused on appropriation,³ often with a link to the political correctness debate.

Popular cultural studies demonstrates different usages of the term 'appropriation.' Some theorists consider appropriation in the context of resistant or oppositional reading practices of audiences. According to Sholle (1990: 90), this 'trend' in popular cultural studies considers "the complex relation of audience pleasures to dominant social structures." Drawing upon Brecht's work, Kipnis (1993) posits a notion of "refunctioning" whereby elements from the dominant culture are appropriated and transformed. This position shares similarities with ideas of pastiche, pirating, and pilfering (Berland, 1993; Hartnett, 1990; Willis, 1990). Lipsitz (1990:99) applies Bakhtin's concept of the dialogic and the importance of social and historical contexts to popular music and suggests that the influence of the past on current rock music is "a dialogic process, one embedded in collective history and nurtured by the ingenuity of artists interested in fashioning icons of opposition." Simon and Giroux (1989:228) associate empowerment and opposition with the appropriation of popular cultural forms:

Popular forms have to be renegotiated and represented in order to appropriate them in the service of self and social empowerment.

This suggests a critical pedagogy disrupting the unity of popular

culture in order to appropriate those elements which enable the voice of dissent while simultaneously challenging the lived experiences and social relations of domination and exploitation.

These approaches are linked by an emphasis on transformation, opposition, and resistance. This notion of 'resistance,' however, needs to be problematized and some of its suppositions require questioning.⁴ Sholle (1990) suggests that the relationship of power, knowledge and resistance is often confused in popular cultural studies. The dominant culture allows for certain forms of resistance but there are also forms that "remain uncoopted by the hegemonic culture" or that "*authentically* [emphasis added] break with the dominant culture" (Sholle, 1990:96). Sholle's intent is to emphasize the need for popular cultural studies to differentiate and analyze forms of resistance. While a consideration of what kinds of resistance are possible within discourses is crucial, setting up a hierarchy of resistance requires coherent and determinate definitions of resistance such that boundaries are fixed and possibilities for opposition are limited and contained. Sholle's point that "the question is not whether or not there is resistance but rather what it is and when it is *significant* [italics added]" also depends on definition (1990: 97). But what is significant? For whom? Who gets to decide? What does/might resistance look like in specific socio-historic conditions? Are there, for instance, 'openings' that point to the possibility of resistance, of producing ourselves as subjects differently? Might resistance be understood as operating on a continuum?

Sholle's critique of Willis's and Corrigan's "trivial" examples of resistance is lodged in what Sholle understands as an unspecified and unproblematized notion of political transformation. Willis's and Corrigan's possibilities for change are read as emotional reactions to regulation rather than as rewritings of discourses. Sholle critiques this work in order to bring a channelled politicization to resistance and to emphasize that shifts in discursive formations are not initiated by emotional reactions. Stressing an analysis of power relations for resistance is important, but dichotomizing affective response from focused resistance does not recognize the complex

interplay of emotion, sensory experience, and corporeality in subversion and opposition (Giroux and Simon, 1989).

I agree with Sholle that it is not enough to merely affirm resistance and understand it as *inherently* political; it must be historicized and politicized. Nevertheless, I would prefer to hold on to a more open concept of what constitutes “political significance” than that found in Sholle’s insistence on locating resistance within a commitment to radical democracy.

In what follows I will critique two fixed and competing views on appropriation that have been at the centre of the cultural appropriation debate, and I will offer more complex and open perspectives that present the possibility of challenging the limits of these first two approaches. I will not address questions about appropriation by focusing on a specific cultural form. Rather, I will reflect on discussions that speak to the issue as it inheres in various forms of cultural production, and I will draw on the responses of writers who, from diverse subject positions, consider appropriation. I remain aware that issues are not identical for all non-dominant groups and in all forms of cultural production. In fact, I will argue for specificity and historicization—how cultural producers and readers are invested in a text at particular socio-historic moments.

CULTURAL APPROPRIATION: CONCERNS ABOUT AUTHENTICITY AND SELF-DETERMINATION

The first view of appropriation is expressed in the following manner: If any dominant group’s form of cultural production uses the ‘voices’ or experiences or materials of an oppressed group, it constitutes appropriation.

