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### The Rise of Cultural Appropriation in Fashion

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## Children in Wampum Beads

By: Henna Choudhary

Lines trailed out of food stalls in which indigenous vendors who wore brandless hoodies, T-shirts and dark wash jeans prepared and packaged bison burgers, frybread, maize and lemonade.

The patrons who stood in line eyeing the menus originated from the Far East to Far Rockaway. It was like the United Nations. They wore fox and beaver animal hides, Native American headdresses and in some cases, face paint carefully sketched across their faces in black and red tribal stripes.

The native Lenape tribe, who once dwelled on the same lower New York state land these festival revelers were treading on, would not have been impressed. The natives typically went shirtless.

An African-American woman wore a brown felt headband bedecked with synthetic tawny feathers atop her waist-length box braids. Standing beside her on a food vendor's queue, a Caucasian man sported a suede beige ensemble with similar synthetic feathers and plastic beads, along with a black leather jacket.

Their two young children, enjoying the chance to play "dress up" with feathered headbands and red face paint splattered across their cheeks, cheered and whooped in unison with the Native American chants that emanated from speakers placed throughout the open green field.

I had come to the right place, a festival of cultural appropriation.

The rising phenomenon of cultural appropriation in fashion revolves around fashion enthusiasts handpicking and choosing to wear eye-catching traditional accessories and attire from cultures they do not personally identify with or claim as their own. Cultural appropriation accusers believe the offense takes root in the exploitation of minority cultures and the loss of cultural context and history in the pursuit of "exotic" fashion trends.

I hopped onto two trains and walked twenty minutes across a lift bridge over the Harlem River to arrive at the fifth annual Indigenous Peoples Celebration at Randall's Island to discover how indigenous celebrants would react to festival attendees replicating the traditions of their ancestors. Perhaps an Eastern European tourist wearing a Native American headdress or a South Asian Queens native trying on a bow and arrow along with a fur skin throw across their shoulders would incite a fray.

If the murky boundary between appropriation and appreciation existed between educating oneself on the cultural context of attire that belongs to another culture, could

non-indigenous celebrants pay homage to native history by dressing in traditional native garments?

Occurrences of cultural appropriation call into question the credibility of local and global fashion designers, celebrities and social media influencers when the accused display no prior knowledge of the cultural significance behind the clothing they decide to parade as a fleeting fashion statement.

Gucci sent models down the runway in Sikh-style turbans during their 2018 Milan Fashion Week show. Victoria's Secret angels paired lingerie with Native American headdresses in a Fall 2017 Shanghai show. And Chanel's Spring/Summer 2017 campaign featured model Arizona Muse in box braids and Bantu knots. When these cultural appropriation offenses reached social media, firestorms of rage ensued.

These individuals who reign the fashion industry benchmark style trends for the vast majority of Americans and influence the "hip" accessories and attire that are manufactured in large quantities.

In turn, Americans that fall prey to mainstream culture queue for *bindis* to decorate their foreheads for Coachella and *sombreros* to sit atop their heads for a night of margaritas on Cinco de Mayo.

From Marc Jacob's campaign with Caucasian models in colorful dreadlocks during his runway show in Fall 2016 to Dior's Summer 2019 'Sauvage' fragrance video release, which featured Johnny Depp as a Native American dancer dressed in traditional North American indigenous wear, reputable designers have been outed as cultural appropriators on social media platforms in increasing numbers during the past few years.

While their reputation becomes marred in the eyes of social activists, their income and net worth barely budges.

Celebrities also receive the brunt of the heat, without sparing the Kardashians, Jenners or Beyoncé.

When Kim Kardashian received relentless backlash after she released the name of her shapewear brand Kimono this past summer, she quickly reformulated the name to SKIMS. Kylie Jenner's fixation on African-American culture, including box braids and cornrows, has made her one of cultural appropriation accusers' most targeted social media influencers. Even other celebrities have pointed an accusatory finger towards her hairstyle choices. 'Hunger Games' star Amandla Stenberg commented on Jenner's cornrows selfie "When u appropriate black features and culture but fail to use ur position of power to help black Americans by directing attention towards ur wigs instead of police brutality or racism #whitegirlsdobetter."

