

UNITED WISDOM

Cultural borrowing, collaboration, and appropriation

Relationships and Intimacy

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Epigraph

> *their source was forgotten*

W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, XIV, “Of the Sorrow Songs,” authorial narrative, web line 1309. A brief fragment about the treatment of songs described by the author; no lyrics are quoted.

What this article is about

Imagine a hypothetical scene. Designer Alexei sees a pattern on a bowl in a small workshop's public catalogue. He wants a similar motif for the packaging of a new product. Maker Mira explains its connection to local work and who contributed to its present version. Alexei likes the idea of inviting her to the launch, but the draft already bears his studio's name and promises an original design of its own. Neither catalogue, workshop, nor participants describe a real historical case. We are considering a question that admiration for another culture cannot settle alone: what relationships does this new use create?

Learning from someone, creating together, changing a discovered form, and presenting what one received as one's own invention are different actions with different conditions. A person's background alone does not establish what they may do with every cultural element. The particular material, available knowledge, participants, presentation, and opportunities to discuss terms matter. This article distinguishes these objects without setting up a universal tribunal over cultural influence. Its central question is how to retain origins, participants' independence, and accurate authorship when another person's form enters a new project. An answer may require changing the project or declining the intended use.

I. A discovered image and the claim to have invented it

Alexei really has designed packaging: dimensions, typography, and combinations of colour. That does not mean he invented the pattern he included. One result can contain several histories of work. Accurately naming his contribution does not diminish it; it makes the contribution visible without taking additional credit. If the studio considers the pattern's origins irrelevant, the question is irrelevant to whom, and why? A convenient advertising description is not necessarily a true one. A new composition does not erase the path of an element it contains, even when it differs substantially from the earlier object.

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A public catalogue makes an image visible. Seeing it, being technically able to reproduce it, learning a technique, and using it commercially are different circumstances. We do not know which permissions already exist or which rights apply in this scene. The article therefore infers neither permission nor prohibition merely from publication. Describe the intended action first: the whole pattern, an altered part, a photograph of the bowl, or new work after studying a technique? These distinctions serve a shared object of discussion rather than a search for a convenient loophole. Participants need to know which proposal they are answering.

“Borrowing” can neutrally describe influence or conceal disputed presentation. If Alexei says the workshop inspired him while the packaging calls its image his invention, those statements conflict. Mentioning inspiration does not repair an inaccurate credit. Conversely, similarity alone establishes neither copying nor a route of transmission. Unknown origins should remain unknown while clarification is possible. Here the designer has already acknowledged the connection. That boundary matters: the hypothetical scene offers no method for identifying every cultural influence through visual resemblance. It addresses what someone does with a connection they already recognize, not what an observer can infer from a shape alone.

II. Acknowledging contribution requires historical accuracy

In the selected authorial context of chapter XIV of *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois treats African American spirituals as a significant contribution and discusses lost acknowledgement of origins and caricature. This is a historical literary judgement from 1903. It raises the visibility of creators without determining terms for our packaging or proving every cultural transformation equivalent to the treatment he describes. His own reasoning is distinguished here from song lyrics, which the article does not reproduce.

A source's history is not decoration added after the decision. For the bowl, relevant knowledge includes who made the present design, which part draws on a transmitted technique, what Mira states from her own knowledge, and what she does not know. The workshop might use several versions. A particular pattern might be recent while the technique is older. These possibilities establish no facts about a people. They show why a general cultural label cannot replace information about particular work and its makers. Accurate claims may require less knowledge than an entire cultural history, but they still require knowledge appropriate to their scope.

Conversation does not remove every uncertainty. Mira may know her version without knowing who first used a similar element. Alexei can truthfully describe working with this workshop without promising a complete history of the motif. A precise, limited credit may serve better than an attractive origin nobody checked. Respect requires neither invented antiquity nor a claim that the work never changes. It requires not embellishing the source for prestige. An incomplete genealogy gives the studio no basis for calling itself the first creator of a form

whose known connection it already acknowledges. Uncertainty limits the claim rather than enlarging it.

III. Who participates in discussing use?

Mira can make decisions about her own work within her actual authority. She does not thereby answer for a whole tradition or express every associated person's agreement. If Alexei invites her to represent the project, what she represents needs naming. “Working with Mira's workshop” differs from a promise of endorsement by an entire culture. The latter requires grounds absent from our scene. One person's visible participation must not become a convenient seal of collective permission. Accuracy protects the scope of their agreement and avoids making them answer for opinions other people have never expressed.

The workshop may contain several contributors too. Perhaps Mira proposed the pattern and a colleague developed its version for the bowl; perhaps she worked alone. This is unknown. Inviting the most visible person does not necessarily describe every contribution. Clarify who worked on the material being used rather than assembling an imaginary list of cultural representatives. Where information is unavailable, the credit should retain that limit. A universal phrase about collective wisdom cannot fill the gap. Though respectful in tone, it can again make particular labour invisible by replacing actual makers with an appealing generality. The description needs to follow what is known.

