

ARTICLE

From appropriation to transpropriation in the arts

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Abstract

An issue raised lately in the media about the arts is the question of “appropriation,” typically defined as taking something for oneself that belongs to someone else, or that originates from a culture or community to which one does not belong—often without permission or legitimate authority. Appropriation is commonly viewed as a unilateral act, with little consideration of possible reciprocal forms. This paper introduces the concept of “transpropriation” as a potential antonym to appropriation—a term not found in dictionaries, but used here to describe a process of making something one’s own through relational engagement with other people or cultures. Unlike appropriation, transpropriation emphasizes mutuality and ethical exchange. Bruno Deschênes succinctly explores both the notions of appropriation and transpropriation in regard to arts, in particular world music, suggesting that the latter is an outcome of the former. In world music, to properly master a music from a culture distinct from one’s own, appropriation is insufficient; the musician might have to take a transpropriative comportment.

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1. Introduction

An issue that comes out quite regularly lately in the media and a few publications about arts is the question of “appropriation,” a term that is usually defined as taking for oneself something that belong to someone else, or that comes from a culture or a community from which one does not belong to, usually without the authority, the right or the permission to do so. However, appropriation is not brought into play in the same way in all forms of the arts, or in every cultural situation. It is very common, for example, in Canada to hear Irish music from a group in which no musician is Irish, or a Roma group in which no one is of Roma origin. In regard to world music in general, hybridity has become the buzzword, and has even been encouraged (in particular by producers or promoters), mixing a native music with Western music (habitually to please the Western ears), playing Western music on native instruments (playing Bach pieces on Chinese or Japanese instruments, or doing jazz on Indian instruments) or mixing two, three or more types of music of eclectic origins (for example, mixing music from Brittania in north-west of France with Berber music). Hybridity in world music, defined as the blending and mixing of the music from various cultures that leads to the creation of new sounds and genres, takes place basically through appropriation since these musicians,

without being natives (although sometimes there might be one or two natives among them), do not ask for permission to play it. They usually do it for their love of it.¹ A musician taking on the music of another culture as well as identities with that music and what it represents.¹

One example that made the headlines in Canada concerning the question of appropriation is as follows. In 2018, internationally renowned French-Canadian director and actor Robert Lepage made the headlines in Montréal and Paris about two plays he produced: *Slāv*, presented during the 2018 Montréal International Jazz Festival, and *Kanata*, presented in a theater in Paris the same year. *Slāv* is about slavery in the Americas, whereas *Kanata* is about the plight of Canadian autochthons. Both plays have been denounced as being appropriation, one of the main reasons being that all the roles in *Slāv* were played by white people, with only two black singers out of six, and in *Kanata*, no Canadian autochthons were part of the cast. Lepage appears to have been somewhat taken aback by such backlash, indicating that he did in these two plays the same type of work he has been doing for years.² He apologized for a lack of oversight. The debate about appropriation can at times be very impassioned, in particular when it concerns groups of people or communities that have been repressed or segregated, a debate that often has ideological and political presuppositions.

However, when it comes to the teaching of arts from diverse cultures in a university, a school, or a community center of any kind, it seems that the issue of appropriation is often left on the sidelines, oftentimes simply ignored.³ Can teaching calligraphy or a martial art in a community center or a school outside of Japan or China be considered appropriation, especially when the teacher is not Japanese or Chinese? We find in numerous universities all around the world Balinese or Javanese *gamelan* ensembles, in which the players are music students. There are more than 150 Japanese *taiko* ensembles in the U.S.² An Argentinian painter known as Bokuma has specialized in traditional Japanese-style painting and calligraphy.⁴ From a musical

viewpoint, if a Chinese or Japanese musician becomes an internationally known classical musician (pianist, singer, composer, violinist, for example), is she or he appropriating European classical music, knowing that in many schools of music in these countries (and many others all around the world) the main music taught is European classical music? This particular music is often viewed as more “civilized” than their “archaic” traditional music. The same for rock, pop, or jazz bands, these musics being viewed as “modern,” although in many cases, Western music and instruments were imposed on endogenous musicians and musics if they wanted to pursue a career in Europe or in North America. Born and Hesmondhgalgh³ show that these views about music also construct different identities.

