Cultural Appropriation Vs. Appreciation in The Arts

Ahairwe Frank

Faculty of Business Administration and Management Kampala International University Uganda
Email: ahairwefrank56@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the nuanced distinction between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation within the context of the arts. Cultural appropriation involves the unauthorized or insensitive use of elements from marginalized cultures by dominant cultural groups, often resulting in misrepresentation, commodification, and exclusion. In contrast, cultural appreciation is defined by respectful engagement, contextual understanding, and acknowledgment of the cultural significance behind creative expressions. Drawing on historical examples, including Edward Curtis's depictions of Native American communities, as well as contemporary controversies in fashion, music, and visual arts, this paper examines how power dynamics, intention, and impact often dictate the fine line between appropriation and appreciation. It also considers the role of audiences, intellectual property rights, and the evolving responsibilities of artists in a globalized world. Through this investigation, the paper emphasizes the need for education, ethical collaboration, and cultural sensitivity to foster creative exchanges that honor rather than exploit cultural identities.

Keywords: Cultural appropriation, cultural appreciation, arts, representation, intellectual property, Indigenous cultures, fashion ethics.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural appropriation has gained attention, especially in the arts, as discussions contrast it with cultural appreciation. Cultural appropriation refers to the unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of cultural elements from one culture by another, typically involving a dominant culture exploiting a marginalized one, thereby excluding the original culture from the benefits of its expressions. In contrast, cultural appreciation recognizes and respects the culture being depicted. While appropriation often leads to exploitation of identities and expressions, appreciation embodies a genuine engagement with those elements. The representation of marginalized identities in art has a long history, with various methods of portrayal often stemming from the inability of those cultures to represent themselves. Collaborative creativity and cross-cultural collaboration are viewed differently in society, particularly when the methodologies of marginalized cultures are invoked. For example, a predominantly white creative team producing a play on BLM protests raises significant concerns regarding cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation is an imprecise, unofficial term that opposes cultural appreciation, with an overlap between the two concepts. Recent discussions emphasize appropriation as discriminatory and exploitative, leading to a backlash where artists fear being labeled as appropriative. This backlash threatens to diminish the joy of engaging with diverse creativity, as artists are concerned about being accused of theft or imitation [1, 2].

Historical Context

Cultural appropriation has been present in all societies to some degree throughout history. Much of the research on cultural appropriation draws on one of two dominant Western perspectives or narratives. The first is a historical narrative of cultures meeting and borrowing from one another. The label of "cultural appropriation" has been used most frequently to reference moments of the other narrative, post Western colonization, imperialism, globalization, and the associated oppression and exploitation of

colonized peoples and cultures by Euro-American cultures, which continues into the present. This investigation embodies a clash of both perspectives as represented by a case study on Euro-American culture's representations of Native American cultures. In examining cultural appropriation and appropriation of art, a large quantity of the resources come from creative practices that have been discussed in a Western context. Stories, images, and objects from Native American culture were represented by Euro-American artists for over a century, many of which are often ignorant of Native culture. These become appropriations, as they construct identities based on an outsider's knowledge (or lack thereof) of another culture's manner of living. The first case study is a discussion of Edward Curtis's representations of Native culture through photography. As a photographer, Curtis took advantage of his role to construct Native identity based on his perspective. Aesthetic vocabulary changes with the times, with the consequence that some artists' work moves out of the canons of the fine arts and into a new, sometimes ambiguous, status. Perhaps such a change of status into the quagmire of the useless could be seen as the price to pay for a new freedom. Art today is more openly critical of the culture in which it arises. It manifests its critique at times in deliberate wariness of the increasingly pervasive commodification of the artwork. And it does so in many cases by referring explicitly to that culture. Here are hints of objects or events on the periphery of the environment, as it were, which have not yet been absorbed into accepted aesthetic vocabularies. In many instances, it seems to be taking too naive or simple a view of art and its status [3, 4].

