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Option:

**ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF CULTURAL APPROPRIATION IN US:
AFRICAN-AMERICANS AS A CASE STUDY**

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Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master in Language and
Culture**

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DEDICATION

The journey was not short, nor should it be. The dream was not close, nor was the road fraught with facilities, but I did it. I dedicate my graduation to the one whose name I carry with pride, to the one who reaped the thorns from my path to pave the path of knowledge to my “dear father” **Rachid**. After the grace of God, what I am in is due to my father, the man who did not get even a fraction of what we got, and the man who strived all his life to be better than he did. To the invisible hand who bore every moment of pain I passed through and supported me in my weakness and frailty, “my beloved mother” **Dawia**, you are the pillars of my life; my first teachers and supporters. To my family, whose unwavering belief in me has provide the foundation of strength and inspiration; my brothers my pride and honor: **Salim** and his wife **Amina** and their children **Mouhamed**, **Aya**, **Zaynab**, and **Wassim**, **Amar** and his wife **Ahlem** and their children **Taim** and **Djinan**, to my beloved sisters: **Sabah** and her husband and their children **Hana**, **Aridj**, **Mouataz** and **Djoud**, **Amina** and her husband and their children **Sadjed** and **Djouri**, and to my uncle **Lamri** who had an impact on my academic career, also to my grandmothers **Nana Yamna**, **Yamina** and **Mallia**, GOD have mercy on them, to everyone who was a helper and supporter on this path. I am grateful to all of you, especially to the sister, besties and friend, my colleagues in Guelma University **Ghalia**, **Wafa** and **Sabrina**, thank you for making my academic journey a memorable one, and a special dedication to my dear colleagues at KEDADRA ALI SCHOOL: **Warda**, **Nada**, **Mounira**, **Marwa**, and **Mounira**. I would not have arrived without your prayers, support and grace after God thanks a lot. Finally, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to all those I could not mention here because the list is long.

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ABSTRACT

This research delves into the multifaceted impacts of cultural appropriation on African American community in US, examining its historical and contemporary manifestations. By analysing specific examples, including fashion, music, and language, this study uncovers the psychological, political, economic, and social impacts of this phenomenon. Through a critical examination of power dynamics, systemic racism, and the commodification of culture, this study argues that cultural appropriation perpetuates harmful stereotypes, erodes cultural integrity, and contributes to economic disparities, highlighting the power imbalances embedded in cultural exchange. Ultimately it offers strategies to combat the negative effects of cultural appropriation, and provide practical recommendations for mitigating them, and fostering intercultural understanding and respect.

المخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة الآثار المتعددة الأبعاد لظاهرة الاستيلاء الثقافي على المجتمع الأفروأمريكي في الولايات المتحدة، من خلال دراسة المظاهر التاريخية والمعاصرة لهذه الظاهرة. وتعتمد الدراسة على أمثلة محددة تشمل الأزياء والموسيقى واللغة لتسليط الضوء على الانعكاسات النفسية والسياسية والإقتصادية والإجتماعية للاستيلاء الثقافي. ومن خلال فحص نقدي لديناميكيات القوة والعنصرية النظامية وتسليع الثقافة، تبرز الدراسة كيف يسهم الاستيلاء الثقافي في ترسيخ الصور النمطية الضارة، ويقوض الهوية الثقافية، وتعميق الفوارق الاقتصادية، مما يكشف عن اختلال التوازن في عمليات التبادل الثقافي. وفي الختام، تقدم مجموعة من الاستراتيجيات العملية للحد من الآثار السلبية للاستيلاء الثقافي وتعزيز الفهم والاحترام المتبادل بين الثقافات.

LIST OF ABRIVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AAVE	African American Vernicular English
BET	Black Entertainment Television
BLM	Black Lives Matter
CRT	Critical Race Theory
IP	Intellectual Property
R&B	Rythem and Blues
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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Introduction

Cultural appropriation has become a widely debated topic in contemporary society, particularly in multicultural nations where diverse traditions, practices, and identities coexist. At its core, cultural appropriation refers to the adoption or use of elements from one culture by individuals of another, usually more dominant culture, often without proper understanding, permission, or respect. While cultural exchange has historically contributed to the development of civilizations, the dynamics of appropriation in modern times frequently reflect unequal power relationships and historical injustices. When cultural elements are borrowed without recognizing their origins or the struggles of the communities who created them, appropriation can reinforce harmful stereotypes, increase social inequality, and contribute to the marginalization of those communities.

This research focuses on the case of African Americans, whose cultural expressions such as music and fashion, language and spirituality have long been targets of appropriation. Despite centuries of oppression, African American communities have created rich and influential cultural traditions that continue to shape both American and global culture. However, instead of being acknowledged or fairly compensated, African Americans frequently face the paradox of cultural rejection and imitation their styles are popularized and profited from by others, while they themselves are stigmatized or marginalized for expressing the same traditions. This paradox raises urgent questions about ownership, respect, and justice. Therefore, this study seeks to critically examine the historical and contemporary implications of cultural appropriation all while shedding light on how it influences African American identity, perpetuates racial stereotypes and contributes to economic and social inequities.

Despite the complicated nature of the topic, this research attempts to answer these frequently asked questions: How has cultural appropriation evolved historically in the United States, particularly in relation to African American Communities? What are the main impacts of cultural appropriation on African Americans? What strategies can be implemented to mitigate the adverse effects of cultural appropriation while fostering genuine cultural appreciation? How does African American culture continue to assert itself and resist appropriation in modern society?

This study relies on variety literature in order to ensure its credibility, such as books peer-reviewed articles, legal documents, and cultural analysis written by scholars who specialize in African American studies, cultural theory, sociology, education, and communication. These sources are significant because they are not only academically credible, but also rooted in real-life social and political struggles; many of them are written by African American scholars, making the study more grounded in lived experience and cultural authenticity.

Scholars have approached the topic from multiple angles, but most agree that cultural appropriation is not simply a matter of borrowing; it is a process rooted in power imbalance and historical injustice. For example, James O. Young, in his book *Cultural Appropriation and Arts*, defines cultural appropriation as the use of cultural elements from another group especially marginalized groups without permission or understanding. He emphasizes the ethical dimensions of this practice, arguing that harm is caused when cultural meaning is stripped away from the original context.

In their edited book *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation*, Bruce Ziff and Pratima V Rao, explain appropriation as the taking of intellectual property, art, or symbols from minority cultures for profit or aesthetic use, usually by dominant group. They stress

that commodification of culture, without credit or compensation, leads to cultural theft. Richard A. Rogers, in his article *From Cultural Exchange to Transculturatio* Offers a comprehensive framework for understanding cultural appropriation, highlighting that cultural borrowing can be either respectful or exploitative, depending on the context and the balance of power between the groups involved.

In another perspective, Bell Hooks, in her essay collection *Black Looks: Race and Representation* introduces the idea of “eating the Other,” where dominant groups consume cultural signs of the marginalized as a way to appear rebellious or exotic, while maintaining racial privilege. Her work reveals how appropriation is often masked as admiration but it actually reinforces inequality.

In the field of music, Imani Perry in her book *Prophets of the Hood* and Tricia Rose *Black Noise* have documented how African American music genres such as hip-hop and R&B have been appropriated by mainstream artists and industries that often ignore their political and cultural roots. Jeff Chang, in his book *Can't Stop Won't Stop* and Mark Anthony Neal, in his book *What the Music said*, also describe how Black creativity, especially in hip-hop, has shaped global youth identity while being commercialized by corporations that exclude the original creators.

Regarding language, H. Samy Alim and Geneva Smitherman in works like the book *Articulate While Black*, explain how African American Vernacular English (AAVE) has been a site of both cultural innovation and appropriation. Their work argues that AAVE is often treated as incorrect or low-class when used by Black speakers but becomes trendy and profitable when used by white celebrities or brands.

In the realm of fashion and beauty, scholars such as Ayana D. Byrd, Lori L. Tharps, Cheryl Thompson, and Tracey Owens Patton have examined how Black hairstyles and

beauty standards are consistently appropriated by dominant groups. In the book *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*, Byrd and Tharps trace the cultural and political history of Black hair, revealing how it has been both a symbol of pride and a target of appropriation. Thompson, in her academic article *Black Women and Identity* explores how hairstyles reflect deeper questions of identity and acceptance, especially when Black beauty is copied yet devalued. Patton, in her journal article *Hey Girl, Am I More Than My Hair?* shows how the commodification of Black hair and beauty reinforces Eurocentric ideals while erasing Black origins. These scholars collectively argue that cultural appropriation in fashion and beauty is not only about aesthetics, but about control, erasure, and inequality.

This literature reveals a consistent pattern that African American culture is widely admired, yet African Americans themselves continue to face exclusion, discrimination, and erasure. Appropriation, as these scholars show, is not just about cultural sharing, it is about historical injustice, racial inequality, and cultural power.

This research is divided into three main chapters. The first chapter, entitled "Cultural Appropriation: Historical and Theoretical perspectives", establishes the foundational understanding of cultural appropriation by defining key concepts and categorizing its various types, including exchange vs exploitation, stereotypical, commercial, spiritual and religious, and linguistic appropriation. This chapter further differentiates cultural appropriation from cultural appreciation and analysing their relationship with stereotyping. It also delves into the historical background of the terms emergence in political and cultural discourse, exploring its origins in appropriation practices and its presence in policy and legal debates.

The second chapter, titled "African Americans in the US", then shifts focus to the historical and cultural landscape of African Americans in U.S, providing the essential context of our case study. It traces the African American presence from Slavery to Emancipation, through the Post-Emancipation struggle for citizenship, the Great Migration and urban identity formation, and the pivotal Civil Rights movement, culminating in their Contemporary societal statue. Part two of the chapter outlines the rich cultural aspects of African Americans, including their distinctive language and communication styles, music and artistic expression, fashion and hairstyles, spiritual and religion, and culinary traditions. This section also examines the changing cultural perspectives and discrimination faced by African Americans, from historical marginalization and stereotyping to the paradox of their culture moving from rejection to imitation, compounded by media representation and misrepresentation, and societal backlash.

Building upon these foundations, chapter three, under the title " African American Culture: between Cultural Appropriation Global Influence ", assesses the profound role of African American culture in shaping the discourse and experience of cultural appropriation. The chapter evaluates the psychological, emotional, political, economic, and socio-cultural impacts of cultural appropriation on African Americans. Furthermore, it proposes and analyses various strategies to combat cultural appropriation, emphasizing the importance of education and cultural literacy, media accountability, legal protections and policy reform, economic empowerment and ownership, and community-based initiatives and grassroots activism. The research concludes by asserting African American culture as a leading force and cultural powerhouse, addressing systemic imbalances, and offering specific recommendations for future action, including legal protection for cultural expressions, support for black creatives and entrepreneurs, ethical consumer

education, media accountability and representation, and community empowerment through education and art. Ultimately, this research strives for a cultural future rooted in justice, equity, and respect for all cultural contributions.

This work is conducted through a qualitative, interpretive methodology, that focuses on analysing academic literature, cultural aspects, and theoretical frameworks to understand the phenomenon of cultural appropriation, particularly in relation to African American culture, rather than employing field interviews or surveys, the study relies on document analysis and literature synthesis to explore how cultural appropriation has been studied, interpreted, and criticized in academic and cultural discourse. The research process begins with the collection of credible sources including books, peer-reviewed articles, and scholarly works, that address cultural appropriation both broadly and within specific African American contexts. Through thematic Analysis, the study identifies recurring patterns such as psychological impact, political erasure, economic exploitation, and media misrepresentation. These themes are further interpreted through the application of relevant theoretical lenses, (postcolonial theory, critical race theory, hegemony, and Social identity theory) to reveal how cultural borrowing is shaped by systems of power. The methodology includes a phase of critical reflection in which proposed solutions such as education, legal reform, and community empowerment.

