"Social Identities & Cultural Appropriation" packet

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Magazine

Is Cultural Appropriation Always Wrong?

First Words

By PARUL SEHGAL SEPT. 29, 2015

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It's a truth only selectively acknowledged that all cultures are mongrel. One of the first Indian words to be brought into English was the Hindi "loot" — "plunder." Some of the Ku Klux Klan's 19th-century costumes were, of all things, inspired in part by the festival wear of West African slaves; the traditional wax-print designs we associate with West Africa are apparently Indonesian — by way of the Netherlands. Gandhi cribbed nonviolence from the Sermon on the Mount.

We sometimes describe this mingling as "cross-pollination" or "cross-fertilization" — benign, bucolic metaphors that obscure the force of these encounters. When we wish to speak more plainly, we talk of "appropriation" — a word now associated with the white Western world's co-opting of minority cultures. And this year — these past several months alone — there has been plenty of talk. In film, there was the outcry over the casting of the blonde Emma Stone as the part-Chinese Hawaiian heroine of Cameron Crowe's "Aloha." In music, Miley Cyrus wore dreadlock extensions while hosting the

V.M.A.s and drew accusations of essentially performing in blackface — and not for the first time. In literature, there was the discovery that Michael Derrick Hudson, a white poet, had been published in this year's Best American Poetry anthology under a Chinese pseudonym. In fashion, there was the odd attempt to rebrand cornrows as a Caucasian style — a "favorite resort hair look," according to Elle. And floating above it all has been Rachel Dolezal, the presiding spirit of the phenomenon, the white former N.A.A.C.P. chapter president who remains serenely and implacably convinced of her blackness.

Questions about the right to your creation and labor, the right to your identity, emerge out of old wounds in America, and they provoke familiar battle stances. The same arguments are trotted out (It's just hair! Stop being so sensitive! It's not always about race!) to be met by the same quotes from Bell Hooks, whose essays from the early '90s on pop culture, and specifically on Madonna, have been a template for discussions of how white people "colonize" black identity to feel transgressive: "Ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture." It's a seasonal controversy that attends awards shows, music festivals, Halloween: In a country whose beginnings are so bound up in theft, conversations about appropriation are like a ceremonial staging of the nation's original sins.

It can feel like such a poignantly stalled conversation that we're occasionally tempted to believe we've moved past it. A 2013 NPR story on America's changing demographics and the evolution of hip-hop made a case that the genre has lost its identification with race, and that young people aren't burdened by anxieties about authenticity. "The melding of cultures we're seeing now may have Generation X and Generation Y shaking in their boots with claims of racial 'appropriation,' " the rapper and performance artist Mykki Blanco said in an online discussion about fashion's debt to "urban culture." "To Generation Z, I would clearly think it all seems 'normal.' " Hip-hop culture is global culture, according to this wisdom: People of Korean descent have dominated the largest international b-boy championships;

twerking is a full-blown obsession in Russia. "We as black people have to come to grips that hip-hop is a contagious culture," Questlove, the drummer and co-founder of the Roots, said last year in an interview with Time magazine in which he defended Iggy Azalea, the white Australian rapper derided for (among other things) affecting a "Southern" accent. "If you love something, you gotta set it free."

But many of the most dogged critics of cultural appropriation are turning out to be the very people who were supposed to be indifferent to it. Members of supposedly easygoing Generation Z object — in droves — to Lena Dunham's posting a photograph of herself in a mock hijab. Others argue that the cultural devaluation of black people paves the way for violence against them. "What would America be like if we loved black people as much as we loved black culture?" Amandla Stenberg, the 16-year-old star of "The Hunger Games," asked, in her video message "Don't Cash Crop My Cornrows," which criticized pop stars like Katy Perry for borrowing from black style "as a way of being edgy." In June, young Asian-Americans protested when the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, as an accompaniment to a lecture called "Claude Monet: Flirting With the Exotic," invited visitors to pose next to Monet's "La Japonaise" while wearing a matching kimono. And South Asian women, objecting to the fad for "ethnic" wear at music festivals like Coachella, continued a social-media campaign to "reclaim the bindi," sharing photographs of themselves, their mothers and grandmothers wearing bindis, with captions like "My culture is not a costume.'"

Is this just the latest flowering of "outrage culture"? Not necessarily. "The line between cultural appropriation and cultural exchange is always going to be blurred," Stenberg acknowledges in her video. But it has never been easier to proceed with good faith and Google, to seek out and respect context. Social media, these critics suggest, allow us too much access to other people's lives and other people's opinions to plead ignorance when it comes to causing offense. When Allure magazine offers tips on achieving a "loose Afro"

accompanied by a photograph of a white woman, we can't overlook how actual black women have been penalized for the hairstyle — that two years ago it was widely reported that a 12-year-old black girl in Florida was threatened with expulsion because of her "distracting" natural hair, and that schools in Oklahoma and Ohio have tried to ban Afros outright. We can't forget that South Asian bindis became trendy in the mid-'90s, not long after South Asians in New Jersey were being targeted by a hate group that called itself Dotbusters, referencing the bindi, which some South Asian women stopped wearing out of fear of being attacked.

