

Premodern Forms of Cultural Appropriation

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When Can We Speak of Cultural Appropriation?

Initial Considerations for a Heuristic Application of the Concept*

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INTRODUCTION – A CONCEPT IN CRISIS?

“If someone is accused of cultural appropriation, people say that they have taken elements of another culture as their own”¹. Thus, the ‘Collins Dictionary’ defines the term Cultural Appropriation, illustrating how the concept², advanced in the postcolonial studies, has shifted since its emergence: In the 1970s and 1980s, the term was originally developed – distinct from the notions of exchanges, inspirations, and mutual influences, which imply consensual agreements between the parties involved – to scrutinize the balance of exchange processes between different groups and to describe inappropriate and unjust appropriation of a cultural asset by one group from another. However, outside academia, it quickly evolved into a stronger and less descriptive form of critique or reproach, addressing behaviours perceived as inconsiderate or even racist. Consequently, the term has increasingly developed into a politicised rhetorical

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¹ Collins Dictionary, Cultural Appropriation, in: Collins Online Dictionary, URL: <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/cultural-appropriation> (last accessed 31/03/2025); see also JENS BALZER, *Ethik der Appropriation*, Berlin 2022, p. 75.

² I use the term ‘concept’ here as an analytical tool to structure and examine a multifaceted phenomenon – or possibly multiple phenomena – whose interrelation remains to be clarified in the course of this introduction and the subsequent contributions. To emphasise the conceptual nature of the term, the author will use capitalization throughout the text.

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device³. The primary venues for this polemic are, to a large extent, the media, and today especially the social media⁴.

Consequently, the concept of Cultural Appropriation as it was developed in academia has become blurred and many scholars across various disciplines have distanced themselves from the concept, criticizing the lack of unambiguous definitions as well as the indiscriminate usage of the term in non-scientific discourses⁵. Hence, the scholarly discourse on the concept remains relatively fragmented today and the concept itself under-theorized, as Rogers already bemoaned in 2006⁶. This development is particularly unfortunate, as the concept – as this text argues – possesses substantial potential for describing specific types of complex interactions and dynamics, including their normative dimensions, that have yet to be adequately captured.

Originally, the concept of Cultural Appropriation was applied primarily to incidences after 1500 – when modern European colonialism emerged in the eyes of scholarship⁷ – and to neo-colonial contexts⁸. Since the 2000s, it has increasingly been

³ This is evident, not least, in the entries found on the website Urban Dictionary. For instance, the first entry provides the following definition: “A way for people, normally white girls from LA, on twitter to take offense for another culture while people from the actual culture normally really don’t give a shit” (The Baconspiracy, ‘Cultural Appropriation,’ June 10, 2020, in: Urban Dictionary, URL: <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=cultural+appropriation> (last accessed 31/03/2025)). This interpretation is echoed in numerous other proposed definitions on the platform. While questions regarding the authorship of Urban Dictionary entries and the website’s algorithm remain unclear or have been critically interrogated (see, for example, CAMILLA GEISSELBRECHT, ‘...where anything can have sexual connotations!’ – Sprachideologische Überlegungen zu Urban Dictionary, April 18, 2022, in: Blog of the Institute for European Ethnology, URL: <https://blog.euroethnologie.univie.ac.at/where-anything-can-have-sexual-connotations-sprachideologische-ueberlegungen-zu-urban-dictionary/> (last accessed 31/03/2025)); these entries at least point to a broad and widely shared understanding of the concept.

⁴ RICHARD A. ROGERS, From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation. A Review and Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation, in: *Communication Theory* 16(4), 2006, pp. 474–503, here p. 474.

⁵ Ibid., p. 474. A notable example of the medialization of the term and phenomenon is JAJA GRAY, Blurred Lines of Cultural Appropriation, in: CUNY Graduate School of Journalism, 2016, URL: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1193&context=gj_etds (last accessed 31/03/2025). The discussion and analysis focus exclusively on posts and counter-posts on social media, as well as the statements of activists. In doing so, the article largely neglects scholarly foundations and academic debate.

⁶ ROGERS, Cultural Exchange to Transculturation (as note 4), p. 474. See also KATHLEEN ASHLEY – VÉRONIQUE PLESCH, The Cultural Processes of ‘Appropriation’, in: *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 32(1), 2002, pp. 1–15, here p. 1.

⁷ Modern colonialism is generally understood as the European conquest of (often overseas) territories between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries, aimed at economic exploitation coupled with the political annexation of these regions to the colonial powers’ motherlands. See on defining colonialism and the challenges of it JÜRGEN OSTERHAMMEL – JAN C. JANSEN, *Kolonialismus. Geschichte, Formen, Folgen*, Munich 2017, pp. 18–28.

⁸ Neo-colonialism refers to the continued economic, political, and cultural dominance of former colonial powers over previously colonised nations, despite formal political independence, JOHN SCOTT – GORDON MARHSALL, Neo-colonialism, in: JOHN SCOTT – GORDON MARHSALL (eds.), *A Dictionary of Sociology*, Oxford 2009, URL: <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/>

used in the study of earlier periods⁹. Yet, unlike other concepts in Colonial Studies, Cultural Appropriation has still not been established for these earlier periods and research on the concept remains here limited both theoretically and in terms of case studies. This is not only due to the general criticism of the term discussed above, but also due to specific objections regarding such applications as unfitting and anachronistic. A key focus of this critique lies in the personal power imbalances underlying Cultural Appropriation, which, as Elisheva Baumgarten argues, did not exist in this form during the Middle Ages¹⁰.

This introduction and the following contributions to the volume challenge this restrictive position and assert instead that Cultural Appropriation is a valuable and academically fitting analytical tool for examining contexts across periods and political constellations. The aim here is neither to trace the origins of Cultural Appropriation nor to suggest there exists a continuity of the phenomenon, let alone to make teleological claims. Rather, Cultural Appropriation is to be presented as a heuristic tool, with a minimal definition, enabling a singling out of sufficiently similar occurrences for study.

acref/9780199533008.001.0001/acref-9780199533008-e-1534 (last accessed 31/03/2025). The rich literature on the topic cannot be presented here. As a starting point, however, one can consider STUART WARD, *Decolonization and Neocolonialism*, in: PETER FIBIGER BANG et al. (eds.), *The Oxford World History of Empire*, vol. 2: *The History of Empires*, Oxford 2021, pp. 1161–1186.

⁹ See for instances BASSIR AMIRI, *Temples et cultes païens dans la Rome chrétienne. Modalités d'appropriation et de transformation*, in: STÉPHANIE RATTI (ed.), *Une Antiquité tardive noire ou heureuse?*, Besancón 2015, pp. 105–117; CHRISTINA ANTENHOFER – HEIKE SCHLIE (eds.), *Framing – Deframing – Reframing. Wege, Mechanismen und Strategien kultureller Aneignung in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*, Heidelberg 2024; ASHLEY – PLESCH, *The Cultural Processes of 'Appropriation' (as note 6)*; ELISHEVA BAUMGARTEN, *Appropriation and Differentiation. Jewish Identity in Medieval Ashkenaz*, in: *AJS Review* 42(1), 2018, pp. 39–63; MISHTOONI BOSE, *From Exegesis to Appropriation. The Medieval Solomon*, in: *Medium Aevum* 65, 1996, pp. 187–210; RICHARD BRILLIANT – DALE KINNEY (eds.), *Reuse Value. Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine*, Surry – Burlington 2011; THERESA JAECKH – JOHN ASPINWALL, *Multiculturalism and Power Relations. Reframing Norman Sicily*, in: VIOLA SKIBA et al. (eds.), *Norman Connections. Normannische Verflechtungen zwischen Skandinavien und dem Mittelmeer*, Regensburg 2022, pp. 292–311; CLAIRE SPONSER, *In Transit. Theorizing Cultural Appropriation in Medieval Europe*, in: *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 32(1), 2002, pp. 17–39; MARIKEN TEEUWEN, *Practices of Appropriation. Writing in the Margin*, in: ERIK KWAKKEL – RODNEY THOMSON (eds.), *The European Book in the Twelfth Century*, Cambridge 2018, pp. 139–156; ELIZA ZINGESSER, *Stolen Song. How the Troubadours Became French*, Ithaca (NY) 2020; STEFAN PFEIFFER, *The Cultural Appropriation of Egypt in Hellenistic Alexandria. The Ptolemies and the Heritage of the Pharaohs*, in: DAMIAN ROBINSON – FRANCK GODDIO (eds.), *Constructing, Remaking and Dismantling Sacred Landscapes in Lower Egypt*, Oxford 2021, pp. 175–186; MATTHEW P. LOAR et al. (eds.), *Rome, Empire of Plunder. The Dynamics of Cultural Appropriation*, Cambridge 2017; ERICH S. GRUEN (ed.), *Cultural Borrowings and Ethnic Appropriations in Antiquity*, Stuttgart 2005. See also the Conference 'Interreligious Appropriations. Modes and Practices of Coping with Religious Diversity in the Global History of Christianity', organised by Stanislaw Paulau (Martin Luther University) and Philip Forness (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven) in June 2023, URL: <https://www.hsokult.de/conferencereport/id/fdkn-139299> (last accessed 31/03/2025).

