

# Against Cultural Appropriation

## by Karmenlara Ely

### Burying myself alive

I have a recurring dream, a nightmare. A secret grave chamber is found underneath the stage of a theatre, under layers of construction. Boxes of trash, liquor bottles, oil barrels, plastic toys, relics and, horrifyingly, body parts of people both long and recently dead collected in crates and garbage bags, their severed limbs in a pile. Some are still breathing, but I cannot allow myself to look. My relatives are there, and strangers. Like a garbage dump, the architecture rots with the purpose of burying things out of sight for generations. If dreaming can be described as an agency, then this nightmare dreams me through its repetition. In the dream I am incapable of rage, only shame. *How can I hide from this archive of violences? If I just sleep forever, will it disappear?* It is as though I myself have done the killing: dismemberment of bodies in a museum of hurt, a library of abuses, trinkets and crimes six feet under the stage. It is as if I too, am one of the victims.

Even though it's impossible to have done this crime, I have. And I am.

In search of a home in the theatre, and in the street, I have performed, masqueraded, stolen, even eaten of these sins, both unspeakable and sacred. The grave chamber in my dreams breathes shame because it is both epic and real. It is a living archive, not just of me, but everyone who came before me, all that I have lost and gained through them. Loss is the American archive I have inherited through my relatives from both indigenous and European roots, with their own competing narratives of historical trauma and survival. The archive is my material, and yet I do not own it, it escapes me, and I am unequipped to represent it. Through performance I have met elders, artists from various geographies, both at home and abroad, whose vision I have served, danced with, and learned from in redefining belonging. Learning to dance with the dead, the living, the shame. The privilege. Healing. I own nothing, claim nothing, except my gratitude. My work is to serve those relations through artistic practice. I learn by listening that I alone have created nothing but am responsible for everything. And that every landscape a theatre is built on might be on fire with bodies inside. Because I cannot sleep forever, I am left with thinking.

### The trouble with Modernity

The first performances on American soil were the performances of the over 500 tribes of First Nations people who inherited and shaped the land called Turtle Island, in the face of genocide and colonization. The first American stage constructions were slave auction blocks, performances were forced. All architecture – for theatre or commerce, has since been built upon the graves, archives and eternal voices of our relatives who endured. There are no theatres in the Americas without this subtext, especially for African diasporic and Native peoples. As a guest in this country, I wonder, what are the contemporary theatres of Norway, or Scandinavia and even Europe built on? What economies are hiding under the floorboards? How do they shape cycles of repetition we are calling tradition or innovation: “post-dramatic” or even “post-contemporary”? Who is silenced, there? Who is responsible? Do we seek our sources of tragedy outside the stage, or is it always already there? And most importantly: Whose testimony do we consider expert in answering these questions today?

Our institutions are haunted by Modernity, deeply hungover from its fantasy, which arguably began over 500 years ago. *Artist as genius* is really the *artist as appropriator*, *artist as pioneer*, *as mapmaker*, *artist as explorer*, masked. The archetypes of the Modernist genius, the solo inventor, the cowboy on the horizon, artist as brand, has constructed us together, America and Europe. Both continents are intertwined precariously with the rest of the world through a shared economy built out of slave labor, genocide and trade of stimulants and people. The artist, when imagined as hero, genius, messiah, hipster – is doomed, against their own best interest, to repeat colonizing gestures. Appropriation cloaked as innovation risks erasure and silencing of alternative art-futures. Art-futures that we cannot yet imagine from our position, because of this blindness.

### Appropriation continues the Doctrine of Discovery

Cultural appropriation at its worst re-performs genocidal gestures, because it imagines a world where the native expert is disappeared. Appropriation avoids citation, self-reflection and critical dialogue. Yet these reflections, especially citation, are the real content of all material processes rooted in community, both indigenous and otherwise. Appropriation refuses attention to the nightmare, the mass graves of Modernity and the future of living resistance. There are vibrant editorials written recently on the appropriation debate that identify its problematic. Older, but more foundational is “Working Through Appropriation” by Trinidadian author Richard Fung, writing in Toronto in 1993: “The primary dictionary meaning of the verb appropriate is ‘to take and use as one’s own’...there are no unique, pure cultures today; people have steadily learned the ways of others and taken them as their own...most of what we think

of as culture involves some degree of appropriation. Foods, religions, languages and clothes all betray contacts with a larger world, which includes our closest neighbours, as well as distant imperial centres. There are no clear boundaries where one culture ends and another begins. But while some of this fusion may be celebrated as exchange, a larger proportion is the result of domination...The critique of cultural appropriation is therefore first and foremost a strategy to redress historically established inequities by raising questions about who controls and benefits from cultural resources” (16-24).