Seen in this light, "appropriation" seems less provocative than pitiably uninformed and stale. It seems possible that we might, someday, learn to keep our hands to ourselves where other people's cultures are concerned. But then that might do another kind of harm. In an essay in the magazine Guernica, the Pakistani novelist Kamila Shamsie called for more, not less, imaginative engagement with her country: "The moment you say a male American writer can't write about a female Pakistani, you are saying, Don't tell those stories. Worse, you're saying: As an American male you can't understand a Pakistani woman. She is enigmatic, inscrutable, unknowable. She's other. Leave her and her nation to its Otherness. Write them out of your history."

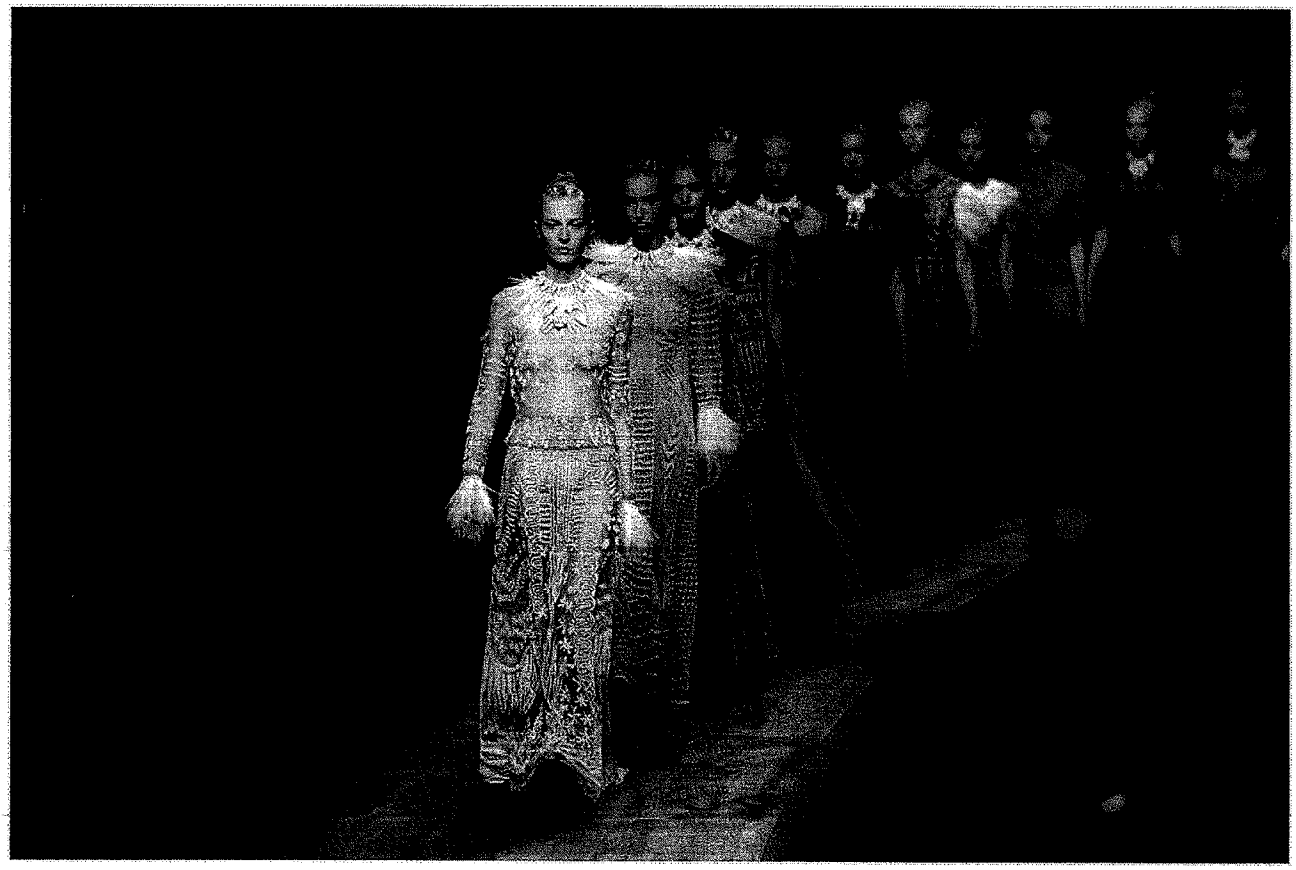
Can some kinds of appropriation shatter stereotypes? This has been literature's implicit promise: that entering into another's consciousness enlarges our own. Reviewing "Green on Blue," Elliot Ackerman's new novel that looks at America's war in Afghanistan from the perspective of a young Afghan, the writer Tom Bissell said "there would be fewer wars" if more novelists allowed themselves to imagine themselves into other cultures. It's a seductive if utterly unverifiable claim. But what cannot be disputed is how profoundly we exist in one another's imaginations. And what conversations about appropriation make clear is that our imaginations are unruly kingdoms governed by fears and fantasies. They are never neutral.

Parul Sehgal is an editor at The New York Times Book Review.

The Atlantic

The Dos and Don'ts of Cultural Appropriation

Borrowing from other cultures isn't just inevitable, it's potentially positive.