¹⁰ See, for instance, BAUMGARTEN, *Appropriation and Differentiation* (as note 9).

As with any other concept or tool, however, its application requires careful and critical assessment – an approach often wanting in existing scholarship¹¹. To address this gap, this introduction subsequently discusses the historical development and definitions of Cultural Appropriation, critically explores its broader applicability beyond modern colonial and neo-colonial contexts, and establishes a theoretical foundation for its usage as a heuristic tool. In the next step, Cultural Appropriation will be compared with other concepts that focus on the examination of transcultural encounters, their interactions, and their outcomes. In doing so, the author highlights the potential of Cultural Appropriation to reveal aspects of cultural interactions that remain overlooked in other concepts with other foci.

Building on this framework, the subsequent contributions evaluate the concept's relevance and limitations through the examination of case studies. Together, these contributions represent the outcome of the conference 'Premodern Forms of Cultural Appropriation,' held from September 11th to 13th, 2023 at the Cluster of Excellence 'Religion and Politics' at the University of Münster and in cooperation with the university's Institute of Jewish Studies and the Department of History¹². The cases discussed range from the Egyptian Empire and early Mycenaean culture to medieval India and 16th-century Mexico, and they are examined by an interdisciplinary group of scholars, including historians, art historians, egyptologists, theologians, and archaeologists. Accordingly, the papers test the relevance and applicability of the concept of Cultural Appropriation across a variety of periods, regions, and disciplines.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT

The term Cultural Appropriation first appeared in 1945 in Arthur E. Christy's book 'The Asian Legacy and American Life', where Christy explored the rootedness of European cultural outcome – literature, philosophy, art, and science – in Asia and Asian objects¹³. Yet, Christy's understanding of the term aligned in fact more closely with the notion of a mere 'appropriation' as it is often employed in literary studies and art history and which – according to the Tate Gallery – denotes "the practice of

¹¹ See for instance ZINGESSER, *Stolen Song* (as note 9); Zingesser explains it in EVE GLASBERG, *A Professor Finds An Act of Cultural Appropriation in Medieval Literature*, April 13, 2020, in: Columbia News, URL: <https://news.columbia.edu/news/eliza-zingesser-book-french-literature-troubadour-poetry> (last accessed 31/03/2025). Another example is REBECCA VOSS, *Sons of Saviors. The Red Jews in Yiddish Culture*, Philadelphia (PA) 2023.

¹² See on the conference 'Premodern Forms of Cultural Appropriation' and its programme, URL: https://www.uni-muenster.de/imperia/md/content/religion_und_politik/aktuelles/conference_premodern_forms_of_cultural_appropriation_program__003_.pdf (last accessed 31/03/2025).

¹³ "The guiding principle of Europeans cultural appropriation from the Orient continued to be *laissez faire*. Like the winds that blow as they list, often unpredictable in origin and indeterminate in direction, the drift of 'orientalism' continued in startling ways in a different and newer age", ARTHUR E. CHRISTY, *The Asian Legacy and American Life*, New Haven (CT) 1945, p. 39.

artists using pre-existing objects or images in their art with little transformation of the original”¹⁴. In this sense, appropriation is understood as ‘influence,’ as a process of ‘adaptation,’ ‘copying,’ and, at times, ‘assimilation’¹⁵. In examining appropriations, scholars have primarily focused on identifying the origins of an artefact – its source of inspiration, the idea provider, whether material or immaterial – by analysing the outcome of the appropriation, such as a literary work or piece of art. In doing so, comparatively little attention has been paid to the appropriation process itself¹⁶. Importantly, although not always, the term is generally used as a neutral – if not implicitly positive – description of this act.

This perspective aligns with the broader linguistic understanding of the word ‘appropriation,’ deriving from the Latin verb *appropriare*, meaning ‘to make one’s own’. Here too, the term is typically regarded as a neutral descriptor of the act of taking. Nevertheless, not all interpretations of appropriation share this neutrality. For instance, the ‘Merriam-Webster Dictionary’ highlights the notion of exclusive possession inherent in acts of appropriation, describing it as something conducted for a “particular purpose or use” and often involving a taking “without authority or right”¹⁷. Similarly, in legal contexts ‘to appropriate’ can refer to the unauthorized – and therefore illegal – taking of something, effectively rendering an appropriation an act of theft¹⁸.

In the 1970’s, scholars – particularly in literary studies and under the influence of postcolonial discourse – began to challenge this interpretation of appropriations as mere influence and inspiration. They argued that such a perspective oversimplified the diversity of actions associable with the term. Instead, they noted that these actions could occur under widely varying circumstances and with differing intentions. Furthermore, they highlighted how this interpretation overlooked the associated responsibilities and failed to address the injustices often inherent in such processes. Central to this discourse was the recognition of the unequal power dynamics inherent in exchanges between dominant and marginalised cultures. Additionally, these scholars began to emphasise the intersectionality of appropriation with questions of identity,

¹⁴ TATE, Appropriation, in: Tate, URL: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/appropriation> (last accessed 31/03/2025). See also PASCAL NICKLAS – OLIVER LINDNER (eds.), *Adaptation and Cultural Appropriation. Literature, Film, and the Arts*, Berlin 2012.

¹⁵ ASHLEY – PLUSH, *The Cultural Processes of ‘Appropriation’* (as note 6), p. 1; JAY CLAYTON – ERIC ROTHSTEIN, *Figures in the Corpus. Theories of Influence and Intertextuality*, in: JAY CLAYTON – ERIC ROTHSTEIN (eds.), *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History*, Madison 1991, pp. 3–36, here p. 3.

¹⁶ ASHLEY – PLUSH, *The Cultural Processes of ‘Appropriation’* (as note 6), pp. 1–2.

¹⁷ Merriam-Webster Dictionary, appropriate (verb), URL: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/appropriate> (last accessed 31/03/2025).

¹⁸ Legal Information Institute, appropriation, URL: <https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/appropriation> (last accessed 31/03/2025). See also ROGERS, *Cultural Exchange to Transculturation* (as note 4), pp. 475–476.

representation, and authenticity¹⁹. One of the most prominent voices in this discourse was Edward Said²⁰.

From the 1980s onward, this notion was discussed under the term Cultural Appropriation²¹. Formative voices here were Bruce Ziff, Pamela Krueger, and Pattima V. Rao²². They primarily employed the term to analyse contexts of modern colonialism. However, the term was never limited to these settings. Instead, it was understood to describe broader inequalities between minorities and majorities, with divisions cutting across categories such as “ethnicity, race, nationality, class, and gender”²³, whereby the minority groups were defined as “disempowered, colonized, peripheral or subordinate”²⁴.

Acts of cultural transfer occur under diverse circumstances and within complex social networks. Consequently, not every instance of such transfer – even when involving a majority or dominant culture and a minority – necessarily occurs under unequal terms and indicates oppression, exploitation of, or a lack of respect for a minority group and its possessions²⁵. Against this backdrop, some critics reject the concept of Cultural Appropriation, arguing that all encounters between cultures inevitably involve exchange, including the transfer of both material and immaterial objects, and which is captured under the term transcultural transfer, which will be discussed further below²⁶. It is important to highlight, however, that the concept of Cultural Appropriation does not oppose this idea. Rather, it advocates for a distinction between different types of appropriation in transcultural contexts, differentiating cultural appropriation from

¹⁹ ASHLEY – PLUSH, *The Cultural Processes of ‘Appropriation’* (as note 6), p. 2; and ROBERT S. NELSON – RICHARD SHIFF, *Critical Terms for Art History*, Chicago (IL) 32003, p. 118.

²⁰ EDWARD SAID, *Orientalism*, New York (NY) 1978.