A contributor can decline public representation while accepting limited work. Mira might help revise the pattern but not want to appear in advertising. Alexei might consider that public presence essential; her refusal still does not make her collaboration incomplete. Creating, permitting use of a name, speaking at an event, and endorsing a product have different objects. If one matters to the project, discuss it separately. These distinctions promise neither a surviving contract nor satisfaction for both sides. They prevent one agreement from being substituted for a package of obligations nobody has yet accepted. A participant's boundaries remain part of the proposal.

IV. Agreement concerns particular conditions

Suppose Mira permitted showing the pattern at an educational meeting. Alexei now wants printed packaging and advertising. Even in a friendly relationship, that is a different use. The new proposal needs information: where the image will appear, intended alterations, authorship credit, and the connection claimed with the workshop. A precise object reduces the need to guess how far earlier agreement extended. This is an editorial distinction rather than a legal ruling on a valid arrangement. Actual projects require separate examination of applicable rights and duties. The scene does not supply the missing legal facts or turn a useful distinction into a contract.

Refusal has practical conditions. If the draft has already been announced, Mira may hear that cancellation would let the team down. The studio's urgency describes its planning; it does not turn an unaccepted proposal into her accepted obligation. Significant dependence means an outward “yes” may reveal less than the whole situation. Yet this article does not determine a person's concealed state from their position. Known pressure, an assumption, and their own response need distinction. The studio's good intentions do not replace that distinction. Nor does another person's anxiety automatically establish that every agreement is improper. What is actually known remains the basis for describing the situation.

Agreed terms can change. The studio chooses another market, adds an origin story, or alters the image until Mira no longer regards it as their joint work. A new question arises, rather than proof of a partner's permanent inconsistency. Earlier agreement has its scope. A way of reviewing changes can be agreed in advance, but having such a process does not guarantee renewed agreement. If the arrangement loses clarity, continued use cannot be called an obvious shared decision merely because a friendly meeting once took place and an initial sketch was made. Present conditions require present accuracy about the arrangement.

V. Credit matters but does not settle everything

Terms are worth retaining in a form both sides can check. A large document is not essential; shared words need to mean shared actions. Alexei might understand “presentation” as a recording that remains online, while Mira means one meeting without further circulation. Until that difference is discovered, “you may show it” is too broad for a confident claim. If clarification is impossible before release, that should affect the studio's decision. Paid advertising does not make its preferred interpretation the only one. Nor should it promise Mira control over distribution that it cannot actually provide. A useful description retains practical limits.

Alexei offers a small credit to Mira on the reverse. The main advertisement still promises the studio's invention. Including a credit does not make these messages compatible. Consider

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what a reader receives: who is called creator, source, contributor, and what is claimed about the new version. Accuracy need not be lengthy. A small clarification should not excuse a large false claim. If the studio refuses to change the main promise, the dispute concerns more than missing thanks: it concerns public presentation of authorship for a particular object. The credit's existence and the advertisement's truth are separate questions.

Acknowledgement does not replace discussion of material terms. Mira might want payment, a share, purchase of an object, or only particular wording; her wishes are unknown. Do not appoint recognition as her need instead of allowing her to state conditions. The studio need not treat every demand as already accepted either. No suitable proposal may result. A stage invitation is not a share of revenue, and naming a culture is not paying for specific labour. These distinctions make the exchange visible without promising one universally fair distribution. What is appropriate requires the actual participants and terms, not an imagined response on their behalf.

Sometimes a source wants no part in a commercial project. Offering money then does not remove the question. The intended use may be unwelcome for reasons beyond the amount. This establishes no right to prohibit every similar form worldwide; the article makes no such sweeping legal inference. But a project claiming collaboration with that person cannot replace their refusal with someone else while retaining the same promise. The plan and description of the relationship can change; the material can be declined. The studio cannot simultaneously assert joint work and make its named partner's independence irrelevant to that assertion.

VI. Changing a form does not erase a relationship

A designer may substantially alter a pattern, removing lines, adding colours, and using a different surface. These changes matter to their own creative contribution. Origins are not measured solely by the number of remaining lines, however. If the studio learned the form from the workshop and tells that story, the connection remains part of the project. Alterations can be named without claiming an absence of influence. No imaginary percentage is needed beyond which every connection disappears. Visual difference and an honest account of the process are different objects of examination. One can be substantial while the other still requires careful wording.

