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Fashion: Seminar

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**My Culture Is NOT Your Costume** Every part of the world has its own atmosphere and cultural background. From the people to the types of clothes that are worn; the vast variations of ethnic backgrounds are endless. However, when it comes to dominant groups of people mimicking small marginalized groups there is a problem. When a group of privileged white men wear cornrows or dreads it automatically is offensive to those of the black community because they are being targeted by these groups who are also trying to copy them. There is a distinct difference between appreciating a certain culture and then the exploitation of it. Although, as times are progressing and social media is starting to become a huge influence on our society, this line that divides appreciation and appropriation is being blurred out by several businesses. Specifically, the fashion and entertainment industry. These businesses are confused on where the line stands between appreciating a culture, and selling off of it. Therefore, **the reason why cultural appropriation is happening within these industries is because not enough businesses are being educated on implementing certain styles in order to stay ethical.**

People have been taking styles for centuries. The act of copying one’s hairstyle and dress is not something new for us to understand. However, the problem our society is facing today is how some cultures are being seen as nothing more than a commodity, rather than a culture in a whole. [[1]](#footnote-0)Cultural appropriation is when a group of people take or borrow certain styles from small marginalized groups who face oppression or have been stigmatized for their cultural practices throughout history. The problem with this issue is that no one seems to understand that definition. The blame for this goes straight back to the fashion and entertainment industry.

Cultural appropriation can range from fashion items to even sources of entertainment. Cultural appropriation can also be events, accessories, and more. I see this happening so frequently throughout social media these days and honestly, it is sickening. For example, when people go to music festivals such as Couchella the attire can cross the line of cultural appropriation due to wearing things such as Native American headdresses and the bindi. It is very offensive to wear these items because of the significant meaning they have within the actual culture of where these “accessories” came from. The problem with using these pieces as forms of accessory is that they originate from historic backgrounds. The headdresses are a symbol of power, dominance, and achievement within the Native American culture. Each ruler in power goes through several tasks to receive this honor of wearing the feathered headdresses. Yet, when a white girl at a music festival decides to be edgy and put one on herself that is considered to be very offensive towards something that is so sacred. The bindi is also facing problems within society. There was a hashtag that became viral and was called, “#ReclaimTheBindi.” [[2]](#footnote-1) This hashtag was created by Hindu and South Asian women in efforts to create a safe haven to openly discuss the discrimination and appropriation that they have all personally experienced. Women would explain how they were considered as being “dirty” or “foreign” for wearing the bindi, and how it is not fair or right that the whole dynamic changes when a fair skinned fashion influence wears it and it automatically seen as being “edgy” and “exotic.” When dominant groups and stigmatized groups come together that is where the divide of appreciation and appropriation should be known.

There is a distinct difference between appreciating a certain culture and then the exploitation of it. [[3]](#footnote-2) Cultural appropriation is an extension of racist and imperialist themes and the that theft of land and life has shifted to include the theft of culture as well. This act of theft is spreading throughout different platforms. The fashion industry is one of the best places to look when researching about cultural appropriation because there are so many instances where it has happened but no one really cared

The fashion brands that we all gloriously look up to are also facing cases of cultural appropriation. In our class discussions, we talked about how Gucci had been targeted for cultural appropriation due to their release of Gucci “head pieces” which looked all too familiar to the turban. This release not only caused me to become enraged, but the group of people who actually wear turbans for their religion are being bashed for it and are automatically seen as terrorists and threats in our society. Everyday they are facing a stigma where people who wear turbans are directly connected to terrorist groups. I do not understand how a smart business brand could pull such a bad business tactic such as this. This discussion is what lead to me to discovering that there is another iconic designer who faced the similar dilemma: Marc Jacobs.