One of the difficulties of this view is the underlying assumption that only the oppressed have authenticity. Such a position suggests that “the oppressed express a truth that will win out...[and] language is seen as simply representing reality rather than constructing it” (Razack, 1993:61). As Lather (1991:164) points out, “there is no ‘correct’ line knowable through struggle;” the concerns and the conditions of struggle in any community are constantly shifting and “any useful theories of social change must deal with this fluidity.”

The meanings of texts are lodged in specific historical contexts and cannot be transferred into generalized conclusions about oppressed peoples: "While we need texts that affirm marginalized subject positions, however, it is important to be constantly wary of the dangers of fixing subject positions and meanings beyond the moment when they are politically productive" (Weedon, 1987:172). It is important to stay alert to "how our multiple identities are constructed and played out at any one time in any one context" (Razack, 1993:69).

Another aspect of this view is the implied understanding that marginalized groups will automatically speak to issues of oppression. There are two problems that this raises. The first difficulty is the danger of reducing a work "to theme, to its *about-ness*" since it may be "*about racism* but is not reducible to it" (Srivastava, 1991:30-31). The work of a cultural producer from a non-dominant group is then considered according to how that work speaks to or for the issues of that group. As Weedon (1987:168) points out, however, "the race and ethnic background of a writer does not guarantee the race politics of a text." Trinh (1991:75) also indicates that "there can hardly be such a thing as an essential inside that can be homogeneously represented by all insiders." Concomitant with this view is the demand and expectation to produce work that takes up issues of oppression. In referring to film and video by people of colour,⁵ Verjee (1992:42) notes:

[E]vents are so sporadic and visibility so scarce, artists of colour are received mainly as political representatives, that is, they are expected to speak for and be accountable to their communities. Structural and institutional exclusion and marginalization have meant that people of colour and their work must always bear the weight and burden of the concerns of race and racism. The public role for artists of colour and their work carries this burden of representation regardless of audience. This burden of representation, a condition of the historical marginalization, often means that questions of representation, gender and sexuality are brought forward in reductive ways which foreclose the possibility for critical dialogue.

Adopting the view that appropriation occurs whenever a dominant group uses the 'voice' of an oppressed group demands a confinement to instituting a prescriptive approach with rules and guidelines. A policing that continues a colonialist perspective is then required. Prescriptions, being unenforceable, do nothing to challenge systemic racism and do not guarantee opportunities for the works of non-dominant cultural producers to be heard. Furthermore, the policing approach provides a convenient hook for white, middle-class writers to vent their outrage about censorship, shout for artists' rights, and ignore racism issues (Philip, 1990a).

In addition, cultural producers with various privileges of access and acclaim can conveniently ignore any critical analysis when they take on the role of ally or adopt a simplistic form of support for those marginalized peoples struggling against appropriation. This is reflected in 'offering' a space for the 'Other' to speak, or unproblematically getting caught up in "waves of benevolence" (Spivak, 1990:63). Trinh (1991:72) illuminates this point:

This is akin to saying that a non-white view is desirable because it would help to fill in a hole that whites are now *willing* to leave more or less empty so as to lessen the critical pressure and to give the illusion of a certain incompleteness that needs the native's input to be more complete, but is ultimately dependent on white authority to attain any form of 'real' completion. Such a 'charity' mission is still held up with much righteousness by many, and despite the many changing appearances it has taken through the years, the image of the white colonial Saviour seems more pernicious than ever since it operates now via consent.

Furthermore, when white artists dismiss charges of appropriation by responding with an 'I'm-on-your-side' response, they conveniently ignore their place in white cultural domination. In articulating this point, Hill (1992a:14) refers to an artist's letter in FUSE:

Andy Fabo's question, "Are we really the enemy?" ... seems to use the position of the alternative artist to deny his legacy of White power as well. Am I saying, "You are the enemy?" I don't think the issue is that simple to delineate. My point is that you are inheritors of a complex and diverse power structure that can't be undone simply because you are innocently good-intentioned.