Likewise, the Beyhive couldn't swarm to rescue their Queen Beyoncé when she was accused of culturally appropriating Southeast Asian culture in a red *sari*, traditional ornate Indian jewelry and hands coated in *henna* designs during her cameo appearance in Coldplay's "Hymns for the weekend" music video.

This whirlwind of accusations brought me to Governor's Island.

Around a wide circular gathering surrounded by white teepees, traditionally referred to as a "continuous hoop," onlookers cheered and bellowed native chants in unison with speakers, singers and dancers sharing their tales of sorrow and loss as descendants of indigenous tribes.

In stalls that dotted the perimeter of the field, indigenous vendors sold woven dreamcatchers bedecked with white feathers and black beads, bundles of aromatic sage and turquoise necklaces set in silver to patrons eagerly browsing through the fold-out tables displaying the wares.

But the Native American feathered headbands on display sold at half the price as the selection at Forever21 and Urban Outfitters.

Festival revelers took no notice and continued to mingle with natives and confidently trot Randall's Island in woven tribal-print ponchos, fringed skirts and suede jackets.

Cultural appropriation accusations aren't solely reserved for those held under constant scrutiny in the limelight. The epidemic of judgement spares no one.

In April 2018, an 18-year-old high school senior, Keziah Daum, decided to tweet her prom pictures in commemoration of the night. Daum wore a red and gold traditional Chinese *qipao* dress with a thigh-high slit, which she happened across at a local vintage shop.

The Manchus, a minority group from China's northeast region, had originally donned the *qipao* in a loosely wrapped fashion. As travel increased and cultural traditions intermingled, women of a higher social status in the Qing dynasty refashioned the garment into a form-fitting dress to mimic Western influence.

Within less than 24 hours, Daum became the target of a ruthless online debate, which unraveled years of convoluted cultural appropriation history.

Enraged tweets shot over to China. "My culture is NOT your goddamn prom dress," was a typical response.

"I'm proud of my culture," an Australian named Jeremy Lam tweeted. "For it to simply be subject to American consumerism and cater to a white audience, is parallel to colonial ideology."

The post went viral. Tweeters from Hong Kong and Taiwan came to Daum's defense. They pointed out that she had posed with her hands clasped in a symbolic prayer gesture. In the midst of the back-and-forth, a tweeter called to attention the fact that the *qipao* had been appropriated centuries ago, when the Han stole the idea from the Manchus.

A global storm of judgement, misunderstanding, outrage and insult ensued.

The culture wars took an even sharper detour recently.

Cosplayer Veronica Rae posted a set of photos in a yellow one-piece bathing suit, thigh-high red stockings, a red blazer and a green wig along with a painted clown face on her Facebook page.

Rae intended to pay homage to the Joker, following the recent psychological thriller film release. However, her post exploded into thousands of derogatory and enraged comments as offended fans insinuated sexualization of mental health due to Rae's decision to wear a revealing version of the Joker's infamous red suit, a character who is known to suffer from mental illness. Joker fans reacted with comments such as "This is oppressive to gamers" and "The Joker could have not been a woman."

The cosplayer responded by saying that clown culture is a nonexistent identity to claim.

"We live in a global world where people associate with, create and identify with many cultures outside of their own," said Jenny Lai, the founder and fashion designer of NOT, a womenswear brand that experiments with movement in clothing and plays on Lai's background in classical dance as well as inspiration from her travels to Amsterdam, Mexico City and South Africa.

"It's very restrictive creatively to have this kind of boundary," said Lai. "For example, it would be a very boring world if authors could only write about their own experiences. I think that cultural appropriation is inevitable in all fields, not just fashion. Music, food, architecture and dance aren't always created in the narrow scope of one person's own experience."

"Some of my recent styles incorporate beading that is inspired by Native American beading and South African beading," Lai admitted. "Sometimes these ideas come from things that I collect or that I am studying, but I try to reimagine these techniques in my own way and have my own interpretation of these inspirations. I'm aware of what could be construed as cultural appropriation, but I can clearly see what aspects I'm taking from it and how I'm transforming it. I try to always share that this inspiration comes from somewhere else."

If Lai's recipe for avoiding cultural appropriation accusations was the answer, was the remedy for the cultural appropriation controversy simply remembering attribution?

If this was confusing, it was nothing compared to my mind ringing with questions concerning what would be appropriate to wear to the Indigenous Peoples Day Celebration.

