

Ethnic

Futurism

Do we really live in a post-identity world, or is that just a naive aspiration expressed by the powerful elite? **By Clara Young**



PHOTOGRAPH BY MAXTREE

One of the stranger things about the Fall 2018 Gucci show was how the turbans got more press than the severed heads. Models carried their domes in the crook of their arms, like rugby balls. Even so, when it came to headlines, the headdresses trumped the heads. “Dear @gucci,” tweeted @SinghLions, Harjinder Singh Kukreja, “The Sikh turban is not a hot new accessory for white models but an article of faith for practicing Sikhs. Your models have used turbans as ‘hats’ whereas practicing Sikhs tie them neatly fold by fold. Using fake Sikhs/turbans is worse than selling fake Gucci products.”

Gucci’s calling out was swift and exacting. Gone are the impunitive days when Yves Saint Laurent turban-topped his ladies and Edith Head wrapped leopard-print scarves around Gloria Swanson’s head. Turbans used to convey oriental glamour; now they spell occidental trouble. Marc Jacobs accessorized with turbans a season earlier than Gucci and escaped critics’ beheading by a mere hair’s breadth. His were worn by a more ethnically variegated selection of models. (Jacobs had learned his lesson from dreadlock-gate. Alessandro Michele’s models, though, were as white and waxy-looking as zombies.)

Veronica Etro also blended cultural references into her Southwestern-inspired collection. She described the mélange as her vision of “ethnic futurism”—or an imagined post-identity world. Ben Barry, chair of fashion and associate professor of equity, diversity and inclusion at Toronto’s Ryerson School of Fashion, has a different take. When designers confuse appreciation with appropriation, it “shows ignorance to the way in which power works in the world,” he says. “It’s easy for Marc Jacobs to put turbans on the runway and say he’s celebrating Sikh culture, but many Sikh men who live in the world and live in Western countries and walk down the street in turbans experience material consequences for wearing them. They experience marginalization, exclusion and violence.”

Some say the mood board makes fashion culturally tone-deaf. A collage of images compiled willy-nilly, like a magpie’s nest of bright and beautiful inspirations, the mood board functions as the guiding principle of what the designer wants to express. What it lacks is context. “It’s detached from the lived experiences of people,” says Barry. “True knowledge about culture and design and experience comes from people. We can learn a lot if we move away from this design board as a source of knowledge to engage with the people and communities who inspire us and wear our clothes.”

About Gucci’s turbans, Barry asks: “Which communities were engaged in the design process? Were Sikh communities engaged? Were Sikh designers part of the design team? How are profits being shared among the design team and with the communities, specifically the Sikh communities? When we see designers, specifically white designers, draw from cultures other than their own, these are questions that need to be asked.”

Cultural accountability and auditing, the kind that Barry advocates, may be the right thing to do, societally speaking, but do they sit well with the freedom and playfulness of designing clothes and crafting fantasy? Can the careful accrediting and footnoting of inspirations yield art that soars and sings?

At Gucci, more than at any other house, there is a sense of a stupendous cache of theatre costumes stumbled upon in an old attic somewhere. Hence the tickle-trunk madness of turbans, pagoda hats, mitre Yankee caps and belly-dancing headpieces. Playing dress-up and dressing up are ways to escape, and fashion is the purest, most do-it-yourself escape from the drudgeries of life.

“I love clothing, and I was always connected to costumes from a young age and dressed in a bohemian, crazy way,” says designer-turned-artist Miguel Adrover. “I used to go to church dressed as a Mohican with a long skirt from my grandmother. I lived in Spain, under a dictatorship, under the Catholic religion.” Adrover paid a steep price for his escapism. A New York star during the late ’90s and early ’00s, he shone as brightly and as hotly as Alexander McQueen and John Galliano. He was spending a great deal of time in Egypt then and had the Middle East and North Africa on his brain. Adrover designed a collection filled with caftans, turbans and veils and had the bad luck of showing it just two days before 9/11. The next month, he lost his financial backing. »

#### HOW DO YOU SOLVE A PROBLEM LIKE CULTURAL APPROPRIATION?

It’s a tricky world out there, but here’s a guide to help you navigate your way through. **By Pahull Bains**

From Anna Dello Russo in a Native American headdress to Kim Kardashian in cornrows and from Marc Jacobs’s dreadlocked white models to Gucci’s runway turbans, fashion’s problem with cultural appropriation doesn’t seem to be going away. Where is the line between appreciation and appropriation? Then there is the bigger-picture question: How do we discourage cultural exploitation while still promoting a healthy cross-pollination of ideas?

For some perspective on just how complex the issue is, the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), a United Nations agency, has been attempting to make cultural appropriation illegal for years but with little progress, says Anjali Patel, a Toronto-based fashion lawyer. Although a legal reprisal may be a ways away, here’s what you can do in the meantime.

**UNDERSTAND THE ISSUE.** First things first. Cultural appropriation is not a territorial issue. The outrage in response to these infractions doesn’t merely stem from a tussle over the ownership of a certain culture or an attempt to wall off one culture from another. To understand the root of the problem is to acknowledge the power imbalance that drives it. “Borrowing references from other cultures is problematic because we exist in a world built on the hierarchy of societies and cultures,” says Susan E. Jean, a founding editor of the fashion psychology magazine *Hajinksy*. “As the traditional model of the fashion industry was established in Europe, picking elements from typically non-Western cultures to inform design choices without acknowledging or participating in their cultural significance reinforces this power dynamic. Taking credit, recognition and/or financial rewards for something created by others who are largely dismissed, exploited or oppressed is harmful.”