Can all these examples (and the list can be unending) be considered cases of appropriation, knowing that such a type of appropriation, in all probability, has been the norm for a long time? And knowing that all human cultures have been and are still being influenced by other cultures, more so in today’s globalization? However, there is more to appropriation than what I have just presented. Could learning Japanese calligraphy or a martial art in Canada or teaching the violin or hula dance in Japan be done from a different viewpoint, comportment, or attitude than appropriation? I would like to propose a term that could be viewed as a converse or antonym to appropriation: “transpropiation.” This term is not yet found in any known dictionary, although searches on the Internet show that it has been used by some people in very specific situations, including by a few philosophers, although with somewhat different meanings in each case.

In what follows are *personal reflexions* as a musician. I start by presenting a few definitions of “appropriation,” followed by a presentation of what I suggest could be its possible antonym: “transpropiation.” I humbly hope to show that transpropiation can be a more suited term in many situations when someone learns an art form, music, calligraphy, or even martial arts, from a culture or community different from one’s own. At times, an artist might want to become a representative of that art form, which means that she or he hopes to be recognized both by the native culture and the artist’s own culture, as is the case for myself, hoping to be recognized as a *shakuhachi* player, although I am not Japanese⁵ (but I have been playing the Japanese *shakuhachi* for the past 30 years). In such situations, there is much more than appropriation at play; it necessitates what could be called a “transpropiative”

¹ Hybridity can bring about the question identity, politic and even power, among others. In this paper, I simply wish to propose a few personal reflexions about a term that could be a converse to appropriation.

² His multimedia plays are inspired by historical events, people, or regions of the world. An overview of his impressive career, see his website: <https://exmachina.ca/robert-lepage>.

³ As a musician, as far as I know, the issue is rarely raised in music schools about world music, though a number of ethnomusicologists have written on the issue. See, in particular, Born and Hesmondhgalgh.³

⁴ His name is Alejandro Bertolo. Visit <https://gallerygen.com/art/bokuma.html>.

⁵ For example, the Chinese pianist Lang Lang is world renowned in classical music spheres, while the American John Neptune is renown as a master *shakuhachi* player and maker living in Japan.

intentional, reciprocal, respectful, and even ethical attitude from the part of the artist toward that other culture, not only the art form itself.⁶

2. Appropriation

The current definition of appropriation is the act of taking possession of something that is other or alien for one's exclusive use or purpose. In other words, it is about acquiring knowledge or adapting something (particularly in the arts, although not only) for one's particular use, purpose, or aim. In some situations, it can even mean withholding something without authority or the right to do so, thus implying that appropriation can occur without requesting or having consent from those appropriated. Such a definition does not raise the issue of the "appropriator" or the "appropriated." It focuses solely on the act itself, not who is appropriating, what is being appropriated, how, why, or from whom. In world music, musicians can sometimes show complacency in taking a song, instrument, or genre from a particular culture without consent. It is as if any music, song, or instrument is there "for the taking," without necessarily considering if that person or culture consents of this taking. This is a prominent occurrence where music is qualified as traditional and part of the public domain, outside the bounds of modern copyright laws.⁷ Appropriation involves taking something to suit one's needs, wants, assumptions, presuppositions, even prejudices and myths about a culture without consideration for the people it belongs to. According to Canadian philosopher James O. Young, appropriation—originally in the European contexts—means taking something from nature without any moral stigma. In the past centuries, in Europe, "[o]ne did not necessarily act wrongly when one engaged in appropriation. In its original use, the word usually referred to taking something from nature."^{4,p.18}

For Marjorie Kibby, appropriation ignores and even denigrates the cultural autonomy of those cultures being appropriated by reifying and essentializing them. She

suggests that appropriation, for any artists (in her case, musicians), can be seen as a critique of our contemporary social world, a desire to go beyond its constraints.⁵ For Steven Feld, appropriation is as much a homage, a source of connectedness, creativity, and innovation, as a means of domination and maintaining asymmetries and divisiveness. Appropriation can be direct, subtle, arrogant, dominating, complex, and contradictory.⁶ For Carol Silverman, one of the problems with appropriation is the commodification of what is being appropriated, in her case, also world music. Neither the music nor the musicians are in charge of their representations in such situations. Taking an example from the East European Gypsy/Roma music, Silverman argues that despite being cast as both borrowers and appropriators, these musicians are pressured by producers to hybridize their music for Western listeners. Such appropriation brings profit to their producers (usually Westerners), without much concern for the musicians themselves. According to Silverman, appropriation by the powerful differs from appropriation and borrowing by a marginal group like the Roma. When the powerful engage in appropriation and impose how and what to appropriate, marginalized musicians usually lose out in the process.⁷