Defining Cultural Appropriation

Cultural appropriation occurs when dominant groups take or "borrow" styles from marginalized groups, who face oppression or have been stigmatized for their cultural practices throughout history. In many cases, the recruited stylization becomes mainstream and is absorbed into pop culture, while the original group continues to be marginalized. This happens routinely in the fashion industry. The recent Coachella music festival, dubbed "Cultural Coachella" by some, became the focal point of a social media firestorm when artist Vanessa Hudgens donned an indigenous headdress, triggering a barrage of posts on Twitter and Instagram. As designers externalize their processes and the world grows smaller through globalization, there is tighter scrutiny of corporate and commercial actions. To prevent appropriation from happening in fashion, it is important to educate and implement certain business practices to stay ethical. The question of stylization has long been an integral part of social life and will continue to be so. Fairness is an ongoing issue of concern and mass debate within fashion philosophy. Questions about the ethics of styling practices arise, focusing on whether stylization is just or unjust. Understanding the history of cultural appropriation is important in moving forward and cutting down on the phenomenon in the fashion industry. Judgments about stylistic fairness can generally be made along the same basic paradigms as all normative judgments: there are matters of choice at issue, and those matters are evaluated against schemata of specification. To direct a habitual action in a certain way and to attend to matters of fairness, it helps to analyze a specific practice in terms of possible aspects that give rise to questions of fairness. By looking at concrete examples, the difference between inspiration and appropriation will be explained, examples of correct and corrupt business moves will be laid out, and ideas for change will be suggested [5, 6].

Defining Cultural Appreciation

Cultural appropriation must be distinguished from cultural appreciation, which involves respectfully valuing and understanding a culture. Appreciation requires recognizing the significance of cultural elements and their meanings to the people. Wearing items from another culture without understanding their importance reflects a lack of appreciation. Critics often dismiss cultural appreciation as an excuse for appropriation, equating imitation with theft. However, for appropriation to occur, cultural elements must be distorted or misrepresented. It's crucial to educate people on the distinction between the two. Fashion can bear significant cultural weight but also risks destruction. Objects representing new meanings in a culture can threaten identity, as seen in colonialism and genocide, where clothing often signified cultural loss. Understanding one's involvement in society and culture is vital for navigating fashion's complexities. Fashion holds varied significance: in the West, it often relates to commercial and aesthetic purposes, while among Indigenous and non-Western communities, it encompasses deep cultural meanings tied to life and identity. For these cultures, fashion production and consumption are rich with meaning, contrasting with the often dismissive views held in Western societies [7, 6].

The Fine Line Between Appropriation and Appreciation

Culture is in the public domain; it is a patchwork quilt made from the bits and pieces of countless creators, cultures, and communities. Everyone is ripping, tearing, stitching, and sewing their quilts of influence, based on the designs of those who came before them, on the influences they absorbed and learned from. Consequently, no artist creates in an echo chamber. Whether consciously or unconsciously, everyone borrows, and it is how they borrow that creates the distinction between appropriation and appreciation.

There is a fine line between borrowing to be inspired and borrowing to exploit. Borrowing is a good thing, but it is the why and the how that either creates appreciators or appropriators. Cultural appropriation is an act of domination, control, or exploitation of a culture, people, or tradition through an object with little to no understanding of its significance or influence. Oftentimes, the work is stripped of its contextualization or fragmentation, robbed of the very things that give it power and meaning original to its creation. The appropriation invariably profits at the cost of the culture it borrows from. Whereas, cultural appreciation recognizes and respects cultural significance, paying homage with contextualization and gratitude, treating the borrowed work as sacred. To this end, appreciators seek resources and sources. Appreciation knows the power structures and dynamics in place and would work to redistribute them thoughtfully and respectfully. Both appropriation and appreciation happen every day in the arts, sometimes side by side, sometimes unnoticed. Most of the time, the line is determined by cultural power dynamics. So, for every instance of appropriation that soared to notoriety in the public sphere, there are thousands of undercurrents of appreciation quietly informing practices and ways of life in communities the world over [8, 9].

Impact On Artists and Communities

Concerns over the appropriation of Indigenous works extend to fashion, music, and literature, influenced by diverse perspectives from Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists. For instance, Navajo jewelry designer Aphelion unapologetically embraces her speculative take on Indigenous art, while others condemn her for using sacred symbols. In fine arts, Mexican artist Eloisa Cartonera is praised for her socially conscious screen-prints, yet she faces criticism for appropriating Huichol and Zapatista cultural forms. Musical artists like the Black Roots Reggae Collective and Tanya Tagaq highlight land claims and environmental issues, while Eminem's music, used in celebrating corporations like McDonald's, is viewed as offensive in British Columbia. The varied experiences and opinions of artists from both community's prompt questions about the right to respect, restore, and repurpose cultural forms. Criticism has increasingly focused on non-Indigenous artists who incorporate Indigenous iconography in their works, especially those that decontextualize the "sacred," share traditional symbols without consent, or commodify Indigenous beliefs for profit. These discussions have been documented, but investigations into non-Indigenous artists appropriating Indigenous sound aspects are scarce. For example, protests in the early 1990s against appropriation by artists like Jewel and Yanni have not been thoroughly explored in research. The discourse surrounding appropriation in Canadian contexts highlights pain regarding Indigenous cultural forms in teen pop culture's poetry slams, media, exhibitions like Everything is Art in 2012, and recent works by some Canadian postsecondary institutions [10, 11].

