

# CULTURAL APPROPRIATION, BIS: WHITE CRITICS, STAY AWAY FROM YOLANDA BONNELL'S *BUG!*

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It was in 1976 when I first went to Hungary, at that time of the Cold War a country « behind the iron curtain », as the saying went. I attended the conference of the International Society for Comparative Literature that took place in Budapest, at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. I remember two – somehow intriguing – things from that event. The first was how the elegant dark Mercedes of Western tourists were mixed up with the elegant dark Wartburgs, in which the Hungarian officials used to be taxied to the Academy. The other one was at Lake Balaton, one of the participants' excursion sites, where East Germans and West Germans met in the shallow waters; in their bathing suits they were just all Germans without any iron curtain between them.

Did I already know Kati at that time? – I don't think so. When did we then first meet? – I don't remember. But I remember that in the 80ies she was a visiting scholar in my research group on Cultural Recycling at the University of Montreal. And that her son Szilárd, had her buy a good collection of different cereals, impressed as he was by the Western capitalist

culture of abundance. Later on, Kati invited me back to Hungary for a series of lectures. On one trip, I visited her at her house in Szeged, where we could admire a statue of Lukacs in her garden; her husband had just acquired it for a ridiculous price, and thus saved it from destruction just after the fall of the iron curtain. Later on, on another trip, again in Szeged, she had me listen to the sound of the NATO jets flying very high in the night sky, and heading for their targets further down in Yugoslavia. Since then, her scientific engagement in Canadian Studies brought her nearly every year to Montreal, where our scholarly exchanges developed also into a friendship.

During my 1993/94 sabbatical in Berlin, I met her again in the capital of the then reunited Germany. When she came to visit there, I discovered her special interest in theatre and accepted her guidance in the rich theatrical world of Berlin.

I am not a specialist on theatre, and even less of Canadian Studies, although I have also published on Canadian literature and art.<sup>1</sup> But why not take advantage of a highly disputed issue that came up very recently in and on Canadian theatre to write a short study for this special volume to honor Katalin Kürtösi. This topic fits also my interests as a researcher, because it falls into the problematic field of “cultural appropriation” on which I have published two scholarly pieces in 1995.<sup>2</sup> Hence my title, “Cultural appropriation bis”.

So, yes, in Canada we are at it again. Or rather we never resolved the question of, nor the dispute on cultural appropriation. In a brief history of this debate, I propose to distinguish three moments of its emergence and resurgence.

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<sup>1</sup> „Nouvelles formes d’art et d’expérience artistique dans une culture en transit : les promenades de Janet Cardiff”, *Intermédialités. Histoire et théorie des arts, des lettres et des techniques* 8 (numéro 15, printemps 2010) : 231-250; „Nikolski, un roman pan-canadien de la littérature québécoise: mobilités culturelles dans le texte romanesque”, in Ivete L. C. Walty, Maria Zilda F. Cury and Sandra Regina G. Almeida (eds.), *Mobilidades culturais: agentes e processos*, Belo Horizonte: Veredas & Cenários, 2009, 285-334; „Difracciones barrocas en la obra de Jana Sterbak”, in *Jana Sterbak, De la performance al vídeo*, catalogue d’exposition, Vitoria-Gasteiz : Artium, Centro-Museo Vasco de Arte Contemporanea, 2006, 28-37; „Récits de migration interne et externe dans la littérature canadienne anglaise”, in Goulart Almeida, S. R. (ed.) *Perspectivas Transnacionais*, Belo Horizonte : ABECAN/Faculdade de Letras UFMS, 2005, 79-98.

<sup>2</sup> „L’appropriation culturelle”, *Discours social/Social Discourse* 7 (1-2 1995): 83-105 and „Kulturelle Aneignung. Eine kulturpolitische Debatte in Kanada”, *Weimarer Beiträge* 41 (3 1995): 325-354.

### 1) AT THE BEGINNING OF THE '90IES.

The underlying issue, at that moment, was the relationship between the “dominant” mainstream culture, and culture industry, to use a term coined by members of the Frankfurt School, the relationship of the “White Man” and the “dominated” culture of aboriginal people in Canada. It was the Canada Council for the Arts that took the initiative to give its Advisory Committee for Racial Equality the mandate to investigate that relationship and to come forth with recommendations. The issue at stake was cultural appropriation, with all its dimensions: purely artistic and aesthetic but also ethical and political, and last but not least economic. Among the examples circulating at that time in the media: a white actor wearing a red face to play an “Indian” in a movie produced and exploited by a white movie maker and company; professional sport clubs using an aboriginal emblem to identify themselves, such as the Black Hawks; ethnographical and anthropological museums buying up aboriginal sacred bundles to show them to a predominantly “white” public; Emily Carr representing in her paintings elements belonging to the aboriginal Haida culture; the white québécois painter Lyne Robichaud had her painting representing a black woman rejected from the exhibition “Celebrating Women – Global Connection”.