²¹ EMILY KENDALL, *Cultural Appropriation*, in: Britannica online Version, URL: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/cultural-appropriation> (last accessed 31/03/2025). See also ASHLEY – PLUSH, *The Cultural Processes of ‘Appropriation’* (as note 6), p. 4.

²² BRUCE ZIFF – PRATIMA V. RAO (eds.), *Borrowed Power. Essays on Cultural Appropriation*, London 1997; PAMELA KRUEGER, *Counterfeit Cultures. Cultural Appropriation, Art by Native Artists and Canadian Art Galleries*, M.A. Thesis Laurentian University, Sudbury, Ontario 1998; SUSAN PEARCE, *Museums and the Appropriation of Culture*, London 1994; ROSEMARY J. COOMBE, *The Cultural Life of Intellectual Properties. Authorship, Appropriation, and the Law*, Toronto 1998; and KNUT HOLTAN SØRENSEN, *Against Linearity. On the Cultural Appropriation of Science and Technology*, Amsterdam 2000. See for a summary of the early scholarship also ANGELA GARCIA B. CRUZ et al., *Cultural Appreciation and Cultural Appropriation. Self-Authorizing the Consumption of Cultural Difference*, in: *Journal of Consumer Research* 50, 2024, pp. 962–984, here pp. 962–964.

²³ BRUCE ZIFF – PRATIMA V. RAO, *Introduction to Cultural Appropriation*, in: ZIFF – RAO, *Borrowed Power* (as note 22), pp. 1–27, here p. 3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁵ The enriching exchanges between groups have been studied for instance in MICHAEL BORGOLTE et al. (eds.), *Integration und Desintegration der Kulturen im europäischen Mittelalter (Europa im Mittelalter 18)*, Berlin 2011. See especially the chap. ‘Grenzüberschreitungen als kreativer Prozess’.

²⁶ See e.g. ROGERS, *Cultural Exchange to Transculturation* (as note 4); and JAMES O. YOUNG, *Cultural Appropriation and the Art*, Hoboken (NJ) 2007.

cultural appreciation²⁷. Achieving this requires nuanced debates about the contexts of appropriation, about boundaries between borrowing and stealing, genuine homage, and commodification. A key challenge in this regard is the lack of a universally accepted definition. The following section will introduce and compare existing definitions and ultimately propose a working definition of its own.

DEFINING CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

As previously noted, some definitions frame Cultural Appropriation as a rhetorical tool in sociopolitical discourses, either using it to highlight racism or portraying it as a prime example of so-called ‘cancel culture’. These perspectives are crucial for understanding the historical evolution of the term, its current interpretations, and the debates it has sparked. However, they deviate significantly from the original meaning and conceptual focus of the term, which was developed within academic discourse and which rather emphasises the process of Cultural Appropriation itself. These scholarly approaches can be broadly categorized into two distinct types:

One stream of definitions regards the unjust and potentially disrespectful nature of Cultural Appropriation, stemming from a power imbalance between the groups involved, as constitutive of the concept. These definitions do not imply that all forms of transcultural exchange and transfer between groups carry such connotations. However, they assert that these characteristics are intrinsic to Cultural Appropriation.

Thus, ‘Cambridge Dictionary’ writes: “The act of taking or using things from a culture that is not your own, especially without showing that you understand or respect this culture”²⁸. Ziff and Rao, two law professors who published their groundbreaking work ‘Borrowed Power’ in 1997, further elaborate on the nature of the groups involved in the act of appropriation: a privileged group – where privilege may be economic, political, or institutional – appropriates from a suppressed or marginalised group²⁹. The power dynamics arising from privilege and the lack of privilege are identified by these two legal scholars as key to distinguishing between “misappropriation”³⁰, as they also refer to Cultural Appropriation, and “assimilation”³¹.

These definitions emphasise the inherent unfairness in this form of appropriation, which stems from a power imbalance that prevents the act from being fully mutually accepted. Especially the ‘Cambridge Dictionary’ underscores the negative implications, attributing it to a lack of empathy or ignorance on the part of the dominant culture in its treatment of the other culture and its artefacts. Theresa Jäckh and

²⁷ LARS DISTELHORST, *Kulturelle Aneignung*, Hamburg 2021, pp. 42–43.

²⁸ Cambridge Dictionary, Cultural Appropriation, in: Cambridge Dictionary, URL: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/cultural-appropriation> (last accessed 31/03/2025).

²⁹ ZIFF – RAO, Introduction (as note 23), pp. 4–8.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 4.

³¹ Ibid.

John Aspinwall refer to this as the “violent dynamics of cultural appropriation”³². Another key element of these definitions is that the subjects involved in the exchange of an object belong to two groups that perceive themselves as distinct and identify with different communities, referred to as cultures³³. The appropriated objects, in turn, must be specific to the respective culture, whether through their design, function, concept, etc.³⁴.

The ‘Oxford Companion to English Literature’ offers a more narrow discussion regarding the nature of the communities involved: Thus, it states: “It is in general used to describe Western appropriations of non-Western or non-white forms, and carries connotations of exploitation and dominance”³⁵. By employing the terms exploitation and dominance, this definition incorporates the previously discussed negative impacts, too. However, with regard to the specific attribution of the groups involved, this paper identifies this definition as a distinct subgroup. The use of the terms ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western,’ increasingly criticised for their lack of precision³⁶, seeks to highlight relationships shaped by colonialism, whether as colonisers and colonised, groups with a colonial or colonised past, or instances of neo-colonialism. For this reason, the definition appears to be too narrow, being overly restrictive regarding specific temporal, regional, and conceptual delineations of the groups involved in appropriation. As a result, the definition does not adequately represent colonial contexts and overlooks the multiplicity and interconnection of marginalization and privilege. These dynamics extend beyond the binary categories of ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’.

The second group of definitions emphasises that not every act of Cultural Appropriation must carry negative connotations. Proponents of this view emphasise the natural exchange and subsequent transformation of goods, ideas, and symbols in transcultural contexts – an argument previously mentioned and also put forward by scholars who reject the concept of Cultural Appropriation. Thus, Rogers writes: “[T]he use of a culture’s symbols, artefacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture, is inescapable when cultures come into contact, including virtual or representational contact”³⁷. Even more notably, James O. Young, one of the leading scholars on the subject, writes in the introduction to his book ‘Cultural Appropriation and the Arts’:

³² JAECKH – ASPINWALL, *Multiculturalism and Power Relations* (as note 9), p. 310.

³³ The concept of culture, its significance, and its complexities will be discussed later. See for the challenge that the word culture poses in the term ZIFF – RAO, *Introduction* (as note 23), p. 2.

³⁴ See for a further discussion of definitions that the author of the present paper identified as falling into category one DISTELHORST, *Kulturelle Aneignung* (as note 27), pp. 41–51.

³⁵ Oxford Reference, *Cultural Appropriation*, in: Oxford Reference, URL: <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095652789#:~:text=A%20term%20used%20to%20describe,connotations%20of%20exploitation%20and%20dominance> (last accessed 31/03/2025).

³⁶ They are geographically inaccurate and perpetuating a Eurocentric worldview. See for a critical analysis of the terms, *Research with International Students, Anti-Glossary of Contested Terms*, URL: *Western/non-Western*, <https://researchintlstudents.com/anti-glossary/> (last accessed 31/03/2025).

³⁷ ROGERS, *Cultural Exchange to Transculturation* (as note 4), p. 474.

[...] [C]ultural appropriation [...] does not necessarily carry with it any moral baggage. Someone might prefer to use the concept of cultural appropriation to designate an objectionable class of transactions. Such people would distinguish cultural appropriation from cultural exchange or cultural borrowing, which could be unobjectionable. I will apply the concept of cultural appropriation to any use of something developed in one cultural context by someone who belongs to another culture. I will then try to distinguish between objectionable and unobjectionable cultural appropriation³⁸.

Similarly, Ashley and Plough, editors of one of the few volumes dedicated to medieval instances of Cultural Appropriation, write in their introduction: “The essays in this special issue avoid the reductive model whereby every act of appropriation must be one of imposed power [...]”³⁹. The two authors call this “a more nuanced view”⁴⁰. However, these definitions ultimately reduce the concept to what ‘appropriation’ already implies – a notion deemed insufficiently specific by postcolonial studies in the 1970s for certain contexts. In contrast, this introduction argues that a truly nuanced perspective requires distinguishing between different forms of appropriation, with Cultural Appropriation identified as one subcategory.

