



Navigation tools

How to make your way in Canada today without getting stuck on the shoals of cultural appropriation **BY DAVID A. ROBERTSON**

SOME OF MY BEST and earliest memories are of the lake. Starting when I was a baby, I went with my family to Riding Mountain National Park in Manitoba every summer and stayed at a little resort with housekeeping cottages. When my wife and I had kids of our own, we continued the tradition, bringing our kids to the lake in August and staying at the same place. The cabins encircle a communal area where there are picnic benches, firepits, and a lamp post that I broke one year with an errant Frisbee. There's a play structure for kids with a few slides and a sandbox. The swimming pool is always warm—it's never the wrong time for a swim, whatever the weather.

At the front of it all, a totem pole stands facing the road.

I remember eating fresh cinnamon buns from Whitehouse Bakery and Restaurant first thing in the morning. I remember having contests in the pool with my brothers, seeing who could swim to the end of the pool and back without taking a breath. I remember going out on the pedal boats, looking down at the water and being able to see the bottom. I remember going for ice cream on Wasagaming Drive, playing checkers by the tennis courts, seeing bear poop in the middle of Ominnik Marsh Trail, eating dinner for a treat at the Wigwam restaurant in town, and going to The Park Theatre to see movies that had already come out weeks ago in the city. My father, brothers, and I would golf first thing in the morning at Clear Lake Golf Course. >>

At the end of the week, all the Robertsons would line up in front of that totem pole for a picture.

My memories of the lake are good ones. I cherish them, and I always will. Now that my father's gone, they mean even more to me. But as I got older, and became aware of my Cree heritage, I began to question some of the things I grew up with at the lake. I thought about Wigwam Dining & Lounge, and I looked at the totem pole standing tall behind us while we lined up for our annual family photo.

None of it sat right.

At first, I couldn't define why. These things—the names, the structures—gave me a nagging feeling, like when you've gone on a trip and wonder if you left the stove on. I tried to put my finger on it as each passing summer it troubled me more and more that Indigenous cultures were being portrayed as though they were nothing more than tourist attractions—curiosities at best, empty and meaningless at worst. (It's apropos that Grey Owl lived in the area at one point.) As I worked to educate myself on issues that Indigenous people face, that undefinable feeling became clear, and the question I kept coming back to was, "Is this cultural appropriation?"

That question alone is a good starting point. We should make a habit of asking it more often, especially once we've been made aware that a name, a monument, a piece of jewellery, an item of clothing, or even a watercraft such as a kayak, might be problematic. Inquisitiveness indicates a desire to learn. A simple willingness to know can help shift an act of appropriation into one of appreciation.

The distinction between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation is relatively straightforward: it's an act of appropriation when someone uses an aspect of a culture that's not their own without understanding or respecting it, especially when it's a historically oppressed group and when it involves personal gain or profit. Appreciation, on the other hand, sees people genuinely trying to learn and understand about another culture in order to broaden their perspective. It builds relationships across different cultures, and involves

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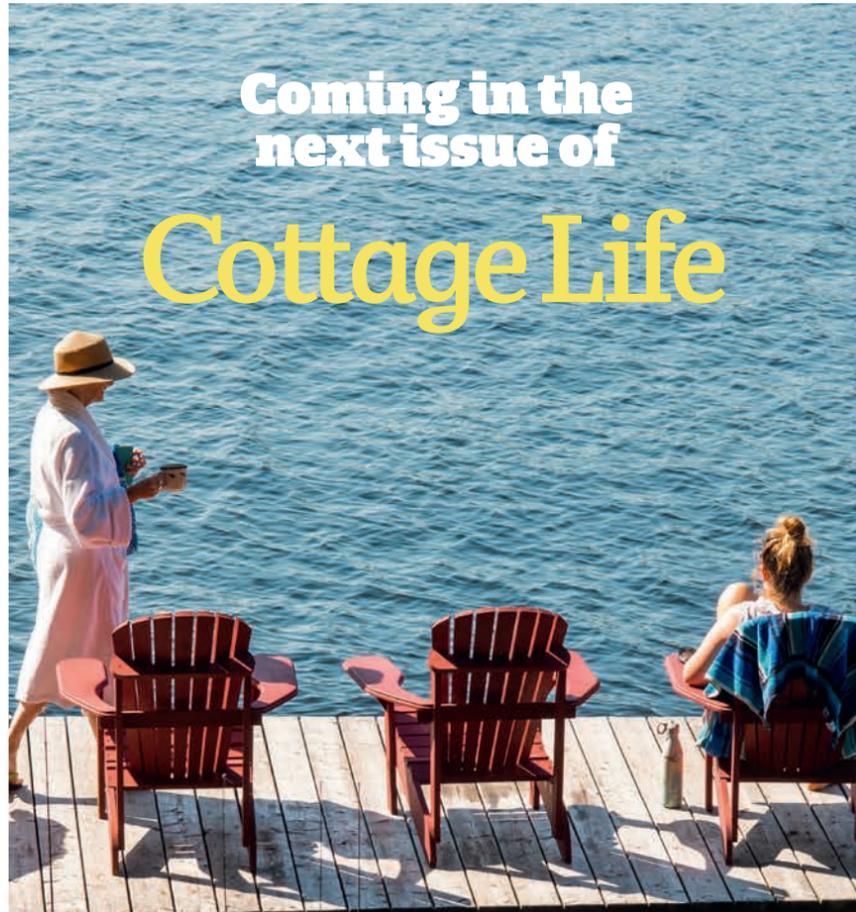
asking permission and giving credit and fair compensation.