I brushed past the creamy material of my suede jackets before grazing the faux fur lining of my black leather jackets hidden in the recesses of my closet.

Outfit hunting for the Indigenous People's Day celebration proved to be no simple task. Indigenous People's Day colliding with Columbus Day on the second Monday of October served as a stark reminder of Spain's colonization and appropriation of the Americas. Not to mention the consequent genocide of the indigenous tribes who had been living off the land for years before the Nina, Pinta and Santa Maria ominously docked in Florida's east coast harbor.

There was no way I was showing up to a festival celebrating and honoring indigenous culture and history decked out in any semblance of cultural appropriation. Aside from enslaving, murdering and transmitting diseases to the native tribes he encountered on his quest, Christopher Columbus did not hesitate to appropriate the natives' land resources, such as cacao, tobacco, gold and plants, to ship back to Spain as a showcase of the fruits of his voyage.

Recalling to mind Pocahontas' infamous one-shoulder suede fringe dress, I decided suede and fur qualified as inherently Native American clothing materials, thereby rendering my jackets as cultural appropriation.

Native Americans in the Great Plains obtained raw animal skins for clothing by hunting and skinning before converting the hides into wearable tunics, skirts, leggings, moccasins and one-shoulder fringe dresses. The suedes and furs were sewn together not with a needle and thread, but with animal sinew and porcupine quill-needles. Due to their nomadic nature, natives designed their clothing with the foundations of durability and practicality in mind, using a fringe design on articles of clothing to help rainwater slide off the fabric quicker.

I glanced away from these potentially self-incriminating garbs to my collection of accessories, eyeing a gold-toned necklace woven with fuchsia, cobalt blue, yellow and orange threads. The necklace was given to me by a close friend as a souvenir from her trip abroad to her homeland of Jaipur, India, but it could easily be mistaken as culturally appropriating North American indigenous woven jewelry.

Before Columbus arrived with pillage on his mind, Native Americans in the Northeast region fashioned jewelry out of land resources including shells, bones, stones, feathers, leather, fur and metals. Interwoven strands of beads and colored threads, resembling my own necklace, often served as an indicator of social classes amongst the native tribes.

I pulled the mirrored doors to my closet shut. It was time to shop.

During my entire train ride to Soho, New York City's most fashion-forward zip code, I bounced between the idea of donning an outfit that screamed appreciation of indigenous culture or respectfully denied any hint of cultural appropriation. In fact, I was set on attempting to maneuver away from culturally appropriating any fashion trend stemming from one of the world's thousands of cultural groups.

I crossed the threshold into Aritzia, a bi-level womenswear boutique nestled onto a street corner between Spring Street and Broadway, and my eyes landed on a checkered dress attempting to replicate the 1990s flannel fad but threading into dangerous waters of appropriating 17th century Scottish tartan. I skimmed the racks of autumn collections. A pristine V-neck jumpsuit with a bell-bottom flare grasped my attention, but after a quick Google search, I found that jumpsuits were first created by a Florentine artist and designer in 1919 as a matter of practicality for skydivers.

Wanting no part in culturally appropriating Italian fashion, I stepped onto the bustling city street once again. After being jostled by shopping bags weighing down the arms of tourists and locals alike, I entered Mystique Boutique. Chinese characters printed in bold black and gold lettering against taupe mesh turtlenecks and an Egyptian hieroglyphic-printed bodycon dress sent me reeling back onto the sidewalk.

While walking past several blocks of storefronts and window shopping to avoid unwittingly landing into another cultural appropriation trap, I came to a halt in front of a thrift store with a faceless mannequin dressed as an "Arabian Nights" belly dancer.

The thick gold anklets, red sequined *bindi* adorning the mannequin's forehead and bedazzled matching blouse and trousers two-piece resonated with me. I was reminded of my own Eastern closet brimming with trailing silk *lehengas*, multi-colored *shalwar kameez* and yards of *sari* cloth laden with mirrored sequins as well as the boxes upon boxes of multi-colored *bangles*, ornamental rings, dangling earrings that pulled on my ear lobes and jewel-encrusted statement necklaces, all straight from my father's homeland of Pakistan.

