

# Appropriation and Marginalized Communities: A Synthesis and Interpretation of Existing Research

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## ABSTRACT

In exploring the interplay between fashion and cultural identity, this study scrutinizes the recurring issue of cultural appropriation within the fashion industry. The research foregrounds the industry's tendency to commodify cultural symbols without consent or compensation, a practice rooted in power imbalances and historical colonialism. It synthesizes current findings on such appropriations' ethical and economic implications, revealing a consistent disregard for original cultural expressions' intrinsic value and significance. Central to the findings is the call for a conscientious reformation of fashion's cultural engagements, emphasizing reciprocity and respect. This work underscores the urgent need to address these disparities and honours cultural legacies, advocating for an equitable dialogue between the fashion industry and cultural custodians.

## KEYWORDS

Cultural Appropriation; Fashion Industry; Post-colonial Theory; Critical Race Theory; Cultural Commodification.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The intersection of fashion and culture is historically rich and inherently complex, marked by an ongoing tension between inspiration and appropriation. The fashion industry, a vibrant tableau of global influences, stands accused of cultural appropriation-borrowing, often insensitively, from the traditions of marginalized communities. This essay aims to delve into the complexities of cultural appropriation within the fashion industry, particularly focusing on its impact on marginalized communities. It draws attention to the profound disconnect between the use of cultural symbols as mere aesthetic enhancements and their intrinsic cultural significances, which are rooted in heritage and identity. Through the critical perspectives of Post-Colonial Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Cultural Commodification, this discourse critically examines the implications of cultural appropriation, illuminating the often-ignored narratives of economic disparity, cultural misrepresentation, and ethical transgression. The ensuing dialogue emphasizes the necessity for an ethical re-engagement with cultural elements in fashion, advocating for a paradigm that fosters respect, acknowledgement, and reciprocal benefit, particularly for those communities whose cultural expressions have been historically exploited.

## 2. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The cultural appropriation that often occurs in the fashion industry is complex and controversial. Fashion has always had its roots in culture, embracing global exploration and tapping into all aspects of culture (Kaiser & Green, 2021); therefore, gaining inspiration from other cultures has consistently

been a prevalent trend in fashion. This phenomenon may manifest in several manifestations, from clothing and accessories to language, customs, and religious symbols. While cultural interchange has been a recurring phenomenon throughout history, however, when cultural appropriation occurs with an imbalance of power, it undermines cultural legacy (Coombe, 1993). Meanwhile, this appropriation is often between dominant cultures and marginalised communities (Young, 2010). An evident instance of cultural appropriation in the fashion industry is the use of Aboriginal headdresses in fashion shows and music festivals (refer to Figure 1 and Figure 2). These headdresses are unique and sacred to each wearer and are a symbol of honour for Native American tribes. traditionally, it is awarded through courageous acts of significant achievement; not all people have the right to wear them (Figure 3) (Loggans 2017). Therefore, Amerindian culture, which has a significant cultural value, has been used as a fashion accessory without recognising its cultural significance or seeking permission from the Native community (Barelli, 2012). This practice not only trivializes the cultural importance but also perpetuates stereotypes and misrepresentations. In addition, the ethical implications of such appropriation are significant, as they often involve commodifying sacred items without consent or compensation, leading to increased economic disparities where the fashion industry profits (Córdova, 2022). At the same time, marginalised communities see little benefit. Therefore, fostering a cultural dialogue that involves active participation and respect from both sides could be crucial in addressing these issues.



**Figure 1.** photo released by Starpix shows model Karlie Kloss wearing an Indian headdress during the taping of the 2012 Victoria's Secret Fashion Show in New York. (2012)



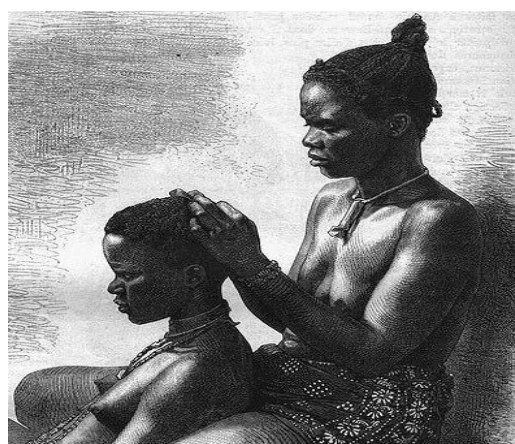
**Figure 2.** Photo: Cooper Neill/Getty Images

Métier d'Arts show in Dallas, Karl Lagerfeld showed a 94-piece pre-fall 2014 collection inspired, as he put it, by “the idea of Old Texas, even before the Civil War.”