Hill's comments have generated angry responses from a number of white artists who, either in Hill's essay or in that of an earlier one by Native artist Joanne Cardinal-Shubert, had been challenged about their appropriation of Native cultures. In the case of the artist group, Fastwürms, their response focuses on the artists' affinity with Native politics, particularly their respect for Native spirituality and support for Native sovereignty. Concomitant with this position is their accusation to Hill of lying; Fastwürms (1992:4) calls for distinguishing "truth from lies, fact from fiction, a good argument from a bad one." Hill's letter in response is important because it critiques Fastwürms on their claim to truth identification and their insistence on being able to name themselves as subjects outside of their locations and histories, that is as a "non-western culture" (Hill, 1992b:5).

Both Hill's and Fastwürm's letters address a range of issues, not all of which can be addressed here. However, I find Hill's letter, with its emphasis on power relations and questions of access to resources, an important critical analysis. Nevertheless, I have to question Hill's insistence on the evidence and authority of 'experience' to argue for his originary and unquestionable knowledge as a Native person. This argument forecloses an analysis of the construction of subjectivity and an investigation of discursive formations. As Scott (1992:25) argues:

When experience is taken as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject...becomes the bedrock of evidence upon which explanation is built. Questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one's vision is structured—about

language (or discourse) and history—are left aside. The evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world.

In summary, fixed notions of communities and a fixed understanding of oppressed/oppressor require ignoring “those with hyphenated identities and hybrid realities” (Trinh, 1991:73):

Community, then is the product of work, or struggle; it is inherently unstable, contextual; it has to be constantly reevaluated in relation to critical political priorities; and it is the power of interpretation, interpretation based on an attention to history, to the concrete, to what Foucault has called subjugated knowledges. (Martin and Mohanty, 1986:210)

CULTURAL APPROPRIATION: CONCERNS ABOUT FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

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A second contemporary view constructs the issue of appropriation as a plot from the camp of the politically correct. Some white, male, middle-class writers, with their privileged access to different media forms and with the support of the media status quo, have been particularly vociferous in their objection to the idea of appropriation of ‘voice.’ In opposition to the first view, this stance is lodged in concerns about censorship and freedom of imagination. In a series of articles and letters in the *Globe and Mail* about the Canada Council’s position regarding appropriation, the newspaper has foregrounded concerns about restriction, constraint, manipulation, and what one headline for ten letters sharing similar outrage about censorship calls “Frightening Attack on the Imagination” (*Globe and Mail*, March 28, 1992:D7). Without entering the debate about the Canada Council’s policies,⁶

I will nevertheless address the questions of censorship and artistic freedom raised in this view of cultural appropriation.

In writing about the appropriation of Native stories, Lenore Keeshig-Tobias (1991:174) states that "white Canadians cry censorship and decry self-censorship." Trinh (1991:231) suggests:

The focus in censorship debates has repeatedly been the legal defense and protection of white male artists' privilege of exhibiting works whose explicit/implicit racial or sexist stance is stridently ignored. The colonialist creed "Divide and Conquer" will persist as long as issues of censorship, racism, and sexism continue to be treated as unrelated.

Philip (1990a:210) links these issues into a comprehensive critique of how "one discourse, censorship, becomes privileged; the other, racism, is silenced." When questions of power and privilege are ignored, racist practices are perpetuated. The debate has to move away from the individual concerns of cultural producers who demand that they must use any experience they choose for realizing their creative expression. Instead, what is needed is an examination of the institutionalized forces and interstices of power that privilege some cultural producers at the expense of others (Giroux, 1992; Philip, 1990a).

In considering the view that stridently argues for the dominant culture's right to freedom of expression, one must question who is really being 'censored.' As mentioned above, attacks levied against considerations of appropriation are often articulated as censorship coming from the 'politically correct.' Yet as Schulman (1991:19) points out:

One empowered individual's discriminatory speech can rob an entire group of people of their 'right' to speak. By valuing absolute speech rights above civil rights, PC-trouncers are helping reseal the silence of those who, historically, have had the least access to speech, just as that access was being forged.... Silencing

disenfranchised voices is the most effective way to prevent real social change.