For this reason, it advocates adopting the open first group of definitions as the guiding framework, as it refrains from narrowly determining the lines along which the groups involved in Cultural Appropriation are distinguished, while also not dissolving the distinction between broader appropriation and the specific subtype of Cultural Appropriation. Building on this foundation, the following section will present a working definition, which primarily aligns with the first type of definition while incorporating additional specifics and clarifications on certain aspects.

CULTURAL APPROPRIATION – A WORKING DEFINITION

Appropriators, Appropriated, and the Relationship between Them

We speak of Cultural Appropriation if someone takes something that belongs to someone else, whereby the appropriator and the appropriated must be members of two ‘cultures’ – meaning communities, groups or entities – that each consider themselves and the other as distinct and separate from themselves⁴¹. As potential demar-

³⁸ YOUNG, *Cultural Appropriation and the Art* (as note 26), pp. 5–6.

³⁹ ASHLEY – PLUSH, *The Cultural Processes of ‘Appropriation’* (as note 6), p. 6.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴¹ For discussions on the processes of understanding one’s own belonging and distinguishing oneself from other groups, see MICHAEL BORGOLTE – BERND SCHNEIDMÜLLER (eds.) *Hybride Kulturen im mittelalterlichen Europa / Hybrid Cultures in Medieval Europe*, Heidelberg 2009, especially section B: ‘Der Umgang mit Differenzen durch Begegnung und Austausch, Anpassung und Seitenwechsel, Gewalt und Recht’. It can be assumed that there are significant points of overlap between this process of differentiation and the process referred to as Othering in postcolonial studies. Othering refers to the process by which individuals or groups are categorized as different and separate from a dominant group. This process reinforces power hierarchies by marginalizing the ‘other,’ assigning them inferior characteristics, and denying them full agency or inclusion within the dominant societal framework. See on the concept

cations that lead to the perception of differences and otherness, Rao and Ziff list the factors ethnicity, race, nationality, class, and gender, to which one might also add physical appearance, habits, traditions, and religion ⁴². Conversely, members of a group share those criteria that are perceived as distinguishing them from another group. In this context, demarcation typically evolves not only along a single criterion but through a combination of multiple criteria ⁴³.

There must be a form of power imbalance between the two groups, placing the appropriated individual(s) in a position of dependency on the appropriating party. According to Ziff and Rao, this power imbalance is often political in nature, as it is key to gaining “access to sources of power” ⁴⁴. However, it may also arise from other resources, including financial or social/class disparities, educational inequalities, hierarchical imbalances (e.g., in professional contexts), or demographic asymmetries, whereby these are frequently interconnected. This imbalance and its consequences suggest that Cultural Appropriations rarely occur through what we might view as adequately equal negotiation or agreement. At least, the imbalance makes a transfer agreed upon mutually and consensually, so as to sufficiently fulfil autonomy criteria, highly questionable. As such, Cultural Appropriations must always be regarded as potentially unfair and harmful to the appropriated party – a point that will be further discussed in the section of ‘Effects and Consequences’. While the normative nature of these terms is undeniable, it is essential to clarify that they are not intended to impose a moral judgment on actions or actors. Rather, they serve to underscore the unquestionably negative consequences of instances of Cultural Appropriation for those whose culture is being appropriated, as will be discussed below.

The preceding discussion in this text has demonstrated that a close examination of the parties involved and their relationship to one another is fundamental to determine whether the transfer of a particular phenomenon constitutes Cultural Appropriation. For this reason, the concept is often criticised as essentialist and thus perpetuating societal divisions until today ⁴⁵. While this is a common feature and a

GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK, *The Rani of Sirmur. An Essay in Reading the Archives*, in: *History and Theory* 24(3), 1985, pp. 247–272. See for a transfer into the Medieval Studies HANS-WERNER GOETZ – IAN N. WOOD (eds.), ‘Otherness’ in the Middle Ages, Turnhout 2022. It would be intriguing to explore the extent to which these processes are interconnected and whether the concept of Othering provides valuable insights into understanding Cultural Appropriation, and vice versa. However, a comprehensive analysis of these two concepts exceeds the scope of this essay and must therefore await future investigation.

⁴² RAO – ZIFF, Introduction (as note 23), p. 3. See also the contributions in GOETZ – WOOD, ‘Otherness’ (as note 41).

⁴³ See on the evolution of groups, group identity, and demarcation of groups STAMATIOS GEROGIORGAKIS et al., *Kulturtransfer vergleichend betrachtet*, in: BORGOLTE, *Integration und Desintegration der Kulturen* (as note 25), pp. 385–450, here pp. 405–410.

⁴⁴ ZIFF – RAO, Introduction (as note 23), p. 5.

⁴⁵ See on a discussion of this criticism DISTELHORST, *Kulturelle Aneignung* (as note 27), pp. 51–61.

potential risk in many postcolonial theories, and cannot be entirely ruled out⁴⁶, I argue that there is compelling reason for reassurance, particularly given the temporal focus of this introduction and its following contributions: Historical examples, it can be contended, are less susceptible to essentialism, as scholarship in these cases does not create divisions but rather documents those already present in the societies under study. However, to avoid cultural essentialism, it is crucial for these instances, too, to ground such documentation in sources that accurately reflect the differences perceived among communities. A major challenge hereby is that sources do not always permit precise determination and evaluation of the relationship of individuals and groups and their perception of each other. Hereby, it is particularly difficult to gain “access to historical experiences of subordinated peoples”⁴⁷.

The Artefacts of Appropriation

For an artefact – which can be both tangible and non-tangible – to be considered culturally appropriated, it must be created by and hold cultural significance for the appropriated party⁴⁸. Specifically, the artefact should be viewed by the group to which it belongs as unique and meaningful. This uniqueness is constituted by the way in which it is entwined with the group, through characteristics such as its form, method of production, history, or function, which imbue it with special meaning for the group. As such, the artefact is integral to the group’s shared identity. However, the nature of this significance can vary and may relate to one or several of its features. In contrast, the appropriating individuals lack this intrinsic connection to the object. The appropriators may or may not recognise the significance attributed to it by its original possessors.

Among the artefacts, scholars of Cultural Appropriation often emphasise pieces of art and intellectual property, assuming that these are particularly likely to carry specific meaning for a group. Thus, the ‘Writer’s Union of Canada’ lists “intellectual property, cultural expressions or artefacts, history and ways of knowledge”⁴⁹. Ziff

⁴⁶ See the danger of essentialism in Cultural Appropriation as well as ways to avoid cultural essentialism when determining cases of Cultural Appropriation discussed by ERICH HATALA MATTHES, *Cultural Appropriation Without Cultural Essentialism?*, in: *Social Theory and Practice* 42(2), 2016, pp. 343–366.

⁴⁷ ASHLEY – PLUSH, *The Cultural Processes of ‘Appropriation’* (as note 6), p. 5.

⁴⁸ In scholarly literature, the term ‘object’ is commonly used to describe what appropriators take from the appropriated. Following a suggestion by Angelika Lohwasser, the term ‘artefact,’ however, seems more suitable in discussions of Cultural Appropriation. Unlike ‘object’, ‘artefact’ inherently conveys cultural significance, which is a crucial element of Cultural Appropriation, as will be explained in the following. While in disciplines such as art history and archaeology the term is predominantly used to refer to tangible objects, other fields – such as cultural studies and ethnology – employ a broader understanding, extending the term to include intangible phenomena, among which rituals and other activities may also be counted. For further discussion on the meaning of ‘artefact’ and its analytical potential, see REINOLD SCHMÜCKER, *Schwerpunkt. Philosophie der Artefakte*, in: *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 61(2), 2013, pp. 215–218.

⁴⁹ Quoted after ZIFF – RAO, *Introduction* (as note 23), p. 1.

and Rao, however, emphasise that groups produce a wide variety of goods that can be specific to and meaningful for them and thus constitute their identity, including everyday items⁵⁰. This introduction follows this approach, understanding cultural objects, i. e. artefacts, in alignment with the broadest interpretation of culture, encompassing all human-made artefacts as opposed to naturally occurring entities. Ziff and Rao rightfully emphasise the difficulty to decide on the connection between a cultural product and a distinct community⁵¹. This challenge becomes increasingly complex as the definition of artefacts expands. It requires a careful evaluation of the artefact itself, including its creation, form, usage, history, and distribution.