**Figure 3.** A Native American chief wearing his headdress. A print from *Customs of the World*, Volume II Hutchinson and Co, Paternoster Row, London

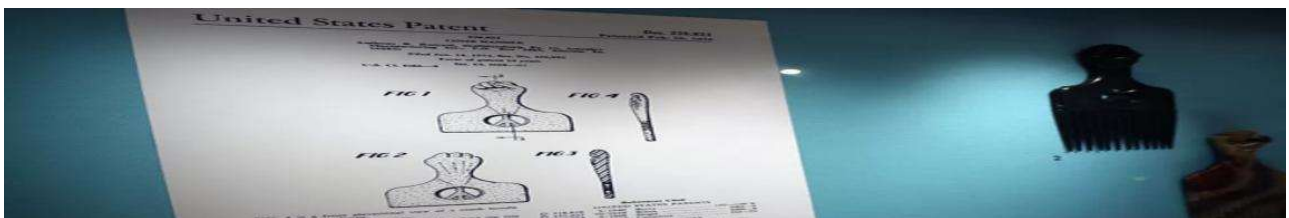
Another example is adopting African American cultural styles, such as cornrows and other traditional hairstyles, which is a significant concern (see Figure 4-5). Originating from Africa's diverse and abundant civilizations, these hairstyles often signified one's family background, tribe, and social status, imbuing hair with spiritual and personal identity (Sherrow, 2023). During the transatlantic slave trade, enslaved Africans were forced to shave their heads, and this represented a deep cultural loss (PapersOwl, 2023). Over time, black hairstyles like Afros, braids, and dreadlocks became symbols of resistance, cultural pride, and political statements, particularly during the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement (see Figure 6) (Chaves & Bacharach, 2021). In response to historical discrimination, as defined, the Act (CROWN Act 2021) protects individuals from discrimination based on natural hair, underscoring the recognition of the cultural importance of these hairstyles. Thus, these hairstyles carry significant meaning, emblematic of heritage reclamation and resistance to racial discrimination (Horne, 2019). These hairstyles are not only aesthetically significant, but also have strong cultural and historical ties to African Americans. Nevertheless, those who are non-African American heritage often exploit them within their realm of fashion (Figure 7), and popular culture ignores this rich historical and cultural context and undermines the struggles that these hairstyles represent.



**Figure 4.** Cornrows



**Figure 5.** Braiding



**Figure 6.** The clenched fist comb symbolised black pride along with afros.



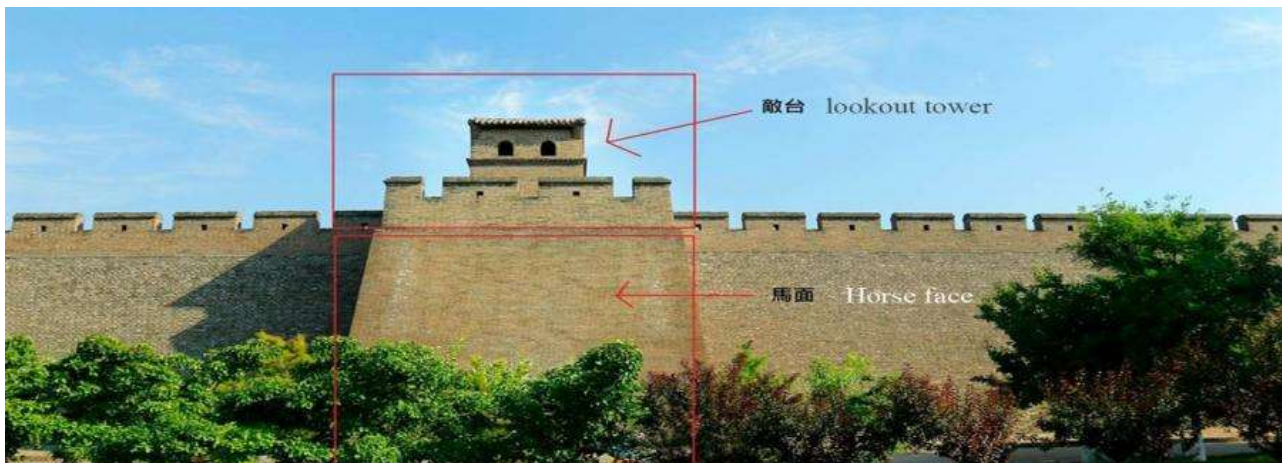
**Figure 7.** Comme des Garçons accused of cultural appropriation after sending models down runway in cornrows.