Hill (1992a) and Keeshig-Tobias (1990) argue that a complaint by non-Natives of censorship fails to recognize the censorship of Native culture that occurs as a result of Native peoples' difficulty in accessing media attention as well as the ongoing representation of their cultures by non-Natives. Churchill (1992:41), quoting former American Indian Movement leader Russell Means, observes that what is really at stake in the appropriation of Native spirituality is the very existence of Native people. 'Ripping off' Native culture is an act of "cultural genocide."

The penultimate argument for freedom of expression comes from Findley (*Globe and Mail*, March 28, 1992:D7): "I imagine—therefore I am." The unquestioned arrogance of this position from a writer with all the privileges of funding, innumerable published works, the authorization to determine cultural issues, critical acclaim, and a valorized reputation obscures an understanding of exactly whose imagination is 'free.' What is 'obvious' to Philip (1990a:215) is clearly not apparent to those who argue for a non-critical praise of imagination: "To state the obvious, in a racist, sexist and classist society, the imagination, if left unexamined, can and does serve the ruling ideas of the time." Maracle (1990) argues that justifying the appropriation of Native stories by arguing for freedom of imagination is a racist strategy.

Concomitant to the argument for unfettered imagination, free rein to any subject matter, and imagining and using the 'voice' of an 'Other' regardless of the particular historical conditions of oppression and colonization, is the universalizing of knowledge. Churchill (1992) points out that non-Natives who usurp aspects of Native spirituality for their own work often argue for their right to spiritual freedom when they are confronted with the charge of appropriation. Thus, Native spirituality becomes universalized such that non-Natives have the right to adopt its practices and beliefs. In the context of histories whereby Eurocentric culture has obliterated indigenous cultures, for

a white person to argue "what's yours also belongs to me" perpetuates racist and colonialist practices.

In discussing the siege on Native culture, both Todd (1990) and Kulchyski (1992) analyze the intersections of politics and culture. They point to some of the historic practices that have led to current cultural conflicts and particular resistances by Native peoples. In tracing the history of the State definition of 'Indian' in Canada, Kulchyski discusses how the legislation designed to enfranchise and define Canadian peoples also served to provide a space of subversion whereby Native people could use the legislated definition of difference to underline their distinct status. Kulchyski (1992:180) notes: "Marginality became in part a position from which aboriginal culture could resist totalizing power." He also details the attack in the late 19th and early 20th centuries on particular Native cultural practices such as the potlatch and the sundance, and describes ongoing Native opposition to policies designed to silence Native culture.

106 Todd (1990) similarly argues that Native peoples' resistance to cultural domination must be understood in a socio-historic context. She links the concern with cultural appropriation to the concept of Aboriginal Title and suggests that for Native peoples the issue is not merely a new media focus but an awareness lodged in historic colonialism. Aboriginal Title becomes the opening whereby negotiation "with the colonizers" is made possible, and "it asserts a reality that existed without European mediation, before Native peoples were positioned as Other" (Todd, 1990:32).

Finally, this second view of appropriation focuses on cultural producers who disregard issues of privilege. Power relations cannot be taken for granted. The privileges of access to funding, of getting work produced, and of receiving critical attention determine how the issue of appropriation will be framed. In other words, those artists in positions of power vis-à-vis access will often raise issues that address the undermining of their privileges. Schulman (1991:20) puts this point forward as a question: "How do certain privileges that we might have access to determine which issues we pursue, and how does this pursuit make the needs of those with no such access invisible?"

Spivak (1988:117) urges a concern for “the theory practice of pedagogic practice-theory that would allow us constructively to question privileged explanations even as explanations are generated.” These privileges are rooted in an “absence of understanding how the silencing of the many enables the few to become the articulators and disseminators of knowledge and culture” (Philip, 1990a:217).

Philip also suggests that ‘social responsibility’ must accompany privilege such that cultural producers will take action: whether it involves a decision not to appropriate ‘voice’ or it “impels them to do something else, but they ought to be impelled to do *something*” (1990a:218). Most importantly, cultural producers must recognize that in a classist, racist, homophobic, and sexist society writing “about rather than out of another culture” (Philip, 1990a:218) guarantees more access and attention for the privileged few.