Valentino's collection at Paris Fashion Week

Patrick Kovarik / AFP / Getty Images

JENNI AVINS

OCT 20, 2015 | CULTURE

Sometime during the early 2000s, big, gold, "door-knocker" hoop earrings started to appeal to me, after I'd admired them on girls at school. It didn't faze me that most of the girls who wore these earrings at my high school in St. Louis were black, unlike me. And while it certainly may have occurred to me that I—a semi-preppy dresser—couldn't pull them off, it never occurred to me that I *shouldn't*.

MORE FROM QUARTZ

What Do We Really Mean When We Talk About Cultural Appropriation

Blackness Isn't Something That Can Be Acquired With a Little Bronzer

Junya Watanabe's Africa-Themed Fashion Show Was Missing a Key Element: Black Models

This was before the term "cultural appropriation" jumped from academia into the realm of Internet outrage and oversensitivity. Self-appointed guardians of culture have proclaimed that Miley Cyrus shouldn't twerk, white girls shouldn't wear cornrows, and Selena Gomez should take off that bindi. Personally, I could happily live without ever seeing Cyrus twerk again, but I still find many of these accusations alarming.

At my house, getting dressed is a daily act of cultural appropriation, and I'm not the least bit sorry about it. I step out of the shower in the morning and pull on a vintage cotton kimono. After moisturizing my face, I smear Lucas Papaw ointment—a tip from an Australian makeup artist—onto my lips before I make coffee with a Bialetti stovetop espresso maker a girlfriend brought back from Italy. Depending on the weather, I may pull on an embroidered floral blouse I bought at a roadside shop in Mexico or a stripey marinière-style shirt—originally inspired by the French, but mine from the surplus store was a standard-issue Russian telnyashka—or my favorite purple pajama pants, a souvenir from a friend's trip to India. I may wear Spanish straw-soled espadrilles (though I'm not from Spain) or Bahian leather sandals (I'm not Brazilian either) and top it off with a favorite piece of jewelry, perhaps a Navajo turquoise ring (also not my heritage).

As I dress in the morning, I deeply appreciate the craftsmanship and design

behind these items, as well as the adventures and people they recall. And while I hope I don't offend anyone, I find the alternative—the idea that I ought to stay in the cultural lane I was born into—outrageous. No matter how much I love cable-knit sweaters and Gruyere cheese, I don't want to live in a world where the only cultural inspiration I'm entitled to comes from my roots in Ireland, Switzerland, and Eastern Europe.

There are legitimate reasons to step carefully when dressing ourselves with the clothing, arts, artifacts, or ideas of other cultures. But please, let's banish the idea that appropriating elements from one another's cultures is in itself problematic.

Here's what it looks like when cultural appropriation is done r...

Such borrowing is how we got treasures such as New York pizza and Japanese denim—not to mention how the West got democratic discourse, mathematics, and the calendar. Yet as wave upon wave of shrill accusations of cultural appropriation make their way through the Internet outrage cycle, the rhetoric ranges from earnest indignation to patronizing disrespect.

And as we watch artists and celebrities being pilloried and called racist, it's

hard not to fear the reach of the cultural-appropriation police, who jealously track who "owns" what and instantly jump on transgressors.

In the 21st century, cultural appropriation—like globalization—isn't just inevitable; it's potentially positive. We have to stop guarding cultures and subcultures in efforts to preserve them. It's naïve, paternalistic, and counterproductive. Plus, it's just not how culture or creativity work. The exchange of ideas, styles, and traditions is one of the tenets and joys of a modern, multicultural society.

So how do we move past the finger pointing, and co-exist in a way that's both creatively open and culturally sensitive? In a word, carefully.

1. Blackface Is Never Okay

This is painfully obvious. Don't dress up as an ethnic stereotype. Someone else's culture or race—or an offensive idea of it—should never be a costume or the butt of a joke.

You probably don't need an example, but U.S. fraternity parties are rife with them. Sports teams such as the Washington Redskins, and their fanbases, continue to fight to keep bigoted names and images as mascots —perpetuating negative stereotypes and pouring salt into old wounds. Time to move on.

