

Global Ethno-scape

Maintaining & Expressing Ethnic-Identity through Contemporary Fashion

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ABSTRACT

Economic and cultural globalization, in the 21st century, has ushered in extreme awareness in almost every aspect of identity. For centuries, fashion has become the easiest and greatest catalyst of self-expression. What is most intriguing is the ongoing immense pressure for individuals to quickly find their self-identities and voices in an ever changing society. As individuals move around and cross borders, maintaining and expressing their ethnic identities becomes even more sacred and important than ever before. This is a dimension, according to Arjun Appadurai, known as ethno-scape. And as we adapt ethno-cultures, and fashions from it, our self-identity becomes mixed and skewed over time. This paper will stimulate discussions about the global ethno-scape from a fashion perspective, and how our ability to imitate and morph, allows us to conform and differentiate, belong and isolate, ourselves within social groups and society. Personally, I have experienced this transformation as a native of The Bahamas emigrating to the United States. Although there is no “national dress” (a distinctive cultural attire) of The Bahamas, I still found it difficult to express my nostalgia for my ethno-culture. Today, the political climate of the world, has led us to continue to adversely discriminate against those that show a distinct ‘dress’ that expresses a specific ethno-cultural background. Tactlessly, sub-cultures generate fashions as a part of the becoming of an ethno-scape. In 2008, Veena Chattaraman and Sharron J. Lennon, conducted a study that investigated whether ethnic consumer’s consumption of cultural apparel, and attributional responses related to their consumption, is predicted by the strength of ethnic identification. Although my proposal will not venture in depth on cultural/ethnic consumption, this research does provide a prospective that can be attributed as valuable. It is my hope that my proposal will create a better understanding of the ongoing contradiction and struggle to maintain ones’ ethno-cultural identity in an ever changing, contemporary fashionable world.

KEYWORDS: ethno-scape, cultural identity, ethnic consumption, globalization, capitalism

(Communicating Cultural Flows) (Globalization of Cultural Flows)

Fashion, clothing in particular, has allowed us to tell stories about ourselves and our identities. The ability to visually communicate who we are, what social/ethnic group we belong to, and who we would like to be, all play a part in telling this story. Ideally, as we shift and move around, there is always an initial setting as to where the story takes place. In comparison, socio-cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, proposes that there are five dimensions of global cultural flow, one of which he has coined ethno-scapes. By this he implies that “landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers and other moving groups and persons [who] constitute an essential feature of the world, and appear to affect the politics of and between nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree” (Appadurai 1988). In its simplest explanation, as individuals move about and cultures flow so do the external identities of people. This has not only given rise to world fashions but also the need for people to express where they are from in foreign environments, in order to communicate with others who, share the same origin.

(Belonging in Difference: A Social Performance)

Although Appadurai’s work constitutes increasingly heated debates surrounding the cultural dimensions of globalization, this concept can surely be adapted to further understand cultural flows and self-identity within the fashion industry. On the other hand, ethnicity also involves belonging, becoming, as well as being that have histories, and at the same time undergo constant transformation (Hall 1990). There is a constant change and shift in the way people want to be perceived. The processes of belonging and differentiating work simultaneously when individuals seek self-identity. Cultural studies scholars call it ‘belonging- in- difference’ (Kaiser 2003). It also constitutes belonging as fitting in, which denotes being a part of, yet a part from. To add to the complexity, there is this ongoing internal tension between displaying individual statements and social performances.

Fashion has been made accessible to everyone through high-low collaborations, social media and real-time fashion mediation (Mackinney-Valentin 2017). The context of ethnicity will be used to relate to

a concept that considers how identities are shaped by space and cultural backgrounds that includes the past and the future. Joanne Eicher, editor of *Dress and Ethnicity: Change Across Space and Time*, defines ethnic dress as that which is worn by members of one group, who distinguish themselves through differentiation by those items, ensembles, and body modifications, which all speak of an individual's past through the adaptation of traditional items which speak of cultural heritage.

In *Fashioning Identity: Status Ambivalence in Contemporary Fashion*, Maria Mackinney-Valentin conducted a case study on the Western world perception of how African males dress, and the actual every day dress of these men in their native countries. She points out that the people of African countries wear what is termed "world dress," which is defined as Western style shirts and pants bought cheaply or secondhand, and not so much the multi-colored patterns and prints that the Western world would have us believe. However, soccer jerseys have become a part of their every-day identity as well. For some of her participants, the reasons for wearing soccer jerseys served less a functional purpose, and more so the purpose of making an individual statement and social performance. This case suggests that ethno-cultures are heavily influenced by world dress, and also, the ability to express ethnic-identity will become even less apparent as world dress becomes the dominant form of self-identity through fashion.

But in many ways world dress is heavily influenced by ethno-cultures due to ethno-scapes. Edward Said has referenced this concept as orientalism: 'biased and distorted "outsider" interpretations of the East (Kaiser 2012). As a cultural and religious connotation, head coverings were used as veils for women and turbans for men in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia. Now, textile head coverings can be seen coming down fashion runways as part of the 'every day' world dress. The complicated fashion system has subjected itself as an agent of orientalism, with its fascination with ethno-cultural differences in dress. It is evident that Appadurai (ethno-scapes) and Said (orientalism) theories are being expended simultaneously in fashion.

Conclusion

The importance of this research rest on finding out ethno-cultural position, and why it is so crucial for the continued evolution of the fashion industry. As the world continues to shift, individuals are not expected to express themselves through one type of fashion. Instead, adapting entails a combination of ethno-scape and orientalism as part of our 'everyday' wardrobe. This research will show how the fashion industry is in itself crossing borders to offer 'new' fashions for the world to wear. It is important for individuals to maintain some part of their ethnic-identity when crossing borders, and I endeavor to understand the depths and extent individuals go to. As well as discover the limitations and restrictions that can occur.

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