(RE:)SHIFTING AN APPROACH TO CULTURAL APPROPRIATION: PROBLEMS AND QUESTIONS

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The two approaches to appropriation that I have pried open here are oppositional views that tend to foreclose critical interrogation. Drawing on arguments from a number of sources, it is possible to suggest a critical approach that avoids fixed responses and claims, and instead adds complexity to the issue of appropriation by raising questions of difference (i.e. insider/outsider boundaries), historicization, and ways of thinking about transforming power relations. Foucault (1982:791-792) points to an understanding of power relations that underlines critical analysis, historicity, and the possibility of social change:

Power relations are rooted deep in the social nexus, not reconstituted ‘above’ society as a supplementary structure whose radical effacement one could perhaps dream of.... A society without power relations can only be an abstraction. Which, be it said in passing, makes all the more politically necessary the analysis of power relations in a given society, their strength or fragility, the

conditions which are necessary to transform some or to abolish others. For to say that there cannot be a society without power relations is not to say either that those which are established are necessary, or, in any case, that power constitutes a fatality at the heart of societies, such that it cannot be undermined. Instead, I would say that the analysis, elaboration, and bringing into question of power relations and the 'agonism' between power relations and the intransitivity of freedom is a permanent political task inherent in all social existence.

Appropriation occurs within a social context that reaps rewards for some and disenfranchises others. Benefits accrue to those in the dominant culture who view knowledge as universal, who ignore the painful complexities of hegemonic relations. Giroux (1992:234) has noted that it is important to interrogate "how dominant configurations of power privilege some cultures over others, how power works to secure forms of domination that marginalize and silence subordinated groups."

Delpit's (1988) notion of the rules which encode the "culture of power" is helpful here. For those 'outside' this field, learning the rules makes for the possibility of acquiring power. Arguing for strategies of access is a recommendation to learn rules; change rules; break rules; and create new, multiple, non-rule possibilities for change. It is also a recognition of the importance of analyzing forms of regulation and resistance in discursive formations. Neither Delpit nor those theorists positing a need for a consideration of access are advocating a world where all cultural groups should learn the codes and rules of the dominant culture. Rather, their point is to remain aware of, and alert to, the shifts and changes in power relations in the field of cultural politics and to ask about who gets to speak, under what conditions, and with what consequences (Black and Morris, 1992; Fung, 1992-93; Hill, 1992a; Philip, 1990a).⁸ Kulchyski (1992:177-178) illuminates this issue in his discussion of the subversive practices of Native peoples:

Resistance involves constructing enclaves of culture within the established order, of finding space within the interstices of power, of controlling the pace and nature of links with the dominant social organization and culture, of adapting Western technology to pre-capitalist social relations, of taking the tools offered by the State and capital and using them to strengthen rather than destroy primitive culture.

An examination of where concerns about 'voice' lie, and how power and privilege are positioned to serve the 'right' of the dominant culture are issues that must be considered. It is imperative to ask why the 'ability' to use the 'voice' of non-dominant cultures is usually an ability of those from a dominant culture and not the reverse. It is also important to note that the ability to do so is fuelled by racist, sexist, and capitalistic practices and is accompanied by privilege:

It is an ability which serves that privilege. It is, in fact, that very privilege that is the enabling factor in the transformation of what is essentially an exercise of power into a right. That right in turn becomes enshrined and privileged in the ideology servicing the society in general. The 'right' to use the voice of the Other has, however, been bought at great price—the silencing of the Other; it is, in fact, neatly posited on that very silencing. It is also a right that exists without accompanying obligation, and a right without an accompanying obligation can only lead to abuse. (Philip, 1990a:212)

What I find useful in Philip's discussion of racism and censorship is her clarity about how a racist society serves to support individualized notions of cultural production and how racism will inevitably be reflected in cultural work (Philip, 1990a; 1990b). Appropriation is not about individual rights. Philip wrestles with questions about whose discourse is served, and asks what, where, why, and how "techniques and tactics of domination" (Foucault, 1980:102) are at work.

