Global Village Chic: "Multicultural Fashion" and the Commodification of Pluralism

Nicole Bennett

"I wanted to point out the tribal roots of body art and offer a little history lesson."-Fashion designer Jean Paul Gaultier (cited in *Vogue*, 1994:321)

"Blending primitive accessories, eighteenth-century shapes and stocking-sheer layers printed with ancient motifs, Gaultier presents a startling vision of cross cultural harmony." (*Vogue,* 1994:321)

1. Introduction

In his 1994 "Global Village Chic" collection, Jean Paul Gaultier, a French designer known for his eccentricities, and often labelled one of the 'bad boys' of Paris fashion, brings together an eclectic combination of clothes meant to celebrate ethnic plurality.[1] The outfits which make up the Global Village Chic collection, combine various prints, cuts, fabrics, and accessories which borrow heavily from a variety of different cultural styles in order to produce a "multicultural effect."

Gaultier's Global Village Chic is arguably the quintessential example of a recent trend within the fashion industry which expresses a concern for cultural pluralism. This interest in pluralism is characteristic of the contemporary revival of exoticism within designer fashion in which elements associated with 'non-western'[2] cultural styles are incorporated into 'western' *haute*

couture lines. This renewed influence of 'ethnic' styles in the high fashion industry seemed to have reached its peak as Gaultier's Global Village Chic hit the runways. The trend is evident in the large number of fashion magazine articles and TV fashion spots which note the turn to ethnicity, exoticism, cultural blending, and multiculturalism in fashion in the 1990s. As *Flare* proclaims:

> At the moment, it seems, nothing is more fashionable than being a woman of culture...designers are sewing up a cultural mosaic, with threads of Roman, Greek, African, Asian and Indian influence. The result is a multiethnic celebration of dress... (*Flare*, 1994c:70).

Dubbed "ethnic," "exotic," or "multicultural" fashion, this most recent appeal to non-western styles was presented as one of the main trends of the 1994 season (*Flare,* 1994b:74).

In this paper, I explore some of the meanings and messages associated with multicultural fashion as it is exemplified by Gaultier's work.[3] I am particularly interested in the way in which Gaultier and other designers—including Giorgio, Donna Karan, Rifat Ozbek, Christian Lacroix, Emanuel Ungaro, Romeo Gigli and Oscar de La Renta—present themselves and are presented by others as commentators on racial and ethnic pluralism. I explore the ways in which their perspectives on pluralism resonate with discourses on race and ethnicity which take place in other fields.

Gaultier's work, and the larger trend of which it is a part, is of interest to me because of the way in which it incorporates, and responds to, current discourses on racial and ethnic tolerance. Global Village Chic, as part of a larger fashion trend in which ethnicity becomes a central element of fashion collections, provides us with a glimpse of the possibilities both opened up and foreclosed when ethno-cultural difference becomes commodified; when notions of racial and ethnic difference, tolerance, and blending are presented in commodity form.

In examining the way that the fashion industry describes its most recent turn to non-western influences, I begin with an un-

derstanding of fashion systems as culturally embedded; as both reflecting upon and contributing to contemporary cultural politics. Like other cultural products, fashion systems can be seen as responses to, or representations of, contemporary cultural politics, and also as component parts of those politics. While it can be argued that multicultural fashion is *primarily* a response to broader debates concerning ethno-cultural difference and plurality, it also makes some contribution to those debates. We should remain open to the possibility that, in presenting fashion which resonates with *particular strands* of the ongoing debates and dialogues concerning how we should understand and manage plurality and difference in contemporary western nation-states, multicultural fashion makes modest interventions into those debates. Having said this, I should stress that I do not want to over emphasize the influence of high fashion in shaping our understandings of racial and ethnic difference. Clearly, the influence of ethnic fashion is limited by its structural location within the larger systems of meaning-making which serve to produce and reproduce our cultural understandings of ethnic and cultural differences.

My interest in ethnic fashion is primarily as a case in which we can begin to examine the limitations of racial and ethnic pluralism as commodity forms. One point which this paper makes, through its examination of how cultural pluralism is expressed in fashion, is that the location of different contributions or interventions may also set boundaries on how difference is conceptualized within them. Pluralism expressed in the fashion industry in commodity form is, I suggest, inherently limited such that it is unable to move beyond particular ways of understanding of ethno-cultural difference. Though designers may genuinely be seeking to promote cultural understanding throughout their collections, ultimately their work cannot help but incorporate ethnicity in stereotypical ways reproducing exaggerated, reified, and over simplified notions of ethnic distinctions. I suggest that ethnicity, once commodified, is unable to engage

with the more radical strands of multiculturalism, as to do so would require understandings of difference which are simply incompatible with the needs of the commodity market.