This approach is appropriate because cultural appropriation is a complex social and symbolic process that requires interpretation, not only measurement. The study seeks to understand meaning, context, and power, elements that are best explored through qualitative method

Chapter One: Cultural Appropriation: Historical and Theoretical Perspectives

Part One: Cultural Appropriation – Definitions and Key Concepts

Cultural appropriation has become a central topic in contemporary cultural debates, particularly in societies marked by racial and ethnic diversity such as the United States. Although it is often treated as a modern issue, cultural appropriation is deeply rooted in historical processes such as colonization, slavery, migration, and globalization. At its core, it involves the adoption of cultural elements such as symbols, styles, practices, or expressions by members of a dominant group from a marginalized group, often without understanding, acknowledgment, or consent. This process reflects broader systems of inequality and power.

The Chapter contains two main parts, the first part introduces the concept of cultural appropriation by offering a range of definitions and highlighting its key features. It then examines the major forms in which appropriation takes place, especially within domains like fashion, music, language, food, and spirituality. These examples demonstrate how appropriation often exploits marginalized cultures while stripping them of context and meaning. The discussion then moves to the connection between appropriation and stereotyping, showing how borrowed cultural elements are frequently distorted in ways that reinforce harmful narratives. A distinction is also made between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation, which is essential for identifying respectful cultural exchange versus exploitative use.

The second part of the chapter provides historical and theoretical context. It traces how the term “cultural appropriation” has developed and been used in various social and political discussions. Finally, it introduces theoretical frameworks, including postcolonial theory, theories of power and Hegemony, critical race theory and theories of identity

Representation that help explain the deeper structures and power relations underlying cultural appropriation. Yet, it is part serves to build the reader's conceptual understanding of cultural appropriation as a power-laden and racially charged process. Through precise definitions, tangible examples, and critical insights, we gain the tools necessary to assess the ongoing impact of this phenomenon.

1. Definitions of Cultural Appropriation

Understanding cultural appropriation begins with exploring the various ways it has been defined by scholars, activists, and institutions. Although the term is widely used in public discourse, its meaning remains contested, complex, and deeply contextual. At its core, cultural appropriation refers to the act of taking or using elements from a culture that is not one's own, especially when the source culture is marginalized or historically oppressed(Rogers474).

One of the most cited definitions comes from cultural theorist James O. Young, who explains that cultural appropriation is "the taking of intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artifacts from someone else's culture without permission" (5). This definition highlights two important components: first, the act of taking cultural content, and second, the lack of consent or reciprocity involved in this process. According to Young, the ethical issue does not lie merely in the borrowing itself but in the unequal power dynamics that frame this exchange.

Similarly, Ziff and Rao define cultural appropriation as "the taking—from a culture that is not one's own—of intellectual property, cultural expressions or artifacts, history and ways of knowledge" (1). They emphasize that appropriation becomes problematic when it involves commodification—that is, when cultural symbols are extracted from

their original context and repackaged for profit or aesthetic purposes, often stripped of their cultural meaning.

Moreover, the Oxford English Dictionary offers a simplified yet widely accepted interpretation, defining cultural appropriation as “the unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the practices, customs, or aesthetics of one social or ethnic group by members of another (typically dominant) community”. This understanding focuses on acknowledgment and appropriateness, stressing the ethical boundaries of cultural interaction. What makes the adoption "inappropriate" often lies in the historical power imbalance between the groups involved.

It is important to differentiate cultural appropriation from related but distinct concepts such as cultural exchange or cultural appreciation. Cultural exchange usually refers to mutual and respectful sharing of cultural elements between groups on equal footing, while cultural appreciation implies a conscious effort to understand, respect, and credit the source culture. In contrast, appropriation tends to involve a one-way transfer that benefits the dominant group while erasing, distorting, or exploiting the minority culture (Rogers 477).

For example, when African American vernacular English (AAVE) is used by white influencers on social media without acknowledging its Black roots, it often falls into the realm of appropriation rather than appreciation. The language becomes trendy, humorous, or “cool,” while Black people are frequently penalized for using the same speech patterns in academic or professional settings. This example reflects what Bell Hooks refers to as “eating the other”, a process in which dominant cultures consume elements of the Other in ways that neutralize their political and cultural significance (21).

Other scholars argue that cultural appropriation is not always malicious or intentional. Instead, it is often unconscious and driven by market forces, popular culture, and media representations that normalize the consumption of marginalized identities (Matthes 1004). However, the absence of intent does not negate the harm, especially when appropriation perpetuates stereotypes, reinforces systemic inequalities, or contributes to cultural erasure.

In summary, while definitions may vary slightly across academic and cultural perspectives, most scholars agree that cultural appropriation involves the unequal exchange, privilege, and historical context. It is not merely about borrowing something from another culture, but it is about how that usage intersects with histories of colonialism, racism, and economic exploitation. Understanding these definitions sets the foundation for identifying real-world cases of appropriation and evaluating their social implications. the next section will explore the various types and aspects of cultural appropriation, highlighting how it appears in different forms.

2. Types and Aspects of Cultural Appropriation

Cultural appropriation is a complex and multidimensional process that takes various forms across different areas of life. It often reflects historical inequalities and power imbalances, particularly between dominant and marginalized groups. Understanding the types and aspects of cultural appropriation is essential to identify when such practices shift from cultural exchange to cultural exploitation, and how it becomes harmful, especially to communities that have experienced oppression or exclusion. This section explores the main categories through which cultural appropriation occurs and the cultural elements most frequently involved.

2.1. Types of Cultural Appropriation

There are several types of cultural appropriation, each reflecting a distinct manner in which one group adopts, utilizes, or imitates elements of another culture. Although these types often intersect and blur in real world contexts, categorizing them individually enables a deeper and more systematic analysis of their cultural and social significance.

One important distinction is between cultural exchange and cultural exploitation. **Cultural exchange** refers to mutual sharing between groups with respect, dialogue, and consent. It usually happens in environments where both groups are treated equally and can benefit from the interaction. Whereas, **cultural exploitation** occurs when elements of a marginalized culture are adopted by a dominant group without permission, often for profit, entertainment or social status, without giving credit or understanding the cultural or historical context, what leads to distortion and disrespect of the marginalized culture (Rogers 477). For instance, wearing a Native American headdress as a fashion statement at a music festival as fashion accessory, without knowledge of its ceremonial value, reflects exploitation rather than exchange. While the dominant culture may consider it as stylish or artistic, Indigenous communities may view it as disrespectful imitation of a sacred traditions.

Another prevalent form of appropriation is **Stereotypical Appropriation**. This type involves misrepresenting a culture through distorted, overly simplified, or inaccurate depictions, often influenced by colonial or racist stereotypes. These portrayals reduce a rich and complex culture to a set of superficial or exotic features. For example, portraying all Asians as martial artists or all Africans as tribal dancers, ignores the vast differences and histories within these groups. Such portrayals erase individuality and reinforce harmful narratives while reinforcing long-standing prejudices that have supported

exclusion and discrimination (Young and Brunk 135). Furthermore, stereotypical appropriation is often reinforced by media and entertainment, where characters from minority cultures are portrayed in limited roles, which contributes to broader societal misunderstanding.

In **commercial** context, appropriation occurs when cultural symbols, arts, or practices are used in marketing, branding, or product creation by companies or individuals without the involvement or benefit of the originating culture. This practice is particularly harmful when the culture being borrowed from is economically or politically marginalized. For example, luxury fashion brands selling clothing with African-inspired patterns or Indigenous motifs, without hiring designers from those communities or acknowledging their origins, transform cultural heritage into profit for outsiders. Such appropriation often strip cultural elements of their meaning and reduce them to commercial goods, Meanwhile the original creators may remain economically excluded or socially invisible (Ziff and Rao 12).

Cultural appropriation also extends to the **Spiritual and Religious** realms. This type occurs when sacred practices, symbols, or beliefs from one culture are adopted by others for aesthetic, commercial gain, or personal reasons, often without understanding or respecting their original significance. For example, practicing yoga only as a form of physical exercise while ignoring its philosophical and spiritual roots, or wearing the a bindi or Native American dreamcatchers as decorative accessories, removes these elements from their cultural and sacred contexts. This detachment can be deeply offensive and spirituality harmful to the originating communities. Additionally, spiritual appropriation often takes place in wellness industries, where traditions like smudging, meditation, or chakra alignment are used for commercial purposes, repackaged and sold without giving credit to the original culture. This not only distorts the practices but also

disregards the communities that continue to face oppression for practicing them (Smith 45).

Finally, language itself can be subjected to appropriation. **Linguistic Appropriation** includes using slang, accents, or dialects from marginalized groups in ways that mock, commercialize, or distort their cultural identity. For example, using African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in music, fashion, or social media especially by influencers or celebrities and gain popularity or profit, while the speakers of that dialect face prejudice and discrimination in educational, legal, or professional settings. These language forms treated as trendy or entertaining by outsiders, while the communities that originate them criticized or punished for using the same expressions in everyday life. (Cutler 530).

In sum, these different expressions of cultural appropriation, whether through fashion, media, religion, commerce, or language, reveals how dominant groups often profit from the cultural contributions of marginalized communities while disregarding their value, context, and voice. Understanding these dynamics is essential for promoting cultural respect, equity, and justice.

2.2 Aspects of Cultural Appropriation

The aspects of cultural appropriation refer to the specific cultural elements that are commonly taken, altered, or improperly used by outsiders. These aspects highlights how cultural appropriation can deeply affect individual's identity, cultural expression, and dignity.

One of the most visible areas where cultural appropriation occurs is in **Fashion and Appearance**. Clothing, hairstyles, and body decorations are among the most recognizable aspects of cultural appropriation. Traditional clothing such as the Japanese kimono, the

Indian sari, or African dashikis are often worn by outsiders as trendy outfits or costumes, without respecting or understanding their cultural meaning. In the same way, Hairstyles such as cornrows, dreadlocks, or bantu knots, rooted in Black history and resistance, are often adopted by non-Black individuals who receive praise or profit for styles that Black people are often criticized or penalized for. This double standard is a central issue in fashion appropriation, where power and privilege determine who is celebrated and who is excluded (Johnson 84).

In addition to fashion **Art and Music** is another aspect where artistic forms such as visual arts, music, and dance, are commonly subjected to cultural appropriation. For example, African American musical genres like jazz, blues, and hip-hop have often been borrowed by white artists who gain commercial success while the original Black creators remain marginalized. This creates an imbalance in recognition, cultural value, and financial benefit. Furthermore, the global popularity of hip-hop often ignores its roots in African American history struggle, identity, and political expression, reducing it to just a musical style separated from its original context. (Hooks 121).

Cuisine and Food Culture also how appropriation affects everyday life. Although food is often seen as a positive form of or even positive of cultural exchange, it can also be a site of cultural appropriation, when traditional dishes are modified, renamed, or sold by outsiders without acknowledging their cultural roots. Moreover, when members of marginalized cultures are criticized for their traditional food practices like using strong spices or unfamiliar ingredients, while the same dishes are praised when presented by outsiders in upscale restaurants. A double standard emerges and becomes problematic when traditional recipes are altered to suit commercial tastes, leading to the loss of their historical and cultural significance in the process. (Heldke 21).