The Process and Effects of Cultural Appropriation

Given that the perception of events varies among individuals and groups, this introduction argues that Cultural Appropriation does not necessarily require a consciously perceived negative impact on the appropriated party or an inevitably negative outcome. What is essential, however, is that it holds the potential for such consequences. This potential arises from three key factors: first, the significance of the appropriated artefact to the originating group, which is diminished or lost through the act of appropriation, whereby the loss can become manifest in multiple different ways; second, the nature of the appropriation process, which is one or more of the following: violent, dismissive, forced and disrespectful; and, third, the manner in which the appropriating group engages with the object after the act of appropriation.

Cultural Appropriation entails the loss of an artefact for the originating group, since it loses the group-specificity and hence a tool for distinction⁵². Depending on the function and meaning of the artefact for the appropriated group, this loss can have practical, financial, or symbolic consequences. These consequences may manifest themselves both collectively and individually, with the artefact and its function determining whether the impact is felt more acutely by individuals or by the community as a whole. Through the act of transfer – and given that the appropriating group inevitably has a different understanding of or relationship with the artefact – it inevitably undergoes recontextualization. Moreover, Cultural Appropriation can result in the deliberate reinterpretation – or even mockery – of the object. This process often involves aesthetic or functional alterations, further reinforcing the loss of the object's original meaning and significance for the appropriated group. Furthermore, the post-appropriation interaction may involve ongoing mockery, while it may also be a recurring act,

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 1–3.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 4.

⁵² For the significances and practices of group differentiation mechanisms in the European Middle Ages, see various publications from the German research project (SPP 1173) 'Integration and Disintegration of Cultures in the European Middle Ages': CHRISTIAN KIENING, *Christologische Medialität und religiöse Differenz*, in: BORGOLTE – SCHNEIDMÜLLER, *Hybride Kulturen im mittelalterlichen Europa* (as note 41), pp. 125–139; and GEROGIORGAKIS et al., *Kulturtransfer* (as note 43), pp. 405–413.

such as the continuous taking of goods. To varying degrees and in different ways, these outcomes can be harmful and detrimental to the appropriated group.

Such transformations are often exacerbated by ignorance, indifference, or disrespect for the minority's interests, needs, and feelings⁵³. Consequently, the intentions of the appropriators are varied; they are often primarily self-centred but can also be directed against the appropriated group. These two motives, of course, can overlap, interact, or coexist⁵⁴. Generally, however, the appropriators benefit from Cultural Appropriation, whether financially, practically, or symbolically. Furthermore, the object can also become an identifier for the appropriators themselves⁵⁵. The unequal distribution of gains and losses underscores the perpetuation of structural inequities inherent in these interactions.

Cultural Re-Appropriation

In recent years, various authors have examined the phenomenon of Cultural Re-appropriation, which, broadly speaking, refers to an act of Cultural Appropriation carried out by a marginalised group. While some scholars interpret the Re-appropriation primarily as a reaction to an act of Cultural Appropriation by a dominant party, others emphasise the simultaneity and mutuality of the two processes within transcultural contexts. These notions are related to questions of causes and intentions of these Re-appropriations which are understood quite differently by scholars. Thus, Cultural Re-appropriations are also understood as being part of the process or effects of Cultural Appropriations.

Rebekka Voß recently argued that Cultural Appropriation and Cultural Re-appropriation “should be seen as a complex model of potential two-way-adaptation”⁵⁶. Rogers, in contrast, postulates that Re-appropriation signifies another form of the majority's pre-eminence, where the dominant group controls the production of objects and imposes them on the minority, which, lacking access to alternative forms of production, is compelled to use, adapt, or replicate those objects without choice or agency. In other words, according to Rogers, Re-appropriation is a consequence of Cultural Appropriation, led by the dominant group, just enacted differently⁵⁷. This dynamic, according to him, can lead to the minority's “cultural assimilation”⁵⁸. In the eyes of other scholars, Cultural Re-appropriation furthermore reflects a desire by the

⁵³ ZIFF – RAO, Introduction (as note 23), pp. 8–9; CHARLES TAYLOR, *Multiculturalism and ‘the Politics of Recognition’*, New York (NY) 1992, p. 25.

⁵⁴ ASHLEY – PLUSH, *The Cultural Processes of ‘Appropriation’* (as note 6), p. 8.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁵⁶ VOSS, *Sons of Savors* (as note 11), p. 8.

⁵⁷ ROGERS, *Cultural Exchange to Transculturation* (as note 4), pp. 481–483.

⁵⁸ ZIFF – RAO, Introduction (as note 23), p. 5. See also ASHLEY – PLUSH, *The Cultural Processes of ‘Appropriation’* (as note 6), pp. 9–10.

minority to participate in the dominant culture or become part of their community⁵⁹. Alternatively, it is understood as a form of resistance, where the minority seeks to protest against domination and reclaim agency⁶⁰.

Even more than the concept of Cultural Appropriation, Cultural Re-appropriation remains significantly under-theorized. The differing interpretations of Re-appropriation – including the identified triggers, underlying interests, and mechanisms – highlight this conceptual gap. Notably, the precise definition of the concept or phenomenon is often left unexamined. Moreover, it is not always situated within the framework of Cultural Appropriation, nor are its connections to or distinctions from that concept consistently analysed. Thus, many questions remain unanswered: Does Re-appropriation function like a reversion of Cultural Appropriation or does it operate through different mechanisms? If so, what processes are involved? What are the consequences for both parties? Which objects are primarily culturally re-appropriated? Are they, once again, cultural or group-specific items, and if so, specific for whom? What contexts lead to or facilitate Re-appropriations? These questions warrant further consideration but must be addressed in a separate study, as their exploration would exceed the scope of this essay.

A critical examination of the above-mentioned interpretations of the various intentions and causes attributed to Cultural Re-appropriation are presumably mutually exclusive. Or how can an act of Cultural Re-appropriation, which emerges from Cultural Appropriation and the dominance of the prevailing community, simultaneously function as a form of protest by the marginalised group? Is the former not externally imposed, while the latter should ideally occur under self-determined conditions? From the authors' perspective, this issue warrants further clarification. At this juncture, it can be argued that only appropriation driven by market dominance aligns with the previously discussed framework of Cultural Appropriation and serves as a direct consequence thereof, whereas Re-appropriation appears to emerge as a reaction within distinct contexts. An alternative concept to describe the utilization of objects from the dominant group by the marginalised group is creolization, which Neta Bodner explores in greater detail in her contribution⁶¹. For the ambiguity of Re-Appropriation

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 8. See for an example of this mechanism of Re-Appropriation JOELLE ROLLO-KOSTER, *From Prostitutes to Brides of Christ. The Avignonese Repenties in the Late Middle Ages*, in: *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 32(3), 2002, pp. 109–144.

⁶⁰ ASHLEY – PLUSH, *The Cultural Processes of 'Appropriation'* (as note 6), pp. 9–10. See for an example of this meaning of Cultural Re-Appropriation VOSS, *Sons of Saviors* (as note 11).

⁶¹ In brief, the term creolization, originally coined in linguistics, today refers to the emergence of an artefact primarily used by a minority group through transcultural contact with a dominant group. Creole languages, such as Pidgin English, are among the most well-known examples of this process. In contemporary scholarship, the concept has been expanded to apply more broadly to various cultural artefacts and practices, as Neta Bodner will discuss in more detail in her contribution. See on creolization and today's understanding and application BERNARD GOWERS, *Creolization and Medieval Latin Europe*, in: *Medieval Worlds* 16, 2022, pp. 263–283. Another concept to which Cultural Re-Appropriation could be

as it appears in scholarship the following summary will leave out this potential subcategory or consequence of Cultural Appropriation.

Summary: A Working Definition

For Cultural Appropriation to occur, there must be the transfer or adoption of an artefact by one individual or group from another group or individual. Crucially, they must perceive themselves, or be identified, as distinct communities. Moreover, there must be some form of imbalance between the two groups, whereby the appropriated group exists in a position of dependency relative to the appropriating group, a dynamic that enables and facilitates the act of appropriation. Consequently, Cultural Appropriation, whether explicitly acknowledged or not, whether conducted consciously or unconsciously, cannot be a mutually consensual case of transfer. The appropriated object may be either material or immaterial but must hold a significance that is specific and meaningful to the appropriated group, contributing to its cultural identity. Hence, the act results in losses for the appropriated group, which may be financial, practical, symbolic, or identity-related. These conditions inherently imply that Cultural Appropriation necessarily carries the potential for negative effects on the appropriated group. In contrast, the appropriating group derives advantages in one or more of these dimensions. The appropriated object undergoes reinterpretation and may be subjected to aesthetic or functional modifications. These transformations can render restitution either meaningless or impossible, as the object's original cultural significance is altered or erased.