Conversely, resemblance without knowledge of transmission and presentation proves no appropriation. Two works might share a known source, independently reach similar solutions, or have another connection. Our scene cannot determine this for them. Here “appropriation” concerns substitution of an acknowledged origin, contribution, or agreed condition, not every similarity. It requires specifying what was taken and which claim or action is disputed. A general accusation based on the creator's cultural background may obscure the particular

object that made discussion necessary. That object needs description before the accusation can be evaluated; identity alone does not supply the missing history.

Distinguish altering a form for a new meaning from misdescribing its earlier meaning. Alexei can make a contemporary pattern after meeting the workshop without calling it an authentic example of another people's ritual. If advertising promises historical accuracy, the altered motif needs grounds for that promise. Inspiration provides none by itself. A new artistic reading may be valuable while remaining a new reading. This freezes no living practice. It retains the distinction between making something, describing a source, and offering testimony about a tradition that an audience may reasonably understand literally. Each claim needs an appropriate basis.

VII. Unequal opportunities enter the terms

In this scene the studio has an advertising platform and the workshop a small audience. That makes Alexei neither guilty by occupation nor Mira invariably right. It affects whose account of the relationship may become more visible. If the studio tells a story of its own discovery, the workshop might struggle to bring a clarification to the same audience. This is a possible arrangement in our fictional project, not a measured advertising effect. One response is to specify where the origin account will appear and who can check it before release. The arrangement can then be considered concretely.

Opportunities to correct a credit after publication differ too. Changing a page may be easier than recalling packaging already distributed; actual technical options still need checking. A promise to fix everything later is not an agreed description now. The studio can state a real limit: some materials are already produced and revised wording can appear only in the next run. Mira may accept or reject that limit. A correction plan is not a completed correction. A draft, a contributor's approval, release, and the actual appearance of accurate wording are separate states of work, even if all are described optimistically.

Where discussion involves threats or serious dependence, the article prescribes neither public exposure nor direct confrontation. Suitable ways of protecting interests depend on actual circumstances. Someone can limit participation, obtain professional assistance, or withhold their reasons for now. None of these options is promised safe everywhere. Our voluntary example permits discussion; carrying that possibility into every conflict would be mistaken. Attention to inequality serves visibility of a decision's cost. It must not demand additional courage from the less influential participant for the sake of a pleasing dialogue. Their ability to stop remains relevant to the situation.

VIII. Shared heritage does not remove particular work

Alexei might say cultures always meet and the pattern therefore belongs to everyone. The article does not verify a universal historical claim about all cultural encounters. Even wide influence does not erase a known contemporary contribution by a particular workshop. A shared technique and a present object may have different histories. Free use of one element does not establish terms for another. Identify the object before claiming common heritage. Otherwise breadth becomes a way to overlook the people whose work the project already uses and whose participation it invokes. The broad statement must not silently substitute for knowledge of the particular relationship.

Acknowledging contribution also does not bind someone forever to one cultural role. Mira may make new things, work across backgrounds, and resist descriptions of her practice solely as preservation of the past. What she says about her own work deserves hearing. It does not make her the sole judge of its entire history. An outside customer should not appoint her an unchanging exemplar for attractive packaging either. A creator's independence concerns refusal and the ability to create differently from what an audience expects. The source of inspiration is a working person, not merely a role assigned by someone else's project.

A new project can combine different forms without claiming they always meant the same. Descriptions should preserve differences, especially around religious meaning or historical experience. Artistic juxtaposition proves neither common origins nor every participant's approval. An encounter may be interesting precisely because people bring different practices. That offers no universal permission to use any material. It makes collaboration discussable without erasing distinctions or requiring a new composition to be called the recovery of an ancient shared truth unsupported by sources. A contemporary relationship can matter without an invented historical unity to justify it.

IX. Correction addresses a particular error

Suppose the studio has released a draft falsely claiming its own invention. That promise is the first object of correction. It can be removed, origins clarified, and changed materials identified. If the dispute concerns terms of use, revised credit alone is insufficient; that question requires separate attention. Acknowledging error does not always require a public statement by Mira. She may want no part in the studio's explanation. Correcting its text remains the responsibility of whoever distributed it. Her participation must not become a prerequisite without which an error supposedly cannot be recognized. The studio can answer for its own words.

After revision, check the actual result. New wording may be on the site but absent from the advertisement. Mira may have approved the image without seeing the credit. These states should not be compressed into “agreed.” It is possible to list what changed and what remains

open. Such checking measures no moral purity. It helps avoid repeating the original substitution during correction. If agreement is still absent, the studio can state that no arrangement exists. Its own willingness to talk cannot be described as endorsement already obtained from the named partner. The distinction remains necessary even after a sincere effort to improve matters.