Comme des Garçons 2020 (AFP via Getty Images)

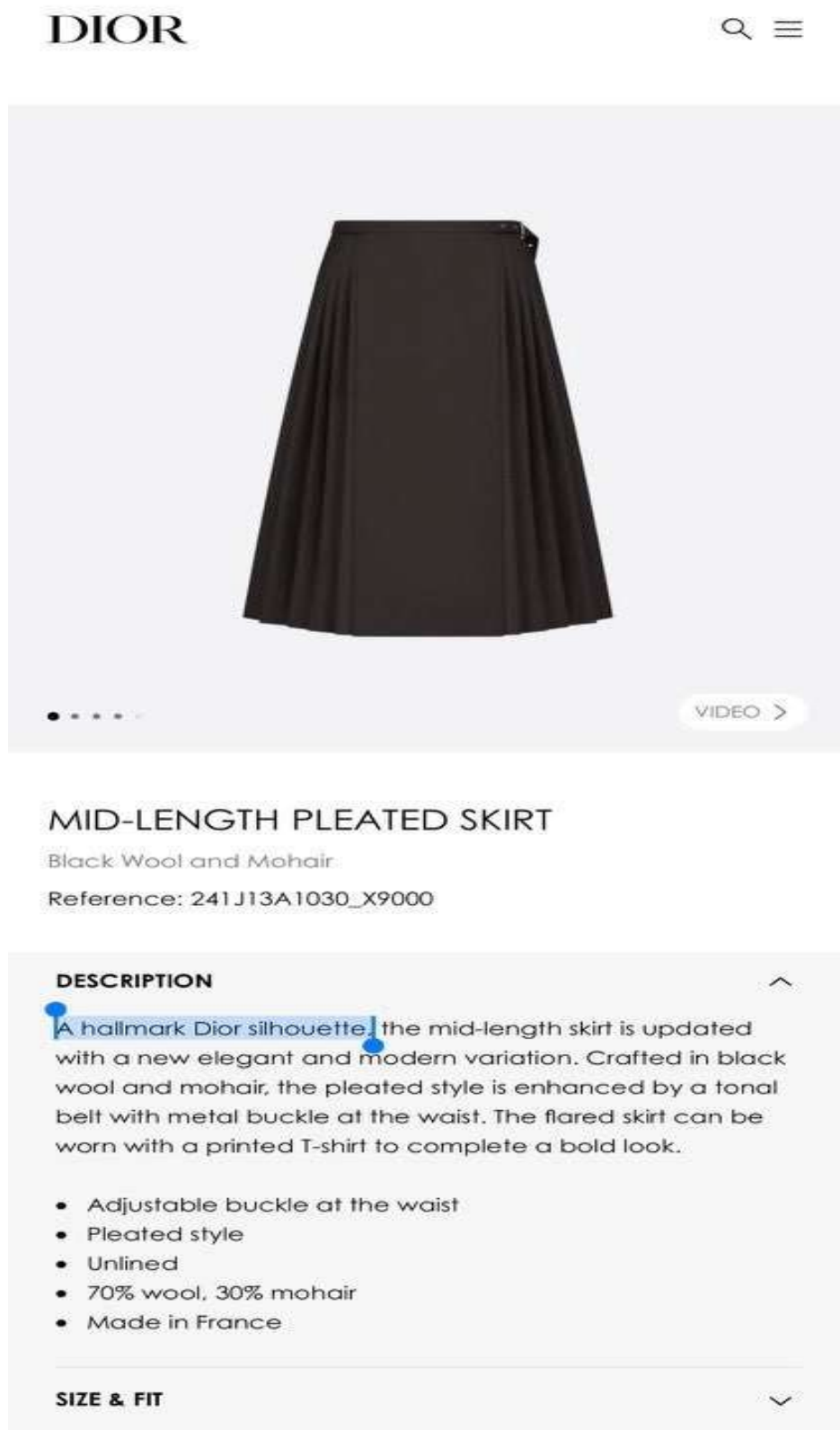
In the global fashion arena, disputes have emerged regarding the appropriation of traditional Asian garments. A case in point involves the Western luxury brand Dior, which has been criticised for its modern rendition of the Chinese 'horse face skirt' (mǎmiànqún). The skirt, featuring strategic openings and pleated panels designed for equestrian ease, is an item with deep historical roots, dating back to the Song Dynasty over a millennium ago (see Figure 8). Subsequently, it became popular throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties and bears its name from the trapezoidal sections of ancient Chinese fortifications known as 'horse faces' that confronted enemies (Figure 9). Dior's portrayal of the skirt as a proprietary silhouette on its official website (refer to Figure 10) (dior.com), absent any attribution to its Chinese heritage, has incited a discourse on cultural erasure and the marginalisation of non-Western narratives in fashion. This incident not only highlights the need for a deeper understanding of the cultural and historical contexts from which fashion elements are drawn but also raises questions about the economic and ethical considerations of such appropriations.



