

# **CULTURAL APPROPRIATION AS A PROCESS OF DISPLACING PEOPLES AND HISTORY**

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## **ABSTRACT/RESUME**

Intellectual and cultural appropriation is viewed as part of a process of displacement of Aboriginal people by those of European heritage. The author illustrates this with several different uses of the Haudenosaunee concept of the Great Law of Peace. The experience of Oka, Quebec in 1990 demonstrates both collective displacement and striking parallels with the Northwest Rebellion of 1885.

L'appropriation intellectuelle et culturelle est considérée comme faisant partie d'un processus du déplacement des peuples autochtones par les gens d'héritage européen. L'auteur illustre cette situation à travers l'emploi du concept de la Grande Loi de la Paix des Haudenosaunee. L'événement d'Oka, au Québec, en 1990 démontre non seulement le déplacement collectif mais aussi des rapports frappants avec l'insurgence Nord-Ouest de 1885.

The discussion of cultural appropriation in Canada has been going on for several years now (Maracle, 1989; Mietkiewicz, 1989; Draine, 1989; Keeshig-Tobias, 1990; Johnson et al, 1990; Todd, 1990; Baker, 1990; Dandie, 1990; Hryniuk, 1990; Van Luven, 1990; Armstrong, 1990). It was initiated, to my knowledge, in the field of literature, addressing the appropriation of Native voices by non-Native would-be-shamans and self-appointed initiates. It involves the complicated issues of censorship, stereotyping and copyright. The discussion has been carried into the non-Native community by, for example, Lee Maracle (1989) asking Anne Cameron to "move over", and by Lenore Keeshig-Tobias addressing a panel at the Writers' Union of Canada Annual General Meeting in the Spring of 1989. Since then, the issue has been discussed widely, even among non-Natives. For instance, at the third Tri-Annual Conference of the Nordic Association for Canadian Studies in Oslo, Norway, in August 1990, there was a panel discussion of Canadian writers to address current issues in Canadian literature, and the overriding topic, suggested by Rudy Wiebe (sic!) was "Appropriations of the Native Voice as a Current Issue in Canadian Letters." In the ensuing discussion, comments ranged from an outraged cry against "Native censorship of Non-Native writers!" by Betty Jane Wylie, a former president of the Canadian Writers' Union, to Heather Spear's poignant rhetorical question, "Would it be okay for German authors to write about the holocaust in the voice of Jewish victims?" Being a German, I would say "no."

Various forms of cultural exchange including kinds of appropriation continue to happen wherever different cultures meet and rub off on each other. If it were not so, this paper could not have been written in English, nor would Plains people ever have ridden horses, nor would my family and I have ever eaten a potato, nor could Native authors have chosen written English as a medium of expression. This exchange of ideas and practices, however, is not an issue in the discussion here.<sup>1</sup> What is an issue here is the kind of appropriation which happens within a colonial structure, where one culture is dominant politically and economically over the other, and rules and exploits it. More specifically, it is the kind of appropriation in which aspects of the colonized culture are appropriated by the dominant one, while at the same time all traces of origin are neglected and displaced. It is a kind of appropriation that is selective, that disowns origin or authorship, and that is ahistorical in that it excludes from its discourse the historical context, especially, here, the history of Native/non-Native relations.

The following paper presents some of the ideas and tentative theoretical explanations which have resulted from research on Native stereotyping, on the appropriation of voice, and on the collective displacement of historical processes (Lutz, 1975; 1980; 1985a; 1985b; 1990). The ideas are based

to a large degree upon the author's cultural and historical situation as a German born into the heritage of the holocaust, and the experiences of collective guilt and its widespread denial in post-war Germany. They are also based upon a twelve month residency in Canada at the time of what has been called the "Oka crisis". Allusions to the internal colonialist situation in Canada are made as attempts to try to understand the psychological mechanisms at work when a people, a national culture, react collectively to historical experiences and practices in which they have become "guilty" as a group, by inflicting suffering and death upon marginalized and suppressed ethnic "others". Such a search for answers cannot come up with any definitive or final replies, but the thoughts expressed here may provide invitations to discuss why and with what consequences colonialist appropriation has been going on for centuries.