2. Ethnic Fashion in the 1990s: Eastern Influences and Cultural Pluralism

Two distinct and somewhat contradictory trends are discernible within the turn to ethnic fashion in the 1990s. The first trend is characterised by a focus upon 'the East'[4] as a source of inspiration, as Asian (and occasionally Middle Eastern) cultural forms are incorporated into western fashion collections. Here, the turn to ethnicity is one in which designers have appropriated elements from styles associated with particular Asian or Middle Eastern cultures (for example Indian saris, or Japanese cuts and prints) and used these in constructing collections which interpret and transform these supposedly 'exotic' costumes into western fashion collections. As *Toronto Live Fashion*, states: You can tell that "the West's top designers have got the global spirit...by the *Eastern influences* in so many of their collections" (1994:42-emphasis in original).

The cover story of *Flare's* January 1994 issue, entitled "What's Hot and What's Not in 1994," also attests to the turn to "eastern influences" in contemporary collections. Amongst those things listed as "hot" in Canadian fashion for 1994 are, "A passage to India" (referring to styles which get inspiration from the Sari), "Fine China" (referring to collections which incorporate both the silhouettes and fabric patterns inspired by 'traditional' Chinese designs) and "Asian Beauty" (*Flare,* 1994a:52). While overall a fairly wide variety of Eastern cultural products are drawn upon, the normal pattern here is one in which a single cultural source of inspiration for each line.

The second trend associated with ethnic fashion in the 1990s foregrounds cultural plurality and is represented by the mixing or blending of different ethno-cultural elements. Jean Paul

Gaultier's and Rifat Ozbek's collections may be the clearest examples of this trend in which designers bring a number of different cultural influences together. Sometimes referred to as "multicultural fashion," these collections are described by the designers themselves and by those who comment on their work as both reflecting and commenting on contemporary ethno/racial politics.

Multicultural fashion can be distinguished both from earlier appeals to non-western fashion and from the work of other contemporary designers who use a *'touch of ethnic'* in their lines or who focus on a single non-western influence, by the way it brings many disparate elements together as a type of global fashion *pastiche*.

The "multicultural effect" of each of the Global Village Chic outfits is produced by combining elements which evoke cultures from disparate historical periods and geographical regions. In one example pictured in *Vogue*, the caption reads: "Around the world in one outfit" (*Vogue,* March 1994). The photo itself shows a model donning a skin tight "tattoo" tube dress which is made of a combination of translucent elastic and opaque fabrics with a complicated print which reproduces parts of the patterns found on a number of Eastern European paper currencies, including both border and background designs and also denomination numbers. Her left wrist and forearm are tattooed with a swirly geometric pattern reminiscent of the more complicated henna patterns worn on the hands and feet of brides and young women in a number of regions of India (*Vogue*, 1994:332).

The themes of this outfit are repeated in altered forms in the other photographs which represent Gaultier's collection. The models sport a variety of clothes ranging from a bustier and leggings to a scarf-like sarong skirt matched with a see-through, skin tight, one armed, cropped top. Each is heavily jewelled with a combination of necklaces, ear, nose, and finger rings, wrist and ankle bracelets and headgear, all apparently influenced by non-western traditions. Body tattooing in swirling ab-

stract patterns, stick on jewels (reminiscent of the more fancy dress-'bindies' worn by Indian women, but placed in rows either along the bone of the nose or at the upper outside edges of the eyebrows) and a broad vertical shimmering grey line pained in the centre of the brow complicate the outfits and add a further layer of exoticism (*Vogue*, 1994:334-338).

Within each outfit of the Global Village collection, Gaultier's combining of elements, drawn from a variety of different cultural "inspirations," effectively foregrounds both pluralism and exoticism.

Together the use of *eastern influences* and the emergence of *multicultural fashion* exemplified by the Global Village Chic collection, form the dominant trends which characterise the appeal to exoticism in contemporary western high fashion systems.

We should not, of course, be surprised that high fashion designers have recently rediscovered exoticism. In the fashion industry context, exoticism is one of a large number of variables which are drawn upon by designers in an industry which is continually searching for ways to move beyond, build upon, or otherwise transform last year's look into something new. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (1987:11) has noted, the "first criteria" of the fashion industry is "newness or nowness." Fashion, she rightly points out "derives an important part of its everyday existence ... from change" (1987:11). In order to create designs which are reflective of the "nowness" of a particular period, which stand for, reflect, and in part define different historical moments, designers draw upon and combine in different ways all sorts of themes of which 'ethnicity' is one:

> ...designers are constantly searching for new ideas, themes and motifs from historical dress, non-European dress, popular culture and subcultures. Like birds of prey, they rob the nests of other fashion systems in a process of appropriation and cannibalization. These stylistic motifs are then reconstructed in a process of

> *bricolage*, the creation of new patterns and modes from the kaleidoscopic pits and pieces of cultural debris. (Craik, 1994:ix-x)

Though the passage above may be read as suggesting that the process of selection and appropriation of 'non-western' fashion elements is more or less arbitrary, this is not altogether the case. As both the designers themselves and fashion industry commentators note, the use of different 'ethnic' elements should be seen in terms of industry responses and interventions into contemporary cultural politics.