Canadian philosopher James O. Young is one of the rare philosophers to tackle the issue of appropriation in the arts. In his book *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts*,⁴ he analyzes and defines what appropriation is from various points of view. As far as I know, few philosophers have tackled the issue of appropriation so extensively; it has been mainly the purview of lawyers, anthropologists, museum curators, archeologists, or artists, among others.⁸ For Young, philosophers have the requisite knowledge to tackle such an issue with relevance. He begins by defining cultural appropriation, explaining that appropriation is an esthetic endeavor for artists, touching on the question of cultural and esthetic experience and authenticity regarding what is being appropriated and what he calls authentic appropriation.

Young suggests that appropriation can be viewed as theft, assault, or offence toward the culture(s) or community(ies) one is appropriating from, but some cases can be viewed as authentic arts. "... some acts of cultural appropriation are morally benign. Some works of art are esthetic failures precisely because an artist has appropriated content in a clumsy and ineffective manner. Other artists appropriate content and create masterpieces."⁴ Arts are certainly the social practices in which appropriation is the most prevalent, although he suggests that not all artistic

⁶ The following discussion is a personal reflexion based on my 50 years of work as a musician, deeply involved in "world music." Having no expertise in political, ideological or social questions, I cannot delve into these matters, even though they are pertinent.

⁷ One example is the jazzman Herbie Hancock. He used a pigmy song in his piece *Watermelon Man* (album *Head Hunters* 1973), recorded by French ethnomusicologists Simha Arom and Geneviève Tourelle, *The Music of the Ba-Benzél Pygmies* (LP 1966). After the release of this piece, several artists asked him to use that pigmy recording. He received rights from these artists without giving back anything to the pigmy community itself or to the two ethnomusicologists who recorded it.

⁸ Nevertheless, a few ethnomusicologists did discuss this issue. See, in particular, Born and Hesmondhalgh.³

appropriations involve cultural appropriation. Young elucidates the common argument that artworks that are an outcome of cultural appropriation are bound to be esthetic failures or immoral because these works misrepresent a culture, at times in a harmful way. Yet, some acts of cultural appropriation are not morally objectionable, and some carry great esthetic and artistic value. Although giving a number of examples within different art forms, his analyses revolve primarily around moral and legal philosophies rather than sociology, esthetics, or questions of identity, for example.

Young distinguishes two types of what he qualifies as cultural appropriation. The first is the appropriation of artistic elements (styles, plots, musical themes, motifs, subjects, genres, and more), used to create new artworks. The second is the appropriation of pieces with an inherent esthetic value, pieces that are found in museums or in private collections. The cultures of origin of these artworks might not necessarily consider the pieces as art, especially if they are used in rituals, for example. Young also enumerates five specific kinds of cultural appropriation: (i) object appropriation, (ii) content appropriation, (iii) style appropriation, (iv) motif appropriation, and (v) subject appropriation, although they might overlap. While the first four types involve taking something specific from a culture, subject appropriation differs largely from the others in that a subject matter is not something created in the same manner as a story, a song, a sculpture, or a painting, although it might include them. The subject appropriation is more of an idea, a viewpoint, a concept, an interpretation, among others. He indicates that there is no clear definition of what subject appropriation is.⁴

Another point Young raises that is pertinent to our discussion is that cultural appropriation has been viewed at times as inauthentic or esthetically lacking. For example, it might be considered that white musicians cannot sing the blues or rap because they are not black. This argument would then posit that classical musicians from non-European origins, for example, musicians from Asian cultures such as Japan, Korea, China, or Indonesia, cannot play Beethoven, Bach, Mozart, or that Nepalese musicians cannot play jazz, and North American autochthons could not play Japanese music. For Young, some appropriations are theft, others are wrong by being harmful to a culture, some are offensive, and some are benign. At the same time, some forms of appropriation celebrate an aspect of a culture that might never have been known otherwise. He even suggests that there are as many masterworks created from appropriation as there are artistic failures.⁴ Some artists try to hide what they have been appropriating, while others are more transparent, openly admitting it. Young

shows that cultural appropriations cannot occupy a single category or qualification. However, he emphasizes that “[c]ultural appropriation endangers a culture, not when others borrow from it, but when its members borrow too extensively from others. Or, as is sometimes the case, language, beliefs, and tastes are imposed on a culture from without.”^{4,p.153}