For a split second, the thought crossed my mind that I was only safe from cultural appropriation in my Eastern closet – where my own cultural identity was rooted in the garments of my mother's Indo-Caribbean lineage stemming from Guyana and my father's homeland of Pakistan.

I swiped my MetroCard through the Spring Street subway terminal and went home.

Despite the recent proliferation of public outrage against cultural appropriation in the fashion industry, cultural appropriation has existed for centuries.

The first form of binding materials together to cover one's body derives from Neanderthals. They stitched together animal skins using thorns, bones and sharpened rocks as needles accompanied by animal sinew or plants as thread. An instance of this

preliminary technique of sewing can be proven by the discovery of a bone needle from 61,000 years ago in Sibudu Cave, South Africa.

Through a 2011 study, which attempted to navigate when body lice and clothing lice first became separate entities, researchers discovered that the first humans to find a means beyond thick body hair to keep warm existed 170,000 years ago. During the first Ice Age, *homo sapiens* utilized more advanced cutting tools than their Neanderthal relatives to sew together animal furs as a necessity for survival during year-round frigid temperatures.

In the Dzudzuana Cave in Georgia, researchers discovered colored flax fibers in areas where humans once lived around 30,000 years. It is assumed that these fibers were once used to make linen clothes in a range of colors, which suggests that clothes began to serve a purpose beyond covering one's body and had instead evolved into a decorative style choice.

After these prefatory practices of fashion design took root, the ensuing inventions to expedite the creation of clothing were endless. British inventor Thomas Saint devised the first sewing machine in 1790, which led the way for Milliner Ellen Curtis Demorest to create a system to copy fashionable garments onto paper during the latter half of the 19th century.

In turn, designers throughout the decades inherited the opportunity to play with new concepts in fashion, such as Yves Saint Laurent's debut of a menswear-inspired tuxedo for women in 1966. Fast-forward to present day and Ronnie Fieg is redirecting the landscape of athleisure for men, women and children through his lifestyle brand Kith.

The fine line between cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation is drawn between the oversimplification, fetishization and assertion of cultural dominance over a minority people in contrast to the reverence of a culture's history in which inspiration is drawn from traditional wear through contemporary clothing designs.

Critics of cultural appropriation define the boundary between cultural appropriation and cultural assimilation, or an equal cultural exchange, by likening present day instances of appropriation to historical periods of colonialism.

In the 17th century, the three-piece suit was born from the traditional garments worn by Eastern European and Islamic populations. Cravats were fashioned after Croatian mercenaries fighting for Louis XIII in 1660 were spotted in dapper neckties. Meanwhile, boldly colored silk waistcoats, which are often attributed to Charles II of England, originated from Turkish, Indian and Persian attire and were acquired by English travelers that ventured East.

During the Highland Clearances, when large populations dwelling in the Scottish Highlands were evicted roughly around 1750 to 1860, the British aristocracy eyed traditional Scottish clothing. Soon enough, tartan and the flannel pattern made its

mark on dresses, waistcoats and cravats in England and later became a trademark of Westward expansion work garments worn by American pioneers.

Once traveling routes shifted to Asia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, England became familiar with Indian *churidars*, characterized by their tight-fitting trousers, as well as *turbans* which hold religious significance amongst Sikhs. The Islamic *tarboosh*, a felt cylindrical hat worn by Muslim men in the eastern Mediterranean region, was adopted by Victorian era men to prevent their hair from reeking of tobacco when they engaged in recreational smoking.

In the realm of women's fashion, Japanese kimono dresses and Chinese *qipao* began to rise in popularity and transformed into a symbol of wealth and status in the West. Women who wore these garments attempted to give off the impression of worldly travels, although many of these dresses were in fact manufactured in America using rayon rather than authentic silk.

The concept of cultural appropriation first made its appearance in academic writings that highlighted colonialism and Western expansionism in the 1960s. The term pinpointed the pattern Western cultures had fallen into, during which they brought home customs, recipes and fashion statements from foreign expeditions involving trade, mercantilism and colonialism.

Scholars were enraged as they came to understand that during these expeditions, a minority culture's practices were plundered by members of a dominant culture and its cultural context was subsequently stripped away. Rich customs embedded in years of tradition and reverence became hollowed into shallow, meaningless trends, which merited little to no significance to its new practitioners.

Modern challengers of the practice believe that cultural fusions and equally beneficial exchanges occur out of respect for a culture's traditions and a mutual understanding between the parties.