**Figure 8.** A traditional mamianqun.



**Figure 9.** Position of the horse face and the lookout tower (Schematic diagram / Dazhi Image)



**Figure 10.** Dior Official Website

Chinese Handfu blogger (只只七二) shared a comparison picture about the mǎmiànrún and the Dior mid-length skirt (refer to Figure 11 below).

孔府旧藏 盘金云龙裙



孔府旧藏 赤罗裳

由两大片裙片组成  
裙片交搭共腰  
每片腰侧有相对的褶裥  
与马面裙结构大致相同



迪奥



Figure 11. comparison chart by 只只七二

John Galliano's contribution to Dior has left an indelible mark on the fashion house (Bergin, 2017). In the 1990s, he boldly incorporated elements of traditional Chinese dress into the Dior Haute Couture Fall/Winter 1997 collection. This collection featured distinct Chinese characteristics, including the qipao silhouette, Chinese knot buttons, intricate embroidery, and the arching eyebrows that are emblematic of Chinese aesthetics (see Figures 12 and 13). Galliano's primary sources of inspiration were Hollywood's pioneering Chinese American actress Anna May Wong and the Shanghai calendar girls of the 1930s, as reflected in his Autumn/Winter 1997-98 ready-to-wear collection (see figure 14) (Bolton & Galliano, 2015). His designs have been celebrated in China for their bold personal style and reverence for the original culture (Kadaren, 2018).



**Figure 12.** Dior Haute Couture Fall/Winter 1997 collection



**Figure 13.** Dior Haute Couture Fall/Winter 1997 collection



**Figure 14.** Shanghai, a Prosperous City that Never Sleeps, Yuan Xiutang; Chromolithograph on paper (1930s)

These examples demonstrate that the relationship between culture and fashion has traditionally been a complex and intricate combination of inspiration, appropriation, and controversy. The fashion industry, rooted deeply in cultural expressions, frequently draws upon a mosaic of global aesthetics (Kaiser & Green, 2021), from the embroidery of Chinese qipaos to the spiritual significance of aboriginal headdresses (Loggans, 2017). These elements carry the weight of history, identity, and heritage (Craith, 2007). However, when these cultural signifiers are unauthorised in fashion shows, the act moves beyond inspiration into the realm of appropriation, leading to discussions not only about aesthetic borrowing but also about power dynamics, ethical implications, and economic disparities (Mukhopadhyay, 2023), especially when these elements are commodified by mainstream culture (Craith, 2007), without benefiting marginalised communities.