2. It's Important to Pay Homage to Artistry and Ideas, and Acknowledge Their Origins

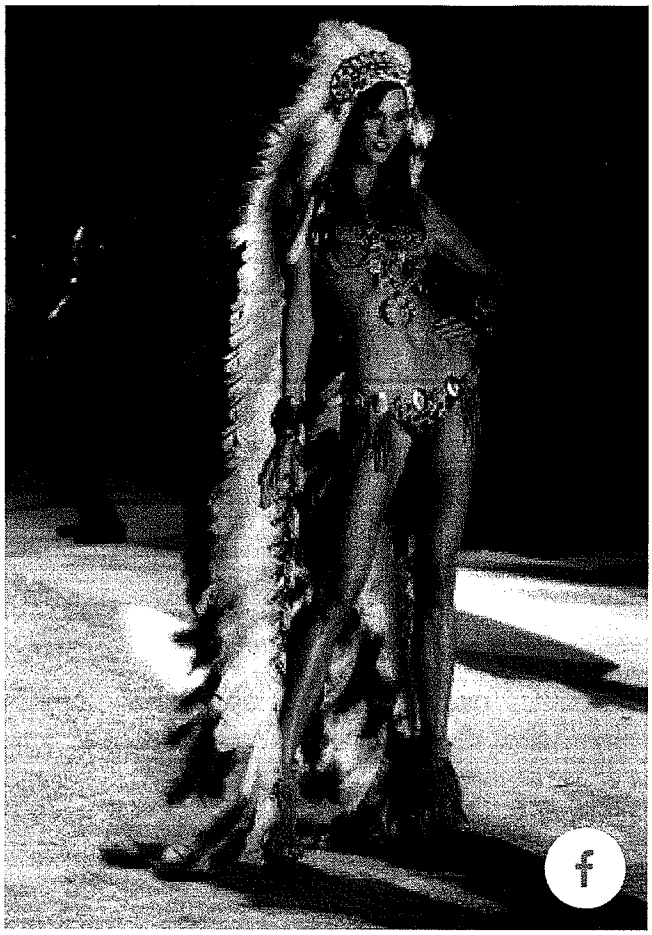
Cultural appropriation was at the heart of this year's Costume Institute exhibition, "China: Through the Looking Glass," at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. There was a great deal of hand-wringing in advance of the gala celebrating the exhibit's opening—a glitzy event for the fashion industry which many expected to be a minefield for accidental racism (and a goldmine

for the cultural-appropriation police).

Rihanna's dress for the Met Gala was made by the Chinese designer Guo Pei in her Beijing atelier. (Charles Sykes / Invision / AP)

Instead, the red carpet showcased some splendid examples of cultural appropriation done right. Among the evening's best-dressed was Rihanna, who navigated the theme with aplomb in a fur-trimmed robe by Guo Pei, a Beijing-based Chinese couturier whose work was also part of the Met's exhibition. Rihanna's gown was "imperial yellow," a shade reserved for the emperors of ancient Chinese dynasties, and perfectly appropriate for pop stars in the 21st century. Rihanna could have worn a Western interpretation, like this stunning Yves Saint Laurent dress Tom Ford designed for the label in 2004, but she won the night by rightfully shining the spotlight on a design from China.

3. Don't Adopt Sacred Artifacts as Accessories



Karlie Kloss in a headdress at the Victoria's Secret Fashion Show (Jamie McCarthy / Getty Images)

When Victoria's Secret sent Karlie Kloss down the runway in a fringed suede bikini, turquoise jewelry, and a feathered head dress—essentially a "sexy Indian" costume—many called out the underwear company for insensitivity to native Americans, and they were right.

Adding insult to injury, a war bonnet like the one Kloss wore has spiritual and ceremonial significance, with only certain members of the tribe having earned the right to wear feathers through honor-worthy achievements and acts of bravery.

"This is analogous to casually wearing a Purple Heart or Medal of Honor that was not earned," Simon Moya-Smith, a journalist of the Oglala Lakota Nation, told MTV.

For this reason, some music festival organizers have prohibited feather headdresses. As *The Guardian* points out, it's anyone's right to dress like an idiot at a festival, but someone else's sacred object shouldn't be a casual accessory. (Urban Outfitters, take note.)

4. Remember That Culture Is Fluid

"It's not fair to ask any culture to freeze itself in time and live as though they were a museum diorama," says Susan Scafidi, a lawyer and the author of *Who Owns Culture?: Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law*. "Cultural appropriation can sometimes be the savior of a cultural product that has faded away."

A denim processor in Kojima, Japan (Chris McGrath / Getty Images)

Today, for example, the most popular blue jeans in the U.S.—arguably the cultural home, if not the origin of the blue jean—are made of stretchy, synthetic-based fabrics that the inventor Levi Strauss (an immigrant from

Bavaria) wouldn't recognize. Meanwhile, Japanese designers have preserved "heritage" American workwear and Ivy League style, by using original creations as a jumping-off point for their own interpretations, as W. David Marx writes in *Ametora: How Japan Saved American Style*:

> America may have provided the raw forms for Japan's fashion explosion, but these items soon became decoupled from their origin ...More importantly, the Japanese built new and profound layers of meaning on top of American style—and in the process, protected and strengthened the original for the benefit of all. As we will see, Japanese fashion is no longer a simple copy of American clothing, but a nuanced, culturally rich tradition of its own.

Not to mention the *ne plus ultra* for many American denim-heads.

5. Don't Forget That Appropriation Is No Substitute for Diversity

At Paris Fashion Week earlier this month, the Valentino designers Maria Grazia Chiuri and Pierpaolo Piccioli sent out a collection they acknowledged was heavily influenced by Africa.

"The real problem was the hair," wrote Alyssa Vingan at *Fashionista*, pointing out that the white models wore cornrows, a style more common for those with African hair, "thereby appropriating African culture."