Cultural Ownership and Intellectual Property

To start with, the problems with authenticity in the arts are often inextricably bound up in the issue of one's status as a member of the marginalized group whose culture is alleged to have been appropriated. Commentary focusing on the barbs of elitism directed at whiteouts can, perhaps strangely, look like an inability – or perhaps, an unwillingness – on the part of the entitled to acknowledge that, however unsexily done and with whatever ulterior motives, they can and do feel. So, who owns a given culture, a given tradition? More precisely: Who has that right first? Who has the priority claim, whatever prior work or effort, or anything else, if any, their culture, or its products, is alleged to have taken? These are burning questions whose answers cut deep into the culture in jeopardy. Where a culture is concerned, it looks odd to imply possession, to begin with. Accordingly, who its rightful possessor is, must look arbitrary. Again, this is not to say these questions aren't burning questions, but only that they are subrationally so. At times, one may feel taboos amiss when this question of ownership is pressed through. It frequently brings to mind quotations that stare long and bitterly into its face. So, who cares about the ownership question? Before relating it to appropriation, it broadly contemplates the sufferings of the dispossessed. At the ready are plaints about isolation and alienation, sadness, suffering, memory, and longing over the softness of one's life history. It's a question of existential compassion. Through the ages,

great art has known how to fine-tune the broader question to evoke pity. This is what all important existential questions do; this is the way humanistic discourse works [12, 13].

Role of the Audience

An audience is composed of viewers, listeners, readers, and any other people who observe and receive art. Their role is crucial in the consideration of arts appropriation and appreciation. Looking at the arts, an audience may observe a film, listen to a song or piece of music, see a painting or piece of sculpture, read a book or poem, and much more. The audiences' experience of the piece or body of art may seem self-explanatory, but there are layers of understanding that can influence how they consider the work. Similar to how their own background and experiences inform the creation of art, an audience's background can inform how they receive art. The audience's role in contemplating appropriation and appreciation is evident in understanding many of the core terms and principles of the overarching concept. For example, boundaries between inspiration and theft, homage and appropriation, borrowing and exploitation can all be blurred depending on the audience's understanding and perspective. Additionally, those audiences who are immersed in a different culture could view a body of work with a vastly different understanding than those who are not. Certain aspects could stand out, be focal points, or even be disqualifying to the appreciation of the work. The role of mourning in appropriation is also worth considering taking in the audience's positioning. Non-native audiences may struggle to mourn the loss of a culture deeply from their background, and mourn simply for the cultural loss of the art form. Overall, audiences do play a crucial role in understanding and evaluating the appropriation of art. However, their role could be considered an entirely separate concept, as there are many strands to explain. In other words, while an audience certainly matters in considering appropriation versus appreciation, audiences' backgrounds, interpretations, and responses to the work can add value and deepen understanding, making precursory consideration of their role a challenging proposition [14, 15].

Case Studies in Various Art Forms

The role of the artist in society is often questioned due to issues like cultural appropriation, raising concerns about the appropriateness of creating or critiquing cultures outside one's own. One poignant example of outsider appropriation is Edward Curtis, a photographer known for misrepresenting Native American experiences in the early twentieth century. Born to immigrant parents, Curtis gained fame through his ethnocentric and romanticized images of Indigenous people. His portrayal created deep divides in the understanding of Native American cultures, often emphasizing their supposed lack of 'civilization,' beauty, and uncorrupted nature by modernity. This re-imagining of a marginalized culture highlights problematic histories of representation. Curtis used his privileged position to narrate a culture he was not part of, embodying an Orientalist view that fetishized Native cultures, which were marginalized due to Western fears of savagery. Although he aimed to counter the savage narrative by portraying Native Americans as noble, he ultimately failed to depict the contemporary realities of Native people. The arrival of Columbus signified the invasion of European ideals and governance in North America, leading to genocide and colonization from which many Native communities have yet to recover. Despite efforts to involve Native peoples in photography, Curtis's fixation on creating imaginary constructions of their cultures ultimately proved detrimental [16, 17].