According to French scholar Denis-Constant Martin, appropriation in music is historically more prevalent than most people realize. For example, it was common among European composers to include a melody composed by another composer, without permission, in one of their works. The best-known examples are Johann Sebastian Bach and Georg Friedrich Handel, who regularly borrowed melodies from other composers. Several other 19th- and 20th-century composers, such as Franz Liszt, Antonin Dvorak, Johannes Brahms, and Bela Bartok, are known for this practice by rearranging folksongs. For Martin, appropriation is the alpha and omega of musical creativity; music, as we know it today, would not exist without it, from the time of Bach and Handel to pop, hip-hop, rap, jazz, techno, and most other forms of today’s hybrid and world musics. He even goes so far as to suggest that appropriation is a requirement for creativity.⁸

Martin posits that the evolution of human cultures, including music, is grounded in appropriation, or what French anthropology rather calls “métissage” (crossbreeding, hybridization, interbreeding, miscegenation). Métissage is not simply an act but is a symbolic and interpretive process. In everyday cultural encounters, appropriation takes the form of cultural transfers. Any appropriation may imply redefining one’s culture when faced with that of the other(s), both for the appropriator as well as the appropriated. However, according to Martin, today, appropriation no longer involves the shared presence of the appropriator and the appropriated. With modern technology, it is easy to maintain and even justify the distance between both sides. These days, thanks to the Internet, anyone can appropriate anything without consideration for who is being appropriated and what is being appropriated. The appropriated is simply ignored.⁸

What one is appropriating cannot retain its original essence/intent/quality, since it is being altered to suit the appropriator. In world music, the term hybridization has somehow become a generic qualifier for all situations in which someone appropriates and thus blends music from different cultures. However, this term is not used when a composer, to give just this example, composes an avant-garde work mixing Western and non-Western instruments (for example, Japanese or Chinese instruments, or composing a piece for a gamelan ensemble). Young defines

hybridity in music as a work that displays the influences of more than one style,⁴ referring to the blending of different cultural, artistic, or social elements to create something distinct from the music of the original cultures.⁹ In world music, although, many times hybridity transforms music into a form of Western music, being rock, pop, jazz, or avant-garde, for example. As noted in Deschênes,⁹ hybridity in music implies forms of “de-identification” in order to re-identify with another music.¹⁰

James O. Young raises the question of “ownership” of what is being appropriated, suggesting that indigenous people often regard their music as being something that is “owned” by the entire culture. “[C]reativity and freedom [are] pitted against concerns about the proprietary rights of individual musicians and (in many cases of cultural appropriation) entire cultures.”¹¹(p180) However, a point that he does not raise in this regard is that this ownership is, for many indigenous artists and non-artists alike, affective, emotional, for some spiritual, and especially a matter of cultural identity beyond and above the question of ownership.¹¹ Cultural identity for an artist is not solely about the culture, but about the music itself, or any art form one professes, for that matter. It is what gives meaning to one’s life as an artist. In many Western cultures, arts are detached from everyday life, which is not the case in many, if not most, cultures considered non-Western.¹²

Appropriation by Western artists of non-Western arts can often be undertaken thoughtlessly and carelessly. This is underscored by the fact that many people will not take into consideration the history of colonization between the two peoples that creates a disparity of power and a callous arrogance when appropriation occurs between colonizer and colonized. This absence of respect can make those appropriated justifiably sensitive to such disregard from the West, as the example presented about Robert Lepage’s plays shows.

⁹ For example, a Canadian musician like myself hoping to master the Japanese *shakuhachi*. Since the solo pieces for that bamboo flute are very different from European/Western music (for example, it has no rhythmic structure, with obligatory silences between short phrases—some with a single tone—are an integral part of its aesthetic), I had to de-identified with some guiding rules of Western music in order to properly integrate what makes that Japanese music so particular.