Spiritual Symbols and Rituals offers another example of appropriation. Spiritual practices and rituals are deeply meaningful and sacred within their original cultures. When these elements such as, chants, symbols, or ceremonies are used casually, out of context, or for commercial gain, they lose their spiritual value. For instance, using dreamcatchers, chakra stones, or Indigenous smudging rituals as home decor or self-help tools ignores their deep spiritual meaning for Indigenous or Eastern communities. Such practices not only misrepresent sacred beliefs but also profit from them in ways that exclude the originating communities (Brown 180).

Finally, cultural appropriation can be observed in **Language and Communication Styles**. **This includes** the way people adopt storytelling methods, speech patterns, gestures, or humour from another culture. These forms of communication are sometimes borrowed for fun or fashion without understanding the deep cultural or historical meaning, what leads to cultural misrepresentation, promotes stereotypes, and reduce the original expressions to something shallow or entertaining (Alim and Smitherman 98).

Understanding the types and aspects of cultural appropriation is essential for recognizing its appears in daily life. While some actions may seem minor or even complimentary, they often reflect deeper patterns of inequality, historical violence, and cultural distortion. By identifying specific types such as commercial use, stereotypical, or spiritual appropriation, looking at the affected areas like fashion, language, and music, we can better understand how appropriation operates and why it matters. More importantly, this awareness helps promote cultural respect, responsibility, and accountability. It encourages both individuals and institutions to shift from uncritical borrowing toward more ethical, and respectful cultural exchange.

3.The Relationship Between Cultural Appropriation and Stereotyping

Cultural appropriation and stereotyping are closely linked. When dominant groups adopt aspects of marginalized cultures, they often do so through distorted images shaped by harmful stereotypes (Ziff and Rao 5). These simplified representations reduce complex identities into marketable symbols, reinforcing unequal power relations.

In African American culture, appropriation often relies on long-standing stereotypes like the “angry Black woman,” the “thug,” or the “cool entertainer.” Such images, common in media and fashion, allow cultural borrowing to happen without understanding or respect (Hooks 125). For instance, white influencers frequently use (AAVE) to appear trendy, while Black speakers of the same language are judged negatively (Rickford and King 26). Similarly, Black hairstyles like cornrows or Afros are seen as unprofessional on Black people, but praised as fashionable on white celebrities (Randle 110). These double standards reflect how appropriation and stereotypes reinforce each other.

Stereotypes also flatten cultural identities. In hip-hop, Black masculinity is often reduced to aggression, while Black women are portrayed as loud or hypersexual. These exaggerated images are repeated in entertainment and advertising, distorting real experiences (Brock 25).

Cultural borrowing is never neutral, it reflects racial inequality and history. Without understanding or context, appropriated elements become tools of misrepresentation. To challenge this, we must reject stereotypes and approach culture with respect for its people and meaning. This link between appropriation and stereotype helps us better understand the following section, which explores the key difference between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation.

4. The Distinction Between Cultural Appropriation and Cultural Appreciation

The terms “cultural appropriation” and “cultural appreciation” are often confused, but they have different meanings. While both involve engaging with another culture, the key differences lie in intent, respect, and power. Cultural appreciation means interacting with another culture in a respectful and informed way. It involves learning about the culture’s history, acknowledging its creators, and giving credit. Examples include attending a traditional African dance class taught by members of that culture or learning about soul food through Black culinary scholars (Ziff and Rao 6).

In contrast, cultural appropriation happens when elements of a marginalized culture are taken by a dominant group without permission, context, or acknowledgment. This often results in misrepresentation or exploitation, especially when the dominant group profits while the original culture is overlooked or stigmatized (Young 136).

Power imbalance is central to appropriation. For instance, Black hairstyles like cornrows may be celebrated on white celebrities but considered “unprofessional” on Black individuals—a clear double standard (Hooks 119). Even when harm is not intended, ignoring cultural context can still lead to appropriation. As Scafidi notes; appropriation occurs when a powerful group adopts elements from a less powerful one, often stripping them of meaning (57).

True appreciation involves consent, collaboration, and respect. It uplifts the source culture, while appropriation often distorts or silences it. Understanding this distinction is essential, especially when engaging with cultures affected by colonization or oppression.

Part Two: Historical Background of Cultural Appropriation

To fully understand the current debates of cultural appropriation, it is important to comprehend the historical processes that led to its rise. This part explores the roots of cultural appropriation from a historical lens, focusing on how it emerged within contexts of colonization, imperial expansion, and racial systems of domination. It also considers how the term evolved into an academic and political concept that reflects deep-seated power dynamics. Cultural appropriation is not merely a cultural trend or misunderstanding; it is embedded in a legacy of exploitation where dominant cultures have historically extracted, repackaged, and profited from the cultural expressions of oppressed people. This section offers an essential historical and conceptual background for understanding cultural appropriation in the modern world. It starts by examining how the term emerged through specific policies and historical events, followed by a brief review of key theoretical frameworks that allow for a deeper and more critical analysis of the phenomenon.

1. The Use of the Term to Define Some Policies

The practice of cultural appropriation has existed for centuries, but the terminology to define and critique it is relatively recent. The term "cultural appropriation" gained traction during the late 20th century as scholars, activists, and marginalized communities began articulating how dominant cultures systematically borrowed or exploited their traditions, often without permission or respect (Ziff and Rao 1). Yet the historical foundation of this practice is much older and intertwined with colonialism, imperial policies, racial capitalism, and global power imbalances.

1.1 Historical Origins of Appropriation Practices

The roots of cultural appropriation can be traced back to the age of European colonial expansion. Colonizing powers such as Britain, France, Spain, and Portugal engaged in not only the political and economic domination of other regions but also in cultural domination. European elites collected indigenous art, adopted exotic aesthetics, and redefined the cultural practices of colonized people to fit colonial narratives. For instance, British colonialists in India embraced Indian textiles and architectural styles to demonstrate control, while simultaneously imposing Western superiority (Young 52). Similarly, in the Americas, settler societies appropriated the cultural and religious symbols of Native American tribes while enforcing assimilation policies through institutions like Indian boarding schools, which aimed to erase indigenous identities and replace them with Western norms (Deloria 92).

1.2. Emergence of the Term in Political and Cultural Discourse

The specific phrase “cultural appropriation” began appearing in activist circles during the civil rights era of the 1960s and 1970s, as African American and Native American communities started challenging the mainstream exploitation of their cultural identities. For instance, Black communities protested the commercialization of jazz, blues, and later hip-hop by white artists and corporations who profited without acknowledging the creators. Indigenous activists similarly objected to the appropriation of their spiritual practices and sacred regalia in festivals, media, and fashion (Hooks 172).

In academic discourse, the term became prominent through postcolonial, critical race, and cultural studies scholars who argued that cultural appropriation is not simply a benign or appreciative act. Rather, it is an act embedded in structures of inequality. Bell Hooks, for example, discusses how cultural appropriation serves as a form of "eating the other,"

where the dominant group consumes the culture of the oppressed as a form of exotic pleasure without bearing any of the social burdens (171).

1.3 Cultural Appropriation in Policy and Legal Debates

In modern policy contexts, cultural appropriation has become increasingly relevant in debates about intellectual property, cultural heritage, and global cultural governance. While international agreements like UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) recognize the value of protecting traditional knowledge and practices, legal systems in many countries still lack mechanisms to prevent the misappropriation of collective cultural expressions (Brown 301). The concept has also emerged in education, fashion, tourism, and entertainment policies, where institutions are being asked to consider how power operates in cultural borrowing. However, enforcement is inconsistent, and many policies lack the tools to distinguish between respectful cultural exchange and exploitative appropriation.

In summary, the term "cultural appropriation" did not emerge from academic abstraction alone; it developed through lived experiences of dispossession, marginalization, and resistance. From colonial policies to contemporary legal frameworks, the act of appropriating culture has been consistently tied to unequal power relations. Recognizing this historical context is essential for grounding any theoretical or critical discussion of cultural appropriation in real-world struggles and histories.

2. Cultural Appropriation in a Theoretical Framework

To critically understand cultural appropriation as a social, political, and symbolic process, scholars have used several theoretical frameworks. These theories do more than just describe the practice, they help explain how power, history, and identity shape cultural exchange in unequal ways. Each framework offers a different perspective to

understand why cultural appropriation often causes controversy, harm, and injustice, especially when practiced by dominant groups toward communities that have been historically oppressed. This section presents four key theories that have informed debates on cultural appropriation:

2.1 Post-Colonial Theory

Post-colonial theory studies the long-term effects of colonialism on cultures, societies, and identities. It helps us see cultural appropriation as part of a larger historical pattern that began during colonial rule, where Western powers took control of other cultures and redefined them for their own benefit. Edward Said, in his famous work *Orientalism*, explained how the West created distorted images of non-Western cultures to justify domination and control (5). These images often portrayed non-Western people as exotic, backward, or mysterious. From this point of view, modern cultural appropriation such as using African American hairstyles or Native American symbols, is not simply borrowing from another culture. It continues the colonial mindset, where dominant groups take cultural elements without understanding or respecting their meaning, while still holding power and privilege (Young 45). Post-colonial theory encourages to ask who controls cultural meaning, who is allowed to borrow from others, and whose voices are silenced in the process.

2.2 Theories of Power and Hegemony

The Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci introduced the idea of hegemony, which refers to how dominant groups maintain power not only through laws or violence, but also by shaping culture and ideas. Hegemony helps explain how cultural appropriation works in modern societies. When a dominant culture absorbs and redefines elements from a marginalized group, it often changes their meaning and removes their political or social

power. For example, hip-hop began as a form of protest and expression in Black urban communities. But when it becomes commercialized by mainstream media and performed by white artists, its original message of resistance may be lost. The culture becomes widely accepted only when separated from the struggles of the people who created it. (Storey 76). Hegemony allows dominant groups to benefit from the creativity of marginalized communities without facing the same oppression.

2.3 Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Critical Race Theory (CRT) argues that racism is not just a personal bias but a permanent and structural part of society (Delgado and Stefancic 7). This theory helps to understand cultural appropriation in the context of ongoing racial inequality. It shows how people of colour are often devalued when expressing their own culture, while those same cultural elements are praised when used by white individuals. One clear example is the treatment of AAVE. When Black people speak AAVE, they may face discrimination in schools or jobs. But when non-Black celebrities or influencers use the same language in music, ads, or on social media, it is seen as trendy or fun (Cutler 86). CRT helps reveal that cultural appropriation is not a harmless act, it is part of a system that rewards whiteness and penalizes Blackness.

2.4 Theories of Identity Representation (Social Identity Theory)

There are numerous theories of identity representation including Social Identity theory, it developed by scholars such as Stuart Hall and Judith Butler, focus on how identity is created through language, culture, and social power. These theories argue that identity is not fixed, and shaped by how others represent or talk about us. In the case of cultural appropriation, these theories show how dominant groups can misrepresent or oversimplify other cultures when they use their symbols or traditions without context or

permission. For example, media images of African American culture may highlight fashion, music, or slang, but ignore the deeper history of racism, resistance, and trauma. These representations turn a complex culture into a marketable trend, often reinforcing stereotypes or hiding the real voices of the community (Hall 228). This kind of distortion can lead to misunderstanding and harm, especially when it becomes widespread.