### 3. THEORETICAL DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. Post-Colonial Theory

Postcolonial theory provides a new vision for understanding power imbalances in cultural appropriation. Bhabha (2012) proposes that when cultures meet, a "third space" gets created, allowing for the negotiation of cultural meanings and the building of hybrid identities. However, a significant limitation of Bhabha's theory is its focus on the discursive aspects of cultural exchange, which might overlook the material consequences of cultural appropriation. For instance, when fashion brands capitalize on cultural symbols, the affected communities suffer not just a loss of representation but also tangible economic and social repercussions that post-colonial discourse may not adequately address (Young, 2010). The use of Aboriginal headdresses in fashion shows serves as an illustration of how the dominant culture appropriates cultural elements from marginalised communities, and the power imbalance is evident as these symbols are stripped of sanctity and recontextualised as fashion statements (Loggans, 2017). This action continues colonial practices where dominant cultures' mimic' and 'mock' the 'other,' often without a proper understanding or respect for the cultural significance (Bhabha, 2012). While Bhabha's theory offers valuable perspectives, A significant criticism of Bhabha's theory is that these theories may fail to address marginalised communities' economic and physical consequences (Hollinshead, 1998). Furthermore, the use of marginalized cultural elements

in fashion tends to fluctuate their true meanings and reinterpret them through a Western lens, which may dilute or distort the original cultural heritage, thus raising the question of who has the right to represent a culture and who benefits from its representation (Mukhopadhyay, 2023). At the same time, marginalized communities often do not have the legal infrastructure to protect their cultural heritage as Western cultures. When designers from mainstream cultures appropriate these cultural elements, there are often no legal consequences, thus perpetuating a form of cultural imperialism (Gilbert & Jérémie, 2017, pp. 20–38). Post-colonial theory advocates for ethical engagement with cultural elements, emphasizing the need for reciprocity and mutual respect. In fashion, this would mean collaborating with cultural representatives, compensating communities, and ensuring that cultural exchange benefits all parties involved. However, postcolonial theory cannot fully encapsulate the diversity of experiences and histories of all marginalised communities, and it may not consider the nuances and specificities of different cultural traditions and the ways in which they have been appropriated, hence the need for a more tailored approach to each unique situation (Dirlik, 1994). In sum, post-colonial theory serves as a critical tool for analysis, yet it should not overshadow the practical realities of those whose cultures are commodified by the fashion industry.

### **3.2. Critical Race Theory**

Employing Critical Race Theory (CRT) in the context of fashion and cultural appropriation involves a deep analysis of how the industry's practices can reflect and perpetuate systemic racism (Crenshaw, 2010). For instance, when non-African Americans adopt hairstyles traditional to the African American community, such as cornrows or dreadlocks (see Figure 7), these styles are often appropriated without acknowledging their rich historical roots in the struggle against oppression and their role as markers of cultural identity (Sherrow, 2023; PapersOwl, 2023). The perils of this cultural appropriation include the dilution and potential erasure of the profound meanings and symbolism these hairstyles embody. CRT not only directs a critical lens at these fashion trends but also situates them within broader racial power dynamics, questioning who benefits from cultural elements and who suffers penalties (Ford, 2009, pp.97-162). For instance, African American hairstyles can be seen as 'unprofessional' or 'inappropriate' when worn by African Americans in certain environments. However, when individuals of non-African descent adopt these haircuts, they are often praised as 'avant' or 'trendy'. This distinction highlights a double standard that originates from racial disparities (Chumo, 2023). This appropriation can lead to cultural dilution and erasure, as these hairstyles' original meanings and symbolism are often ignored or misunderstood (Stevenson, 2021). CRT challenges the fashion industry to consider the impact of its actions on marginalised communities and to strive for an approach that respects and honours the cultures from which it draws inspiration (Crenshaw, 2010). This includes acknowledging the origins of these cultural elements, engaging with, and compensating the communities affected, and working against the systemic structures that enable cultural appropriation and inequality to persist (Cruz et al., 2023). To address this, the fashion industry must reflect on its impact on marginalized communities and adopt a more conscientious approach.