Cultural Sensitivity and Education

In the arts, encounters with cultural others are made explicit, productive, and ever complex. But there are issues, many of which are fraught with politics, which can impede this productive process. For example, imaginative wildness is at times suppressed by public policing of culture – a hyper-awareness of the porousness of forms, ingredients, and meanings in the intercultural landscape. Such policing is described as political correctness, cultural appropriation, or intellectual property rights. It can take the form of significant public outcry aiming to inhibit, reduce, postpone, or modify works. This kind of policing is deeply problematic. It is destructive artistically because it deters creativity. It is also problematic politically, as it assaults imagination, which is defined as the capacity to take oneself beyond what one already knows, perceives, and imagines. It is this capacity that allows for empathy, but it is also a capacity that can generate fake empathy. The moral argument against appropriation has vast historical depth. An international standard can only be developed if enough time and background understanding are taken to hear the respective peoples' positions and then make the terms of the discussion clear and well-informed. For this to happen, there must be a sensitive social history in context. Broadly speaking, the indigenous position is one of outrage and rejection, while the settler position is outstandingly ambivalent, torn between wanting to expose people to a troubling but marvelous reality and not wanting to infringe upon

the tenuous gains of precious peoples. Attention to the shifting ground on both sides must be made clear, as there are righteous positions right at home and nearer the heart [18, 19].

Navigating Cultural Exchange in The Globalized World

"I don't know how to help you," said my fellow student from Lebanon, "This project is part of my culture, and if I were to share it with you, I don't know how. I am not the one who can share." I finished the project anyway, based on images from the internet. I told myself that I tried to share, even if I didn't know much about their culture. Maybe it is better to just let them tell you if it is good. The conversation of cultural appropriation continues to gain momentum and importance. It feels prominent anywhere that cultural elements intersect today. The reactions on social media, especially towards the cultural appropriations of unfamiliar traditional elements by local newcomers, show the act of 'training and visiting foreigners' and 'knowledge and understanding' as ambivalent elements of appreciation and appropriation on both seasoned and novice spectators. There is a consensus that it is complicated, and in most cases, the boundaries of appropriation and appreciation are blurry and unclear. As a musician, designer, artist, /cultural creator, one is confronted with these challenges in navigating the uncovering and discovery of cultures that are unfamiliar, contemporary, curious, or foreign. In a world layered with cultures through globalization, one cannot ignore that things and knowledge from other cultures are embedded in people's own lives, and vice versa. Even though cultural 'exchange' might sound nice and innocuous, exchange cannot be assumed to occur symmetrically. The relations of exchange would contain asymmetries even between 'nations' that are thought to be given, fixed, and self-evident. Both individuals and groups on different levels experience both presence in the negotiation of exchange. As a designer or creator, this asymmetrical relationship becomes even more complicated [20, 21].

Future Directions in Arts and Cultural Exchange

Artists will not stop being inspired by each other's work. If anything, these kinds of exchanges will only become more frequent in a world that is getting smaller by the day. They may, however, become increasingly conscious of these issues. In considering what it means to be influenced in an artistic exchange, one must think about how the social relation behind that influence functions. Appropriation cannot be understood as a purely formal matter. Rather, it must be seen as a form of social exchange with varying power imbalances. In a world where different cultures form parallel 'matrices of intelligibility,' appropriation is akin to 'cutting through the wires' that hold those worlds in coherence. On one side of the divide, where one culture's products dominate, for example, artists will be able to enter others' worlds to 'plug in' to different perspectives and gain access to different social and aesthetic experiences. At the same time, on the other side, the same asymmetries of power will allow the empowered parties to 'shut off' or 'short-circuit' other matrices of intelligibility, thereby disallowing their local interpretation. In finding new forms of representation and agency, artists find new ways of seeing and of grasping their worlds. New forms of representation offer different worlds, rendering certain aspects of experience visible and others inaccessible. In this sense, technology as representation affects social and cultural experiences. If artists do not want to be denied this exchange, they must open their minds. Otherwise, they risk losing considerable agency. Global interacts with local in a wide variety of contexts, and different cultures meet in multiplicity and complexity. Often, they interact in imbalanced ways, with one culture influencing the other more dominantly. What transpires in art music under those circumstances is at the core of how humanity makes itself. What can and does happen in these exchanges is a reshaping of identity, within each culture but also between them [22, 23].

CONCLUSION

Cultural appropriation and appreciation are not opposites but exist on a spectrum defined by context, intent, and power distribution. The arts, as a site of expression and influence, hold immense potential for cultural exchange, but also for cultural harm. When dominant cultures adopt elements from historically marginalized ones without understanding or consent, they risk reducing rich traditions into consumable commodities, perpetuating historical injustices. However, through education, ethical practices, and genuine engagement, artists and institutions can distinguish between exploitative appropriation and respectful appreciation. The arts can serve as a medium for empathy, respect, and mutual growth by amplifying marginalized voices, recognizing cultural ownership, and fostering collaborative creation. It is only through conscious, informed participation that society can celebrate diversity without distorting or diminishing the cultures it seeks to admire.