So the next time you’re drawn to a Navajo print at a high-fashion store? Take a minute to think about it. “Marginalized individuals are becoming increasingly disenfranchised with seeing aspects of their culture reduced to a style statement,” says »

Cultural insensitivity did not do Adrover's business in; historical sensitivity did, and so did market sensitivity. But what if the attacks hadn't happened? Would Adrover, who is Spanish, have been reprimanded for his Ishtar-inspired looks?

This is where we return to the severed heads. After the Gucci show, Alessandro Michele told a reporter: "We exist to reproduce ourselves, but we have moved on. We are in a post-human era, for sure; it is under way." Michele had been reading *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*, an essay written in 1984 by an academic named Donna Haraway.

Haraway believed that the boundary-blurring cyborg, who is both human and machine and therefore not really one or the other but something entirely new, was a way to escape the dualities that imprison us. In the case of the *Cyborg Manifesto*, whose concern is feminism, Haraway focuses on the essentialist dualism of male/female and man/woman, but cyborg thinking is a way out of other dualisms, too, like the ones that dog debates about turbans, dreadlocks and cornrows. We operate within increasingly narrow confines chopped up by innumerable fences: imperialist/colonized, dominant/marginalized, white/black, white/brown, religious/secular, you/me....

Haraway believed that if you are hybrid, a mosaic, a pastiche, a form of fusion—that if you are a human machine or a monster in the Frankenstein sense, patched together out of various dead body parts, whose existence pushes out the farthest limits of human experience—then you are in utterly new territory, unpopulated by the old binaries of powerful and powerless.

In the show, whose setting was a clinic, Michele was a self-proclaimed Victor Frankenstein and the models were suitably dead-looking. He was proposing them as new identity-free people with no allegiance or association to tribe, religion, ethnicity or gender. By extension, what they were wearing was similarly empty of meaning. "The act of cutting, splicing and reconstructing material and fabrics to create a new personality and identity" read a note on one of Gucci's Instagram photos.

French designer Marine Serre, who has come under fire for the crescent moon motif—which is very much like the Islamic moon—on her clothing, told *The Cut*: "I'm really trying to push this hybridity by mixing things together.... I really tried to actually break these boundaries and borders and taboos. My work is about hybridity, and of course I do not wish to be associated with cultural appropriation. Today, the world is merging because of the media, because of Instagram."

Is it coincidental that the designers who are proffering cultures of everyone and cultures of no one are white? Probably not. That futuristic "vision thing" comes more easily to those who do not battle with the everyday ignominies of missing out on an apartment because of the way they wear their hair or being passed over for a job because of their last name.

Still, it wouldn't be right to end the article here and conclude that turbans on white-skinned models and Islamic moons on form-fitting bodysuits are dangerous decoys in the cultural wars. The identity conflicts we trigger when we "carefreely" co-opt the hair, clothing and symbols of exclusion—the daastar, the hijab, cornrows, the yellow star, the afro—are about infinitely just causes. But they often fracture the fight for an even more urgent justice, which is of the evermore poor and powerless many—the 99.99 per cent—against the invisible, self-perpetuating system of the wealthy and powerful few. It is a slightly different fight—economic, not cultural—and one that is propelled by indignation, which is what we feel when designers turn important cultural symbols into empty fashion accessories.

Yet if the bigger fish to fry is not cultural but economic fairness, winning it requires a coming together. It requires us to, even if temporarily, set aside or merge our different, diversionary you/me conflicts and join our affronted identities in the common cause of economic justice. □

Kimberly Jenkins, a lecturer at Parsons the New School in New York. "They're frustrated because the people who typically draw this inspiration are white or enjoy some sort of power or privilege over them."

**ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS.** You may love a particular designer or brand, but is it engaging in positive and respectful practices when it comes to borrowing from other cultures? Jean suggests you find out if the communities or cultures being referenced have been recognized and are benefiting financially. Loewe's forthcoming home collection, presented at Salone del Mobile in Milan earlier this year, does just that, bringing together artisans, crafts and design traditions from different parts of the globe. The collection of blankets, tote bags, tapestries and decorative boxes features ribbon embroidery from India, patchwork from Togo and Senegal, hand-painted silk tapestries from Japan and more, all coming together—sometimes on the same piece. But rather than exploiting centuries-old traditions for the purposes of a designer collection, Jonathan Anderson, the brand's creative director, and his team travelled to these countries to engage with the artisans in person, documenting the process in videos highlighting the efforts of those involved. In addition, profits from the project will be donated to charities promoting women's education and traditional craft in minority communities around the world.

**CHOOSE CREDIBLE SOURCES.** Seeking out the right sources for the designs you admire is vital, whether you're buying directly from the designers whose culture it is or from brands that have demonstrated a respectful working relationship with the artisans from that culture.

**MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD.** "Social media offers consumers the ability to rally for the change they wish to see," says Cassandra Napoli, associate editor with WGSN. "They are being educated online by popular Instagram accounts, like Diet Prada, that fearlessly call out the perpetrating brands, but they are also looking to one another and having honest conversations. This has created a new reality in which these types of design decisions are simply not tolerated [because] consumers are in a position of power and have the ability to dictate where they place their dollars."



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