¹⁰ I will not delve into the question of hybridity here. We can find a large literature on it in ethnomusicology.

¹¹ If such the term “ownership” is appropriate in such situation, a term which has quite possibly been imposed by Western legal systems.

¹² Howard Murphy¹⁰ gives an excellent example in this regard about the Yolngu people of north Australia.

This dualistic view of appropriation is not without its critics. In a recent article, Argentinian anthropologist Ezequiel Adamovsky suggests that the notion of appropriation as it is propounded in North America, *i.e.*, the U.S. and Canada (and quite possibly Europe), cannot be applied to the social and cultural situations in Latin America (although he does not say anything about the arts).¹² One of the reasons is that the way this term is defined in North America implies an asymmetry in which the boundaries between the appropriator and the appropriated are not contested. For Adamovsky, such a definition underlays a view that what is being appropriated is owned, so to speak, by a whole ethnicity, as just mentioned above by Young, while the appropriators remain within their ethnicity of origin. The miscegenation that has been going on in Latin America cannot be construed from a point of view of such dichotomy, presenting in his article a quite thorough account of what has been going on in Latin America on the question of appropriation, and differing from the current discourse among North American scholars, as presented above. Miscegenation, that is *métissage*, is an integral part of Latin America’s social life. It is much more than simply appropriation; miscegenation is transappropriation, as we will see below.¹²

There are three other points that are worth raising about appropriation: one that Young briefly touches upon without developing it, and two others by the authors cited above, including Young and Adamovsky, that say nothing about. The first point concerns what could be called, for lack of a better qualifier, “insider appropriation.” There are two examples: The Australian *didgeridoo* was created by the Aboriginals of Northern Australia. The growing interest of other Aboriginal communities and non-Aboriginals from all over the world in the instrument has been such that it became the emblematic instrument of all Australian Aboriginals.¹³ In other words, Aboriginal communities from other regions of Australia appropriated what they seem to consider a heritage of all the Aboriginal people of the continent. The same can be said about Northern Canadian Inuit throat singing, called *kattajaq*,¹³ found originally in the north of the province of Quebec in Canada, but which has now become an identifier for all Inuit from Quebec to Alaska.¹⁴ In these particular types of situations, can we talk about appropriation? Jean-Jacques Nattiez, who recently published an excellent book on the music of the Inuit people, from Alaska to Greenland, does not raise

¹³ They are initially throat games to entertain children during the long winter nights, when men were out for hunting. They were banned not long after Christian priests started to convert them in the second half of the 18th century. It has fortunately been maintained in secret. Canadian ethnomusicologists started to study them only in the 1970s.

the issue.¹⁵ For, although such appropriation is not between distinct cultures, it is within different communities of a particular culture, and possibly a form of appropriation by “mimesis,” something that everyone in the community can use to represent themselves in our modern and global world. However, it cannot be viewed as “métissage” (i.e., miscegenation, interbreeding, as French Jean-Loup Amselle¹⁶ defines the term), since no hybridization is occurring, although these art forms are being modernized under the pressure of globalization. It could be viewed as a form of transmission within a particular culture.¹⁴

The second point that is not raised by the authors cited here is the connection between appropriation and appreciation. That is to say, appropriation implies a degree of appreciation of what is being appropriated, although the appreciation of something is not necessarily implied by another as appropriation. In a recent article, Cattien and Stopford¹⁷ review the literature on how appropriation also implies an appreciation of what is being appropriated. It must be said that they base their definition of appropriation on Young’s definition, criticized by Abramovitz: For them, appropriation is basically an act of taking. Yet, the connection they suggest between both terms, appropriation and appreciation, is worth mentioning. Obviously, appropriation in world music (and surely in all arts), as I have been presenting it here, obviously implies an appreciation of what is being appropriated. Musicians who take on Roma or Irish music, without being Roma or Irish, do it for their love of this music, as myself, a Canadian, take on a Japanese musical instrument. For Cattien and Stopford, cultural appropriation is somehow “cultural appreciation,” both having socio-cultural and historical particularities. They view the interest, thus appreciation, of something that belongs to an *Other* as an act of appropriation.¹⁵ Cultural appropriation becomes a way to render something an object of appreciation, whereas cultural appreciation renders something a possible object of appropriation. For these two researchers, cultural appropriation is an