As an historical example of three centuries of intellectual appropriation, I have chosen three different ideological uses found for the "Great Law of Peace" of the Haudenosaunee people by various European-derived social and political systems. The so-called constitution of the Five or Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy, however, is much more than just a political constitution. Based upon the epistemological traditions of the Iroquois, it expresses their whole world view, the origin of their confederacy, their beliefs and ideals, the mode of ethical conduct for all people, and the rules and regulations for a democracy that stands as the finest and most intricately balanced in the world.<sup>2</sup>

On September 12, 1987, the year of the bicentennial of the United States constitution, Cornell University hosted a conference for 400 participants, a quarter of them Native Americans, on the topic "The Iroquois Great Law of Peace and the United States Constitution". The conference drew attention to, and expounded, the known fact that in drafting the Albany Plan of Union in 1754 and later in formulating the constitution for the independent states, political and philosophical leaders such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson (Grinde, 1977) as well as Thomas Paine and John Rutledge (Grinde, 1987/88; Burton, 1987/88; Schaaf, 1987/88) were influenced by and consciously used their knowledge of the Great Law of Peace of the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and (as of 1715) the Tuscarora peoples (Parker, 1916). Those who drafted the United States constitution were fascinated with the idea of six independent nations bonding together politically for mutual assistance, protection and peace, but with each retaining their individual sovereignty. They appropriated this idea for their union of states. So the most powerful nation of the world, today, in terms of political influence and economic and military power, the self-appointed heralds of democracy and champions of capitalist free enterprise, have based some

of their most fundamental political values on Haudenosaunee culture, without however giving credit to the originators, nor trying to understand the spirit of the culture expressed through the Great Law of Peace.

The oral tradition of the Haudenosaunee, the "People who build long-houses", had long reported their impact on the American political system, but within the dominant culture an awareness of this heritage had gradually disappeared until finally being displaced altogether from the public consciousness of White America. It was not until the engaged scholarly research of critical historians like Grinde and Schaaf that written documentary evidence was presented to substantiate the Haudenosaunee oral tradition. Four days after the Cornell conference, official acknowledgement followed: U.S. Senator Daniel K. Inouye (Democrat for Hawaii) introduced House Concurrent Resolution S 76 to commemorate the Iroquois early advice to the American founding fathers and to reaffirm the government-to-government relationship (Barreiro, 1987/88:xi-xiv).

The Haudenosaunee example demonstrates a general colonial attitude characteristic of European and Euro-American dealings with the land and the peoples of North America: both were treated as raw materials to be appropriated, exploited, transformed or consumed according to the colonizer's immediate interests. This is most obvious in terms of geographical dispossession, but appropriations of non-material aspects of Native cultures have long been overlooked, or been dismissed as inconsequential, or being of the past. The founding fathers of the fledgling United States of America respected the powerful Six Nations as equals and contemporaries, but later interpreters and users of Haudenosaunee democratic principles tended to abstract the "living constitution"<sup>3</sup> from the actual people practising and living it. Even long before the Great Law of Peace was finally written down and published in an authorized version in 1916 (Parker:30-60), it continued to occupy the minds of scholars and political theorists. Ironically it has informed not only the U.S. constitution but also Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, and it continues to be cited by feminists today.

In 1877 Lewis Henry Morgan published his *Ancient Society, or Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery through Barbarism to Civilization*, based upon his years of research among the Seneca and other Haudenosaunee. Seven years later Friedrich Engels, in fulfilling the legacy of the then late Karl Marx, published a historical materialist interpretation and extension of Morgan's study on *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884). Engels was obviously deeply impressed with the social organization of the Iroquois Confederacy:

Der Irokesenbund liefert die fortgeschrittenste gesellschaftliche Organisation, zu der es die Indianer gebracht, soweit sie die

Unterstufe der Barbarei nicht überschritten (also mit Ausnahme der Mexikaner, Neumexikaner und Peruaner) (Engels, 1884) (Translation: The Iroquois Confederacy presents the most advanced social organization ever to be achieved by those Indians who did not progress beyond the lowest stage of barbarism [i.e. excepting the Mexicans, New-Mexicans, and Peruvians].)