Profit doesn't necessarily mean monetary gain. The other day, I was scrolling through TikTok, and I came across a video of a dancing model wearing a bikini, a headdress, and war paint. Ostensibly, this individual was trying to get "likes." If you're borrowing elements from another culture that is not your own to get attention on social media, that's appropriation. Even taking a picture at a powwow of a dancer without their permission and posting it on Instagram can be an act of appropriation because the purpose of social media is to draw interest, usually to yourself or to your business.

Profit. Attention. Personal gain. If you're borrowing from an Indigenous culture for any of these things, it's an act of appropriation, and it doesn't have to be deliberate or malicious. In most cases, nobody's trying to do harm. Putting an inukshuk on the front steps of your cottage. Buying dreamcatcher earrings from the shop in town because they look nice on you. Going out on the water for a paddle in a kayak.

On which side of the line does each of these fall? The inukshuk was never intended to be decorative; it had, and has, an important function. If you're buying an authentic dreamcatcher made by an Indigenous artist, that's great. But if not, if they are thrift store knock-offs, then the store is benefiting from an Indigenous culture, which is appropriation. (And your dollars are encouraging them to do it.) As for kayaks, they, like inukshuks, were invented by Inuit people and have a history that spans thousands of years. Now, I don't think that going out on the water with a kayak is an act of appropriation, but nonetheless, it's an opportunity for appreciation.

It's not always black and white—one thing or the other. When you're out on the water, surrounded by the beauty of Mother Earth, maybe take a moment for quiet reflection. To acknowledge that Indigenous people have had elements of their cultures stolen for centuries—even as the country we now call Canada has made numerous attempts at stripping those cultures away entirely, as though there's no value in them. Ironic. The truth is, much has been taken from



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Indigenous people, but they've given Canada a lot, and not only kayaks.

"What's the big deal?" That's another question I get a lot in my line of work as an author and public speaker where I write and present often on the subject of appropriation. Do you really have to get bent out of shape when you see a white dude wearing a Chief Wahoo baseball cap? When you watch Peter Pan and have to listen to "What Made the Red Man Red?" When you see "Indian warrior" or "pocahottie" costumes at the local party supply store? When you see elements taken from various Indigenous cultures decorating cottage properties?

Well, yeah, because the stakes are higher than it seems. Addressing appropriation is necessary if we're genuinely going to work towards healing as a community. It's an integral part in the process of reconciliation. Healing requires us to listen to, learn from, and understand each other.

So what does it look like to address appropriation? While working on this article, I discovered that the Wigwam Dining & Lounge recently changed its name to 1929 Dining & Lounge, 1929 being the year it was built. I spoke to the owner, Rhonda Murray Cabral, who explained that she and her family had owned the restaurant her entire adult life, and that she'd grown increasingly uncomfortable with the name. "When you know better, you do better," she said, and when she took over control of the business, she decided to make the change. There's now a land acknowledgement on the menus and on the main page of 1929's revamped website, explaining that the establishment is on Treaty 2 territory. She asked my opinion on a heritage wall she's considering, which could reference 1929's former name and explain what a wigwam is. Rhonda is confident in her decision to change the name. She isn't concerned about getting the sort of backlash sports franchises see when they change their appropriated names and mascots. In fact, she says that the vast majority of her patrons have embraced the move.

When you know better, you do better.

I like that. It's a great example of consideration and respect, and if a small business is willing to make a significant

change like this, we are all capable of doing so. We just need to be willing to do the work.

If you've placed an inukshuk on your property, do some research. When you have a guest over and they notice the beautiful structure on your doorstep, you can thank them and explain that inukshuks are used in the north by Inuit people for a number of reasons, including as a navigation tool to guide people across the tundra, a signpost to mark a cache or a good hunting or fishing spot, and as a message board to communicate something such as a change from an intended route. When you buy those dreamcatcher earrings, take the time to ask about the meaning of that particular piece from the person who made it. Learn enough about it so that you can articulate its meaning to somebody else.

What about totem poles? They're typically made out of red cedar and represent ancestry, histories, people, or events. They display beings or crest animals that mark a family's lineage. They are visual representations of kinship. If

your cottage has one, at least know that, and let others know it too. Otherwise, an important structure to the Indigenous people of the Pacific Northwest might be looked at as no more valuable than a garden gnome.

I'm not perfect by any stretch of the imagination. I ate at the restaurant formerly known as the Wigwam without thinking of how actual wigwams, semi-permanent cone-shaped or domed dwellings, were used by many First Nations before colonization and are still used for ceremonial purposes. I've smiled while taking pictures in front of the totem pole at the lodge without consideration for how problematic it is. When my eldest daughter was two or three, I even dressed her up as an Indigenous person for Halloween, as though her heritage is a costume.

Everybody makes mistakes. The key is to learn from them.

Asking yourself whether or not something is cultural appropriation leads to other questions that will help guide your decisions or put an issue that might not

seem that important into a different context. Reconciliation is an act of healing. It's reaching out to learn from a place of truth so that we can become truth-tellers ourselves and create stronger communities.

My best and earliest memories are of the lake. So were my dad's. He loved the calm of being near the water; it reminded him of his childhood on the trapline. Maybe your memories are of the lake too. My dad used to say that we're all human beings, and we share far more than we think we do. Let's move forward together with that in mind, and ensure, as much as we can, that the time we spend, the memories we cherish, don't come at the expense of somebody else's culture. 🐾

David A. Robertson (he, him, his) is the author of numerous award-winning books for young readers including When We Were Alone and The Barren Grounds. Dave is a member of Norway House Cree Nation and currently lives in Winnipeg. This is his first story for Cottage Life.

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