Each of these theoretical frameworks gives us a different way to understand cultural appropriation. Post-colonial theory links it to the legacy of empire and control. Theories of hegemony show how cultural power can be used to neutralize resistance. Critical Race Theory reveals how racial inequality is embedded in cultural exchange. Theories of identity representation help explain how appropriation can reshape or erase the identities of marginalized people. Together, these perspectives help us see that cultural appropriation is not just about borrowing elements from another culture, it is a deeply political issue that reflects broader systems of power, history, and inequality in society today.

In sum, chapter One has offered a comprehensive overview of cultural appropriation by defining the term, illustrating its common forms, and placing it within historical and theoretical contexts. The discussion revealed that cultural appropriation is not a neutral act of cultural exchange but a process shaped by unequal power relations, often resulting in harm to marginalized communities, particularly African Americans. By examining examples from various cultural areas, such as fashion, language, music, and food, the chapter highlighted how cultural elements are frequently removed from their original context, commodified, and used without recognition or respect. These patterns are reinforced by stereotypes and social inequalities, making cultural appropriation both a cultural and political issue. Theoretical perspectives, including postcolonial theory and critical race theory, provided important tools for understanding the deeper implications of

appropriation. This foundational understanding sets the stage for further analysis of its real-life impacts in the chapters that follow.

Chapter Two: African Americans in the U.S

Understanding the historical, cultural, and social trajectory of African Americans is fundamental to analyse the complex realities of cultural appropriation. While Chapter One provided theoretical and historical frameworks surrounding appropriation as a global phenomenon, this chapter narrows the focus to African Americans in the United States. It traces their journey from forced migration through slavery, examines their evolving societal roles, and analyzes how their cultural expressions were formed, transformed, and at times misrepresented or commodified. This exploration is essential for situating cultural appropriation within a broader sociohistorical context, one marked by resilience, resistance, and systemic inequality. This chapter is divided into three major sections: the existence of African Americans in the U.S., the cultural aspects of their identity, and the evolving societal perceptions and discrimination they continue to face.

The aim of this chapter is not merely to recount history but to connect historical realities with present-day cultural dynamics, particularly how appropriation has evolved as part of the racialized history of the United States. By understanding the deep historical roots of African American culture and social position, we can better understand the layered meanings behind acts of cultural borrowing or commodification. This contextual grounding will provide a more nuanced perspective when assessing the impacts of cultural appropriation in later chapters.

Part One: The Existence of African Americans in the U.S. and their Struggle Towards Civil Rights

The history of African Americans is inseparable from the broader American narrative, yet it remains uniquely shaped by marginalization, resistance, and cultural survival. This part outlines the historical presence of African Americans from the era of slavery through

modern times. Each phase in this trajectory, slavery, emancipation, migration, civil rights movements, and contemporary experiences, has contributed to shaping African American identity and their place in U.S. society. A clear understanding of this history is essential to grasp the roots of cultural appropriation and its consequences for African American communities.

This historical journey is not a linear path of suffering; it is also a narrative of transformation, innovation, and power. African Americans have continuously created new forms of expression, community, and survival, even under conditions designed to erase them. By revisiting their historical trajectory, we witness the ongoing struggle for citizenship, human dignity, and cultural autonomy. The cultural products, practices, and innovations born from this history have not only enriched American society but have also become contested spaces in the ongoing conversation around ownership, recognition, and exploitation.

2.1. From Slavery to Emancipation: The Foundations of African American Presence

The presence of African Americans in the United States began in the early 1600s, when Africans were brought to the American colonies as slaves. These individuals were not immigrants who came by choice, they were captured and sold as property. In 1619, the first enslaved Africans arrived in Virginia, starting a system of racial slavery that would last for centuries and deeply influence the social and political structures of the country, especially in the South (Gates 22).

Even under harsh and inhumane conditions on plantations, enslaved Africans created spiritual, communal, and cultural practices by drawing on their diverse African backgrounds. These traditions laid the foundation for what would become African

American culture. Slaves were often forbidden to read or write, and their identities were attacked, but they resisted through storytelling, music, and maintaining family and community ties (Berlin 85).

Slavery was not only a system for labour, it was also an ideology that supported inequality by claiming that Black people were inferior. In response, enslaved people found ways to fight back, not just through revolts or escape, but also by forming a unique cultural identity that would survive long after slavery ended (Douglass 49). The abolitionist movement grew stronger during the 1800s, eventually leading to President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and the 13th Amendment in 1865, which officially ended slavery. However, freedom did not mean equality. The newly freed African Americans still faced racism, poverty, and the psychological wounds of slavery (Du Bois 45).

2.2. The Post-Emancipation Era and the Struggle for Citizenship

After the abolition of slavery, African Americans entered a new period in American history known as Reconstruction (1865–1877). This was a time of both hope and difficulty. For the first time, African Americans began to experience some of the rights that had long been denied to them. Many Black men were able to vote, and some were even elected to public office. Communities built schools for Black children, and new institutions were created to support African American life (Foner 122). However, these important gains were met with strong resistance. Many white Americans, especially in the South, were angry about the changes and wanted to return to a system of racial control. In response, state governments passed Black Codes, which were laws that restricted the freedoms of African Americans. Later, BC developed into the more formal system of Jim Crow segregation, which lasted for many decades. At the same time, violent groups like

the Ku Klux Klan used threats, attacks, and murder to try to stop African Americans from voting or participating in politics. Despite the 14th Amendment (which gave citizenship to everyone born in the U.S.) and the 15th Amendment (which protected voting rights), African Americans were often blocked from using these rights in real life. This period showed how legal rights could be ignored or weakened by social and political forces. Even in the face of these problems, African Americans continued to work for progress. They created their own churches, schools, newspapers, and mutual aid societies. These institutions were not only practical, they also helped to build a sense of community and pride. Through these efforts, a Black middle class slowly began to emerge in some areas. More importantly, these institutions became spaces where African Americans could share ideas, organize resistance, and preserve their culture. This era also gave birth to a growing group of Black thinkers, writers, and leaders who started to shape new ways of understanding African American identity. Their efforts would later influence major movements for civil rights in the 20th century. Though the Reconstruction period ended with many of its goals left unfinished, it marked the beginning of a long and ongoing fight for full citizenship and equal rights (Blight 311).

2.3. The Great Migration and Urban Identity Formation

Between 1916 and 1970, millions of African Americans left the rural South and moved to cities in the North and West. This large movement, known as the Great Migration, changed the lives of African Americans and the shape of American cities. People were leaving behind systems of racial violence, poor job opportunities, and limited freedoms in search of better living conditions and greater personal freedom. Cities like Chicago, Detroit, New York, and Los Angeles became popular destinations. In these urban areas, African Americans found jobs in factories, railroads, and other industries. Although working conditions were often difficult, wages were usually higher than in the

South. This gave African Americans a new chance to support their families and build more stable lives. Over time, Black neighbourhoods grew, and African American communities churches, businesses, and social clubs that reflected their culture and values (Wilkerson 44).

This migration also helped create new African American identities shaped by urban life. In the cities, African Americans began to express themselves in new and creative ways. One of the most famous examples of this cultural development was the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s. This movement, centred in Harlem, New York, celebrated Black art, music, literature, and thought. Artists like Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Duke Ellington used their work to show the beauty and strength of Black life and challenge racist ideas (Lewis 110).

The Harlem Renaissance was more than just a cultural moment, it was a declaration of identity. Through poetry, jazz, theatre, and visual art, African Americans affirmed their humanity and creativity. Their works questioned white dominance and highlighted the rich traditions rooted in African and African American experiences. Still, life in northern and western cities was not free of discrimination. African Americans faced new forms of racism, such as housing segregation, unfair policing, and job discrimination. White landlords often refused to rent to Black families, and Black workers were paid less than their white co-workers for the same labour. These forms of inequality shaped the structure of American cities and limited upward mobility for many Black families (Boyd 203).

Despite these challenges, the Great Migration was a key moment in African American history. It allowed African Americans to build stronger communities and develop a powerful cultural voice. The experiences and cultural expressions formed during this time

laid the foundation for later civil rights activism and helped define what it meant to be Black in modern America.

2.4. The Civil Rights Movement and Institutional Change

The mid-20th century was a turning point in African American history. During this time, African Americans organized and participated in the Civil Rights Movement, a powerful struggle aimed at ending racial segregation and achieving equality. After many years of injustice and second-class treatment, Black communities across the country came together to demand legal rights and social change. The movement included many well-known leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and Malcolm X, each with different approaches but shared goals. Peaceful protests, boycotts, legal challenges, and public speeches became tools for fighting racial injustice. For example, the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the March on Washington showed the power of nonviolent resistance. These actions drew national attention to the everyday discrimination faced by African Americans (Branch 178).

One of the movement's major successes was the passage of new laws. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 made racial segregation illegal in public places, workplaces, and schools. It also banned discrimination based on race, colour, religion, sex, or national origin. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was another landmark law. It protected the right to vote by removing unfair practices like literacy tests, which had been used to keep Black citizens from voting. These legal changes were important because they helped break down the system of Jim Crow segregation, especially in the South. However, while laws changed, social attitudes did not always follow. Although segregation was no longer legal, many African Americans continued to face separation in practice, including ongoing discrimination in housing, education, employment, and policing. Additionally, a growing

conservative backlash began to push against the progress made by the Civil Rights Movement. One major example was the War on Drugs, a federal policy that began in the 1970s and 1980s. Although it was presented as a response to crime, this policy disproportionately affected Black communities. High incarceration rates and aggressive policing damaged many African American families and neighbourhoods (Alexander 59).

Despite these setbacks, the Civil Rights Movement remains one of the most important chapters in U.S. history. It showed that African Americans were not passive victims of racism but were active agents of change. Through protest, education, and community building, they helped reshape American democracy. Culture also played a major role during this period. Protest songs, murals, poetry, and speeches became tools of resistance and symbols of hope. These cultural expressions helped unite people and communicate powerful messages to the world. The legacy of the Civil Rights Movement continues to inspire new generations who still fight for justice and equality. Its achievements laid the groundwork for later movements like Black Lives Matter, which carry forward the struggle for full inclusion in American society.

2.5. African Americans in Contemporary U.S. Society

Today, African Americans play an essential role in shaping the social, political, cultural, and economic landscape of the United States. Despite many achievements, they still face serious challenges caused by the long history of racism, exclusion, and inequality. Understanding the current situation of African Americans requires looking at both their successes and the struggles that continue. In politics, African Americans have made important gains. The most symbolic achievement was the election of Barack Obama as the first African American president in 2008. His presidency was a historic moment, showing how far the country had come. However, it also revealed the continuing

complexities of race in America. Many people hoped that Obama's leadership would mark a post-racial era, but racial tensions and injustices remained visible (Harris 94).

In culture, African Americans are at the center of many global trends. Black musicians, writers, fashion designers, athletes, and filmmakers have shaped pop culture not only in the U.S. but around the world. From hip-hop to streetwear, African American creativity has become a powerful force in global media and style. Still, this cultural influence often leads to appropriation, where Black cultural expressions are copied or profited from without proper credit or understanding of their origins. While cultural achievements are celebrated, African Americans continue to face structural inequalities. In education, Black students often attend underfunded schools and face disciplinary practices that disproportionately affect them. In employment, wage gaps and limited access to leadership positions remain common. In health care, African Americans are more likely to suffer from chronic illnesses and receive lower-quality treatment (Patterson 137). These inequalities are not isolated; they are connected to centuries of racial discrimination and unequal policies.