After two years of deliberations, the Committee presented its final report recommending to legally regulate, if not to outright prohibit, cultural appropriation. This triggered a large debate in Canadian media. Some voices sided with the recommendation to fight against the “cultural sin” of appropriation, some made fun of it, and some radicalized the offence and decided to extend and to apply it to any kind of binary difference: from culture to culture, from race to race, from gender to gender, etc.

The debate came also up with definitions, of which I would like to recall two here, both appeared in *The Toronto Star*. The first, a serious one, on June 8, 1992:

Cultural appropriation is understood to be taking – from a culture that is not one’s own – intellectual property, cultural expressions and artifacts, history and ways of knowledge, and profiting at the expense of the people of that culture.

And the second one, on April 11, 1992, parodying the biblical phrasing of the Ten Commandments: “You shalt not appropriate the culture/voice/experience of others – if you haven’t lived it, you can’t write it/film it/paint it.” My attitude and evaluation regarding many aspects of this debate was skeptical and critical in 1995. And it still is in 2020. To come to a better understanding, I broke the problem of cultural appropriation down into five different “offenses” that were implied: against 1) truth and truthfulness in representation; 2) correct understanding and interpretation; 3) ethical and moral values; 4) property rights; 5) political rights or righteousness (or correctness<sup>3</sup>). All these offenses include debatable considerations. Yet, my basic consideration on cultural processes was and still is the following: there is no cultural activity that would not include some kind of otherness, and therefore a relation between a self and an other, be they individual or collective. All other claims and pretences would lead up to some kind of identitarian solipsism in culture and would make cultural life extremely poor.

I therefore was very happy to discover the cartoon the *Globe and Mail* published on April 2, 1992. It shows two people. A woman is sitting behind a very large desk<sup>4</sup>, a man is standing in front of her. He is dressed in a historical toga, with a writing scroll in his hand. And she says to him “Let me get this straight, Mr. Shakespeare... You’re not Danish and at no time have you ever been a Prince... I think we might have a problem here...”. Conclusion: no *Hamlet* under regulations against cultural appropriation! With excellent humour, this cartoon revealed the potential absurdity underlying the whole debate.

## 2) THEN AGAIN, IN 2018: THE CASES OF *SLAV* AND *KANATA*

*SLAW*, a theatrical event, co-created and performed by Betty Bonifassi and directed by Robert Lepage in the context of the Montreal International Jazz Festival on 26 June 2018.

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<sup>3</sup> As a matter of fact, the whole debate was somehow riding on the wave of USA political correctness. That wave did not affect French speaking Québec (only the already mentioned case of Lyne Robichaud appeared in Québec media) as much as what some Quebeckers like to call “the rest of Canada”, that is English speaking Canada.

<sup>4</sup> Probably representing Joyce Zeman, the then director of the Canada Arts Council.

It offered a “theatrical odyssey based on slave songs” (Globe and Mail, 4 July 2019). What triggered a controversy was the fact that it “featured a majority white cast playing enslaved people across history” (Globe and Mail, 4 July, 2018). Therefore, the production was accused of engaging in a “racist appropriation of black culture” and the singer Betty Bonifassi of “taking advantage of the suffering of black people”. (La Presse Canadienne, 4 July, 2018). In short terms, while using materials originating in black slavery, it was criticized by mostly black activists as “conçu par des Blancs, pour des Blancs” (Radio Canada, 27 June, 2018). Given the protests and controversy this show triggered, the Montreal International Jazz Festival decided to cancel it.

*Kanata*, another theatrical event, was scheduled by Robert Lepage’s company Ex Machina, in collaboration with Ariane Mnouchkine’s Théâtre du Soleil in Paris for December 2018. Two factors contributed to its cancellation: a shit-storm against it on social media that motivated the North-American co-producer to cancel its support even before the show came on stage and the reason behind the controversy once again the “crime” of cultural appropriation. In an article published on 5 September 2018, La Presse Canadienne formulates the problem as follows: “Plusieurs groupes d’autochtones avaient en effet dénoncé la pièce, qui traite de la relation entre les Blancs et les Autochtones, étant donné qu’elle n’incluait aucun artisan des Premières Nations”.