In a recent video that went viral, the African American actress Amandla Stenberg's offered an eloquent discourse on the complex cultural context of cornrows. But the real problem at Valentino was not the hair; it was the conspicuous absence of women of color on the runway. Lack of diversity is an

issue for the entire industry, but the problem was particularly visible at Valentino, where the designers talked the talk of multicultural acceptance:

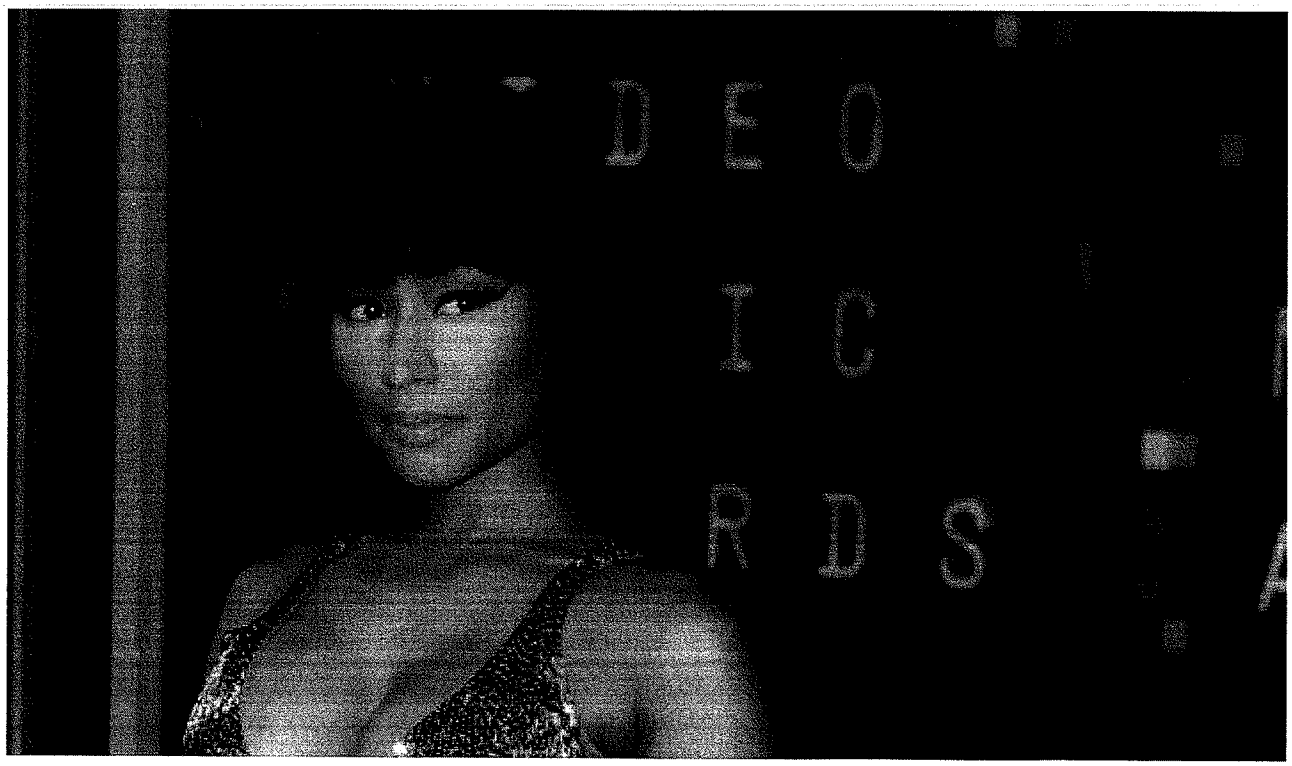
"The message is tolerance," Piccioli told *Vogue*, "and the beauty that comes out of cross-cultural expression."

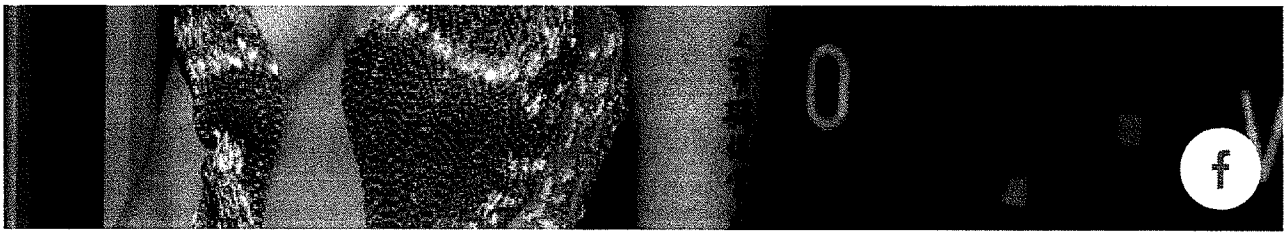
If that's the point, the faces on the catwalk—regardless of their hairstyle—should reflect it.

6. Engage With Other Cultures on More Than an Aesthetic Level

"What would America be like if we loved black people as much as we love black culture?" asks Stenberg in the aforementioned video, a particularly salient point in an America coming to terms with an epidemic of police violence against young black men.

The rapper and TV personality Nicki Minaj echoed the message in *The New York Times Magazine*, in reference to Miley Cyrus, who criticized Minaj's comments about being overlooked for the Video Music Awards because of her race.