The sides may stop collaborating. Alexei chooses another pattern and Mira does not attend the launch. This may be a loss to both rather than a happy ending. Absence of a joint project need not make another culture closed or the designer incapable of learning. The object was narrower: a particular use lacked suitable terms. Another encounter could involve different material and a different proposal. It owes nobody repaired relations. Learning from another person retains meaning only when their response can change one's plan, rather than merely decorate it with approval. Sometimes that change is abandoning a preferred use.

X. Collaboration allows a project to change

New agreement does not automatically vindicate an earlier use. Mira may accept a revised version while considering the first release mistaken; Alexei may acknowledge error without obtaining permission to continue. Those responses are compatible. If the studio's public explanation links later collaboration to a claim that no objections ever existed, it again overstates. Distinguish stages: earlier description, discovered difficulty, completed alteration, and new response. This requires neither disclosure of private correspondence nor publication of a partner's reasons without permission. It requires responsibility for one's own message without filling another person's position with a convenient story of final reconciliation.

Return to the first packaging. Alexei offers a new composition, accurate credit, and separate discussion of image use. Mira may accept one part and reject another. Their answer remains unknown. “Collaboration” can now be examined through actual work: whether she participated in decisions, which conditions were accepted, and which public statements were confirmed. One photograph together supplies none of that description. Long acquaintance does not remove the need to clarify a new use either. Good relations can support work without automatically determining its present scope. The word needs to follow the actual relationship rather than stand in for it.

Attention to a source may mean more work for Alexei and a less striking story of his own discovery. That is a real cost of revising this fictional plan. The article promises neither better sales, stronger reputation, nor recognition. It retains another purpose: the creator stops building a message on appropriated origins or unknown agreement. Their own contribution remains visible because it is named separately. Meeting another culture no longer becomes a resource obliged to confirm a project already finished in principle. The encounter can affect the form and the decision to use the material at all.

Borrowing, collaboration, and appropriation differ through particular relationships rather than one external feature. Who made the selected object, how are its origins described, what is permitted, who receives credit and benefit, and what can be reconsidered? Answers may be incomplete. That requires neither an immediate general verdict nor concealment of uncertainty in words and actions. Respect can include learning, new creation, accurate acknowledgement, and stopping. It requires neither prohibition of every influence nor compulsory agreement from people whose work has entered another person's plan. Their response remains capable of affecting what happens next.

What this means in practice

If this concerns your project, select one cultural element and describe its intended use: what you take, where it appears, what changes, and which origins you claim. Separate the known source, contemporary contribution, your own work, and uncertainty. Infer no right of use merely from public availability. Do not call resemblance proven borrowing when the route is unknown. Legal terms for an actual project need their own examination; this article does not replace it.

Where voluntary discussion is possible, clarify a participant's authority and the object of agreement. Learning, selling, a name, speaking, and public endorsement are distinct. Consider credit and material terms separately. Assign nobody the sole role of cultural representative or use one partner as confirmation of everyone's views. Suitable terms may be unavailable. Under threats, direct discussion is not prescribed; this practice establishes no safe method for every circumstance.

Before release, compare the public description with terms actually agreed. If there is an error, state which message or action was corrected and where correction has not happened. Readiness to change is not completed change. This voluntary reflection measures no person's morality, is no therapy, and guarantees neither reconciliation nor project success. It retains a precise object of encounter and the possibility that another person's answer will affect your decision, including revising the plan or declining the chosen material.

Key quotation

> *the greatest gift*

W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, XIV, “Of the Sorrow Songs,” authorial reasoning, web line 1308. A brief fragment evaluating the contribution of African American songs. It does not transfer to every contemporary project.

Connections between traditions

Material or perspective	Comparative question	Boundary
Du Bois, authorial context in chapter XIV	Who remains visible in the history of cultural contribution?	Historical literary judgement determines no present designer's rights
Hypothetical studio and workshop project	What do participants create and agree to?	An invented example describes no actual people or measured effect
History of a technique and contemporary work	How do a transmitted practice and a present contribution differ?	Common origins establish no terms for every object
A new artistic reading	Can forms meet while meanings remain distinct?	A new composition proves neither common origins nor collective approval

Sources

1. W. E. B. Du Bois. *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Project Gutenberg no. 408, HTML, XIV, "Of the Sorrow Songs." Actually read selected continuous authorial context, web lines 1305–1313, not the whole book. The print basis of this HTML edition is unestablished. The author's own judgements are used without song lyrics. A historical literary perspective, not an experiment or legal ruling on cultural use. Rights UNKNOWN; availability is not treated as universal permission and no full text is imported into the packet.

Tags

cultural borrowing, collaboration, appropriation, authorship, origins, cultural contribution, workshop, design, packaging, tradition, contemporary work, credit, recognition, agreement, conditions of use, authority, benefit, payment, influence, artistic reading, representation, uncertainty, cultural memory, independence, correction, public description, source, Du Bois, spirituals, historical perspective, United Wisdom

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