In an indirect defense against partly anonymous and aggressive criticisms, Mnouchkine enumerates a long and interesting list of sins against political correctness Le Théâtre du Soleil is not committing:

Kanata (...) n’appelle ni à la haine, ni au sexisme, ni au racisme ni à l’antisémitisme; il ne fait l’apologie d’aucun crime de guerre ni ne conteste aucun crime contre l’humanité; il ne contient aucune expression outrageante, ni terme de mépris ni invective envers une personne ou groupe de personnes à raison de leur origine ou de leur appartenance ou de leur non-appartenance à une ethnie, une nation ou une religion déterminée. (La Presse Canadienne, Sept. 5, 2018)

Finally, with a reduced financial plan, *Kanata* was rescheduled in Paris and Le Théâtre du Soleil invited critics and detractors of all colors and origins to come and see it before criticizing it.

So, the verdict on the cultural appropriation case is again – as in the early 90ies: white people have no right to represent non-white people. And “represent” here covers all its nuances of meaning: adopting the voice of, wearing the clothes of, using the symbols of, adopting the role of, speaking in lieu of the cultural Other.

### 3) AND NOW *BUG*

Yolanda Bonnell identifies herself as “a queer artist of Ojibwee/Anishinaabe and South-Asian origin”. At the beginning of 2020 she presented her performance-play *bug* at the Theatre Passe Muraille in Toronto. The Toronto Theatre Database (ttdb.ca) proposes the following synopsis of her play:

*bug* follows The Girl as she navigates her way through the intergenerational trauma while being followed by Manidoons [the Anishinaabe word for bug, insect or worm], the physical manifestation of her addictions. The physical performance weaves stories of Indigenous women grappling with their painful past and making tough choices to survive in this country.

And she asked white critics, while inviting them to see it as witnesses of the effects of colonialism, to abstain from publicly reviewing it because they represent “the dominant colonialist criticism”. In an article published in VICE CA she made her negative request quite clear:

As part of our efforts to decolonize art and foster culturally informed criticism, my theatre company, mandoons collective, run by Cole Alvis and I, requested that only Indigenous, Black, people of colour (IBPOC) folks review the show.

To be clear, white people are welcome to attend the show. It’s important to have witnesses present to understand the ongoing effects of colonialism. And we are totally fine with a person of color giving us a bad review. It’s not the review we’re worried about, it’s the voice behind it.

Her rejection of theatre reviews by “white voices” provoked an intense debate in the media, especially in English Canada, but also abroad. Unfortunately, it also resulted in nasty attacks against her person on social media. However, the voices in that debate were mostly nuanced and rationally argued. She even received the support of Kevin Loring, the director of the Indigenous Theatre at the Canadian National Arts Center in Ottawa. He considered Yolanda Bonnell’s position as a positive provocation that could open the debate to a greater variety of voices, especially non-white ones. He argues that in Bonnell’s case white critics are inclined to propose bad interpretations, because they might not understand the context and therefore make mistakes (opinion reported in *La Presse*, 20 February 2020). From the media reports I read, I have to recognize the complex and high-quality theatrical performance of Violeta Bonnell, saturated with elements of indigenous culture and multigenerational indigenous suffering<sup>5</sup> under colonial and post-colonial rule. I also concede that a white critic might be less competent to correctly identify all those elements. Yet, for me lots of questions need to be answered, before silencing the critical voice of the other. Why should a white critic not be allowed to describe her/his theatrical experience and give an opinion on the play? Evidently, her or his review would come out of a different angle and perspective than what Bonnell calls an IBPOC view. But why lump together into one homogeneous identity, and therefore perspective, all white voices as “colonial” – they might among themselves offer quite divergent and even conflictual perspectives? And why shy away from the cultural interaction that could take place between an indigenous theatrical performance and a non-indigenous criticism about it? And why presuppose that any white voice can only carry a colonialist content and therefore misunderstand and preclude the decolonializing intent of the play? If we accept that “criticism” is not just “being against” in a confrontational relationship, why could a voice from another culture, even if it were the colonially dominant one, not open up an intercultural debate that can bring the specifics of a theatrical performance into a public space of dialogue?

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<sup>5</sup> In the novel *Le livre d’Emma* (Montréal : Remue-Ménage, 2001), the Quebec-Haitian author Marie-Célie Agnant creates a remarkable female protagonist who has killed her own daughter in order to put an end to the multigenerational suffering of Haitian women; she traces that suffering all the way back to slavery. For me, even as a white man, reading Agnant’s novel was one of the deepest reading experiences – but no effort was made by the author to exclude me from reviewing it.

