

A Culture paradox

Assessment 2: In postmodern and digital contexts, the new is constantly being 'hacked' out of the old. Borrowing, stealing, recycling, appropriating and collaging are dominant creative strategies in contemporary art and design. Using three or four examples from the last 20 years, critically analyse 'remix culture.'

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The onset of easily available information has caused a steady increase in appropriation. However, appropriation is often confused with being a remix, an easily misunderstood media. Remix culture or remixing is the process of using pre-existing samples to combine and/or create a new work based on the user's purpose.¹

Artists, designers, and creative producers are routinely dealing with differentiating remixing and cultural appropriation, unfortunately, misstep-ing into the appropriation zone time and again. Theoretically, remixing aims to utilize accessible material of any form into creating new work with similar or contrasting meaning. Appropriation, on the other hand, lifts existing works in whole or partially, intending to use them for new pieces that do not consider the original creator's values, sometimes even so as to upset them. The need to appropriate is debatable, but the form itself can be traced back to colonial and even older periods when the colonizer looted not only the wealth but also the culture of its colonies.² During that period, the colonized states lost millennia-old artifacts to the looters, now embroiled in a battle between the origin country and the 'founder'. From language to food, the effect of appropriation is evident in every object we come across. Historians and academics' confrontation of stolen and appropriated art around the world proves the immorality of the actions of our conquerors. This extends to the exploitation of cultural entities by mass producers for commercial benefits. Conversely remixing aims to provide new context while using permissible existing content and in some cases even better the understanding of the previous art. When done accurately, remixing can benefit a larger audience due to generally being more contemporary in nature.

Evidence of remixing and appropriation is ever present in fashion, now more so than ever. Historically appropriation did not pose a threat to its development, allowing fashion brands and couturiers to loot from varied cultures for its own benefits for decades. Today, on the other hand, fashion houses or labels can be rightfully entangled in lawsuits with the slightest appropriation, so much so that the term *appropriation chic* is used to describe the employment of racial, cultural or ethnic variety as a prop for promotion.³ On the other hand, the majority of consumers remain ignorant to the consequences of appropriation; owing to the importance fashion has been given in social status quo. The long-term implication of purveying appropriated fashion is a knowledge that must be propagated religiously amongst communities.

¹ Navas E, 'Remix Theory » Remix Defined' (*Remixtheory.net*, 2006) <http://remixtheory.net/?page_id=3> accessed 11 August 2017

² Arewa, O. (2016). Cultural appropriation: when 'borrowing' becomes exploitation. [online] the conversation. Available at:

² Arewa, O. (2016). Cultural appropriation: when 'borrowing' becomes exploitation. [online] the conversation. Available at: • <http://theconversation.com/cultural-appropriation-when-borrowing-becomes-exploitation-57411> [Accessed 21 Sep. 2017].

³ Pham, . (2017). *Why We Should Stop Talking About "Cultural Appropriation"*. [online] The Atlantic. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/05/cultural-appropriation-in-fashion-stop-talking-about-it/370826/> [Accessed 19 Sep. 2017].

Fashion designer Stella McCartney used a plaid pattern titled ‘Chinatown plaid’ in her fall 2013 ready to wear collection, which instantaneously became infamous for being culturally appropriated. The pattern is seen across China and South East Asia on migrant workers’ plastic carry all’s. McCartney was labeled insensitive, for turning a poor man’s symbol into couture fashion, giving rise to the existing misuse of cultural symbols in fashion. The carry all’s held the meager belongings a migrant worker carried to urban centers in search of a new life. The plaid took off immediately, being repeated on clothes and accessories across brands. The fashion house was admonished by Chinese media and netizens, but this wasn’t a novelty in fashion. Before the onset of fashion as an extensively consumer based industry, clothing trends were heavily influenced by culture, tradition, climate and religion. That, in turn, indicates the adaptation of clothing based on its immediate environment. These adaptations are accredited to the fusion of cultures over centuries, as an immediate effect of globalization. Over 3000 years ago, the Scottish are said to have invented the plaid as a pattern, calling it Tartan.⁴ This plaid entered China more than 3000 years ago,