Drawing upon the work of Said, Lather (1991:33) also links oppression with questions of representation:

It is "the formidable difficulties of empire" that are at the root of the crisis of representation and the consequent paradoxes of producing and legitimating knowledge in a post-foundational context. To challenge canons, to expose systems of power which authorize some representations while blocking others—this has been part of the self-proclaimed task of the uprising of the marginalized, the silenced, the ex-centrics.

Issues of representation require a complex analysis concomitant with questions of access and an imbrication of anti-racist issues with those of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. All of these concerns require specificity: a consideration of their interplay at particular socio-historic moments can suggest transformative possibilities for the future.

Further layering and complications are introduced with a problematizing of notions of 'absolute reality' and an 'authentic outsider' such that a space is provided whereby rigid definitions of insider/outsider can be questioned, locations of difference can be understood as fluid rather than fixed, and definitions or categories of cultural identity can be interrogated. As Trinh (1991:76) asserts: "I' is not unitary, culture has never been monolithic, and more or less is always more or less in relation to a judging subject."

A difficulty with the position that insists on all-encompassing notions of self-determination and community is its link to essentialism, identity politics based on rigid parameters, and a search for and belief in autonomy. In the call for a fixed, determined, and defined position, another 'truth' is offered up to replace other fixed approaches. There is an assumption that this position can stand autonomous from the complex imbrication of discursive formations. But any theoretical approach both produces, and is produced by, various discourses that intersect at particular historical moments.

A fixed notion of community is at stake when a political space is demarcated such that any dominant group's form of cultural production that

uses the material of a non-dominant group is understood as cultural appropriation. A number of questions then emerge. If this response to appropriation requires a consistent and unified community 'voice,' is there any space for questioning and dissenting positions? Who has the authority to name the parameters of appropriation and decide if a work 'fits' or not? Are voices of disagreement silenced when, with so much at stake, a community is in struggle to challenge painful inequities in cultural areas such as education, funding, dissemination, and critical attention? Are there multiple ways to make meaning in collectivity rather than merely representing unity? Can contradiction, dissent, and tension enhance and create, rather than threaten political possibilities? How can political alliances be shaped that avoid a collapse into unified identity? How can coalition, collaboration, and community politics encourage multiple points of entry? While engaged in the concrete struggles of everyday life, can an approach of ongoing critical attention be emphasized such that "a single discourse does not become the locus of certainty and certification" (Giroux and Simon, 1989:24)?

In order for communities and groups to engage in counter-hegemonic and resistant cultural practices and make claims on the economic and cultural monopolies of the dominant culture, the idea of 'appropriation' requires acts of definition. There is always the inherent danger, however, that parameters will be established whereby what fits or does not fit becomes determined and policed, and what is legitimate and can be promoted becomes fixed and enshrined. A helpful strategy is to adopt "a willingness to recognize that a representation may 'mean' differently in place, in moment, and in particular minds" (Lubiano, 1991:159).⁹ An analysis of cultural appropriation needs ongoing complication, restructuring, and refocusing.

In her consideration of appropriation, Verjee (1992:46) argues for movement "forward through critical dialogue rather than reverting to reductive analyses." I understand critical dialogue as that which emphasizes the interrogation of social and historic conditions and examines relationships of power and knowledge (Foucault, 1980; Weedon, 1987). Weedon's descrip-

tion of a feminist post-structuralist framework is pertinent for problematizing the issue of cultural appropriation. Such an approach

...addresses subjectivity, discourse and power in an attempt to show that we need not take established meanings, values and power relations for granted. It is possible to demonstrate where they come from, whose interests they support, how they maintain sovereignty and where they are susceptible to specific pressures for change. (Weedon, 1987:74-75)

With the above considerations in mind, how might bases of power be shifted? Keeshig-Tobias (1990:177), for example, suggests that "there comes a time when...all white supporters of Native causes will have to step back...and let the real Native voices be heard." Remembering Trinh's cautions raised around the 'authentic' subject, I question how a 'real' Native 'voice' can be unproblematically identified. Concomitantly, however, I am suspicious of plunging into a wave of circular questions while avoiding actions that might engage the possibility of transforming power relations. However, to conclude with only an open call to action here would be an inappropriate gesture.