Marc Jacobs is a world wide known fashion designer who is known for his understanding of society and his bold statements regarding to it. On the other hand, some fans would disagree due to his recent release of his spring/summer collection. The main focus was on the models hair which was styled into multi-colored dreadlocks. [[4]](#footnote-3)The designer received several accusations of cultural appropriation because of lifting influences from the black culture and showcasing them on a cast of white models. His reasoning apology for the whole incident was, “ And all who cry “cultural appropriation” or whatever nonsense about any race of skin color wearing their hair in a particular style or manner - funny how you don’t criticize women of color for straightening their hair. I respect and am inspired by people and how they look. I don’t see color or race- I see people. I’m sorry to read that so many people are so narrow minded…Love is the answer. Appreciation of all and inspiration from anywhere is a beautiful thing. Think about it.”[[5]](#footnote-4)

I believe this was a very blindsided act for Jacobs to do because of his history of understanding social groups. In fact, the stigma against wearing out traditional black hairstyles has gotten so bad that some schools have banned black girls from being able to wear their natural hair out. Therefore, it was wrong for Jacobs to have made this aesthetic choice because these white models are seen as beautiful and trendy, yet the actual black women who are wearing cornrows and dreads in the workplace are being shunned and treated differently due to their looks.

People who are actually apart of the culture and community are now seen under this stigma of wearing these hairstyles to be apart of the fad or trend, yet it is just their culture which had been marginalized to make people believe that these hairstyles are now “fads.” [[6]](#footnote-5)There was a story where a girl named Tiania, who was only 7 at the time, was not allowed to wear her natural dreadlocks to school, therefore she moved schools. It is socially unacceptable that a little girl was faced with unjust rules such as, “hairstyles such as dreadlocks, afros, and other faddish hairstyles are unacceptable.”[[7]](#footnote-6) This is why cultural appropriation is a problem because I believe that these new rules are not fair because these styles originated from them, so how is it right for schools and government officials to ban these styles and then praise the celebrities for wearing the same thing ? It is almost as if these characteristics are accessories rather than a form of self-identity.

The solution for this misconception of being trendy and culturally inappropriate would be to educate these businesses and consumers on what the difference is between appreciating a culture and appropriating it. First off, someone’s ethnic background and culture is NOT a costume for people to go buy at the store. Someone’s ethnic background and culture is NOT a fad. Appropriation is incredibly harmful to the cultural identity. [[8]](#footnote-7)The fundamental difference between appreciation and appropriation is that cultural appreciation does not exist. The reason why it does not exist is because it is nearly impossible to. For instance, if someone was actually interested in appreciating a certain culture, he or she would most likely research about the culture and the significance of the clothing and accessories. Yet, this usually ends up being appropriation due to no one actually caring and just picking out the little pretty bindi’s without a second thought.

Now, there is another comparison when it comes to this topic: appropriation and the act of exchange. The difference between appropriation and exchange is that cultural appropriation is when an individual working within the power dynamic where members of a dominant culture take particular elements from a culture of people who have been oppressed by that *same* dominant group. Exchange is different because there is no power imbalance. Whereas when artists or businesses appropriate they take traits from other cultures and profit off of them, and do not give any of the profits to the small marginalized group that they have basically stolen from.

Appropriating a culture is so easy to do because it seems like there is no harm being done. Little does anyone know that these so called fashion statements could cause a chain reaction of backlash and miscommunication. Although, what if some people defended cultural appropriation and thought there was no problem with it ? There was a New York Times article that was released and one of the headlines were, “In Defense of Cultural Appropriation.” This article was basically about defending cultural appropriation, which in my opinion is outrageous. The truth is, cultural appropriation can not be defended. People who are defending it are either confused, don’t know what it is exactly, or just simply ignoring its true complexity and background. I agree with this because how can someone be okay with other people literally taking their source of identity ? I disagree with the claims made in the New York Times article because there are several facts and events that can prove that cultural appropriation is indefensible.

In conclusion, there is a distinct difference between appreciating a certain culture and then the exploitation of it. The type of clothing is not the only culprit, but also hairstyles, accessories, and make up can also be apart of cultural appropriation. Through my research, I have learned that cultural appropriation is not a topic that is defendable, but is also a topic that is unavoidable. I thought it was so interesting learning about the difference between exchanging with the small marginalized groups and appropriating them because in the beginning of my research I had no idea there was a difference. I was shocked at the responses to the Marc Jacobs collection because he claimed that it was to represent love for everyone, yet he used white models instead of colored ones to actually display their natural hair styles. I learned that cultural appropriation also does not only exist within fashion but also social events as well. My thoughts on the fashion industry has not changed because I believe they need to push themselves farther into their research about what is culturally acceptable and what is not. Businesses need to learn new ethical ways to display their artistic visions without targeting small stigmatized groups for profit.

