

# An emotional Jesse Wenté on the 'remarkable arrogance' of an appropriation prize

Fighting back tears, Wenté spoke about the pain caused by latest cultural appropriation debate

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Indigenous critic Jesse Wenté spoke with Matt Galloway on CBC Radio's *Metro Morning* about the mushrooming scandal surrounding an editorial published in *Write* magazine that argued for "cultural appropriation."

The author of the editorial, Hal Niedzviecki, has since stepped down, as has Walrus editor Jonathan Kay after he published an opinion piece of his own advocating for debate around the issue of cultural appropriation.

Several media executives, [including one from CBC](#), had also tweeted they would contribute funds to an actual appropriation prize.

Here's Galloway's interview with Wenté:

*Questions and answers have been slightly edited and condensed.*

**Matt Galloway:** What have the last few days been like for you?

**Jesse Wenté:** Mostly unpleasant, I would say. And a challenge. But before we get to that, I want to read some names, that I think are important here, and may have been lost since this conversation started. Joshua Whitehead. Richard Van Camp. Tanya Roach. Louise Bernice Halfe. Elaine Wagner. Gord Grisenhwaite. Alicia Elliott. Shannon Webb-Campbell. Helen Knott. Gloria Mehlmann. These are the names of the writers who appeared in that issue of *Write* magazine that has caused all of this. They were the ones that protested first to the editorial and started this, and yet we have since moved on.

I want to make sure everyone seeks out these names to read. There are many other names that are commenting on this issue. There are many other lists of names. But those lists are inconsequential. This is the list that matters. These are the voices that should be centred and heard. That is one of the great lessons for everyone in all of this: the voices that we have centred for far too long in this country. Perhaps we should re-examine that, especially if we want to recreate what this nation is together.

What we are, instead, is divided, largely by rhetorical arguments that conflate notions of free speech with cultural appropriation while disguising the very distinct histories of these two things. We have to understand that cultural appropriation is institutionalized, it is the very foundation of what Canada is built on. And not just cultural appropriation, but appropriation of all things Indigenous: our lives, our lands. This is what this nation was founded on. It was the policy of the government to do this. To ignore, to pretend now, that we somehow have moved on beyond this and that somehow we're all on equal footing and thus we can all share equitably is to fail in your responsibility as a storyteller.

None of us that I've seen want to limit free speech. I wish there were so many more stories written about Indigenous people. But those stories come with responsibility. Indigenous people know this all too well, we are beholden to our communities. When we say these things, we know exactly who will hold us responsible. Who is that for non-Indigenous writers, when they don't have these connections to the community? Do they truly understand the reason that these stories are sacred?

The biggest challenge coming out of this for the Canadian media is going to be how you re-approach to the Indigenous community after this.

**MG: There was the editorial, support given, pieces written, and then this thing happens on Twitter in the dead of night when media executives, including one from CBC, throw their support behind the idea of an appropriation prize. What did that tell you about what you just said is important, that idea of re-examining who tells stories?**

**JW:** It tells me that the establishment of the Canadian media is ill-equipped to actually do that. Because do they have the people capable of that sort of self-examination? When you tweet at midnight, like that, it displays a remarkable arrogance. It displays how much you truly value our voices. You don't think we can see you? It means they didn't care we could see them. It didn't

matter to them. Now there's all this scrambling, there's all this apologizing. It's appreciated, words are great, but we need actions. These things can't happen again. This absorbs so much energy, it causes so much pain in our community, to have to re-argue for our value as human beings, on our own land? In a foreign language as I do to you now, one that was imposed on us? Please. What are we talking about in 2017.

**MG: What will prove to you that people are taking this seriously finally?**

**JW:** I'm not sure at this point. I've spent a long time working in large cultural institutions like the one we sit in today, hoping and working to see fundamental change in them, that we needed to change their very nature, for them to understand themselves in order to move forward. These moments make me question whether that work is achievable, and I think that's really difficult. Because it means we will have to build it ourselves, and we will. If anything this proves our strength as a community and our endurance. Don't mistake my emotion here, or my civility anywhere, as weakness. This is our strength, this is me being in touch with my ancestors and feeling them sitting beside me.

I hope to never do this again.

Article can be found here: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/jesse-wente-appropriation-prize-1.4115293>

Exhibit: *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*

Location/Phase: Part 3: Toronto

Witness: Jesse Wente

Submitted by: Christa Big Canoe / Commission

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Initials

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