The criminal justice system is another area of concern. African Americans are more likely to be stopped by police, arrested, and given harsh sentences compared to white Americans. High-profile cases of police violence, such as the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others, have sparked widespread protests and renewed calls for justice. Movements like BLM have brought attention to these issues and pushed for meaningful reform. At the same time, African American communities continue to show great resilience and creativity. They build institutions, support local businesses, engage in activism, and pass down cultural traditions through families, churches, and community groups. This strength and unity have helped African Americans not only survive but thrive in a system that often marginalizes them.

So, Recognizing the historical and present-day experiences of African Americans is essential for understanding the true impact of cultural appropriation. It allows us to see why representation matters, why credit is important, and why cultural ownership must be respected. With this context in mind, the next chapter will explore the cultural aspects of African American identity, the traditions, symbols, and styles that are often borrowed or misused in popular culture. Understanding their origins and meanings is the first step in addressing the problem of appropriation in a respectful and informed way.

Part two: Cultural Aspects Vs Cultural Perceptions Types and Challenges

2.2. Aspects and Examples of Cultural Appropriation

Cultural appropriation is not an abstract idea; it shows up in everyday life through very visible acts that turn cultural expressions into commodities. For many African Americans, this process removes music, fashion, or language from their original settings, empties them of history and meaning, and then sells them back to the public in ways that enrich dominant groups while ignoring, or even silencing the communities that created them.

This section explores the common areas where such appropriation often occurs fashion, hairstyles, language and slang, music, spiritual symbols, and food. Studying these examples reveals how appropriation is not just a moral debate but a lived reality that shapes identity, feeds stereotypes, and sustains unequal power structures. By tracing how each element is lifted, marketed, and repurposed, we show that cultural appropriation is both a cultural act and a political one. We begin with one of its most visible and most congested areas, fashion.

Fashion is one of the most visible spaces where cultural appropriation happens. The mainstream industry often borrows styles from marginalized cultures without acknowledging their meaning or origins. For African Americans, this is especially

painful, as Black fashion was once rejected or mocked, only to be praised when adopted by white celebrities. This issue reflects deeper power imbalances, where dominant groups profit from the same cultural expressions they once dismissed. A clear example of appropriation in fashion is the commercialization of traditional African clothing. The dashiki, a colourful West African garment tied to African identity and the U.S Civil Rights Movement, has been adopted by non-Black celebrities and designers as a trendy piece, often without acknowledging its cultural or political meaning (Johnson 184). Fashion designers like Marc Jacobs have faced backlash for using dreadlocks on white models while ignoring their cultural roots and the bias Black people face for the same hairstyle. As Akilah Hughes notes, “You can’t adopt the look without acknowledging the struggle that comes with it” (qtd. in Rogers 479).

Hip-hop fashion also reflects appropriation. Items such as baggy jeans, gold chains, and sneakers, once called “ghetto,” are now praised when marketed by luxury brands like Gucci or Balenciaga, removed from their original Black context (Cunningham 58). The harm lies not just in the borrowing, but in the erasure of origin, lack of credit, and absence of benefit to the source. As Susan Scafidi states, “The problem is not copying per se—it’s copying in a context of power inequality, without permission, attribution, or benefit to the source” (*Who Owns Culture?* 10). In short, fashion appropriation highlights racial inequality, allowing dominant groups to benefit from Black cultural styles while Black individuals remain marginalized for using the same styles.

Hairstyles is another aspect of cultural appropriation. Hairstyles are powerful expressions of identity and heritage, especially within African and African American communities. Styles like cornrows, locs, Afros, Bantu knots, and box braids hold deep cultural and political meanings, often linked to resistance and cultural pride (Thompson

92). Yet these same styles are often appropriated by individuals from dominant groups who ignore their origins and the discrimination Black people face for wearing them.

Appropriation in this context reveals power imbalances, where Black hairstyles are policed and stigmatized, yet embraced as fashion when worn by others. Celebrities such as Kim Kardashian and Katy Perry have popularized styles like cornrows and box braids without crediting their roots. Kardashian even called them “Bo Derek braids,” disregarding their cultural history (Patton 36). Meanwhile, Black students and workers still face penalties for wearing these styles. In professional settings, natural hairstyles like Afros or dreadlocks are often deemed “unprofessional,” limiting Black people’s social and economic opportunities (Byrd and Tharps 124). When the same styles are worn by white models or influencers, they are celebrated as edgy trends. The beauty industry also profits from this appropriation. Major brands market braiding hair, loc extensions, and afro wigs while side-lining Black creators and businesses. Influencers often rebrand traditional practices as “new trends,” erasing the cultural labour behind them (Craig 47).

Historically, Black hair has been a form of resistance, from the Afro of the 1960s to modern movements like Black Hair Matters and the Crown Act, which seeks to end hair-based discrimination. These movements emphasize that Black hair is more than style, it is a symbol of pride and autonomy. Ultimately, the appropriation of Black hairstyles highlights ongoing racial inequality. True appreciation requires respect for cultural meaning and a willingness to challenge the structures that marginalize the very communities that create these expressions (Williams 209).

Another aspect of cultural appropriation is **Language and Slang**. Language expresses identity, history, and cultural belonging. In African American communities, (AAVE) developed under specific social and political conditions. It represents resilience and

creativity but has often been ridiculed and deemed improper. Today, AAVE and Black slang are frequently appropriated by dominant groups, especially in media and online spaces, often without recognition or understanding. Phrases like “on fleek,” “lit,” “periodt,” “woke,” and “slay” have become popular in media and online culture, often used without recognition of their roots in African American communities. This reflects a broader pattern of linguistic appropriation, where elements of AAVE are borrowed without respect for their cultural significance (Alim 6).

The term “woke” is a key example. It originated as a political call to awareness in Black activism but was later diluted and misused in mainstream discourse, even turned into an insult to dismiss progressive views (Rickford and King 26). This shows how appropriation can strip words of their original power. On platforms like TikTok, non-Black influencers often gain fame for using AAVE, while Black creators are overlooked or restricted by algorithms (Barrett 109). This reinforces inequality, turning Black speech into content for profit, without benefiting its originators.

In schools, AAVE is still labeled “incorrect,” despite being a valid linguistic system with its own rules and historical depth (Green 15). This reflects ongoing linguistic racism, where Black voices are devalued even as their expressions are adopted. Corporations also use AAVE in advertising without supporting the communities they draw from. This selective adoption celebrates the culture but ignores the people behind it, turning language into a resource to be mined (Smitherman 42). Appropriating Black language while ignoring its speakers perpetuates inequality. True respect means recognizing the cultural and historical context, and valuing both the language and the people who created it.

Music has always been a powerful form of cultural expression for African Americans, used for storytelling, resistance, and community building. From spirituals and blues to

hip-hop and R&B, Black music has shaped global sounds. Yet, these genres have often been appropriated by dominant groups without acknowledgment or fair compensation. Appropriation in music exploits creativity and erases the social and historical context behind it. This reflects broader racial and economic inequalities in the industry (Rose 63). A classic example is the rise of rock and roll. While Black artists like Chuck Berry and Sister Rosetta Tharpe were pioneers, white performers such as Elvis Presley became global stars by adopting Black musical styles, often presenting them in simpler and more marketable forms (Kelley 112).

Hip-hop, born in the Bronx as a voice for marginalized youth, is another case. Though it remains deeply political, the mainstream often elevates non-Black artists who mimic the culture but avoid its realities. For instance, Iggy Azalea was criticized for using Black Southern rap styles while ignoring issues of race and privilege (Morgan 88). This pattern continues in global pop music. African rhythms and Afrobeat elements are frequently used by Western artists without credit or collaboration, benefiting mostly non-African producers (Mbaye and Gueye 57). Similarly, music festivals like Coachella popularize Black dance and music among non-Black audiences, often stripped of cultural context (Pough 145).

Musical appropriation is not just artistic borrowing; it's tied to racial inequality. Black creators innovate but are often denied recognition and profit. Genuine appreciation requires understanding and honouring the roots, struggles, and contributions of African American music traditions.

Spiritual Symbols, also have been targets of appropriation; Spirituality is an important part of African American culture, reflecting identity, resilience, and resistance. Symbols like rituals, sacred items, and clothing carry deep meaning shaped by history.

However, many of these spiritual elements have been appropriated by mainstream culture in ways that strip away their original meaning (Ziff and Rao 3). For example, African spiritual practices like Santería, Vodun, and Ifá have often been commercialized or misrepresented. Elements like altars, burning sage, or invoking Orishas are used in wellness trends without recognizing their origins or the stigma faced by Black communities (Murphy 149). Practices such as sage smudging, though rooted in Indigenous and African diasporic traditions like Hoodoo, have been turned into luxury self-care products, losing their cultural and spiritual meaning (Womack 210).

Visual symbols from African spirituality (cowrie shells, Ankh crosses, tribal face paint) appear frequently in media and fashion without respect for their sacredness. Beyoncé's "Spirit" performance in *The Lion King: The Gift* incorporated several spiritual symbol, sparking debate about the line between cultural appreciation and commodification (boone). The rise of "manifestation" culture on social media also shows appropriation of African diasporic spiritual practices, rebranded as trendy lifestyle habits without proper credit (Brown Douglas 81). This appropriation is harmful when spiritual symbols are used for profit by dominant groups, while Black practitioners face discrimination or criminalization. African American youth using Hoodoo may be stigmatized, while white influencers are praised for similar practices, highlighting racial inequality (Hooks 146).

In sum, spiritual appropriation invades deeply personal symbols, turning them into superficial trends and silencing their true cultural meaning. True respect means learning about this traditions, recognizing their importance, and engaging with theme in ethical way.

Food is a powerful expression of culture and identity. For African Americans, traditional cuisine, often called “soul food” emerged during slavery as a creative response to limited resources. These dishes, such as fried chicken, collard greens, and cornbread, reflect resilience, cultural preservation, and community (Opie 4).

Today, many of these foods are being appropriated, especially in the gourmet food industry and on social media. Non-Black chefs and influencers often profit from these dishes without recognizing their cultural origins or sharing economic benefits with Black communities (Williams-Forson 32). For instance, upscale restaurants may sell soul food-inspired meals at high prices while ignoring their African American roots. This appropriation also reflects a racial double standard. Foods like chitlins or oxtail are sometimes stigmatized when linked to Black culture but praised as exotic or gourmet when served by others (Hooks 119). This reinforces stereotypes while profiting from Black traditions. Furthermore, Black chefs and historians are often excluded from mainstream food media, limiting their ability to tell their own stories (Tipton-Martin 19). At the same time, non-Black creators gain large followings and financial success from showcasing African American recipes without proper context or credit (Harris 138). To address this issue, it is important to support Black culinary voices and honour the history behind these foods.

By examining the various aspects and multiple examples of cultural appropriation targeting African American culture, whether in the areas of fashion, hairstyles, language, music, or spiritual symbols, it becomes clear that these practices are not merely superficial imitations; they reflect power imbalance historical injustice that continue to impact the African American communities. It also helps to see how social attitudes and beliefs about African American culture are formed and changed over time. In the next section, we will

explore how changing cultural perceptions and ongoing discrimination continue to affect the lives and identities of African Americans in today's society.