And he continues later:

Und es ist eine wunderbare Verfassung in aller Kindlichkeit und Einfachheit, diese Gentilverfassung! Ohne Soldaten, Gendarmen und Polizisten, ohne Adel, Könige, Statthalter, Präfecten oder Richter, ohne Gefängnisse, ohne Prozesse geht alles seinen geregelten Gang [...] – die Haushaltung ist einer Reihe von Familien gemein und kommunistisch, der Boden ist Stammesbesitz, nur die Gärtchen sind den Haushaltungen vorläufig zugewiesen – [...] Arme und Bedürftige kann es nicht geben – die kommunistische Haushaltung und die Gens kennen ihre Verpflichtung gegen Alte, Kranke und im Kriege Gelähmte. Alle sind gleich und frei, auch die Weiber. Für Sklaven ist noch kein Raum [...] (Engels, 1884:109f).

(Translation: And it is a wonderful constitution, in all its infanthility and simplicity, this clanship-constitution! Everything proceeds in an orderly and planned manner, without soldiers, sheriffs, or policemen, without a feudal class, without kings, governors, prefects or judges, without prisons, without courts of justice [...] – households are shared by a number of families and they are communist, the soil is owned tribally, only the small garden plots are allocated to the households on a seasonal basis – [...] there can be no poor or needy – the communist household, and the clans know their obligations towards the elder, the sick and those suffering from war injuries. They are all equal and free, including the women. There's no place yet for slavery. [...])

Engels, perceiving Iroquois society from the vantage point of historical materialism, based upon the study of predominantly European historical processes, placed the Iroquois on a low rung in the ladder of linear evolution moving from what was then called "savagery" through "barbarism" to "civilization". Marx and Engels anticipated the ultimate fulfillment and blossoming of this process in advanced communism, beyond the stages of capitalist democracy and the socialist state. Hence, despite his personal admiration, Engels sought to fit the Haudenosaunee into a theory, one which

we now understand as Eurocentric, and he therefore had to describe them as basically immature, childish in religious matters and uncomprehending vis-a-vis nature. The contradiction within his argument is typical for texts of his time. On the one hand, Native Americans were idealized – Engels' "Würde, Geradheit, Charakterstärke und Tapferkeit dieser Barbaren" (Engels, 1884:111. Translation: "...dignity, straightness [honesty], strength of character, and braveness of these barbarians.") reads almost like a quotation from his contemporary Karl May – and at the same time they were understood as "primitives" whose culture was doomed to die before the onslaught of more advanced forms of European civilization, corrupt as they might be: "Diebstahl, Vergesellschaftung, Hinterlist, Verrat, die die alte klassenlose Gentilgesellschaft unterhöhlen und zu Fall bringen." (Engels, 1884:111. Translation: "Theft, appropriation, intrigues, betrayal, which undermine the old classless clan society and bring about its collapse.") Engels' theoretical perceptual frame predetermined his conclusions. Utilizing the dual stereotypes of the noble but dying savage and the primitive barbarian at the same time, he could fit the Haudenosaunee and their form of government, which he so admired, into a structure of social evolutionary theory which allocated to them a position altogether inferior and alien to the European experience. No credit was given to the originators of Iroquois political thought, nor was their culture as a whole taken into regard. Serving as mere raw materials, the Haudenosaunee literally filled the double function of both criticizing the corruption of European society while at the same time appealing to the political imagination as models of a state lost to the present but achievable in the future. The historical context of colonialism was displaced altogether.

The third example is taken from a contemporary, 20th century discussion in West Germany. Feminist scholars of social anthropology have gone back to the Great Law of Peace, rereading Haudenosaunee culture and society as a case study in matriarchy. They use existing published accounts of Iroquoian society, like Morgan's and Engel's, as samples for a feminist scholarly discourse far removed from Haudenosaunee reality today. Irene Schumacher, in her doctoral dissertation (1972), postulates a loss of political influence of Haudenosaunee women through culture contact and uses their example for generalizations about questions of gender and power. Similarly, Ilse Lenz (1983) uses the example of Iroquoian "matriarchy" as an ethnological case study to substantiate an academic (and politically emancipating) argument. Neither Schumacher nor Lenz could be accused of being unscholarly or unconvincing in their argumentation according to established European scholarly discourse, but their use of Iroquois women as samples and (historical) objects follows the colonialist mental tradition. (As