“irreducible feature of Western understandings of esthetic appreciation.”¹⁷

The third point is one that I have not seen explicitly raised: when a culture or a society does not perceive what someone else appropriates from them as being appropriation. The best example I know of, based on my experience with that culture, is Japan. Most Japanese people I have met over the years do not judge non-Japanese who take up a form of art, such as calligraphy, traditional painting, tea ceremony, flower arrangement, *bonsai*, *taiko* (drums), *shakuhachi*, including martial arts, or who might dress in what Japanese call “cosplay,”¹⁶ as some kind of “appropriators,” although Japanese people of course acknowledge that these foreigners appreciate their traditional arts, without calling it appropriation.¹⁷ Paradoxically, when it comes to Japanese traditional music, although, as I learned over the years in learning the *shakuhachi*, some Japanese people find it peculiar that a foreigner might be interested in their traditional music. A few Japanese believe that Westerners should focus solely on Western music since they view it, in particular classical music, as more “civilized” or “modern.”¹⁸ The issue of appropriation appears to be irrelevant to Japanese people, possibly because they have been taking in Western cultures in all possible ways, in technology, philosophy, and arts, for example, since the second half of the 19th century, while trying the best they can to maintain their unique cultural identity, as noted in Koichi.¹⁸ Numerous Japanese martial arts practitioners, for example, are happy to teach such arts abroad. I did not find any studies analyzing a situation where there is obvious appropriation, while it is not viewed as such by the appropriated.

In regard to world music,¹⁹ Born and Hesmondhalgh³ suggest that appropriation is not just a simple “act of taking”; there are modes or categories of appropriation, and I would add a degree of appropriation. Some musicians appropriate

¹⁴ According to French anthropologist Jean-Loup Amselle (2010), the notion of “métissage” appeared in the 19th century, about mixing of racial bloods. At the time, among anthropologists and philosophers, opinions were either for or against it. Today, this notion is widely used in fashion, literature, music, art, entertainment, and culture in general. It designates the free mixing of genres.

¹⁵ Cattien and Stopford do not mention any situation in which there is appropriation without appreciation. An example could be a situation in which someone with power over a community appropriates something to have a stronger power over them, without appreciating at all what is being appropriated.

¹⁶ Cosplay, a blend word of “costume play,” is an activity and performance art in which participants called cosplayers wear costumes and fashion accessories to represent a specific character from Japanese animation or manga. Cf., <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cosplay>.

¹⁷ Under the pressure of modernization, their traditional arts have been “pushed aside,” so to speak. Lately, artists are reappropriating their traditional arts and handcrafts while modernizing them. For example, Alison Tokita suggests that Japan, in the 20th century, evolved through two parallel music trajectories—Western and Japanese.¹⁹

¹⁸ For example, I had a Japanese friend whose father criticized her for wanting to learn the *koto*, the Japanese table zither. The violin or the piano was, according to him, more interesting instruments to learn.

¹⁹ I am also a journalist, specialized in world music.

while respecting the culture they appropriate from, and some do not. Some take what they can without much thought about appropriation, caring almost only about what is being appropriated, often without qualifying it as appropriation. Some cultures will not mind that foreigners appropriate their arts, and might even encourage it, as in Japan, while others might resist it, without being able to stop it. An appropriator might bring something unknown from a particular culture into the open, while someone else might harm a culture and promote stereotypes far from the reality of that culture, like the case of the Roma. As ethnomusicologist Carol Silverman indicates, Eastern European musicians can become more successful by playing Roma music than Roma musicians themselves. Most of their playing is based on stereotypes of Roma music.⁷ In addition, degrees of appropriation can differ if the musician appropriating the music takes lessons from a master of that music or not (e.g., learning by her-/himself, from a friend or, nowadays, on the Internet or Youtube where we find numerous teaching videos), or if that musician performs traditional music or uses an instrument for her or his musical interest, ignoring its traditional use. Not all appropriations are disrespectful, particularly if they bring awareness to a disregarded, ignored, avoided, or misinterpreted situation, either politically, socially, or culturally. There is a significant difference between arrogantly appropriating something for oneself, or doing it out of respect and love for this art form, even although the persons being appropriated might not give consent or might not care much about what and how it is being appropriated.