REFERENCES

1. Schaumann N. Fair use and appropriation art. Cybaris Intell. Prop. L. Rev.. 2015;6:112.

2. Nasution PP, Ghani MW. In The Name of "Like This": The Appropriation of Artwork In Digital Age. International Journal of Creative and Arts Studies. 2019 Aug 22;6(1):33-43.

3. Lenard PT, Balint P. What is (the wrong of) cultural appropriation?. Ethnicities. 2020 Apr;20(2):331-52.

4. Lalonde D. Does cultural appropriation cause harm?. Politics, Groups, and Identities. 2021 Mar 15;9(2):329-46.

5. Katzarska-Miller I, Faucher F, Kramer L, Reysen S. Lay definitions of cultural appropriation in US community and college student samples. Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal. 2021;7(12):580-98. academia.edu

6. Arya R. Cultural appropriation: What it is and why it matters?. Sociology compass. 2021 Oct;15(10):e12923.

7. Reed TG. Fair use as cultural appropriation. California Law Review. 2021 Jan 1;109(4):1373-442.

8. Kirby TA, Gündemir S, Carter AB, Schwanold E, Ketzitzidou-Argyri E. The role of intraminority relations in perceptions of cultural appropriation. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology. 2023 Dec;125(6):1373. researchgate.net

9. Mosley AJ, Biernat M. The new identity theft: Perceptions of cultural appropriation in intergroup contexts. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology. 2021 Aug;121(2):308. apa.org

10. Dugeri M. The Cannibalization of Culture: Generative AI and the Appropriation of Indigenous African Musical Works. J. Intell. Prop. & Info. Tech. L.. 2024;4:17.

11. Younging G. Elements of Indigenous style: A guide for writing by and about Indigenous peoples. Brush Education; 2025 Jan 13.

12. Lixinski L. Lucas Lixinski,'Selecting Heritage: The Interplay of Art, Law and Politics', 22 (1) European Journal of International Law 81-100 (2011).

13. van Haaften-Schick L, Whitaker A. From the artist's contract to the blockchain ledger: New forms of artists' funding using equity and resale royalties. Journal of Cultural Economics. 2022 Jun;46(2):287-315.

14. Demmer TR, Kühnapfel C, Fingerhut J, Pelowski M. Does an emotional connection to art really require a human artist? Emotion and intentionality responses to AI-versus human-created art and impact on aesthetic experience. Computers in Human Behavior. 2023 Nov 1;148:107875. sciencedirect.com

15. Morris JE, Paris LF. Rethinking arts-based research methods in education: enhanced participant engagement processes to increase research credibility and knowledge translation. International Journal of Research & Method in Education. 2022 Jan 1;45(1):99-112. tandfonline.com

16. DeWall BB. Edward Sheriff Curtis: A new perspective on 'The North American Indian'. History of Photography. 1982 Jul 1;6(3):223-39.

17. Younging G. Elements of Indigenous style: A guide for writing by and about Indigenous peoples. Brush Education; 2025 Jan 13.

18. Borrows J, McNeil K, editors. Voicing identity: Cultural appropriation and Indigenous issues. University of Toronto Press; 2022 Nov 1.

19. Breilh J. The social determination of health and the transformation of rights and ethics: A meta-critical methodology for responsible and reparative science. Global Public Health. 2023 Jan 2;18(1):2193830.

20. Zawadzka A. A View from the 'Second World': Holocaust and Colonialism in Contemporary Contexts of Eastern Europe. InResponses to 7 October: Antisemitic Discourse 2024 May 29 (pp. 88-99). Routledge.

21. Kumar A, Caron J. Meditative inquiry for educators: Understanding the significance of spirituality, contextual and cultural awareness, and organic change. Culture, Education, and Future. 2024 Dec 25;2(2):173-99.

22. Ogbonna HO, Mbah CS. Examining social exchange theory and social change in the works of George Caspar Homans–Implications for the state and global inequalities in the world economic order. Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences. 2022 Jan;13(1):90-104.

23. Dalenogare LS, Le Dain MA, Ayala NF, Pezzotta G, Frank AG. Building digital servitization ecosystems: an analysis of inter-firm collaboration types and social exchange mechanisms among actors. Technovation. 2023 Jun 1;124:102756. [HTML]

Page | 54