in the case of Engels' theorizing, this has to be said despite my sympathies for the humanitarian cause they advocate.) In both cases, selected aspects of Iroquois culture are appropriated and used as elements in a political theory developed by, and predominantly serving, Europeans. Moreover, the appropriation is selective. Again, it is ahistorical in that the history of Native/non-Native relations is not on the agenda, and there is no awareness of the fact that The Great Law is still an important reality in the lives of Haudenosaunee people in the United States and Canada today. There is not even an awareness of the fact that other feminists have visited Haudenosaunee clan mothers,<sup>4</sup> and that such clan mothers as Alice Dewasenta Papineau and Audrey Shenandoah in turn have visited Europe on several occasions, addressing issues of ecology and peace, explaining to European audiences the Two Row Wampum. In each visit they travelled as members of sovereign nations, that is with their own Haudenosaunee passports (Biegert, 1987; Bruchac, 1989; Fadden, 1977; Burton, 1987/88; Grinde, 1977; 1987/88; Schaaf, 1987/88; Wolf, 1979).

As these three examples show, the intellectual appropriation of Haudenosaunee thought remained highly selective, even in cases of the three leading humanitarian political ideologies, promoting ethnic and national sovereignty in democracy and the abolition of social inequality based on property and/or gender. In all three cases, the Haudenosaunee people are made to vanish as living participants in that ongoing culture from which the thoughts have been appropriated.

In this discussion the term "displacement" has been used in its psychoanalytical sense as a form of repression. Freud, of course, used the German term "*Verdrängung*", which is far more descriptive than the clinical "displacement".<sup>5</sup> It could best be translated as "the pushing/urging/pressing/shunting aside (or under) in order to make disappear".<sup>6</sup> Displacement/*Verdrängung* makes us "forget" memories that are painful or shameful, memories that cause bad conscience. They are subconsciously pushed out of our conscious memory in an act that requires a considerable amount of psychic energy. Because the psychological conflict as such is not resolved however, the memories will come to haunt the displacing agent in various guises. It makes one unable to learn from past experience, and thus renders one vulnerable to irrational and harmful repetitions of former mistakes.

Freud described "*Verdrängung*" as an individual psychological reaction formation, but the West German psychoanalysts and cultural theorists Margarethe and Alexander Mitscherlich applied the Freudian concept to the collective displacement of the Nazi past and the holocaust in West German society after the war (1967). The Mitscherlichs deal with the way in which West Germans, after the immense losses in human lives inflicted upon others

and upon themselves, instead of mourning and trying to come to grips with their own involvement and guilt, moved on to the seemingly harmless agenda of making money and being well behaved democrats, thereby learning little if anything from the past and remaining vulnerable to the repetition of totalitarian modes of political problem solving. To me, the Mitscherlichs' analysis makes a lot of sense. It can explain, for example, why West German politicians went into hysterics over a peace movement supported by more than half of the population who objected to the deployment of yet more nuclear warheads from the United States in the Federal Republic. To quench the peaceful "terrorism", West Germany was turned temporarily into a totalitarian police state in the fall of 1983.<sup>7</sup>

In looking at the appropriation of Native cultures by non-Natives, and considering how very little, as a rule, non-Natives in North America tend to know about the indigenous cultures of the continent, it seems obvious that something like a collective displacement of the process of colonization, dispossession, partial genocide and continued cultural ethnocide has and is taking place. Such a process seems almost uncannily "familiar" to me as a German, but it is merely a *déjà vu* on a phenomenological level. I am not saying that the treatment of Native peoples in the Americas can or should be compared to the German treatment of Jews and other marginalized groups in our recent history, because the historical, economic, social and geographical conditions just cannot be compared in any meaningful manner. Nor would I try to "universalize" deeply ingrained German feelings of shame and historical responsibility. Therefore, the parallel I am about to draw very tentatively now, about collective psychological reaction formation, is a tricky one, and is not designed to alleviate my own historical "package" by insinuating Canadians and Americans carry comparable ones.