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This propels me to introduce two reservations about the conceptual shifts I am attempting to map out in this paper, and I would suggest that they are related. First, while I am problematizing the notion of cultural appropriation and reworking its theoretical frames of reference, I am also holding on to the strategic use of the term for cultural politics. Appropriation has concrete material effects for particular groups of people engaged in cultural practices. At the beginning of this paper, I mentioned that I was entering its terrain from sites of contradictory tensions, and one of the tensions is situated in my investments in both sustaining and problematizing 'cultural appropriation.' Second, although I have pointed to the importance of attending to the specific historical relations, conditions, and possibilities of cultural production, I have not focused on one particular case in detail. Attention to cultural appropriation in terms of one cultural text and the specific configurations of

its production and reception would provide a concrete way to think through the dilemma of both problematizing and sustaining 'cultural appropriation.'

In conclusion, the issue requires ongoing questions and a layered critique rather than quick-draw solutions. Instead of avoiding or erasing the term 'cultural appropriation,' I choose to underline its contested meanings and provisional uses: to think of the term as "a site of permanent openness and resignifiability" (Butler, 1992:16). Appropriation "has to be kept alive as a *problem* [italics added]" (Spivak, 1990:63): as a theoretical and political problem.

Wrestling with the queries of this paper is not an abstract exercise. In terms of my own practices, I wonder how to establish a political subject, 'feminist cultural worker,' that does not foreclose notions of what constitutes 'feminist' and 'cultural worker.' I want to build a transformative, oppositional cultural politics¹⁰ based on collaboration, collectivity, and community that rewrites potentialities for the future. In doing so, I want to stay open to ongoing shifts in, and challenges to, notions of resistance, identity, difference, and coalition. If fluidity and complexity in meaning-making are erased, possibilities and potentialities for social change and transformation will be diminished.

NOTES

1. I am not suggesting that I have drawn from a singular and coherent body of work in these fields. Both feminism and post-structuralism are highly varied and contested terrains and their interplay is complex. But it is their interplay that interests me for thinking through questions of subjectivity, discourse, the production of knowledge, power relations, resistance, and social change.
2. *FUSE*, in particular, has published numerous articles that either focus on, or pay some attention to, cultural appropriation. A recent issue (Summer, 1993) takes cultural appropriation as its theme.
3. See, for example, Conlogue (1992), Godfrey (1992), and Ross (1991).
4. This discussion is, of necessity, brief and it does not take into account how the category of 'resistance' is used in analyses other than that of cultural studies, such as in feminist and

post-structuralist theories. For the latter, see Alonso (1992: 404-425), Foucault (1982), Game (1991), MacLeod (1992), Mohanty (1992), and Pathak and Rajan (1992). An attention to resistance, however, is significant for theorizing political cultural practices as well as the relationship of audiences to cultural texts.

5. In his essay, Fung (1992-93) discusses the problems associated with the phrase 'people of colour' and refers to a number of sources for an examination of terminology. I use the phrase here in the context of Verjee's use of it.

6. For a comprehensive analysis of arts councils, see Bailey (1992) who also includes letters by Faith Nolan, Alan Gotlieb, Marlene Nourbese Philip, and Anne Collins.

7. A recent issue of the *Journal of Communication* (1992) focuses on political correctness and the implications for communication studies. Lawrence Grossberg, Everette Dennis, and a number of other writers point out that political correctness does not have a fixed, coherent or consistent interpretation and that diverse understandings and questions inform the terrain of this term.

8. Paul Willis (1990:3) suggests that non-dominant groups may also engage in resistance to strategies of access:

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It may be that certain kinds of symbolic creativity in the expressive and communicative activity of 'disadvantaged' groups exercise their uses and economies in precisely eluding and evading formal recognition, publicity and the possible control by others of their own visceral meanings.

9. As Fung (1992-93:50) points out, "there is no absolute representational remedy."

10. As I write this, I feel a need to interrogate my understandings of 'transformation,' 'cultural politics,' and my engagement in a struggle for social transformation. That project and its theorization and embodiment is continual and will have to be the subject of other writings.

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