This is, by the way, what Fernando Ortiz had in mind when, in 1940 in *Contrapunteo Cubano del Tabaco y el azucar*<sup>6</sup>, out of a postcolonial Cuba, he developed the concept of *transculturación* as different from Malinowski's – his intellectual mentor – acculturation. Both terms concern the cultural context of colonialism and designate cultural interactions in an unequal power relation. But Ortiz, not reducing this relation to a purely one-way vector and therefore to pure loss for the weaker cultural position, sees the colonized culture as having also an influence on the colonizer's culture. In his mind, even in an uneven power relationship, the possibility of a complex inter-action is always present. In 2020 it is still worthwhile to remember how he justifies the creation of his neologism:

With the readers permission, ..... I am going to take the liberty of employing for the first time the term transculturation, fully aware of the fact that it is a neologism. And I venture to suggest that it might be adopted in sociological terminology, to a great extent at least, as a substitute for the term acculturation whose use is spreading [Ortiz, 97]

Acculturation is used to describe the process of transition from one culture to another, and its manifold social repercussion. But transculturation is a more fitting term.

I have chosen the word transculturation to express the highly varied phenomena that have come about in Cuba as a result of the extremely complex transmutations of culture that have taken place here, and without a knowledge of which it is impossible to understand the evolution of the Cuban folk, either in the economic or in the institutional, legal, ethical, religious, artistic, linguistic, psychological, sexual, or other aspects of life.

The real history of Cuba is the history of intermeshed transculturations. [Ortiz, 98]

And further on, he explains the complexities inherent in his new term and concept:

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<sup>6</sup> Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint. Tobacco and Sugar*, introduction by Bronislaw Malinowski, with a new introduction by Fernando Coronil, Durham: Duke University Press, 1995 (1940). We can find the same concern for a non-binary (my identity vs the Other), and therefore more complex, thinking as applied to cultural processes in Serge Gruzinski, *La pensée métisse* (Paris: Fayard, 1999).



I am of the opinion that the word transculturation better expresses the different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another because this does not consist merely in acquiring another culture, which is what the English word acculturation really implies, but the process also necessarily involves the loss or uprooting of a previous culture, which could be defined as a deculturation. In addition, it carries the idea of the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena, which could be called neoculturation. [Ortiz, 102-103]

Maybe, criticism in “white voices” could have been part of a very much needed process of transculturation in Canada.

One additional aspect needs to be considered here. Cultural appropriation, in this case, reaches a second degree level. It is no more the appropriation of material belonging to another culture – Yolanda Bonnell represents and performs her own culture – but the appropriation by means of commenting on the other culture. We have to deal here with some kind of cultural meta-appropriation or meta-cultural appropriation that would not only say “if you don’t belong to a given cultural identity or race, you do not have the right to appropriate it!” but, beyond that first level of cultural appropriation “if you don’t belong to a given cultural identity, you are not allowed to engage in a meta-discourse on it!”. If we consequently and radically apply this logic, only Yolanda Bonnell would be able and therefore allowed to review her own show<sup>7</sup>: identitarian solipsism of a second degree!

CODA: SPAIN 1965

Since I have not seen Yolanda Bonnell’s *bug* performance and therefore cannot share the theatrical experience of her public, I would like to conclude this essay on cultural appropriation evoking another personal experience that has to do with the rejection of my voice as a critic. May I first recall my intercultural experience as a student in romance

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<sup>7</sup> David Caviglioli evokes an extreme hypothesis in his article subtitled „Délire de l’appropriation culturelle, phase deux”: „En poussant un peu, on arriverait à la conclusion que seule Yolanda Bonnell possède la science nécessaire pour commenter le travail de Yolanda Bonnell” ( *L’Observateur*, 19 February, 2020).

languages. During my university years, I had the chance to integrate into my curriculum various study sessions abroad: in Italy, Spain, Portugal and France. Those stays in foreign countries, mostly Mediterranean, resulted in an important intercultural learning process that had a major impact on my general sensitivity in cultural terms. Retrospectively, I can affirm that I acquired more knowledge and experience in cultural difference on the streets, in bars and restaurants, on the train and in other public spaces, than I learned about languages and literatures in foreign universities. It was a constant back-and-forth between my identity, my self-perception and my pre-given assurances and those of members of other cultures.

Except when my commentaries, coming from a foreigner, were not welcome, and even outright rejected, by my local interlocutors. Just to give one example: in Spain, still under the Franco regime in 1965, in a group of students we were vigorously criticizing that authoritarian regime that allowed no opening towards a more democratic system. But when I actively joined that critical debate, my Spanish friends turned around against this critical voice by a foreigner: “you, as a foreigner, cannot understand that Spain is not ready yet for full democracy”, thus adopting exactly one of Franco’s own anti-democratic arguments. As coming from another country, culture and language, I had no right to criticize Spain, that was a right only Spaniards were entitled to. With all the difference of the situation – there was no colonial past in between us, no political asymmetry – this position reminds me of Yolanda Bonnell’s “white critic, keep away from my performance”.

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