For 16 years, the United Nations has been working on a law that would protect the rights of indigenous communities from this exploitation. Author/artist Murielle Borst-Tarrant (Kuna/Rappahannock) is a member of the *United Nations’ Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues*, studying the historic legal construct *Doctrine of Discovery*. The foundation of the *Doctrine* over 500 years ago promoted international control, dominance and appropriation of indigenous peoples and lands based on the claim that those who are not Christian are not human. The following is from Borst-Tarrant’s paper given at *International Day of World’s Indigenous Peoples, 2011*: “The neo-classical design of the non-indigenous Western framework is perceived as a cultural norm. We need to promote reform in the arena of arts policies and cultural advocacy to indigenous methodologies and cosmologies that are the central core of indigenous arts practices rooted in indigenous cultural knowledge. The challenge lies in asserting that indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their own cultural heritage, including the visual and performing arts.”

Neo-liberal voices silencing native arguments against cultural appropriation as merely “political correctness” or “cultural policing”, violently reassert the ethic of the heinous *Doctrine*. It reveals a stronghold of outdated institutional artistic privilege, which historically has a position of unchallenged, unrestricted access in the name of innovation. There is a tendency in neoliberal society to conflate cultural appropriative acts and cultural backdropping with “cultural exchange”, but no equity or dialogue is involved. The *Doctrine* is a centuries-old licence to pilfer the culture of marginalized communities without consent, a right which defined Modernity. We must tear it down. Look instead to the powerful, critical artistic works, witty re-appropriative acts and activisms of community leaders as equal partners in the international artistic landscape. To quote Thomas Talawa Prestø, Artistic Director of the Tabanka Dance Ensemble, “If you have nothing of your own to say, be silent and step to the side so someone with something to say may speak. Using our cultures to silence our voices and superimpose your own is old, it has been done, and has nothing to do with contemporaneity.” Under every stage are living archives in various stages of vibrant decay, mourning, renewal, revolt and healing.

### It’s not about morality

Blindness to the violent impact of the *Doctrine* on the international art scene is not from a lack of moral political compasses. Our marketplace is far too much in love with Victorian morality and the image of an educated and “socially engaged artist” as hero. We lack equitable relations. We lack weakness and anonymity. Willingness to give space, time and flesh to uncomfortable spaces. To allow ourselves to be beginners. Relations, with actual risk, critical encounter and dialogue, stand in opposition to appropriative acts. The term “weak actor” comes to mind (perhaps the opposite of the hero or protagonist) as it is used in the research of Tuija Kokkonen. She presents, in her PhD research at UniArts Helsinki, a theory of post-human performative action emerging from practices binding “weak actors” and non-human actors as co-performers in an ethics of hospitality to “create a new kind of polis”. I like thinking with the idea of the “weak actor” instead of the innovator. It is a way to think critically about appropriation, because a “weak action” exists through acknowledging interdependency and intimacy. Camilla Eeg-Tverbakk’s PhD dissertation proposes an equally compelling live form for practicing ethics, which she calls *teater ting*. Eeg-Tverbakk rethinks the impact of appropriating the testimony of others, and the imminent sovereignty of “things” in documentary work. She calls for an “ethics of the unknown” with care and acknowledgement of agencies, dreams, experiences “I am not able to grasp and comprehend from my perspective” (2016). Both of these contributions are examples of thinking hospitable to an alternative art-future emerging from Nordic artistic research.

### Post-Modernity is still Modernity

All work begins and end with relations, therefore the work and the questions of accountability are never finished. The nightmare is a call. Identifying who we are in the work and what relations we are making is foundational ethics as ground. If I find myself faced with material from an archive outside my experience, it’s a call to put myself in question with a living expert from the tradition, and risk finding out I have nothing to give. To risk belonging, to risk the nakedness of community, to risk losing. We are in a time of resistance, change and dreaming new art-futures where diasporic and indigenous peoples are the emerging leaders. Our future lies in the yet unlearned vocabulary and methods that destabilize modernity and its psychic hold on us. Our attachment to the “new”, the so-called *avant* and its cynical relationship to territory, production, and consumer capitalism is failing us. *The empty white or black box has a trash heap just outside the window*. Can we artists, at our best, practice a slower ethics? Are we able to be beginners? Artists are capable of decentralizing power, rather than heroically imitating the desires of institutions to grow as a brand. As a theatre educator, I know that unless I am part

of a destabilizing and decolonizing process myself, I am doing nothing but rushing towards an aestheticized nowhere, an architectural nightmare.

### References

Eeg-Tverbakk, Camilla (2016), *Theatre – ting: toward a materialist practice of staging documents*, PhD dissertation. London: University of Roehampton.  
Fung, Richard (2013), “Working Through Appropriation”, in FUSE, summer 1993, V. XVI n 5+6, p. 16-24.

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