



Towards Braiding

Mis-steps on the path to braiding: opening conversations about inappropriate and appropriative engagements

One of the potential risks involved in working toward braiding is that brick efforts to interface with thread sensibilities can reproduce harmful patterns of colonial engagement, particularly when they are premised on presumed entitlements and consumptive tendencies. There is a fine line between engagements that can deepen appreciation for/across both sides, in particular recognition of their contextual gifts *and* limitations, and engagements that reproduce uneven power relations and further feed the conflict between the orientations. Further, engagements don't just happen in one layer: they happen across multiple layers, are shaped by multiple contexts, and can be perceived differently depending on who is involved and what layer(s) they emphasize. The following section is an invitation to deepen one's sense of the different layers involved, and develop greater sensitivity toward the issues related to possible inappropriate and/or appropriative engagements.

Whether or not actions by a non-Indigenous person in relation to Indigenous peoples' stories, material culture, spirituality, experiences, knowledge, and perspectives are interpreted as inappropriate varies according to many factors, including: the local/national political temperature of events and debates about appropriation; the quality of relationship the person has with Indigenous communities and struggles; the context in, and purpose for, which these actions are mobilized; and the individual and collective perspectives and experiences of those who are encountering those actions. While this discussion is intended to foster greater sensitivity for awareness of the potential impact or reception of particular actions, given the range of contributing factors, it is not always possible to predict or manage how one's actions will be perceived. In other words, this is not only about discerning the impact of one's actions in advance, but also about cultivating a sense of openness to critique and self-reflexivity so that if issues do arise, it might be possible to respond in generative, non-defensive ways that lead to deeper learning about enacting ethical engagements. The idea is not to foresee all possible responses, but rather to develop an orientation to engagement that is premised on the importance of humility, continued learning, and centring relationships.

There is also a need to remain aware of the risk that people will take up these critiques, and even transform the languages they use, without actually transforming, or intending to transform, their disposition or sensibilities. This is sloganization without transformation: seeking to transcend complicity and avoid critique, without giving anything up (or being accountable).

Appropriation is associated with a reproduction of colonial habits of being, and it is often rationalized using explanations rooted in those habits, including:

- **Entitlement to access:** e.g. “If Indigenous people can use Western knowledge, then why can’t I use Indigenous knowledge?”
- **Exploitative capital accumulation:** e.g. “This will help sell...” “Indigenous people should be grateful that I am disseminating their work...”
- **Move to innocence:** e.g. “I am a good person because: I am inclusive of Indigenous cultures and ideas/I have a critique of colonialism/I want to dismantle colonialism”
- **Dehistoricization:** e.g. “The past is behind us and resentment for the past will get us nowhere, why can’t Indigenous people move on?”
- **Universalization:** e.g. “Indigenous knowledge is an important part of our collective human knowledge, and thus it should be made equally available to all of humanity”
- **Instrumentalization of Indigenous critique:** e.g. “To be able to appropriate something suggests property is being stolen, but the idea of property itself is a colonial concept”
- **Self-transparency:** e.g. “I have the best intentions, so I couldn’t possibly be harmful”
- **Selective engagements:** e.g. “I really like this part of an Indigenous text or idea, and I will ignore the parts that I don’t like or which are inconvenient for my purposes”
- **Decontextualization:** e.g. “I find this Indigenous idea or story useful for my purposes, so it doesn’t matter if this differs from its original meaning and context of use”
- **Individualized sanctioning:** e.g. “My Indigenous friend/colleague/partner said it was ok”
- **Aggressively seeking permission:** e.g. “I’m sure I can convince someone to approve of my actions if they would only give me the chance to explain”
- **Generalization:** e.g. “I have experienced 3 months in an Indigenous community in Nepal, so I understand Indigenous struggle.”
- **Self-Indigenization:** e.g. “We are all Indigenous to somewhere” or “We have been here long enough that we have become Indigenous to this place”

Source: Jimmy, E., Andreotti, V. (2019) *Towards braiding report*. Guelph, ON: Musagetes Foundation.



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Exercise: in what circumstances?

The following actions are known to be problematic in certain contexts (in different ways and to different degrees). In what circumstances could the cases below be read as: 1) Potentially inappropriate; 2) An example of appropriation? We invite you to pay attention to the criteria you use to distinguish between appropriate/ inappropriate and appropriative/ non-appropriative categorizations.

	Appropriate / inappropriate?	Appropriation?	Justification notes
1. A non-Indigenous author creating fictional stories about Indigenous experiences and selling the books as authentic portraits.			
2. A non-Indigenous director hiring non-Indigenous actors to perform Indigenous characters in a theater play, movie, or tv show.			
3. A non-Indigenous craftsperson making and selling art that looks like Indigenous people's art.			
4. A non-Indigenous person using stories and knowledge of Indigenous people that have been published/are accessible to the general public.			
5. A non-Indigenous person dressing like Indigenous people, wearing Indigenous jewellery, or decorating their house with			

Indigenous objects.			
	Appropriate / inappropriate?	Appropriation?	Justification notes
6. A non-Indigenous person performing Indigenous ceremonies and selling Indigenous medicines.			
7. A non-Indigenous person taking part in Indigenous ceremonies and using Indigenous medicines.			
8. A person discovering and claiming Indigenous ancestry and then applying for Indigenous scholarships/jobs while having no substantive connection to/recognition from an Indigenous community.			
9. A non-Indigenous person studying Indigenous cultures and knowledges in order to become an 'expert'.			
10. A non-Indigenous person applying for/accepting a job that claims to centre Indigenous peoples and knowledges.			
11. A non-Indigenous person asking elders to open and close events.			
12. A non-Indigenous person learning an Indigenous language, craft or dance.			

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