2.3: Changing Cultural Perceptions and Discrimination

The perception of African American culture has continuously shifted throughout U.S. history, influenced by social, political, and economic changes. These evolving perceptions often reflect the dominant society's attitudes toward African Americans, oscillating between fascination and fear, admiration and marginalization. Such cultural ambivalence has profound implications, not only for how African Americans are treated but also for how their culture is consumed, judged, or appropriated. As African American contributions to music, fashion, language, and politics gained visibility, so did the complexities surrounding cultural identity, representation, and discrimination.

This section examines how African American culture has been viewed and treated over time, highlighting the relationship between visibility and vulnerability in the context of racism and appropriation.

2.3.1 Historical Marginalization and Stereotyping

Historically, African American culture was devalued and often demonized. During the era of slavery and Jim Crow, African Americans were portrayed through racist stereotypes such as the "savage," the "mammy," or the "coon", images that justified their exclusion from mainstream American life as shown in *Ethnic Nations* (Riggs). Cultural expressions that did not conform to white norms were treated as inferior or even dangerous. For example, spirituals, blues, and jazz were initially dismissed as primitive, despite their complexity and artistic depth.

Such stereotypes not only shaped public perception but also impacted institutional policies, from education to housing and employment. AAVE, hairstyles, and dress styles

were frequently classified unprofessional or inappropriate, further embedding discrimination into everyday life (Smitherman 54). The policing of African American cultural expression was not just social but systemic.

2.3.2 From Rejection to Imitation: The Paradox of Cultural Appropriation

Paradoxically, as African American cultural practices gained popularity, they began to be adopted by white Americans and others outside the community. Jazz, once considered degenerate, became celebrated when performed by white musicians. Hip hop (born in the Bronx as a voice for marginalized Black youth) eventually became a global industry, often profiting non-Black artists and corporations far more than the original creators (Rose 96).

This shift from rejection to imitation illustrates a central paradox of cultural appropriation: Black culture is embraced while Black people continue to face systemic discrimination. Hairstyles like cornrows or box braids, when worn by African Americans, are sometimes deemed unprofessional; but the same styles are praised as edgy or fashionable when worn by white celebrities (Cramer and Carter 87). This selective appreciation reinforces inequality by rewarding those who borrow culture while excluding those who live it.

2.3.3 Media Representation and Misrepresentation

Mass media plays a crucial role in shaping cultural perceptions. For much of the 20th century, mainstream media either excluded African Americans or depicted them through narrow, often harmful, tropes. While progress has been made in terms of representation, particularly with Black-led films, music, and television, many depictions remain problematic. When African American characters are consistently portrayed as criminals, sidekicks, or entertainers, this distorts public perception and perpetuates systemic racism (Hooks 42).

At the same time, media has also been a space of cultural assertion. Platforms like BET, YouTube, and social media have allowed African Americans to reclaim narratives, challenge stereotypes, and promote authentic representation. Movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and #OscarsSoWhite have spotlighted issues of misrepresentation and demanded equity in storytelling (Gray 211). Still, the dominance of white-owned media industries means that African American cultural output is often filtered through a commercial lens, leading to simplification or erasure of its deeper meanings.

2.3.4 Societal Backlash and Cultural Policing

As African American culture becomes more visible and influential, it often meets with societal backlash. From the moral panic over rap lyrics in the 1990s to the criminalization of sagging pants or natural hairstyles, Black cultural expressions are regularly framed as threats to public order or morality. Laws and institutional codes have been used to police these expressions, whether in schools, workplaces, or public spaces (Alexander 183).

For example, students have been suspended for wearing dreadlocks, and employees have faced discipline for speaking in African American Vernacular English or dressing in culturally specific ways. Such forms of cultural policing reflect broader attempts to control Black identity, reinforcing the idea that conformity to white norms is necessary for social acceptance. At the same time, the normalization of these styles in white spaces reveals how cultural elements can be sanitized and exploited once stripped of their original context (Collins 120).

2.3.5 Toward Recognition and Respect

Despite these challenges, recent years have seen increasing efforts to recognize and respect African American culture as both creative and political. Movements advocating for cultural equity have pushed for policies that protect Black intellectual and artistic

contributions. Educational reforms now emphasize African American history and cultural studies, helping to contextualize and humanize cultural practices previously misunderstood or maligned.

Moreover, the concept of cultural appreciation (as opposed to appropriation) has gained traction. This involves learning from, engaging with, and crediting the culture's originators while respecting their experiences and struggles. Artists, educators, and activists continue to stress the need for ethical engagement with African American culture, one that values authenticity and resists commodification (Young 79).

The changing perceptions of African American culture reflect a society grappling with its own contradictions. While Black cultural forms are increasingly celebrated, African Americans still face discrimination, misrepresentation, and exploitation. The historical and contemporary treatment of African American identity reveals how culture is not merely aesthetic but deeply political. Addressing the injustices of cultural appropriation requires not only acknowledgment but also structural change, one that affirms African American agency, dignity, and ownership of their cultural heritage.

Culturally, African Americans have contributed immensely to the American fabric, particularly through music, fashion, religion, and cuisine. These expressions have not only served as tools of self-definition and survival but have also shaped American popular culture at large. However, this influence has often been met with marginalization, misrepresentation, and cultural appropriation (Young 79). The paradox of being rejected as a people while having one's culture imitated and commodified reveals the ongoing tension between cultural innovation and social invisibility.

Moreover, the media's role in perpetuating stereotypes, alongside public debates around cultural ownership and authenticity, highlights the need for a more nuanced and

respectful engagement with African American culture (Young 79). Calls for cultural recognition and the right to define one's narrative reflect a broader struggle for social justice and equality.

In sum, understanding African American history and cultural identity is essential for critically assessing the phenomenon of cultural appropriation. Their experience illustrates how culture is not just a set of practices or styles, but a living reflection of historical struggle, collective memory, and the demand for dignity. Therefore, any analysis of cultural appropriation must center African American voices and experiences, acknowledging both the pain of erasure and the power of cultural expression.

So, the historical and cultural journey of African Americans in the United States is a profound testament to resilience, creativity, and identity formation under centuries of oppression. This chapter has traced the trajectory of African American presence from the trauma of slavery to the ongoing quest for recognition and equality in contemporary society. From the struggle for citizenship after emancipation to the assertion of identity through urban migration, civil rights activism, and modern achievements, African Americans have continually resisted systemic exclusion and transformed adversity into cultural power.

Chapter Three: African American Culture: Between Cultural Appropriation and Global Influence

Cultural appropriation is one of the most controversial cultural issues in the contemporary world. African American culture, which has historically faced discrimination and marginalization, is also one of the most appropriated globally. From music and fashion to language and hairstyles, many elements of this culture have been taken out of context, commodified, and used without consent or recognition. This chapter examines the deep and complex relationship between African American culture and cultural appropriation. It is divided into three parts. The first part investigates how cultural appropriation affects African American communities psychologically, politically, economically, and socially. These impacts are not only symbolic but also measurable in how they limit opportunity, distort identity, and reproduce inequality.

The second part discusses strategies that African American communities and their allies use to resist and combat cultural appropriation. These include educational reforms, legal protections, and community-based empowerment initiatives aimed at asserting cultural rights and promoting self-representation. The third part offers an overall assessment and forward-looking recommendations. It emphasizes the importance of African American culture as a global source of creativity, and proposes ways to shift from appropriation to respectful appreciation. The section also identifies concrete steps to protect cultural contributions and preserve them for future generations. This chapter argues that understanding, respecting, and protecting African American culture is essential not only for achieving cultural justice but also for building a more ethical and inclusive society.

Part One: Assessing The Impact of Cultural Appropriation on African Americans

Cultural appropriation does not only involve the uncredited use of cultural elements; it also causes harm to the communities it affects. For African Americans, cultural appropriation is a continuation of historical exploitation, often tied to slavery, segregation, and ongoing racial inequality. The use of African American symbols, expressions, or styles by outsiders without proper context, understanding, or respect produces real consequences. These consequences are psychological, political, economic, and social. So, this section examines four key types of impact: the emotional and psychological harm of cultural erasure, the political weakening of marginalized voices, the economic loss resulting from stolen cultural products, and the broader social-cultural damage caused by stereotyping and misrepresentation. Understanding these impacts is necessary to expose the injustice behind cultural appropriation and to support efforts toward equity and cultural respect.

3.1. The Multi-Dimensional Impact of Cultural Appropriation on African Americans

African American individuals and communities often face **emotional** harm when aspects of their culture are appropriated. Cultural elements like hairstyles, fashion, music, or dialects are frequently mocked when used by Black people but celebrated when adopted by outsiders. This double standard leads to feelings of marginalization, frustration, and pain. When cultural expressions are taken out of context, they often lose their deeper meaning. For instance, (AAVE) is frequently considered as “improper or “uneducated” when spoken by Black individuals, yet it becomes trendy when used by celebrities or social media influencers. This double standard reinforces the idea that Black culture is valuable only when it is detached from Black people themselves. Such situation can cause

emotional distress, identity conflict, and a sense of being excluded from one's own culture(Mosley).

Furthermore, young African Americans may feel disconnected from their heritage when it is commercialized or distorted in popular media. This weakens self-esteem and cultural pride (Thompson 117). One clear example is the appropriation of traditionally Black hairstyles, like cornrows and dreadlocks are often seen as “unprofessional” when worn by Black individuals, but considered “fashion-forward” when adopted by white celebrities like Kim Kardashian or Miley Cyrus. This double standard is not just offensive, it is psychologically damaging because it denies Black people recognition for their creativity and resilience (Patton 28).

Similarly, music genres like hip-hop, soul, and R&B originated as expressions of African American resistance and identity. When these forms are copied without understanding their roots or acknowledging their creators, it reduces them to commodities. This can feel like a form of cultural theft, contributing to emotional detachment and resentment among originators (Rose 56). These **psychological and emotional consequences** are deeply personal, but they also reflect larger structural problems. The next section will explore how cultural appropriation weakens the political power of African Americans and undermines efforts for racial justice.

Cultural appropriation affects more than just feelings; it also has **political consequences**. When the cultural expressions of African Americans are taken, altered, or used without permission, it contributes to the silencing of their political voice. Culture serves as a powerful form of expression that reflects resistance, identity, and activism. Appropriating these cultural elements weakens the political messages behind them and shifts away from the original creators. For instance, hip-hop was once a tool for protesting police brutality

and systemic racism, but in many commercial forms today, it focuses on superficial topics. This shift makes it harder for African American artists to use their platforms for raising political awareness (Rose 60). Similarly, clothing and hairstyles that once symbolized resistance, like Afros or dashikis during the civil rights era are now sold in fashion markets as “trendy” without their historical significance. This neutralizes their original message and reduces them to aesthetic choices, not political statements (Collins 91).

Furthermore, cultural appropriation erases voices in policy and public debate. When the cultural products of African Americans are adopted by dominant groups, those groups often become the new “experts” in public discussion. This practice marginalizes African American voices in spaces where their experience should be central. For example, when non-Black scholars or influencers speak or write about African American culture without including Black academics or activists, it shifts authority and attention away from the communities who embody and understand that culture (Crenshaw 18).