How can we regard, then, an artist from an Asian culture, for example, willingly teaching her or his traditional art to foreigners, either Westerners or others? Are these students appropriating these arts? Are these indigenous artists intentionally giving away their art to be appropriated? Is this situation really appropriation or something different?

3. Transpropriation

A rarely used and little-known term that offers an alternative viewpoint in regard to appropriation is *transpropriation*.²⁰ This term is used in diverse scholarly fields such as philosophy, philosophy of law, and environment studies. Surprisingly, it is not used in ethnomusicology, anthropology, social sciences, and other fields studying cultural and social encounters, although the term “transculturality” is at times used.²⁰ Transpropriation

has not even found its way into current dictionaries. In Europe, it has been used in the 1990s to refer to common goods that can be used in multiple situations by multiple users, as proposed by Belgian philosopher of law and jurist François Ost,²¹ on the collective ownership of heritage lands or properties, or for environmental questions. Transpropriation in this context refers to the management of communal heritage sites, monuments, places, lands, and natural environments regarding the cultural and/or historical meaning they may have for a community. In a 1971 article, American philosopher Edward S. Casey defined *transpropriation* as a way to make something one's own through one's reciprocal relationship with other people, although it appears that his use of this term by philosophers (and sociologists or anthropologists) has remained unheeded.²²

Ezequiel Adamovsky raises the issue of “cultural transpropriation,” defining it as an “interethnic flux that collaborates in ethnogenesis or the redefinition of ethnic identities. Unlike appropriation, cultural transpropriation is not an individual endeavour but a collective one. It involves a genuine transformation of the subject through the assimilation of elements taken from other ethnicities.”^{11(p53)} According to him, cultural transpropriation does not reinforce racial hierarchies or the oppression of minorities as appropriation does. It is the opposite, although conflicts of interest or power struggles might, of course, arise. Adamovsky does not develop explicitly what transpropriation might be about in the contexts of Latin America; he mentions it only at the end of his article.

My reason for proposing the use of the term “transpropriation” when art forms from different cultures interlaced together—however in my case as an individual artistic comportment—is that appropriation appears to be understood as an umbrella term for cultural and social communications and encounters between artists of different origins, as if it does not have or does not need to have a converse term. I do not believe that all human encounters, whether social, political, cultural, or otherwise, can be viewed and analyzed solely through the lens of appropriation, in particular through the stance of its underlying judgments, viewpoints, stereotypes, or dualistic interpretations.

In anthropology, we find the notion of transculturality, which refers to the adaptation and entanglement of groups of people in social or cultural contexts, focusing on adaptation, transformation, negotiation, sharing, and exchanging of meanings, rather than on individual loss or gain, through which new identities are mutually forged. Anthropologist Afef Bessenaieh defines transculturality

²⁰ The terms “trans-appropriation” or “trans appropriation” have also been used. My preference for “transpropriation” over the other terms is that the “ap-” of appropriation, which possibly refers to take or adopt something, is replaced by “trans-,” which means going across.

as the creation of relational “webs” and flows of shared significance and reciprocity woven by human practices and representations between communities.²⁰ Transculturality is about coherence in relatedness, commonality, and mixing of shared cultural practices in day-to-day encounters, a view which is in line with Adamovsky’s “cultural transpropriation.”¹²

As German philosopher Wolfgang Iser suggests, transculturality occurs not only on the macrolevel of societies but as well through to the microlevel of individuals’ identity within society.²³ The prefix “trans-” in transculturality and transpropriation thus refers to a transfer of reciprocal, meaningful, and pragmatic experiences—a sharing that can be cultural, ideological, social, political, artistic, even spiritual, as well as personal. When two or more persons relate to each other, they are in an open state of acceptance and sharing (even during a disagreement). Transpropriation is thus not about what is shared, said, and done, but more about *how* and *why* this sharing occurs, including the *quality* of how it is shared. It could be suggested that transpropriation occurs in personal encounters and between a group of persons, while transculturality or cultural transpropriation, as a web of shared meanings, is about nurturing a community. While transpropriation and transculturality between a few individuals or a community as a whole can never be completely balanced—as there are individual differences, disagreements, conflicts of interest, expectations and power struggles—it is essential to consider that everyone participating is willing to relate to others through an intentional and mutual interrelatedness, beyond each one’s positions and differences, as well as beyond the group’s cultural representations of themselves as a group.