However, it seems to me that in North America a collective displacement, similar to the displacement of recent history in Germany, has taken place with regards to the colonization of Native peoples. I first came to think about this parallel while travelling through the United States with a group of scholars, studying regional and folk cultures (Lutz, 1985b). Wherever we went, experts would tell us about the history and culture of their place, but never would they be able to explain Aboriginal history and contributions to the culture of their region. The absence of Indian content in their theoretical discussions was conspicuous, and I felt that there was a massive displacement at work. This seems no surprise given the shameful and painful history of United States/Aboriginal relations in past centuries.

By contrast, Canada has an international reputation of having followed a much more civilized and humane code of political conduct with regard to Native peoples. Personally, I have long thought this to be a complacent

myth, although the most conspicuous acts of violence parallel to Wounded Knee, Washita River, or Sand Creek seem to be absent from Canadian history. Nevertheless, there is the example of the crushing of the Northwest Rebellion in 1885, which for a long time was also displaced, until, almost overnight in 1985, Louis Riel, Big Bear, Poundmaker, and Gabriel Dumont were "appropriated" as national heroes of the Canadian west at the centennial of Batoche.<sup>8</sup>

If collective displacement entails a partial loss of reality and an obstruction of historical memory, linked with a propensity to repeat past mistakes, the Canadian experience of the summer of 1990 seems to provide a perfect example. First, there is the irrational reaction on the part of many politicians, who were prone to criminalize the Mohawks from the start, who saw in them a stereotypical bunch of savage warriors or a few isolated troublemakers, not realizing that in using such rhetoric, they were solidifying Mohawk solidarity with the warriors, alienating almost the whole of Native Canada, and many non-Natives besides. Second, the Canadian government appeared to be unaware of the message of the Two Row Wampum,<sup>9</sup> unaware of the uninterrupted and continuing sovereignty of the Six Nations Confederacy, so much older than either the United States or the Canadian confederation. Thirdly, politicians made no attempts to address the Mohawks themselves. Finally, there are some haunting parallels with political mistakes of the past. As in the Northwest Rebellion, the *casus belli*, the issue of contention, was land sovereignty.<sup>10</sup> As in 1884/85, warnings were neglected that the government's structural, colonial violence might produce personal violence<sup>11</sup> and taking up of arms on the side of the colonized. Again, the situation was allowed to deteriorate until an armed conflict evolved. As in 1885, the police moved in first to quench the "uprising", and like Crozier's Mounted Police at Duck Lake, the Sureté du Quebec at Oka incurred a blasting defeat and the tragic and totally unnecessary loss of life. Still, there was no direct involvement of politicians on the spot. Instead, after the lack of success on the part of the local police, the army was sent in. Again, as at Batoche, the Natives were surrounded and finally had to surrender, some of them walking away, others being arrested. Fortunately, this time there was less bloodshed in the process. And, again, as in 1885, the whole Oka issue will now be resolved quite legalistically, in a very civilized, seemingly non-violent, Canadian way that looks so different from the more openly violent mode of solving "frontier conflicts" still prevalent in the U.S.<sup>12</sup> The courts will have to solve in legal terms a problem which is political in nature. This time, I am sure, there will be no hangings, but undoubtedly some will be found guilty and will be sentenced, while others are likely to be acquitted. The very fundamental political and cultural issue, involving national

sovereignty and the appropriation of Native land rights, will be displaced and the whole affair will be treated as an episode involving some criminal elements. Will this enable Canada to learn from this present experience for the future?

In history there are no "ifs", but in historiography and political theorizing, we may ask questions. So, here is the final question I would like to ask as a result of the thoughts developed above: if the appropriation of Haudenosaunee culture had not been selective, but had instead involved respect for the Native culture as a whole, if the exchange between Native and non-Native culture had been the kind of symmetrical dialogue retaining sovereignty and mutual respect as expressed in the Two Row Wampum, if all aspects of the Great Law of Peace had been known to Canadian politicians and the public at large, if the shameful colonial history of dealing with Native grievances in the past had not been displaced, would we have had an Oka?