While the introduction argues for the uniqueness of the concept of Cultural Appropriation in describing specific phenomena, it also recognises significant overlaps with other concepts. Moreover, it considers that other frameworks can be fruitfully integrated with the concept of Cultural Appropriation. Both aspects will be addressed in the following subsection.

CULTURAL APPROPRIATION AS A HEURISTIC TOOL: A COMPARATIVE CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

As a result of the postcolonial turn, various disciplines developed or revived concepts aimed at describing “forms of cultural interaction”⁶² in their full complexity, while also addressing colonial, neocolonial, and other social and historical forms of injustice. These concepts share many similarities, yet each carry slightly different

compared to is the one of mimicry, coined in HOMI BHABA, *The Location of Culture*, London 1994, chap. 4 ‘Of mimicry and Man. The ambivalence of Colonial Discourse’.

⁶² “Kulturelle Interaktionsformen” (transl. by the author), DANIEL KÖNIG, *Konzeptionalisierung kultureller Interaktionsformen in der Forschung*, in: DANIEL KÖNIG et al. (eds.), *Transkulturelle Verflechtungen. Mediävistische Perspektiven*, Göttingen 2016, pp. 51–53. See also PETER BURKE, *Cultural Hybridity*, Cambridge 2009.

connotations and emphases. This section seeks to provide a brief comparison between the concept of Cultural Appropriation and similar frameworks to carve out its unique characteristics and to identify its advantages and disadvantages. Furthermore, it will propose concepts that complement the study of incidents of Cultural Appropriation.

Cases of Cultural Appropriation are often also understood as examples of Cultural Transfer⁶³. This concept, developed in the 1980s⁶⁴, focuses on the processes of exchange of both material and immaterial objects through space and beyond boundaries. A key focus of the research on the concept is the transformation that the cultures involved undergo through the transfer⁶⁵. While the concept receives to this day plenty of attention, it is also criticised for reducing complex processes to a “unilateral sender-receiver model”⁶⁶. Furthermore, the positive connotation of the concept, which emphasises the inspirational and cooperational character of such transfers for all cultures involved, must be critically examined. Additionally, the framework of Cultural Transfer places less emphasis on the causes and contexts of such interactions, framing them instead as developments that always occur in spaces of transcultural encounters⁶⁷. By contrast, the notion of Cultural Appropriation challenges these assumptions, requiring careful differentiations based on context, intent, and effect.

Similar to the concept of cultural transfer, Acculturation – a term originating in the nineteenth century⁶⁸ – is now predominantly understood as describing the mutual influence and adoption of cultural elements among culturally distinct individuals and groups. Hereby, this concept is highly focused on the result or product of those interactions: i. e., the merging of societies or individual aspects such as the development of language. Although the process is often understood as natural, it carries a form of intentionality. Furthermore, the result of an acculturation process implies a cultural convergence towards a form of equality. While Cultural Appropriation can

⁶³ See for an extensive introduction to the concept GEROGIORGAKIS et al., *Kulturtransfer* (as note 43), pp. 385–450.

⁶⁴ The term ‘transfert culturel,’ in English ‘cultural transfer,’ was coined in 1985 by MICHEL ESPAGNE – MICHAEL WERNER, *Deutsch-französischer Kulturtransfer im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert. Zu einem neuen interdisziplinären Forschungsprogramm des C.N.R.S.* in: *Francia* 13, 1985, pp. 502–510.

⁶⁵ CHRISTIANE EISENBERG, *Kulturtransfer als historischer Prozess. Ein Beitrag zur Komparatistik*, in: HARTMUT KAELEBLE – JÜRGEN SCHRIEWER (eds.), *Vergleich und Transfer. Komparatistik in den Sozial-, Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften*, Frankfurt am Main – New York 2003, pp. 399–417, here p. 405; GEROGIORGAKIS et al., *Kulturtransfer* (as note 43), pp. 392–394.

⁶⁶ DANIEL KÖNIG – SASKIA DÖNITZ, *Kulturtransfer*, in: KÖNIG et al., *Transkulturelle Verflechtungen* (as note 62), pp. 58–60, here p. 60.

⁶⁷ See for a critical examination of what the concept of Cultural Transfer can offer and where its limitations lie GEROGIORGAKIS et al., *Kulturtransfer* (as note 43), pp. 395–398.

⁶⁸ See on the history of the concept LUDMILA SOKOLSKAYA – ARTURAS VALENTONIS, *History of the Acculturation Concept*, in: *Journal of Intercultural Communication* 20(3), 2020, pp. 31–43; and REINHARD HÄRTEL (ed.), *Akkulturation im Mittelalter (Vorträge und Forschungen 78)*, Sigmaringen 2014.

result in Acculturation, it differs in its focus, as it highlights how transcultural contact often perpetuates or reinforces differences and marginalization⁶⁹.

A more nuanced concept than Acculturation is that of Transculturation, which examines the interweaving of cultural traditions in terms of societal relationships, processes, practices, and artefacts⁷⁰. A major difference between Transculturation and Acculturation is their understanding of culture. While the latter understands it as static, Transculturality emphasises its constantly changing character, leading to the continual reformation of these cultural interaction spaces. The concept was introduced by Fernando Ortiz (1881–1969)⁷¹ and later revived by the philosopher Wolfgang Welsch, who saw it particularly at work in today's globalised world. Welsch envisions the dissolution of distinct entities, proposing fluid transitions between boundaries and identities, between the foreign and the familiar, or even the 'dissolution' of such distinctions. Although transculturality also affects the micro level, the concept primarily focuses on the macro level⁷². As such, it is not well suited to address the effects of specific encounters. Yet, the notion of Cultural Appropriation emphasises that it is crucial to consider the specific contexts of encounter, such as the features and meaning of an appropriated artefact as well as the relationship of the communities involved in the transfer.

Another concept that remains highly influential today is Homi Bhabha's notion of Hybridity, which he defines referring to products of transcultural encounters. These products emerge from complex processes of cultural and identity negotiation that, in his view, occur within the interstitial spaces between cultures, referred to as the 'Third Space'. Hybridity challenges the notion of fixed, stable identities and cultural boundaries. Instead, it emphasises the fluidity and ongoing construction of identity and culture through the interaction and blending of diverse cultural elements, resulting in the creation of hybrid objects, both material or immaterial amalgamations⁷³. Thus, Peter Burke distinguishes between 'hybrid artefacts,' 'hybrid texts,' 'hybrid practices,'

⁶⁹ An additional problem with the term is, similar to the challenge identified for Cultural Appropriation, the divergence between its academic and colloquial usage, as the latter particularly understands acculturation as the unilateral integration of minorities through the adoption of cultural elements of the majority, thus contradicting the postcolonial idea, KÖNIG et al., *Akkulturation*, in: KÖNIG et al., *Transkulturelle Verflechtungen* (as note 62), pp. 53–56.

⁷⁰ MARGIT MERSCH, *Transkulturalität*, in: KÖNIG et al., *Transkulturelle Verflechtungen* (as note 62), pp. 72–77, here p. 73; AFEF BENESSAIAH, *Multiculturalism, Interculturality, Transculturality*, in: AFEF BENESSAIAH (ed.), *Amériques transculturelles – Transcultural Americas*, Ottawa 2010, pp. 11–38.

⁷¹ FERNANDO ORTIZ, *Cuban Counterpoint. Tobacco and Sugar*, Durham (NC) 1995.

⁷² See, for instance, WOLFGANG WELSCH, *Transkulturalität. Lebensformen nach der Auflösung der Kulturen*, in: KURT LUGER – RUDI RENGGER (eds.), *Dialog der Kulturen. Die multikulturelle Gesellschaft und die Medien*, Wien et al. 1994, pp. 147–169; and WOLFGANG WELSCH, *Was ist eigentlich Transkulturalität?*, in: DOROTHEE KIMMICH – SCHAMMA SCHAHADAT (eds.), *Kulturen in Bewegung. Beiträge zur Theorie und Praxis der Transkulturalität*, Bielefeld 2012, pp. 25–40.

⁷³ BHABHA, *Location of Culture* (as note 61).

and 'hybrid people'⁷⁴. An issue with the concept is its continuously strong separation of the different entities that contribute to the hybrid result. Additionally, the concept implies a certain harmony within these amalgamations, while paying less attention to the context in which the conflation occurred, as well as to its effects and the perception of the resulting 'hybrid product'. Cornejo Polar even goes so far as to argue that the concept serves to obscure instances of violence⁷⁵. While Cultural Appropriation can also result in what are understood as hybrid products, identifying hybrids as such does little to reveal the conditions of their formation or to assess their afterlife following the process of hybridization – an aspect that the concept of Cultural Appropriation, by contrast, strongly emphasises.