Nicki Minaj at the MTV Video Music Awards (Mark Ralston / AFP / Getty Images)

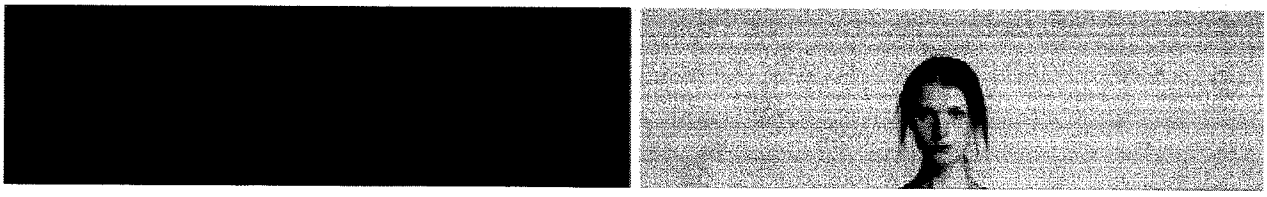
"Come on, you can't want the good without the bad," said Minaj. "If you want to enjoy our culture and our lifestyle, bond with us, dance with us, have fun with us, twerk with us, rap with us, then you should also want to know what affects us, what is bothering us, what we feel is unfair to us. You shouldn't *not* want to know that."

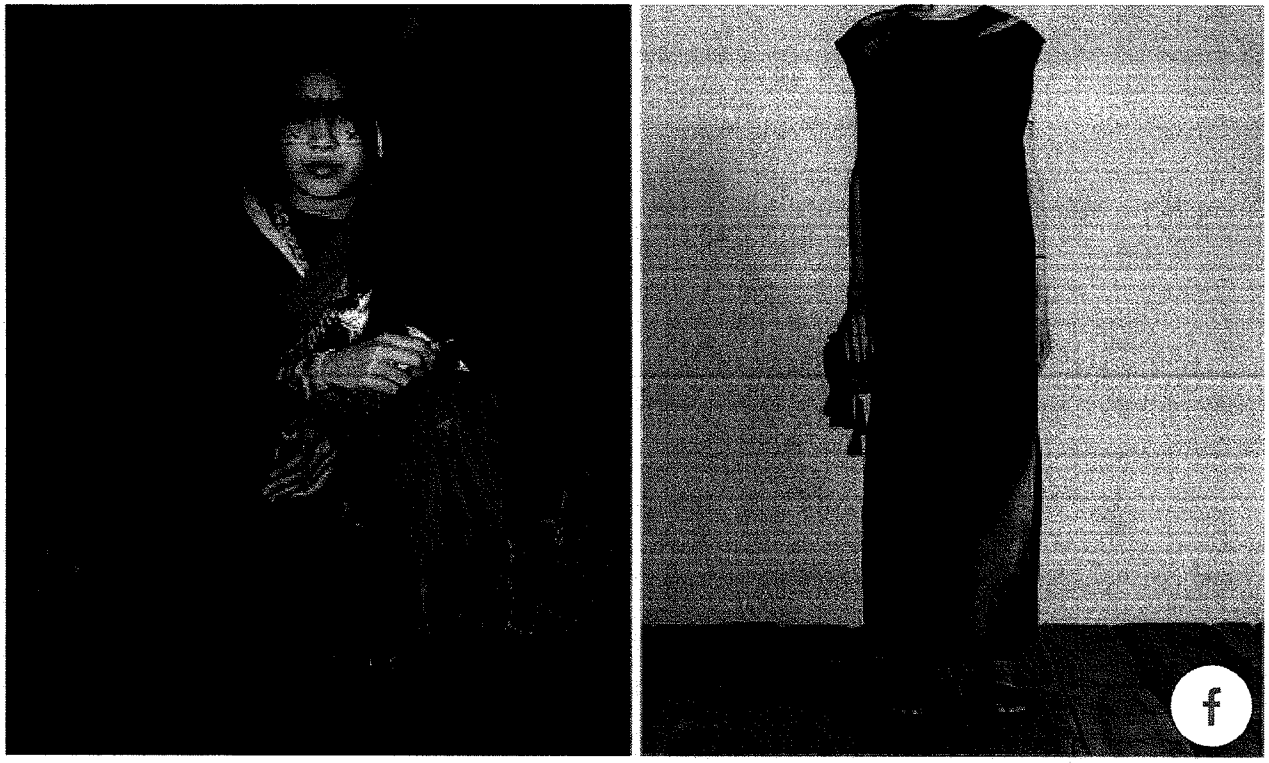
Cherry-picking cultural elements, whether dance moves or print designs, without engaging with their creators or the cultures that gave rise to them not only creates the potential for misappropriation; it also misses an opportunity for art to perpetuate real, world-changing progress.

7. Treat a Cultural Exchange Like Any Other Creative Collaboration—Give Credit, and Consider Royalties

Co-branded collaborations are common business deals in today's fashion industry, and that's just how Oskar Metsavaht, the founder and creative director of the popular Brazilian sportswear brand Osklen, treated his dealings with the Asháninka tribe for Osklen's Spring 2016 collection.

Francisco Piyako, an Asháninka representative, told *Quartz* the tribe will get royalties from Osklen's spring 2016 collection, as well as a heightened public awareness of their continued struggle to protect land against illegal loggers and environmental degradation.





