

The EthnoFolk Letters 7

Toronto, Ontario, Feb.

Dear Judy,

A book review in the Jan. 12/95 Toronto *Star* reminded me of a recent conversation you and I had about cultural appropriation. The book was **The Caribbean Diaspora in Toronto: Learning to Live with Racism**, written by Frances Henry, an anthropologist of Jewish origin married to an Afro-Caribbean man. What bothered me when reading the review was that Henry felt obliged to offer personal notes to justify her "researching and writing a book about Caribbean people when I am not directly a member of that group." The reviewer noted that "Such an apologia is unusual in a serious academic study"; I think it's also an indication of the ludicrous heights political correctness has reached. As a serious student of various ethnic cultures for almost 20 years, I wonder how long it will be before someone accuses me of cultural appropriation because I teach and perform dances of cultures not my own. When I was one of the two non-Croatian members of the amateur group "Folklore Ensemble Croatia," it was plain my colleagues were amazed at and proud of my interest in their culture. And although my dancing is limited to teaching recreational folkdance now, many immigrants of Armenian and Romanian background have taken pains to tell me how much my teaching their dances means to them. In most cases, they had no opportunity to learn their native dances where they were born. (It's true the dances are done out of context—for example, without songs and rituals and costumes—but many of them are no longer done in their original setting.)

I realize most CSTM/SCTM readers will never have heard of recreational folk dancing. Typifying our invisibility is the TV series **Dancing**, which aired on PBS in May of 1993 and made no acknowledgment of our existence, although we are a worldwide movement that's been around for more than half a century. As Desmond Morris would say, we have formed our own tribe. But the controversy over cultural appropriation that I first became aware of over the writings of W.P. Kinsella has made this tribal member unwilling ever to teach North American native dances, no matter how accurately I may be able to do them. And I think that's a shame, because it means recreational folk dancers will not be exposed to as wide a spectrum of dances as they could be. Something cannot be fun, educational and mind-broadening if you're accused of stealing it.

Karen Bennett

Judith notes:

Karen is a long-time folk dance performer and teacher, a journalist, and the current editor of the Ontario Folk Dancer, the excellent newsletter of the Ontario Folk Dance Association, which is an exchange member of CSTM/SCTM.

I think Karen has raised some really important points and would love to see this letter touch off a discussion here in our **Bulletin**. Please send your reactions and comments to us.