However, borrowing elements of other cultures is inevitable for as long as the world remains diverse in population and people continue to travel and explore foreign lands. Or so history points towards.

A middle-aged indigenous woman, wearing a red and black Aztec-print dress with her hair twisted into a long jet-black braid, handed over change to a 20-something Caucasian woman.

"Thank you for your purchase and I hope you enjoy the festival," the vendor said with a bright beam plastered across her face as she tucked the payment into a brown leather pouch full of cash that was tied around her waist.

"I will, I love attending powwows. Just the other week, I was at the Fargo Moorhead Crossroads Powwow in North Dakota. It was phenomenal," the woman donning a crochet fringed poncho cape and brown suede moccasins said.

At a neighboring stall, a mother-son duo manning a precious gemstones setup huddled over a jewelry display, advising an East Asian couple to select a vintage silver bangle encrusted with glimmering topaz stones.

“Topaz recharges and revitalizes the mind and soul,” the elderly native woman explained as the couple listened keenly. “It will align the meridians of the body, which will help your body build resistance against sickness and disease.”

A towering man of African descent with an unmistakable Caribbean accent bent his neck forward as he inspected wooden pendants engraved with symbols, inquiring about the significance of each symbol. A teenage boy, dressed in black skinny jeans and a black T-shirt with “Native Lives Matter” printed in bold white letters across the front, patiently answered his customer’s string of questions.

“The crossed arrows mean friendship but the single arrow pointing right means protection,” he said, pointing to each pendant hanging from black strings nailed to a wooden board.

The native vendors were immersed their sales as they merchandised tokens of indigenous culture to festival revelers. The non-indigenous patrons would then wear or gift these keepsakes to their loved ones. Yet, there didn’t seem to be any worry of sullyng native culture or any measures being drawn to prevent non-indigenous buyers from redefining native identity through their fashion picks.

At the Indigenous Peoples Day celebration, cultural appropriation was not an issue so long as those belonging to the indigenous tribes were able to profit off of sharing their own culture’s articles.

Several yards away from the stall with hanging Native American wooden pendants, a Polynesian indigenous tribe practiced their traditional dance sequence, which would be performed later in the evening. Surrounding a picnic blanket laid across the grass, the women wore sparkling turquoise, peach and violet headwraps blanketing their hair and cotton skirts and dresses with symbols stitched across the fabrics that they loosely wrapped around their bodies. They spun in circles, effortlessly in sync, displaying their lacy handheld fans in slow, wide circular movements.

One of the women, dancing with her eyes closed in a tranquil state, wore burgundy, white and gray sneakers. The Greek were the first cultural group to create sandals to protect their soles from rocks and blistering hot sand when running races. Centuries later, Wait Webster of New York created the first patent that detailed the process of making rubber soles, marking the invention of sneakers to mankind.

But there was no chance a picture of this indigenous woman wearing sneakers would elicit insults calling out ignorance or cultural appropriation on any social media platform.

If a minority culture adopts practices, attire or accessories from a dominant culture it is simply referred to as cultural assimilation. It is only when a member of a dominant culture chooses to spice up their wardrobe with an article of clothing belonging to a minority culture, particularly one that has been marginalized throughout history, do cultural appropriation accusations bubble up.

No one wants to be accused of ignorance, no one wants to be compared to the likes of one of the world's most well-known cultural appropriators Christopher Columbus or Marc Jacobs or Keziah Daum; and no one wants to be that person who doesn't know what to say when someone asks "Do you know where that print on your T-shirt is *actually* from?"

My gaze wandered towards the stalls teeming with cultural appropriation once again. The adults continued to busy themselves with ensuring they retained full understanding of the articles they purchased as they milled through the leather pouches, suede wrist cuffs and handbags embellished with crisscross patterns.

Beyond the horizon, children with brown and beige felt headbands ran through the open green expanse, their hanging multi-colored feathers and wampum beads flying in the wind behind them. They were wearing knit cardigans, Old Navy jeans and Nike sneakers, not caring that Nike was a woman, that Nike was a goddess and that Nike was Greek.

As the children chased one another, one of their feathered headbands slipped off and laid forgotten in a patch of dirt near a tree trunk. No one took a second of notice. The game went on.