Osklen's Spring 2016 collection (Oskar Metsavaht / Lynda Churilla / Osklen)

In return, Metsavaht returned from his visit with the Asháninka with motifs and concepts for Osklen's spring 2016 collection: Tattoos were reproportioned as a print on silk organza; the striking "Amazon red" of a forest plant accented the collection; and women's fabric slings for carrying children reappeared in the crisscross shape of a dress. Metsavaht's photographs of the Amazon forest, the Asháninka, and wild animals also appeared on garments, as well as Osklen's website.

"Sharing values, sharing visions, sharing the economics, I think it's the easiest way to work," said Metsavaht. "This is the magic of style. It's the magic of art. It's the magic of the design."

And it's a magic that I'd be happy to appropriate for my closet.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JENNI AVINS is a lifestyle reporter at Quartz.

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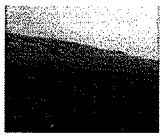

Jet Lag Is Worse on Mars
By Tom Chmielewski

When Your Religion Makes You Too Uncool to Work at Abercrombie

On Wednesday, the Supreme Court heard arguments about discrimination against job applicants who wear headscarves. But the case reveals something deeper about who's considered attractive in America.

EMMA GREEN | FEB 26 2015, 6:45 AM ET

Jim Bourg/Reuters

When she was 17, Samantha Elauf applied to work at an Abercrombie Kids store in Tulsa. She wore a headscarf to the job interview, which she did every day in accordance with her Muslim faith. Before she went to the interview, she asked a friend who worked at the store what she should wear and whether her headscarf would be a problem, but the friend said she would be fine—as long as the scarf wasn't black, because black clothes weren't part of Abercrombie's "look."

She didn't get the job. When the hiring manager saw Elauf's headscarf, she realized that it violated Abercrombie's official Look policy, so she had to ask the district manager whether they could make an exception. The hiring manager thought the headscarf was probably religious garb, but she wasn't sure, she said.

The district manager said they couldn't make an exception. His reasoning, as an attorney recently paraphrased it, was "if we allow this then someone will paint themselves green and call it a religion."

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When Your Religion Makes You Too

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Racism Lives On Under the Cover of 'Religious Freedom'

That was seven years ago. On Wednesday, the Supreme Court heard oral arguments in a discrimination case against Abercrombie & Fitch, brought by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission on behalf of Elauf. The legal question at the center of the case is this: If a job applicant would need some sort of exception to be made to a company policy because of her religion, is it her obligation to mention that in her interview, even if she doesn't know about the company policy?

If it sounds simple, it's not. At various points during oral arguments, Justices Kennedy, Scalia, and Sotomayor all said they were "enormously," "very," or "so totally" confused. The attorneys and the justices exchanged long back-and-forths over the difference between the words "understands, knows, believes, [and] suspects." At one point, Scalia point-blank asked one of the attorneys, "Would you tell me what it is you want?"

According to Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, employers are not allowed to discriminate against potential hires based on their religious belief or practice. It's entirely legal to have a company policy against head coverings, but if an employee needs to wear one for religious reasons, employers are required to make an accommodation, unless they can prove that it will create an "undue hardship" on their business.

In practice, this can be complicated. In this case, for example, the question is whether the hiring managers at Abercrombie really *knew* that Elauf's head covering was religious, or whether they were just *guessing* that it was. This distinction matters; in 2013, the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that correctly assuming that Elauf's headscarf was religious is not the same as actually knowing her headscarf was religious.

Whatever the Supreme Court decides, there will be consequences for people looking for jobs—and for people making hiring decisions. On the one hand, the Equal Opportunity Employment Commission argues that it's unfair to expect a job applicant to ask for an exception to a policy she doesn't know about. On the other hand, Abercrombie argues that employers can't be expected to "start a dialogue" with an applicant if they suspect the applicant's religious practice will violate a company policy, because that would encourage stereotyping and could potentially expose employers to lawsuits.

It could be that the American Look is changing, too.

That's what makes this case so legally serious. But it's serious in another way, too: It's a concrete example of how standards of "attractiveness" and "cool" can be built on inadvertent discrimination. According to court documents, Abercrombie described its brand as "a classic East Coast collegiate style of clothing." When Elauf applied for a job in 2008, the Look policy included prohibitions on black clothing and "caps"; these and other rules were designed to protect "the health and vitality of its 'preppy' and 'casual' brand." As Justice Alito put it during oral arguments, Abercrombie wants job candidates "who [look] just like this mythical preppy or ... somebody who came off the beach in California."

"East Coast" and "preppy" don't necessarily mean "white," but that's what they imply. "Collegiate" doesn't necessarily mean "monied," but that's what it implies. It's not that Abercrombie isn't for black kids or Asian kids or Muslim kids—after all, Samantha Elauf wanted to work in an Abercrombie store. But wearing Abercrombie means styling oneself as a "classic" American—a label traditionally claimed by people who are white and have enough money to care about starched

Uncool to Work at Abercrombie
EMMA GREEN

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collars. Not coincidentally, "classic" Americans probably dress like Protestants—which is to say, they don't dress in much religious garb at all. Abercrombie's business depends on the aspiration to look like a very specific kind of American; for kids who don't look like that, being able to pull on a faded t-shirt and seem a little bit less like an outsider may be Abercrombie's exact appeal.