Its travel to China is attributed to *the Cherchen man*; a Caucasian man’s mummy found in Western China that is almost 3000 years old. After that the plaid slowly became a standard textile as well as utility pattern across Chinese objects, eventually becoming the iconic pattern for the carry alls. Thus the Chinatown plaid cannot be credited to the migrant worker carry alls, further proving that their history may be older than even Tartan. Since fashions copyright laws are more relaxed than other media,



*Stella Mccartney’s fall 2013
‘Chinatown plaid’*

creators are less burdened with the legalities of mistakenly using materials in their creations. The result is a free culture, which generates a plethora of products for the end consumer across designs and brands. The variety free culture provides is an advantage for both consumer and creator, prompting consumers to seek out originality from creators.

The invention of easily transferable data has encouraged the spurting of fusion cultures that contain hybrid practices, rituals and arts. Formerly trading between countries or kingdoms, where the best of their merchandise was displayed for sale, instigated this. The more rare or exotic objects attracted traders, who in turn brought treasures from their own lands. Although considered fusion cultures in their formative years, these are the building blocks of our futures normalized cultures. Over time, these cultures will become what we consider ancient cultures today, sometimes erasing their roots in the process, thus cementing the logic that nothing can be named a hundred percent original.

⁴Lewis D, 'A Brief History Of Plaid' (*Smithsonian*, 2015) <<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/brief-history-plaid-180957342/>> accessed 11 August 2017

French fashion house Chanel launched its Boomerang with its 2017 spring-summer collection.⁵ Under the guise of a fashion accessory, the boomerang retailed at a staggering \$2000, further pushing the envelope of benefiting from cultural appropriation. As a merely aesthetic product, its design contained the iconic Chanel monogram, lacquered to gleaming black color, yet its shape was ergonomically inaccurate for a boomerang. Social media was split about its acceptance of the inefficient boomerang, the wealthier lot buying it for everything from a show of pomp to simple ignorance. Originally aboriginal, the boomerang is synonymous with Australian iconography, featuring in Australian media and merchandise for decades.



Chanel's 2017 spring-summer collection Boomerang

Having been mass-produced as souvenirs or toys in offsite menial labor factories, it is easy to disregard the insensitivity involved when purchasing the same during vacations. The two incidents bring up the question of whether cultural appropriation only applies to the elite in the eyes of the common man, forgiving the appropriations by smaller creators. Some research shows that Chanel produced boomerangs in 2006 for their flagship sporting goods store in Hong Kong.⁶ Back then; it was passed off as a sporting good, even though it retailed at an equally staggering price yet media was not seen in an uproar or calling out the fashion giant. As a sports equipment, a boomerang could be considered beyond cultural allusions thus removing it from controversies. It can be argued that the boomerang sport is far too uncommon to require a high fashion upgrade, but this applies to any sport in use. High fashion consumers and commoners had somehow failed to see the cultural appropriation, which can be attributed to the lack of widespread understanding of its detrimental effects. The by-product of easily available information is the obligation the general public has to educate themselves enough to overcome ignorance.

⁵ Tullin P, 'Why Remixing Art And Technology Can Only Benefit The Culture Sector' (*the Guardian*, 2013) <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture-professionals-network/culture-professionals-blog/2013/sep/04/remix-summit-art-technology-london-nyc>> accessed 11 August 2017

⁶ nitro:licious. (2017). *Chanel Sport Exhibition* - nitrolicious.com. [online] Available at: <http://nitrolicious.com/2006/10/24/chanel-sport-exhibition/> [Accessed 21 Sep. 2017]



Victorias Secrets' Native American Headdress

Victoria's Secret has prided itself in showcasing long legged slim perfect models as the ideal of beauty. Renowned for its decked out runways and use of extravagant props for its models, the lingerie giant added insensitive to their repertoire by sending out a model in Native American headdress and inspired jewelry. The large hyper-realistic feathered headdress is not specific to any particular Native American tribe, however, is the stereotypical costume based ones seen across cos-play stores. Native American clothing and accessories have become commonplace during Halloween, misused as get-ups on kids and adults alike. Spotted in the party scene, and retailed by major brands like Forever 21, Urban Outfitters etcetera, the products come with 'Navajo' or names of other tribes that have since become an adjective to added their aesthetics.⁷ Their original purpose has since been overlooked, owing to them being more economically profitable in fashion than religiously important for their native owners.