Moreover, one of the most politically damaging aspects of cultural appropriation is selective acceptance. Dominant Society may accept or even celebrate elements of African American culture, such as music, fashion, or slang, while continuing to discriminate against African American individuals. This contradiction reinforces systemic racism considering that Black creativity is valuable, but Black people are not. For example, while Black athletes and entertainers are praised, Black political activists are often silenced or even criminalized (Hill 122). This double standard reinforces unequal power structures and undermines efforts toward social justice. It creates a cultural environment where African Americans must prove their humanity, while others freely benefit from their cultural contributions without facing the same struggle.

These political consequences go hand-in-hand with material realities. In the next section, we will explore the economic impacts of cultural appropriation, focusing on how African American communities often lose financial opportunities due to the uncredited use of their cultural innovations.

Cultural appropriation does not only damage identity and political voice. it also has serious **economic consequences** for African American communities. When Black cultural products such as music, fashion, language, or hairstyles are adopted by mainstream markets without credit or compensation, they often generate wealth for non-Black individuals or companies. Meanwhile, the original creators remain marginalized and excluded from the profits generated by their own culture. This form of appropriation continues a long legacy of exploitation, where African Americans have contributed to national and global culture but have been systematically denied fair economic compensation for their work and creativity.

Furthermore, cultural appropriation leads to the loss of cultural ownership and economic benefit; many African American innovations in music such as jazz, blues, rock and roll, and hip-hop, have been commercialized by non-Black performers or companies. In the 1950s and 60s, white musicians like Elvis Presley built careers by performing music rooted in Black traditions, often receiving far more recognition and payment than the original Black artists (George 88). Even today, Black creators often struggle to obtain copyright protections and maintain control over how their cultural works are used and sold. This exploitation is also visible in the fashion industry, where trends originating from Black streetwear and hairstyles are often imitated by luxury brands without giving proper credit. For example, designers have taken inspiration from African American styles such as durags, grills, and braids, rebranding them as “edgy” or “high fashion” while excluding Black designers from the same spaces (Cunningham 74).

Moreover, disparity in cultural capital can be a consequence of cultural appropriation; African American culture generates significant cultural capital, meaning value that can be transformed into money, recognition, or social influencers, music companies, and entertainment brands frequently profit by copying Black fashion, language, and creativity without supporting or investing in the Black economy. This practice contributes to the ongoing wealth gap between Black creators and the larger society. (Tinsley 134). For instance, viral dance trend started by Black teen created by teenagers on platforms like TikTok are often replicated by white influencers, who then receive brand deals, media coverage, and financial rewards. Meanwhile, the original Black creators are ignored or forgotten, despite being the content true originators of the content (Abidin 59).

In addition, cultural appropriation can stand as barrier or obstacle to economic empowerment, it limits opportunities for economic independence within Black communities. When African Americans are unable to profit financially from their own culture, they lose opportunities to build businesses, support local economies, and pass wealth to future generations. Cultural industries have the potential to be as powerful tools for economic empowerment, but appropriation reduces that possibility.

Although the economic costs of cultural appropriation are measurable in dollars and missed opportunities, the social and cultural impacts are equally damaging. In the next section, we will explore how appropriation distorts cultural meaning, reinforces harmful stereotypes, and weakens community identity.

Cultural appropriation has a deep impact on the **social** and **cultural** foundations of African American communities. It is not just about individual offense, it affects collective identity, shared heritage, and social perception. When aspects of African American culture are imitated without proper understanding or respect, they are often misrepresented,

commodified, or stripped from their original meaning. This harms both how African Americans see their own culture and how others perceive it.

Cultural appropriation leads to the distortion of cultural meaning; cultural expressions like language, music, and religious practices carry deep social

and historical significance. However, when outsiders adopt these elements, they often simplified and used mainly for entertainment or rather reduced to stereotypes. For instance, (AAVE) is frequently used online or in advertising to appear cool or fashionable, Yet, when Black individuals use (AAVE), it is still judged as uneducated or unprofessional (Baugh 57). This reflects a harmful double standard, where Black culture is celebrated only when by outsiders, what reinforces discrimination while using it for social gain. Likewise, spiritual elements such as African-centred religions, rituals, or sacred symbols like the ankh or certain traditional tribal patterns are frequently used in fashion and media without recognizing their deeper spiritual meaning. This misuse can be seen as a form of spiritual disrespect, even erodes cultural dignity and pride (Hooks 171). Repeated acts of cultural appropriation reinforces harmful stereotypes; when the media continuously depicted Black culture through distorted or exaggerated images like portraying Black women as hypersexual or Black men as aggressive, it shapes public opinion in harmful way. Moreover, these portrayals are particularly dangerous when used by non-Black creators who benefit from such representation without experiencing while escaping the real-life consequences of racism (Collins 79). In addition, cultural appropriation reduces African American identity to a set of marketable elements like slang, fashion, or rhythm, thereby limiting how society perceives the full humanity and rich diversity of Black life. Instead of being recognized as a complex and multifaceted culture, it becomes a caricature, exploited for entertainment or profit.

Furthermore, ongoing cultural appropriation can create confusion and identity loss within the African American community itself. As outsiders continue to adopt and alter Black cultural expressions, it becomes increasingly difficult, especially for younger generations who may struggle to distinguish between authentic traditions and commodified versions. This weakens cultural continuity and diminishes the sense of belonging within the community (Taylor 148). Also, cultural appropriation can foster internalized oppression. When African Americans are repeatedly shown their culture only recognized or valued when it is used by the others, some may feel pressure to abandon their own heritage in order to be accepted or successful in mainstream society.

Taking together, these psychological, political, economic, and social and cultural harms reveals that cultural appropriation is far from a harmless act. It has deep and lasting consequences for African American communities. In light of this, the next part of this chapter will explore strategies to combat cultural appropriation, with a focus on education, empowerment, legal protection, and cultural celebration.

Part Two: Strategies to Combat Cultural Appropriation

Given the profound psychological, political, economic, and cultural impacts of cultural appropriation, it is crucial to develop practical and sustainable strategies to confront and reduce this harmful practice. These strategies should aim not only prevent further appropriation but also to promote fairness, mutual respect, and cultural justice. This part explores the main strategies, each strategy addresses a different aspect of the problem and works together to restore dignity, agency and rightful ownership to African American culture.

3.2.1. Raising Cultural Awareness and Education

One of the most powerful tools to combat cultural appropriation is education. Many acts of appropriation are rooted in ignorance rather than direct malice. Therefore, educating the public particularly about African American history, identity, and the legacy of struggle, can help individuals distinguish between cultural appreciation and cultural exploitation. Through increased awareness people are more likely to recognize the value of cultural integrity, foster empathy, challenge stereotypes, and encourage respectful cultural engagement.

Teaching students the full history of African American contributions and

Struggles, can develop a deeper respect for their culture. Unfortunately, many educational systems still present American history from a limited or biased perspective that overlook key Black cultural narratives. Expanding educational content to include African American voices and cultural contributions helps correct historical gaps. It also empowers Black students with cultural pride and teaches all students to value of cultural diversity (Ladson-Billings⁸³).

Beyond formal education, public education campaigns can raise awareness about appropriation through documentaries, TV shows, podcasts, museums, and art exhibitions. When presented in accessible and creative formats, these efforts help audiences rethink their assumptions. For example, documentaries like *The Remix: Hip Hop X Fashion* (2019) that explore how Black fashion has been exploited and erased by the mainstream industry. Campaigns such as *#My Culture Is Not Your Costume*, which educate people about the misuse of traditional clothing, hair, and symbols.

Social media also plays a key role in spreading awareness. Many Black creators use platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter to call out appropriation, explain its harm,

and highlight authentic cultural creators. These digital spaces are especially effective for reaching younger audiences who are open to learning (Florini 232). While awareness is the first step, real change requires power and resources. The next section, will explore how empowering African American communities economically and socially can help reclaim or protect cultural ownership and build long-term cultural resilience.

3.2.2. Empowerment of African American Communities

Empowering African American communities is a vital step to fight cultural appropriation. When these communities have the resources, platforms, and meaningful representation, they can actively shape their own cultural narratives and protect their heritage and cultural identity. Empowerment also helps challenge the ongoing patterns in which others profit from Black culture while African Americans face marginalization and inequality.

Cultural appropriation often involves taking ideas from African American creative work, while offering little recognition or compensation ignoring to the original creators. A practical way to resist this is by directly supporting Black-owned businesses and creative talents. purchasing from and promoting Black-owned fashion brands, beauty companies, musicians, writers, and filmmakers helps ensure that people who create cultural products benefit from them. For example, Black entrepreneurs in industries like hair care, music, and streetwear often face financial barriers or get overshadowed by major corporations that copy their style. Consumer can help redirect through purchases social media promotion, or business partnerships. This approach transforms appropriation into appreciation by empowering original creators and increasing their visibility in competition markets (Jones and childs 146).

Representation is a key factor in resisting cultural appropriation. When African-Americans are not allowed to tell their own stories in media, fashion, and academia,

outsiders fill the space often with distortions or stereotypes. Promoting self-representation means giving African Americans control over how their culture is presented and interpreted. When African Americans control their image and narrative, it becomes harder for others to take and twist their culture for profit or entertainment. It also builds cultural confidence within the community and helps preserve traditions for future generations (Crenshaw et al. 35).

While empowerment strengthens internal resilience, it also needs to be supported by external protections. The next section will explore legal and policy-based solutions to defend African American culture from exploitation and misuse.

3.2.3. Legal and Policy-Based Protections

African American cultural expressions are often copied and monetized without consent or credit. Current laws do not fully protect these cultural assets, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation. It needs legal frameworks, such as intellectual property rights and community-based consent models, to help safeguard these traditions.

Most intellectual property (IP) laws were designed for individual ownership and do not recognize the collective and historical nature of cultural expressions. For example, traditional Black hairstyles or oral storytelling techniques cannot easily be copyrighted, even if they are widely recognized and imitated. However, there is growing legal debate about how to expand these laws to cover traditional cultural expressions. Scholars argue for the need to adapt copyright laws so they can protect collective creativity, especially in cases where Black artists or communities create something that later becomes widely adopted by the mainstream (Hines 74).

Beyond copyright, many cultural practices deserve community consent before being

used or commercialized. This model already exists in some Indigenous legal systems and could be adapted for African American communities, for instance, if a fashion company wants to use a Black cultural symbol or design, it should first consult with knowledgeable community members or cultural experts. This ensures that cultural elements are used respectfully, accurately, and with permission (Brown, M. 138). Cultural consent respects the idea that some aspects of culture are not for sale, they carry spiritual, emotional, or social significance that cannot be reduced to aesthetics or profit. Incorporating these practices into law or industry policy can build a more ethical cultural economy where respect, credit, and compensation are central principles.

While laws can protect against misuse, culture also thrives through celebration and innovation. The final strategy focuses on how to encourage authentic expression of African American culture from within the community itself.

3.2.4. Encouraging Authentic Cultural Expression

In addition to preventing appropriation, it is essential to promote and protect authentic cultural expression from within the African American community. This means creating environments where Black creativity can flourish on its own terms, not shaped by outside demands or commercial pressures. This strategy focuses on two key actions: building platforms that celebrate African American culture and resisting imitation by supporting community-led innovation.

When African American artists, performers, and thinkers have control over their own Platforms such as music labels, film studios, festivals, and cultural institutions, they can share their stories and styles in authentic ways. These spaces not only provide visibility but also allow creators to define their own cultural boundaries, for example platforms like the Essence Festival, a major event that highlights Black music, business, and thought

leadership. BET (Black Entertainment Television), a media outlet created to showcase Black voices and perspectives in television and music. African American museums and cultural centers, These institutions preserve and present cultural heritage with care and depth (Gaines 121). Such platforms help reclaim cultural pride and create direct connections between artists and audiences without needing outside validation or approval.