As the image of an entanglement suggests, the concept of the same name – also referred to as *Entangled Histories*⁷⁶ – proceeds from the assumption that trans-cultural interactions develop organically, continuously weaving and dissolving connections. Hereby, the strings that get entangled are mutually involved in the creation of a net. Thus, this approach attempts to understand the creation of culture within a space of transcultural interaction as a product equally generated by all parties involved. Furthermore, it argues that all entities involved in the entanglement undergo a transformation through the new connections – an important difference to Hybridity. It is a process that continually unfolds, with threads connecting and then separating, indicating that the connections are temporally limited⁷⁷. In this context, the concept does not imply a complete dissolution of the entities but rather refers to specific points of contact in which the entities become entangled⁷⁸. In doing so, the concept aims to challenge the notion that cultural exchange is primarily driven by the dominance of the majority or dominant group within a context of power imbalance. Instead, all entities

⁷⁴ BURKE, *Cultural Hybridity* (as note 62), pp. 13–33.

⁷⁵ ANTONIO CORNEJO POLAR, *Mestizaje and Hybridity. The Risks of Metaphors – Notes*, in: ANA DEL SARTO et al. (eds.), *The Latin American Cultural Studies Reader*, Durham (NC) 2004, pp. 760–764.

⁷⁶ Different scholars have brought forward different names for a similar concept: Sanjay Subrahmanyam significantly advanced the term 'connected histories,' SANJAY SUBRAHMANYAM, *Connected Histories. Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia*, in: *Modern Asian Studies* 31(3), 1997, pp. 735–762; Shalini Randeria promoted the notion of 'shared history,' SHALINI RANDERIA, *Entangled Histories of Uneven Modernities. Civil Society, Caste Solidarities and Legal Pluralism in Post-Colonial India*, in: YEHUDA ELKANA et al. (eds.), *Unraveling Ties. From Social Cohesion to New Practices of Connectedness*, Frankfurt am Main 2002, pp. 284–311. In France, the concept is mostly known as 'histoire croisée,' MICHAEL WERNER – BÉNÉDICTE ZIMMERMANN, *Vergleich, Transfer, Verflechtung. Der Ansatz der Histoire croisée und die Herausforderung des Transnationalen*, in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 28(4), 2002, pp. 607–636. In German, the concept is referred to as 'Verflechtungsgeschichte,' WOLFRAM DREWS – CHRISTIAN SCHOLL (eds.), *Transkulturelle Verflechtungsprozesse in der Vormoderne (Das Mittelalter. Beihefte 3)*, Berlin – Boston 2016.

⁷⁷ WOLFRAM DREWS – CHRISTIAN SCHOLL, *Transkulturelle Verflechtungsprozesse in der Vormoderne. Zur Einleitung*, in: *ibid.*, pp. VII–VIII.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. XVI–XVII.

possess agency⁷⁹. While this is an important angle that is all too often overlooked, it also poses the risk of romanticizing those interactions. Who, for instance, decides on and thus regulates these entanglements?

Cultural Appropriation does not deny mutual influence but emphasises the lack of agency experienced by the dominated minority group. At the same time, these two concepts can complement one another through their different emphases. Thus, one can plausibly argue that instances of Cultural Appropriation occur within entangled contexts and during processes of disentanglement. Another interesting consideration results from the German denomination of the concept as ‘Verflechtung’ which carries the impetus of being trapped in the net of interaction. This does not deny the agency and active involvement and impact of a minority group in an act of Cultural Appropriation but emphasises the potential lack of voluntariness involved (too)⁸⁰.

Another concept that can complement the study of Cultural Appropriation is Intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw⁸¹. Since its inception, intersectionality has been integrated into feminist and postcolonial theories to analyse how overlapping socially constructed categories, such as gender, race, sexuality, ability, class, nation, ethnicity, and age, determine identity, belonging, and thus political power relations and social relations. These categories are not “discrete and mutually exclusive entities, but rather build on each other and work together”⁸². Decoding individuals’ and groups’ identities and affiliations through these categories enhances our understanding of privilege and marginalization, exclusion mechanisms, and power structures⁸³. Therefore, it can also be of great heuristic value to understand the axes along which Cultural Appropriations happen.

Intersectionality questions the static concept of culture, as the latter shapes identities and belonging, as well as group identities based on very broad categories such as language, borders, nations, etc., a rigidity that is also inherent in the concept of Cultural Appropriation, endangering cultural essentialism as discussed previously. This tends to take too little account of the fluidity of groups and belonging and, on the

⁷⁹ MARGIT MERSCH et al., Agency. Die Wirkmächtigkeit von Akteuren und Aktanten, in: KÖNIG et al., *Transkulturelle Verflechtungen* (as note 62), pp. 145–150.

⁸⁰ DREWS – SCHOLL, *Transkulturelle Verflechtungsprozesse* (as note 77); and ROLAND SCHEEL, Byzanz und Nordeuropa zwischen Kontakt, Verflechtung und Rezeption, in: DREWS – SCHOLL, *Transkulturelle Verflechtungsprozesse* (as note 76), pp. 3–34.

⁸¹ The term was coined in KIMBERLÉ CRENSHAW, Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex. A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics, in: ANNE PHILLIPS (ed.), *Feminism and Politics*, Oxford, 1998, pp. 314–343; see also KIMBERLÉ CRENSHAW, Mapping the Margins. Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color, in: *Stanford Law Review* 43, 1990/1991, pp. 1241–1299. Further influential contributions to the discourse are BELL HOOKS, *Ain’t I a Woman?*, Boston 1981; IRIS MARION YOUNG, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton 1990; and MARTHA MINOW, *Making All the Difference. Inclusion, Exclusion and American Law*, Ithaca (NY) 1990.

⁸² PATRICIA HILL COLLINS – SIRMA BILGE, *Intersectionality*, Cambridge 2020, p. 14.

⁸³ See for a discussion of the different definitions and range of applications *ibid.*, pp. 39–63.

contrary, endangers to lead to rigidity, separation, and possibly to the continuation of exclusion. Thus, it may also provide a framework for exploring how the mechanisms carved out for Cultural Appropriation function within what is perceived as one community or ‘culture,’ for instance, along boundaries defined by gender, sexuality, social class, or other axes of differentiation – contexts that have been less frequently considered as potential instances of Cultural Appropriation. Intersectionality, which questions common understandings of group affiliation and stresses the complexities of belonging, is valuable to circumvent making hasty and overly simplistic decisions regarding group affiliation and basing the evaluation of contexts of Cultural Appropriation on such judgements.

While the previously introduced concepts address transcultural interactions and forms of exchange, the concept of Cultural Appropriation distinguishes itself by delving deeper into interactions that occur within specific cultural relationships – namely those characterized by unequal power dynamics, which often translate into general dependencies. Moreover, it specifically examines the products that arise from these relationships, as well as their effects, which may persist over the long term. The combination of these focal points, alongside its call to critically interrogate processes within such dependencies, defines this concept. At the same time, it can be integrated with other approaches that focus more strongly on different aspects of transcultural contexts to achieve a deeper understanding.

CULTURAL APPROPRIATION BEYOND PERIODIZATION BOUNDARIES?

While other postcolonial concepts have already been successfully applied to precolonial contexts without much contention⁸⁴, the concept of Cultural Appropriation, as mentioned earlier, faces various doubts. Thus, the concept’s application to times before modern colonialism is considered anachronistic and unfitting, as personal constellations are understood to differ from those colonial contexts⁸⁵. With regard to the first critique, however, I would argue that almost all historiography involves some degree of anachronism. The crucial question, rather, is whether the previously described criteria – those determinatives for Cultural Appropriation – were at play in the context in question. With regard to the second point, I would like to emphasise that the purportedly limited applicability of the concept of Cultural Appropriation is, in fact, primarily a result of its conceptual history. The original ideas behind the concept instead envisioned broad applicability without temporal restrictions, while its application over the past decades has primarily focused on modern colonial and neo-colonial contexts. It is certain that the relationships between privileged and marginalised groups differed in

⁸⁴ See on the literature the sections on the various concepts. See for a structured discussion on the application of modern terms and concepts to premodern incidences JACKSON W. ARMSTRONG et al. (eds.), *Using Concepts in Medieval History. Perspectives on Britain and Ireland, 1100–1500*, Dublin 2022.