## NOTES

1. For a discussion of the contributions Native American cultures made to the world, see Lowe (1986) and Weatherford (1988).
2. The following brief excursion may serve to explain some of the reasons for this fascination: According to Morgan (1851; 1877), the Haudenosaunee are socially structured around the *ohwachira*, a fireside of clan-related sisters and their families, presided over by a clan-mother and — traditionally — living together in a longhouse, comprising several of such matrilineally and matrilocally related bodies. Within the nine totem clans of the five founding nations, certain chieftainships or seats in council (fifty in all) are hereditary, and the clan-mothers together with all women in their clans elect the male individual, *royane*, the sachem or delegate who will carry the title and represent them in the Grand Council of the fifty sachems, "lords" or *royaner*. Since all clans are exogamous a son can never inherit the title from his father. Together the fifty sachems decide on internal and external affairs. Decisions are reached unanimously after a complicated sequence of decision finding and making processes that involve not only all the nations but also the clans, *ohwachiras* and individuals, women and men alike. Thus there are no majorities overruling minorities. The men are bound to the women who select them for office, and although clan-mothers possess the power of impeaching a *royane* unfit for office, their well-being like that of the whole nation depends on the ability and in-

tegrity of the royane they select. Gender functions within society differ, but they are not seen hierarchically.

While all this may sound ideal to non-Native ears, it must also be remembered at the same time that the Iroquois sought to bring their "Great Law of Peace" to all surrounding nations, who, if they refused to join the League three times, were forced to join in what may aptly be called a "Pax Iroquoia". Under the influence of rivalry for the hegemony in the fur trade with Indian nations the Iroquois sided with the British and waged an imperialist war against the Hurons, Erie, Neutrals and other French allies, and the "Great Law of Peace" made the Six Nations Confederacy into the most feared military alliance in North America.

3. The 1987 annual convention of the German Association for American Studies, convening at the University of Bremen, addressed "The Living Constitution". There was a strong input from U.S. American officials and scholars, but ironically, none of the papers presented mentioned the Great Law of Peace as the most important source for the U.S. Constitution, and as a truly "living" ongoing tradition. Merely a five minute feature (by your's truly) in a workshop devoted to minority literatures, dealt with "The Iroquois and the U.S. Constitution".
4. See in this context Ursula Wolf's (1979) report about her travels in Native North America, where she met with and interviewed Native women, among them Iroquois clan-mothers.
5. For an illuminating discussion of how the translation of Freud's works from German to English has taken out much of the down-to-earth, concrete and even folk terminology of Freud and turned it into more abstract, clinical, "scientific" idiom, see Bettelheim (1983).
6. *Collins German Dictionary* (London & Glasgow: Collins/Stuttgart: Klett, 1981) lists a whole range of English terms, neither of them alone catching the full semantic range of "Verdrängung", e.g.: "driving out; ousting; superseding, replacing; displacement; driving; dispelling; repression; suppression." For a discussion of displacement of Indian origins in U.S. culture see my article (Lutz, 1985b).
7. For a Native report on the Pan-Indian peace delegation's visit to Germany in the Fall of 1983, see LaDuke's (1984).
8. For the most substantial study of the appropriation of the image of Métis people and Louis Riel in particular within Anglo-Canadian literature and Canadian popular culture see Klooss, (1989).

9. The significance of the Two Row Wampum for bilateral relations between the Iroquois Confederacy and the Canadian government had been explained to the Canadian House of Commons Committee on Indian Self-Government by the Haudenosaunee Confederacy in 1983. The committee was so impressed with the presentation that it printed a photograph of the Two Row Wampum on the cover of its committee report (Mitchell, 1989: 109f).
10. For a radical Native revisionist history and political discussion of the Northwest Rebellion see Adams, 1975. For another recent account, including Métis oral history, see Payment (1990).
11. In my use of the terms "structural" v.s. "personal violence" I am following the definitions of violence developed by the Norwegian peace researcher Johan Galtung (1975).
12. For a discussion of the difference between the U.S. frontier mythology and the Canadian "garrison mentality" (Frye), see Harrison (1986).

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