But those who aren't Abercrombie cool can take heart: Last year, the company's profits dropped by 77 percent, and the CEO responsible for the store's Look policy, Mike Jeffries, resigned. The company's decline is partly due to nationwide sales losses at shopping malls, where Abercrombie & Fitch and its cousin, Hollister, are fixtures. But there's a more amorphous reason, too: For some reason, teens just aren't buying as much Abercrombie as they did in the 90s and 2000s. It could be that the Abercrombie Look has fallen out of fashion, its "distressed" and inexplicably pre-ripped jeans now forgotten in the back of many a Millennial closet. But it could also be that the American Look is changing: As more and more kids look like Samantha Elauf, maybe there won't have to be exceptions made for headscarves. Maybe they'll simply be cool.

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EMMA GREEN is the assistant managing editor of TheAtlantic.com, where she also writes about religion and culture.

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Millennials, bosses disagree on work-life balance

By **Brigid Schulte**

MAY 7, 2015, 9:49 PM

Workers around the globe have been finding it harder to juggle the demands of work and the rest of life in the past five years, a new report shows, with many working longer hours, deciding to delay or forgo having children, discontinuing education, or struggling to pay tuition for their children.

Why?

A big reason is the economy: Professional workers in companies that shed employees in the Great Recession are still doing the work of two or more people and working longer hours. Salaries have stagnated, and costs continue to rise, according to a new survey of nearly 10,000 workers in eight countries by Ernst & Young's Global Generations Research.

But another big reason? The boss just doesn't get it.

Bosses just don't get millennials

▶ Play Video 2:27

Close to 80 percent of millennials surveyed are part of dual-income couples in which both work full time. Of Generation X workers, people in their 30s and 40s now, 73 percent are. But of baby boomers, the generation born just after World War II that now occupies most top management positions, just 47 percent have a full-time working spouse. More than a quarter of baby-boomer workers have a spouse at home, or one who works part time

or with flexible hours and is responsible for taking care of all home-front duties.

"I really see that there's an empathy gap in the workplace," said Karyn Twaronite, Ernst and Young's global-diversity and inclusiveness officer. "When there's frustration about work-life balance in the workplace, and you think your boss doesn't get it, that very likely could be true."

Younger workers see that technology frees them to work productively from anywhere, she said. But older bosses who are more accustomed to work cultures with more face time may see only empty cubicles. "They're afraid people who don't come to the office won't work as hard," she said.

Whole Foods plans store geared toward millennials

Millennial workers, the group that companies say they are scrambling to attract and retain, are the most dissatisfied. Survey after survey, including the EY one, show that what millennials most want is flexibility in where, when and how they work. Millennials as well as men were most likely in the survey to say that they would take a pay cut, forgo a promotion or be willing to move to manage work-life demands better.

Yet the survey found that 1 in 6 reports suffering negative consequences for having a flexible schedule. Lack of flexibility was cited among the top reasons millennials quit jobs. And nearly 40 percent of young workers, male or female, in the United States are so unhappy with the lack of paid parental-leave policies that they say they would be willing to move to another country.

"A figure like that certainly shifts the conversation from paid parental-leave being a 'nice to have' to being a 'need to have' for companies," Twaronite said.

In the United States, the only advanced economy in the world with no paid parental-leave policy, only 9 percent of companies offered fully paid maternity-leave benefits to workers in 2014, down from 16 percent in 2008, according to the Families and Work Institute's National Study of Employers. For spouses and partners, 14 percent of U.S. companies offer paid leave, either partially or fully paid, down from 16 percent in 2008.

The institute found that the share of employers offering reduced hours and career flexibility also has fallen and that flexible work options are not available to all employees, but only to certain groups, such as parents.

Why we need more baby-makers

"Wanting flexibility or work-life balance is the number one thing we hear all the time from candidates. It's the number one reason why people are looking for a new job, by far," said Heidi Parsont, who runs TorchLight, a recruiting firm in Alexandria, Virginia. "We're definitely seeing more candidates asking for it. But companies still see it as making an exception. It's still not the norm."

Ryan Shaw, 23, is a case in point. He doesn't have children, yet he rates work-life balance as not only important but also "necessary for success."

Shaw does social-media marketing for a start-up in Los Angeles called Forcefield. He liked his job. But he didn't like living in L.A., where his expensive rent kept him from being able to pay down his astronomical student loans. He had other job offers that would have given him more money but demanded more work hours.

He had a different idea. He told his boss that he would stay at the company, but only if he could do his job from his laptop, wherever and whenever he wanted. His boss agreed.

So Shaw is moving back home to Florida.

"The narrative that's always drawn is you have to choose financial success or personal success [and] having a life. And to me, that's a false choice," Shaw said. "I think you can have both. I'm sort of playing the long game. I want to take care of my health and have deep relationships with people I care most about. And not just people who happen to be in the same building with me every day."

VIEW COMMENTS (27)