**Annotated Bibliography**

"Figure 2f From: Irimia R, Gottschling M (2016) Taxonomic Revision of Rochefortia Sw. (Ehretiaceae, Boraginales). Biodiversity Data Journal 4: E7720. Https://doi.org/10.3897/BDJ.4.e7720." doi:10.3897/bdj.4.e7720.figure2f.

I found this source to be very helpful because it provided me with a clear and educational definition and understanding of what cultural appropriation is.

Fury, Alexander. "Marc Jacobs and the Appropriateness of Appropriation." The New York Times. September 21, 2016. Accessed April 16, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/21/t-magazine/fashion/marc-jacobs-dreadlocks-appropriation.html.

This source gave me insight on what exactly did Marc Jacobs get targeted for and how his response was to it. I know this is not an educational source, however it did give me a lot of information on the incident that happened with Jacobs and his spring/summer collection.

Persch, Jasmin Aline. "Girl, 7, Switches Schools after Her Dreadlocks Are Banned." TODAY.com. September 06, 2013. Accessed April 16, 2018. <https://www.today.com/parents/girl-7-switches-schools-after-her-dreadlocks-are-banned-8C11095779>.

This source was very helpful because it gave a real report on a incident where a student was not allowed to wear her natural hair out because it was considered as being a “fad.” I disagree with this and this article gave me background information on exactly how outrageous these new school dress code regulations are getting.

"The Thin Line Between Appreciation and Exploitation." New York Apparel RSS. Accessed April 16, 2018. https://macaulay.cuny.edu/eportfolios/whatwewear/cultural-appropriation/.

This was one of my favorite articles because it gave such a good explanation on how different appreciating a culture is rather than exploiting it.

Young, James O. "Profound Offense and Cultural Appropriation." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63, no. 2 (2005): 135-46. http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.newschool.edu/stable/3700467.

This source was a little long and boring at times but the definition that the James Young provided fit very well into my paper and helped expand my idea, as well as give further details about the true meaning of cultural appropriation.

1. "Figure 2f From: Irimia R, Gottschling M (2016) Taxonomic Revision of Rochefortia Sw. (Ehretiaceae, Boraginales). Biodiversity Data Journal 4: E7720. Https://doi.org/10.3897/BDJ.4.e7720." doi:10.3897/bdj.4.e7720.figure2f. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. "The Thin Line Between Appreciation and Exploitation." New York Apparel RSS. Accessed April 16, 2018. https://macaulay.cuny.edu/eportfolios/whatwewear/cultural-appropriation/. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. "The Thin Line Between Appreciation and Exploitation." New York Apparel RSS. Accessed April 16, 2018. https://macaulay.cuny.edu/eportfolios/whatwewear/cultural-appropriation/. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Fury, Alexander. "Marc Jacobs and the Appropriateness of Appropriation." The New York Times. September 21, 2016. Accessed April 16, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/21/t-magazine/fashion/marc-jacobs-dreadlocks-appropriation.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Fury, Alexander. "Marc Jacobs and the Appropriateness of Appropriation." The New York Times. September 21, 2016. Accessed April 16, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/21/t-magazine/fashion/marc-jacobs-dreadlocks-appropriation.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Persch, Jasmin Aline. "Girl, 7, Switches Schools after Her Dreadlocks Are Banned." TODAY.com. September 06, 2013. Accessed April 16, 2018. <https://www.today.com/parents/girl-7-switches-schools-after-her-dreadlocks-are-banned-8C11095779>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Persch, Jasmin Aline. "Girl, 7, Switches Schools after Her Dreadlocks Are Banned." TODAY.com. September 06, 2013. Accessed April 16, 2018. <https://www.today.com/parents/girl-7-switches-schools-after-her-dreadlocks-are-banned-8C11095779>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Young, James O. "Profound Offense and Cultural Appropriation." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63, no. 2 (2005): 135-46. http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.newschool.edu/stable/3700467. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)