3. Meanings and Messages: How Difference is/can be understood in Multicultural Fashion

What messages are designers such as Gaultier making with their multicultural fashion collections? What do they and the fashion commentators who interpret their collections say about ethnicity and racial and ethnic tolerance in their explanations of the various ethnic and multicultural fashion collections?

(a) Celebrating Pluralism

With the Global Village Chic collection, Gaultier is implicitly responding and contributing to current debates on cultural pluralism, and cultural border-crossing. In Global Village Chic, he presents a *'celebration'* of pluralism by combining elements associated with different ethno-cultural groups, and making them speak to each other in the various outfits that make up the collection. The repetition of styles and colours in the various elements of each outfit allow the viewer to see each *as an outfit* rather than as an assembly of clashing or incompatible parts. As a metaphor for the peoples whose cultural products were the inspiration for the various elements of each outfit, Gaultier's Global Village Chic presents a clear statement about the ability for different ethno-cultural groups to come together

in harmony without losing their specificity. As *Vogue* (1994:333) states, in reference to the Global Village Chic line, "Gaultier presents a starling vision of cross-cultural harmony."

Through the Global Village collection, Gaultier responds (and contributes) to debates about the heterogeneity of contemporary societies in a way which celebrates cultural plurality and cross cultural experiences. Rather than responding by appealing to rhetorics of ethnic purity, separation, or assimilation, Gaultier presents consumers with a series of outfits that bring a number of different cultural products together in a celebration of diversity.

This celebration of diversity can also be witnessed in the work of Rifat Ozbek who, along with Gaultier, is described as being representative of the "multicultural slant" found in nineties fashions (*Vogue*, 1993:471). Ozbek's "Culture Club" collection which incorporates Indonesian prints, cavalry cut jackets, and Nepalese inspired hats trimmed with Mongolian fir, is described in *Vogue* as a style which is "truly a global cocktail:"

> Like a posse of vagabonds, [Ozbek's] eclectic group of girls decked out in wild mixes of Mongolian-fur-trimmed Nepalese hats and nylon taffeta trenches lend new meaning to the term global village (*Vogue*, 1993:471).

The models who pose in Ozbek's collection in *Vogue* embrace each other as they walk together in a line down a park lane. In Ozbek's image of the "global village" it is not conflict but rather harmony that results from crossing the borders that exist in diversity.

(b) On the nature of ethnicity: Geographical and Temporal distinctions

What of the *nature* of ethnicity as it is presented in the fashions of Gaultier, Ozbek and others? In examining the descriptions of ethnic fashion in the 1990s, it is clear that the celebration of

diversity expressed in the recent turn to ethnicity in fashion is one which is consistent with understandings of ethno-cultural difference in which the term *ethnic* is associated with *non-western* and *'pre-modern'* influences. Ethnicity is defined in terms of both geographical and temporal distinctions.

(i) Ethnicity as non-western

It is quickly evident from the descriptions of ethnic and multicultural fashion that *ethnic* refers to fashion which draws upon any *'non-western'* cultural product.[5] Ostensibly a geographical categorisation, in fact, the term *ethnic* is used as a banner under which fashion elements associated with any and all of the west's cultural "others" are grouped. Ethnic fashion refers to fashion whose designs (either in terms of cut, silhouette, type of apparel, accessories, prints, or details) are influenced by any cultural product not associated with the western cultural norm. Incorporating *any* 'non-western' influence seems to be sufficient for a collection to be grouped under the ethnic fashion banner. Thus we see Christian Lacroix's gilt embroidered silk Kimono house dresses, Franco Mirabelle's crumpled linen Nehru suits, and the eclectic mixing of Gaultier, all described as part of the recent re-emergence of ethnic fashion.

While the ethnic fashion collections introduced in the 1990s contain messages about celebrating cultural diversity, they also make clear distinctions between that which is *ethnic* and that which is *non-ethnic* fashion. While claiming to celebrate cultural and racial tolerance and border crossing, the collections also serve to maintain long held beliefs about the normality or universality of Euro-American cultural products by setting off all other cultural products as 'ethnic,' and/or exotic.