⁸⁵ See, for instance, BAUMGARTEN, *Appropriation and Differentiation* (as note 9), p. 40.

contexts. This, however, is also the case for modern colonialism – a point that applies even more strongly to neo-colonial contexts. Yet, the applicability of the concept is not called into question for either of these phenomena. Thus, it seems both reasonable and justified to understand the concept as a valuable heuristic tool for examining the relationship between minorities and majorities, its implications for the production of cultural goods and cultural identity, as well as its instrumentalization – regardless of fixed historical periods or specific regional contexts. As such it provides a valuable lens for analysing the individual components involved in Cultural Appropriation: actors, artefacts, and spaces.

A final example from Toledo will illustrate the extent to which the strict separation of historical periods and the associated applicability of the concept of Cultural Appropriation are interconnected: In 2013, the Federation of Jewish Communities in Spain approached the Catholic Church with a request to restore a medieval building in Toledo, today best known under its Christian name ‘Santa María la Blanca’, to its original function as a synagogue. The building had been confiscated in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, a time of several violent persecutions and riots against the Jews of Castile, and had subsequently been converted into a church⁸⁶. Although the building at the time of the petition was and is no longer used as a church, Toledo’s archbishop denied the request⁸⁷. How can we understand the confiscation of the synagogue, its subsequent conversion into a (Catholic) church, and the archbishop’s recent decision to keep the building in Christian property? How are these events interconnected and what do they tell us about Cultural Appropriation and the phenomenon of Cultural Appropriation in pre-colonial periods?

The decision to retain possession of a building that was confiscated and repurposed during a period of persecution bears significant parallels to other contested properties discussed within the framework of Cultural Appropriation. The preserva-

⁸⁶ For more information on the synagogue-church of Santa María la Blanca and the historical context of its conversion after 1391, see JULIO PORRES MARTÍN-CLETO, *Nuevos Datos Sobre Santa María la Blanca*, in: *Toletum. Boletín de la Real Academia de Bellas Artes y Ciencias Históricas de Toledo* 31, 1994, pp. 77–84; and GONZALO VIÑUALES FERREIRO, *El pogrom de 1391 en la Diócesis de Toledo. ¿Legitimidad, identidad y violencia en la Castilla de la Baja Edad Media?*, in: LEANDRO MARTÍNEZ PEÑAS – MANUELA FERNÁNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ (eds.), *De las Navas de Tolosa a la Constitución de Cádiz. El Ejército y la guerra en la construcción del Estado*, Valladolid 2012, pp. 93–108. Additionally, an entire chapter in the author’s forthcoming dissertation, currently nearing submission, is dedicated to the synagogue-church, its conversion, and the various ways these events can be interpreted.

⁸⁷ The official reason for denying the request is that the Jewish community rejected restitution when it was offered to them in the early 2000s, and now that the building is in the possession of the Cathedral of Toledo, it cannot be returned to them. Thus, the bishop stated: “En la actualidad Santa María la Blanca no es una iglesia ni una sinagoga. En ella no se celebra culto oficial de ninguna confesión. Se trata de un edificio histórico que la archidiócesis cuida, conserva y mantiene”, quoted in ELENA FERNÁNDEZ ARCONES, *Las sinagogas de Toledo. Recuperación del edificio original*. Master Dissertation (*Recuperación del edificio original*, 2019), URL: https://oa.upm.es/57934/1/TFG_20_Fernandez_Arcones_Elena.pdf (last accessed 07/04/2025).

tion of numerous objects in museums across Europe is just one such example⁸⁸. The temporal gap between the expropriation of an appropriated object and the subsequent debate over its restitution, as well as the decision against its return, is central to this discussion. The fact that the building now houses a museum under the auspices of the Toledan bishopric makes the situation all the more contentious. Thus, it underscores how non-Jewish authorities utilize the building to present the history of Iberian Jewry from its own perspective, thereby appropriating the authority to narrate that story⁸⁹. Against this backdrop, the bishopric's decision to retain the building and reject its restitution can justifiably be classified as an act of Cultural Appropriation.

However, is this an example of one, ongoing act of Cultural Appropriation, given that the building has remained in Christian hands for over six centuries? Or is it a reaffirmation of a historical act of Cultural Appropriation, or even an entirely new act? How can the case of the synagogue-church of Santa María la Blanca in Toledo be interpreted without overstepping periodical boundaries, while also avoiding the suggestion of direct continuity, which would require the actors involved to be the same or at least from the same community? This example highlights the challenges of establishing strict rules for its applicability. Instead, the concept of Cultural Appropriation, with its analytical focus, provides nuanced insights into cultural interactions, such as the case of the synagogue-church of Santa María la Blanca. It sheds light on how specific acts of appropriation were committed, while also highlighting the intentions behind and the effects of cultural transfers. Moreover, it deepens our understanding of the circumstances surrounding the negotiation of such transfers and offers valuable tools for evaluating their outcomes.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE VOLUME

The outcomes of the conference are being published in this and the journal's next issue (scheduled for 2026), bringing together contributions that approach Cultural Appropriation from different disciplinary, temporal, and regional perspectives, while collectively questioning the adequacy of established models for describing cultural contact, transfer, and transformation.

In the present volume, Angelika Lohwasser revisits the transformation of the Egyptian god Amun into a central deity in Nubia. It traces a long-term process of Cultural Appropriation that unfolds not as a single act, but as a structured sequence of

⁸⁸ See the critical analysis of these collections, for instance, in BÉNÉDICT SAVOY, *Afrikas Kampf um seine Kunst. Geschichte einer postkolonialen Niederlage*, Munich 2021; and GÖTZ ALY, *Das Prachtboot. Wie Deutsche die Kunstschatze der Südsee raubten*, Frankfurt am Main 2021; a less critical, even apologetic perspective on these European collections can be found in NEIL MACGREGOR, *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, New York (NY) 2012.

⁸⁹ See on the Cultural Appropriation of Jewish objects CAROLINE B. GLICK, *Cultural Appropriation and the Jews*, in: *Jewish News Syndicate*, Dec. 1, 2022, URL: <https://www.jns.org/cultural-appropriation-and-the-jews/> (last accessed 07/04/2025).

adaptation, recontextualization, and re-signification. The article sets the stage for understanding appropriation as a dynamic process of religious and political integration, shaped both by shifts in power and by local meaning-making.

A different kind of appropriation – discursively constructed and polemically charged – is addressed in Wolfram Drews' analysis of Paulus Alvarus' writings in ninth-century Córdoba. Cultural Appropriation appears here as a rhetorical accusation used by Christian polemicists against Muslims, Jews, and even fellow Christians. This contribution adds the dimension of Cultural Appropriation as a strategy of boundary defence, employed from a Christian minority position.

Shifting to the context of late medieval and early modern Ireland, Marcel Bubert explores the intersection of Cultural Appropriation and racialization. Focusing on English settlers in Ireland who adopted Irish cultural practices, the study shows how such appropriation became the basis for new forms of ethnic stereotyping. This essay thus broadens the conceptual scope of the volume by linking cultural adoption to emerging structures of exclusion and identity policing.

Neta Bodner's chapter turns to Jewish and Christian architecture in medieval Cologne, proposing a theoretical model that draws on both appropriation and creolization to analyse material and stylistic exchange. Focusing on synagogues, ritual baths, and shared urban space, it shows how religious architecture reflects broader social processes and theological imaginaries. In doing so, the chapter challenges binary models of integration versus isolation and calls for a more nuanced understanding of shared technological and aesthetic environments.

Matthias Maser's contribution examines the concept of Cultural Appropriation through the lens of medieval Iberian numismatics. He proposes a broader, semiotic understanding of appropriated objects as transcultural signifiers that mediate between cultural systems. This theoretical framework is applied to Christian imitations of Islamic coinage, which, while visually mimicking Almoravid models, were modified to assert Christian supremacy. Against this backdrop, the analysis challenges conventional understandings of Cultural Appropriation and illustrates how such acts can involve both adaptation and ideological assertion.

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⁹⁰ Unfortunately, not all of the conference speakers were able to publish the contributions they presented at the event. We would like to express our sincere gratitude for their valuable participation, which greatly enriched the conference and resonates in the present and subsequent texts: Francesco Gusella (University of Münster), Roland Scheel (University of Münster), Theresa Jäckh (University of Tübingen), Maria Streicher (University of Tübingen), and Eduardo Angel Cruz (University of Leuven), whose papers tremendously contributed to the conference and this anthology.

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