Originally worn for sacred rituals or by tribal chiefs, the headdress was first subjected to charms and enchantments that bestowed power upon them. The headdress is put to shame when used as a decoration, placed on the heads of individuals who may not be acceptable in Native American cultures. When clothing retailers replicate these attires into substandard plastic versions, painted in garish colors, the Native American communities are portrayed as out of date, trivial societies. Overtime time, this becomes the typecast role they are interpreted as, instead of the sophisticated and successful individuals they've built themselves to become. Hypocritically Native American artisans have taken to using their heritage as a certification for manufacturing as well as selling articles from their culture. These articles can be seen on sale across countries, even websites, sometimes purchased along with a spell or ritual that activates their said power. The artisans creating them are seldom authorities on the topic, resulting in the articles being produced in the same way as a non-Native American would produce them. As rightful successors to their culture, they're as equally responsible to be custodians of their heritage as we are of protecting dwindling cultures into extinction.

⁷ Grinberg, E. (2017). Why Native American designers are not OK with fashion headdresses - CNN. [online] CNN. Available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/11/30/living/native-american-fashion-appropriation/index.html> [Accessed 21 Sep. 2017].



Givenchy's fall 2015 'Victorian Chola'

'Chola' is used to describe Latin American Women with a distinctive style of baggy pants, gelled down tresses and dark lip liner.⁸ For their Fall 2015 collection, Givenchy sent predominantly white models down the runway sporting a heavy Chola make-up and hair, revised with Victorian fashion. Titled "Victorian Chola", fashion factions, highlighting the problematic characteristics, immediately picked up the show. Sported on several pop icons like Selena Gomez, Rihanna and FKA Twigs, the Chola style has seen a resurgence in recent times.⁹ Masquerading as a fashion trend, prevalent from the runway to the streets, Chola style is being mimicked by women everywhere, of whom many do not understand the appropriation they're supporting. Impersonating a minority ethnic groups tradition can lead to misinterpretation of their practice, hurting sentimental values in the process. Every practice, even in dressing styles, has roots that can be traced back to the originator's ethos, religious customs and personal struggle that they translated into their appearance as defiance or acceptance. In their early years, the Chola style was reserved for Latina American women, being demeaned by their Caucasian counterparts, much to the same way styles followed by African American women were labeled 'ghetto'. Adoption of these styles by celebrities brought them to the lime light suddenly converting them into chic, runway looks, robbing their original proprietors without credit or concern. Chola fashions exaggerated pinned up hairstyles are reminiscent of the pin-up culture, while their large gold hoops and chains are similar to African American & hip-hop accessories. Their similarities may extend beyond aesthetics, but it's in their differences that they have found a niche for themselves in the world. Donning Chola or African American attire does not entail an individual entry to their culture, a factor that is disregarded by trendsetters and followers alike. Belonging to any culture goes beyond appearance and by determining a cultures characteristics based on their exterior is to disregard their other accomplishments and qualities.

⁸ Chung, M. (2015). *The Problem With Givenchy's Fall 2015 Show*. [online] HuffPost UK. Available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/03/10/givenchy-chola_n_6838656.html [Accessed 21 Sep. 2017].

⁹ Shepherd, J. (2014). *Chola style – the latest cultural appropriation fashion crime?*. [online] the Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2014/aug/15/-sp-chola-style-cultural-appropriation-fashion-crime> [Accessed 21 Sep. 2017].

When a designer or creator is given freedom to use everything as inspiration, they are in turn instigated to innovate competitively, leading much more original works. Creative producers have a duty to be considerate of the values, morals and ethos of their inspiration, never intentionally offending anyone's emotions. Appreciating the origin of a trend, whilst understanding its deeper meaning educates its viewer, demolishing any ignorant views that can help clarify other misunderstandings. In this manner, it is possible to be culturally appreciative and not appropriate.¹⁰

¹⁰ Tazi D, 'How To Culturally Appreciate And Not Culturally Appropriate' (*Dazed*, 2016) <<http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/28767/1/how-to-culturally-appreciate-and-not-culturally-appropriate>> accessed 11 August 2017

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