### **3.3. Cultural Commodification**

"commodification" refers to transforming something into a product for commercial purposes, i.e., an object bought and sold in the marketplace. This includes both intangible cultural heritages, like music, fashion, and art, as well as tangible aspects, such as traditional crafts, rituals, and festivals. Intangible cultural heritage frequently finds its way into the commercial sphere, becoming part of company names, brands, logos, and products, which are then bought and sold in the marketplace. Similarly, tangible cultural heritage, including artworks created explicitly for commercial sale, is subject to this process of commodification. This commercialization intersects with individual and collective identities and customary practices, repackaging them into commodities that hold value in the marketplace (MacLeod, 2006). Therefore, Theories of cultural commodification are critical for understanding the transformation of cultural symbols into commercial goods within the fashion

industry. The intricacies of this transformation raise questions about the intersection of cultural significance and economic value. As cultural manifestations become intertwined with commerce, their original meanings and purposes can be altered or obscured, leading to cultural integrity and authenticity concerns (Xie, 2010). The study shows that this conversion often leads to a loss of meaning and context, reducing rich cultural heritage to mere aesthetic value in the marketplace. Such commodification can be seen in the way fashion brands appropriate traditional garments, motifs, and hairstyles from various cultures, presenting them as new and exotic trends while ignoring their deep-rooted cultural significance (Bai & Weng, 2023). The act of commodifying culture poses a threat not only to the preservation of cultural heritage but also to the autonomy and economic well-being of the communities to which these cultural symbols belong. As a result of repackaging these symbols for global consumption, the original artisans and cultural practitioners frequently find themselves marginalized, with little control over their cultural expressions and without fair compensation for their use (Córdova, 2022).

MacLeod (2006) shows that cultural commodification is positive when it allows for self-assertion or the use of cultural commodities to challenge and reshape the views of outsiders. However, the commodification of culture has a negative impact when it becomes a widely held but outdated and ineffective form of self-expression (MacLeod, 2006). In conclusion, the process of cultural commodification can be a double-edged sword. As MacLeod (2006) noted, it offers an avenue for self-assertion and for cultural communities to challenge and potentially reshape external perceptions. Nevertheless, when cultural elements are commodified solely for outdated forms of self-expression, they risk losing their essence and becoming ineffective. The key lies in maintaining a balance where cultural commodification serves as a bridge to enhance understanding and appreciation rather than an instrument of cultural dilution.

## 4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the discourse surrounding cultural appropriation in the fashion industry is a microcosm of a larger conversation about power, history, and the value we assign to cultural identities. The practice of borrowing from marginalized communities-often without understanding, acknowledgement, or recompense-reflects a historical pattern of exploitation that continues to manifest in modern sartorial expression. This research has underscored the ethical breaches and economic injustices inherent in such appropriations, casting a spotlight on the industry's responsibility to engage with cultures in a manner that is respectful and reciprocal. The core conclusions drawn from this synthesis of existing research are clear and compelling. There is an imperative need for the fashion industry to transition from an exploitative model to one that is collaboratively celebratory, ensuring that the cultures which inspire haute couture and high-street trends are participants in and beneficiaries of the fashion narrative. Such a shift not only respects the sanctity of cultural symbols but also enriches the industry by fostering authenticity and a deeper connection between the wearer and the garment's cultural origins. The significance of this study lies in its potential to inspire change and provoke dialogue. By confronting the uncomfortable realities of cultural appropriation, this research paves the way for a more just and inclusive fashion landscape. It calls for legal frameworks, ethical guidelines, and industry standards that protect against cultural erasure and ensure that marginalized communities are not only recognized but also compensated for their contributions to the tapestry of fashion. Ultimately, fashion is a language that speaks to our identities, our histories, and our values. It is incumbent upon the industry-and indeed, society at large-to ensure that this language is not one of appropriation, but rather one of appreciation and mutual respect.

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