Instead of responding to appropriation with imitation, some African American creatives have chosen to innovate from within, creating new expressions that reflect their evolving identities and resist being copied, ensuring both a form of artistic progress and an act of resistance. Hip hop, streetwear, spoken word poetry, Afrofuturism, and trap music represent ways in which Black communities have responded to exploitation by constantly evolving to stay ahead of mainstream appropriation (Love 94). By supporting this internal cultural growth, through funding, recognition, and education, communities can maintain control of their cultural direction. Moreover, encouraging originality reinforces the idea that Black culture is not static or available for external use, but is living, dynamic, and deeply rooted in experience.

After we have explored strategies to combat cultural appropriation through education, empowerment, legal protections, and cultural expressions, the next part mention the broader role of African American culture as a source of global creativity and resilience, and also offers an assessment of its influence, discusses how we can move from appropriation to appreciation, and proposes key recommendations for the future.

Part Three: Assessment and Recommendations

After examining the multiple impacts of cultural appropriation on African American

communities and exploring key strategies to challenge this issue, it is important to reflect on the overall role of African American culture in shaping global creativity. This final part of the chapter offers a broader assessment of how African American culture has influenced global creativity, and also looks ahead, proposing thoughtful ways to move from exploitation to genuine appreciation. African American contributions to art, language, music, and identity continue to shape global culture, yet those same contributions are often taken without recognition or reward. This contradiction demands not only critical reflection but also active efforts toward cultural justice.

So, this part is divided into four key parts. First, it summarizes the role of African American culture in shaping global creativity. Second, it examines how cultural appropriation can be transformed into genuine appreciation. Third, it presents practical recommendations to protect and support African American cultural expression. Finally, it concludes with a call to action, encouraging individuals, institutions, and governments to take responsibility for cultural respect and accountability.

3.3.1 African American Culture : Victim of Appropriation, Force of Innovation

African American culture has been a powerful source of creativity, resistance, and innovation. This section highlights how African American cultural expressions have shaped global art, music, language, fashion, and social trends. Despite systemic barriers, Black communities in the United States have played major and lasting role in shaping culture around the world.

African American creativity has offered new forms of artistic and social expression that have been travelled far beyond the United States. From jazz and blues in the early 20th century to hip hop, soul, and contemporary streetwear, African American culture has been a consistent engine of global artistic innovation. These cultural forms are not only

expressions of creativity but also tools of identity, resilience, and political commentary (Perry 34; Neal 67).

Music is one of the most visible and influential areas of African American creativity. Genres such as jazz, R&B, hip hop, and gospel music have become a global force. Hip hop, in particular, has become a global movement, with artists in Europe, Asia, and Africa adopting its rhythms, language, and style, often without recognizing the struggles of the Black communities that created it (Chang 103). In addition to music fashion and style are also central to African American cultural influence. The rise of streetwear, sneaker culture, hoop earrings, oversized clothing and braided hairstyles such as cornrows and locs, which were born in Black urban communities (Cobb 54). These trends are now global but are often appropriated by fashion houses and influencers who profit from them without crediting their origins.

In language and slang, African American Vernacular English (AAVE) has shaped popular speech, especially among youth, in both digital spaces and real-life interactions. Terms such as “woke”, “slay” and “lit” originate from African American communities but are frequently used in mainstream media without context or acknowledgment (Alim and Smitherman 89). These examples demonstrate not only the creative power of African American communities but also their cultural leadership. Despite marginalization, their innovations are central to how the world defines modern identity, art, and communication (Hooks 27).

The global impact of African American culture is undeniable. However, with influence comes the risk of exploitation. When cultural elements are taken without recognition or respect, appropriation replaces appreciation. The next section will explore this distinction

in greater depth and offer insight into how to shift from harmful cultural practices to ones rooted in respect and fairness.

3.3.2 From Appropriation to Appreciation

While cultural appropriation continues to be a serious issue, there is an important distinction between appropriation and appreciation. The goal of this section is to explore how societies can move beyond harmful forms of cultural borrowing and instead practice respectful, informed, and ethical cultural engagement. Genuine cultural appreciation does not strip, exploit, or distort culture; rather, it uplifts it by honouring its roots and creators. The key difference between cultural appropriation and appreciation lies in intent, context, and impact. Cultural appropriation often involves members of dominant groups using aspects of marginalized cultures, like hairstyles, fashion, music, or language often without understanding their significance or giving credit to their originators (Young 5). In contrast, appreciation involves respectful learning, acknowledgment, and fair collaboration. For example, when a mainstream fashion brand adopts African American streetwear styles without involving Black designers or recognizing the style's cultural history, it contributes to appropriation. However, if the same brand partners with Black creators and highlights the cultural meaning of the designs, it demonstrates appreciation (Hooks 124; Rogers 479). To practice appreciation, both individuals and institutions must take deliberate and respectful action. This includes acknowledging the origins of cultural elements, learning about their historical and social context, supporting and collaborating with creators from the culture. It is equally important to avoid using cultural symbols in ways that promote stereotyping or disrespect.

Education plays a crucial role in this process. Schools, universities, and media platforms have the responsibility to teach the public about African American history, struggles, and

cultural significance. Without such education, cultural products become divorced from the people who created them, reinforcing invisibility and inequality (Hooks 129).

Furthermore, cultural appreciation should not be limited to individual acts and extend to systemic change. Industries like fashion, music, and entertainment should need to adopt policies that ensure equity and inclusive representation and prevent exploitative practices. Encouraging fair pay, shared credit, and creative ownership can help reduce appropriation and foster ethical cultural exchange (Perry 77).

In short, Genuine cultural appreciation requires active effort, cultural awareness, and a deep sense of respect. It is not just about using cultural symbols, but about understanding and valuing the people and histories behind them. Society continue to evolve, it is necessary to transform our cultural practices to reflect this respect. The following section will offer practical recommendations for how this transformation can be achieved at individual, institutional, and policy levels.

3.3.3 Practical Recommendations for Cultural Protection and Empowerment

To move from cultural appropriation toward cultural justice, it is important to implement practical measures that support African American communities and protect their cultural expressions. This section highlights specific actions that individuals, institutions, and policymakers can take to encourage respect, recognition, and fair treatment of African American culture across various sectors.

Protecting African American culture begins with education. Schools, universities, and media platforms should provide clear and accurate lessons about the history, struggles, and contributions behind African American music, language, traditions and art. This educational approach not only helps prevent cultural appropriation but also promotes cultural literacy and empathy (Alim and Smitherman 94). Another key recommendation

is the economic support of African American creators. Companies and consumers should prioritize purchasing from Black-owned businesses, collaborating with Black artists, and crediting original creators. Financial recognition is essential to address the inequalities caused by years of cultural exploitation (Perry 65).

Legal frameworks can also play a vital role in cultural protection. Copyright laws and intellectual property rights must be updated to better reflect collective cultural ownership. While individual works can be copyrighted, many African American cultural practices like hairstyles, dances, or musical styles have historically been shared across communities. Scholars argue for the development of legal tools that recognize cultural heritage as a form of intellectual property (Rogers 490).

In addition, media responsibility is equally important. Journalists, influencers, and producers should ensure that Black culture is not misrepresented, stereotyped, or trivialized in public discourse. This includes hiring Black voices, involving cultural consultants, and challenging biased narratives in film, television, fashion, and advertising (Hooks 135). At the community level, public programs initiatives such as cultural festivals, exhibitions, and public talks can offer spaces for African American communities to share their heritage in their own voices. These events help build cultural pride, visibility, and intergenerational continuity.

Practical change is possible when individuals and institutions take deliberate steps to protect and evaluate African American cultural contributions. However, these efforts must be grounded in a wider commitment to respect, fairness, and accountability. The final section of this part a call to action, inviting all sectors of society to actively participate in creating a more equitable and respectful culture future.

3.3.4 Call to Action for Cultural Accountability and Respect

Cultural appropriation is not just a social or artistic issue, it is a matter of justice and equity. This final section calls upon individuals, educators, cultural institutions, and governments to take shared responsibility for promoting cultural accountability, and contribute to building a future where African American culture is honoured, valued, and treated with.

Individuals have a powerful influence on how cultures are perceived and respected. By learning about the origins of the cultural elements they engage with, giving proper credit, and rejecting content that exploits or misrepresents culture, people can help shift societal norm from appropriation to genuine appreciation (Young 14). This also involves challenging personal biases, confronting stereotypes, and amplifying authentic voices.

Educators hold a vital role in this process by integrating African American history and cultural contributions into school curricula. When students are taught to value Black culture from an early age, they are more likely to resist harmful cultural practices and support cultural preservation (Alim and Smitherman 98). Cultural institutions such as museums, academic organizations, and media companies must revise their policies to ensure inclusion, fair representation, and acknowledgment of Black cultural origins. This may include hiring Black curators and professional, partnering with African American scholars and artists, and taking active steps to repair past cultural misrepresentation (Hooks 140).

Governments also have a responsibility for protecting minority cultures through legal recognition, funding for cultural initiatives, and anti-discrimination laws. Policies should support cultural education, creative ownership, and equitable access to platforms for

artistic expression (Rogers 495). At every level, action must replace silence, Respect must replace theft and exploitation, Inclusion must replace erasure.

African American culture has shaped the world in powerful ways, and it deserves to be respected, honoured rather than misused and exploited. This chapter has examined the harmful impacts of cultural appropriation, highlighted strategies for resistance, and offered an outlined path toward more respectful and ethical cultural engagement. Moving forward, responsibility lies with all members, individuals, institutions, and policymakers to take concrete steps toward cultural accountability, support Black creators, promoting cultural understanding, and building a society in which cultural exchange is ethical, equitable, and just.

Conclusion

Cultural appropriation is more than a social trend or artistic choice, it is a reflection of deeper issues tied to power, inequality, and historical injustice. Through this research, we have examined how cultural appropriation affects marginalized communities, particularly African Americans, whose cultural creativity has been repeatedly borrowed, commercialized, and misrepresented without proper acknowledgment or benefit. While African American culture has profoundly influenced global art, music, language, and fashion, this influence has often been met with appropriation rather than appreciation.

By tracing the origins and meanings of cultural appropriation, this thesis has shown that the issue cannot be separated from the legacy of slavery, systemic racism, and social exclusion. Cultural symbols that carry deep historical and spiritual meaning for African Americans have too often been reduced to trends, stripped of context, and used in ways that reinforce harmful stereotypes. This has caused emotional, social, economic, and political harm to individuals and communities.

At the same time, this research has highlighted the strength and resilience of African American culture, which continues to serve as a powerful force of identity, expression, and resistance. In response to cultural appropriation, African American communities, and their allies, have developed strategies such as education, media activism, policy reform, and economic empowerment to protect their cultural rights and demand recognition.

The findings of this research lead to a clear conclusion: respecting cultural heritage is not only a moral duty but also a social and political necessity. True cultural appreciation requires listening, learning, and acknowledging the lived experiences of others. Moving forward, individuals, institutions, and societies must promote cultural responsibility, challenge appropriation when it occurs, and celebrate diversity with integrity and respect.

Only through such efforts can we build a more inclusive, just, and culturally conscious future.

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