In the arts, “transpropriative” learning is, I believe, from my experience in learning the Japanese *shakuhachi*, bi-, and even multidirectional, not one-sided. It is not about self-consciously claiming and taking something for oneself as appropriation is defined above, but rather about crossing over one’s cultural, and even personal, boundaries into this other culture, which might imply giving up something of one’s native culture to grasp and make one’s own partially what that other art is about, since there might be important differences between one’s native art and the other art (for example, in my case, between Western and Japanese traditional musics). In other words, transpropriation is about showing a willingness to learn something from another culture by descending from one’s cultural and even personal “ivory tower,” agreeing to set foot outside of one’s cultural (and sometimes social) comfort zone. From such a perspective, one’s intentions are not solely about satisfying our personal interests, curiosity, or artistic whims, but as much about paying respect to those persons

who are willing to share with us and give away something of themselves and their culture to us, while allowing us to make it one’s own. And, in the end, agreeing to be changed by what is learned.²¹

4. From appropriation to transpropriation

The viewpoint of appropriation implies maintaining distance, difference, including sometimes an authority over those being appropriated, through the presuppositions and stereotypes one personally, culturally, and even socially has about that *Other*. From a transpropriation viewpoint, these presuppositions and stereotypes are conspicuously active in the background. They are, in fact, from the outset, what attracts and entices any artist to go beyond one’s cultural boundaries to appropriate what caters to them. Appropriation imposes our presuppositions, myths, and stereotypes on an *Other*, while a transpropriative stance should compel us to confront them, since they are in the way of getting into someone else’s cultural “shoes,” that is, in the way of understanding and grasping the meaning another culture attributes to what we learn from them. By becoming conscious of and reflexive about our myths, presuppositions, stereotypes, and assumptions about another culture and its art, we might realize that through them we misinterpret, and often reify or essentialize what we want to appropriate.

Where or when does appropriation “start” and “end?” How about transpropriation, where or when does it start and end? Are both of them distinct and unrelated viewpoints on the art form one wants to make one’s own? Or do they overlap, both taking place at the same time? Or should they be viewed more like two processes that define and delimit at different degrees our socio-cultural encounters with what we view as *Other*, depending on the one hand who appropriates or transpropriates what, why, and how it occurs and, on the other, who and what is being appropriated, as well as how the appropriated react to being appropriated or transpropriated?

5. Conclusion

To conclude, as suggested, transpropriation starts from appropriation, that is, a “desire” to learn and to possess something different and beyond what we have been raised in. To get deeper into that art—being a music, painting, a martial art, or anything else—only appropriation is

²¹ One example from my study of the Japanese *shakuhachi*. The solo pieces for that bamboo flute have no rhythms or meter. Thus, they must not be played with a linear sense of time. Being trained as a classical musician, it took me more than 10 years to unlearn the strictly linear sense of time of Western music.

insufficient. We only get the surface of things. To go deeper, we need to go over it, that is, to cross over one's cultural and personal boundaries, go on the other side, and be attentive and respectful of what that artist or that culture is willing to teach us and let us use for our artworks. With today's unavoidable transcultural entanglement and enmeshing of cultures and individual interests, no cultural encounters can be solely appropriation. Hybridity in any art appears to be more an outcome of transpropriation than appropriation, a purposeful and intentional fusion of sometimes eclectic cultural genres (which is clearly the case in world musics). If appropriation is about superficial pleasure, presuppositions, assumptions, and myths, transpropriation can be about what is beneath their surface. This means that we might have to give up something of ourselves to be able to gain something from that *Other*, a point I raise in Deschênes^{9,22}. In the end, we gain more through transpropriation than appropriation.

However, the meaning of appropriation and transpropriation differs from one person to another, from one culture to another, from one art form to another. My humble hope is to incite the readers to reflect on their situation in regard to their personal encounter with arts that are considered different from one's own culture.

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22 I even suggest that we might need to go through a form of partial de-identification in order to re-identify, at least in part, with that other art and culture.

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