This positioning of some cultures as the *norm* and some as *different* is a common element in many of the liberal appeals to cultural, racial, and ethnic pluralism. Though the liberal approach seems to strive towards laudable goals such as recognition and celebration of diversity, it has been criticised by more

radical theorists for its failure to significantly challenge status quo conceptions of race and ethnicity. The liberal approach is criticised firstly for limiting the social contribution of 'ethnic' communities to that of being providers of cultural spice; livening up, but not fundamentally altering western cultural norms. Secondly, it is stressed that the liberal celebration of diversity serves ultimately to reproduce the privileged space of the (supposedly non-ethnic) norm and to maintain existing power hierarchies related to racial and ethnic differences. As Homi Bhabha (1990:208) states in his critique of liberal notions associated with the celebration of diversity, "it is commonplace of plural, democratic societies to say that they can encourage and accommodate cultural diversity;" that, in fact, "the sign of the cultured civilised attitude is the ability to appreciate cultures in a kind of *musée imaginaire*; as though one should be able to collect and appreciate them." However, while this approach encourages or celebrates plurality on one level, Bhabha also notes that there is an element of containment ever present with such appeals to cultural diversity, for there remains a transparent (often unarticulated) norm "given by the host society or dominant culture, which says 'these other cultures are fine, but we must be able to locate them within our own grid'" (1990:208).

Radical multiculturalists such as Bhabha suggest that it is not only the refusal to recognise difference which creates and maintains hierarchical dualities. As Bhabha points out, the liberal appeal to cultural pluralism also serves to contain difference and reproduce associated hierarchies through the continued reference to an imagined cultural norm (or grid as he puts it) as it celebrates cultural diversity. As he states "the universalism [of liberal multicultural societies] that paradoxically permits diversity masks ethnocentric norms, values and interests" (Bhabha, 1990:208).

Bhabha's critique of the "liberal relativist perspective" echoes critiques of early multiculturalism in Canada, which claimed that the celebration of diversity reflected in federal multicultural

policies and programs was one which forever relegated many groups to the position of second class "multicultural" citizens whose role was to add cultural spice to the apparently otherwise bland Canadian cultural landscape. The celebration of diversity promoted by multiculturalism, it was argued, while acknowledging plurality on one level, ultimately reproduced existing ethno-cultural hierarchies.[6]

Both the Global Village Chic collection and the overall turn to ethnic fashion of which it is a part are grounded in the same liberal understandings of ethnic and racial difference described and criticised above. The turn to ethnic fashion remains very much within a "celebration of diversity" approach to racial and ethnic tolerance as it is described by Bhabha. Though they appear to acknowledge and promote pluralism, they do so in ways which reproduce ethnocentric norms by positioning those that differ from the norm as *ethnic Others*.

The appeal to ethno-cultural diversity found in the fashion industry's turn to ethnicity is similar in this respect to the ways in which other industries have commodified ethnicity in the contemporary period. World beat music provides another example of commodified ethnicity whose emergence and popularity roughly coincide with the contemporary return to ethnic fashion. As Goodwin and Gore (1990:65) note, while the term *world beat* was originally "adopted by a loose aggregation of San Francisco musicians...who wanted a convenient label for their fusion of rock, funk, African and Afro Caribbean musics," its current meaning is significantly broader in scope. More recently, they note, "the term world beat has become a fashionable label for the musical traditions of regions other than North America and Europe" (Goodwin and Gore, 1990:65)[7]. In this respect, the term world beat incorporates and highlights "ethnicity" using a similar categorisation of norm and other as that reproduced by ethnic fashion.[8] As with ethnic fashion, the defining characteristic of world beat music is based upon an oversimplified distinction between western cultural products and non-western cul-

tural products, a distinction that ultimately rests upon discourses of exoticism.

Elli Lester's work on the use of discourses of the exotic in fashion advertising presents a critical assessment of the way in which these discourses serve the purpose of a "global material culture" (1992:75). The ethnic fashion example which I am examining here, is similar to the case which Lester examines in the way in which ethnicity and exoticism are set off from the norm defined in terms of Western European and North American traditions, and in the way in which stereotypical images serve to objectify the ethnic other. Lester relates the Banana Republic catalogue to other texts in which the "costumed 'native,' is abstracted from his or her setting, and re-created as a metaphor for exotic difference." Through the strategies of (a) "the creation of the subject through the construction of a preferred reader," (with the exclusive use of white models) (b) the "uses of history and 'invented tradition' from the point of view of the preferred reader" (*not* from the point of view of the 'natives' in other words), (c) "the jumbling of spatial and temporal images" using collage and montage, and (d) "the construction of authenticity," Lester argues that the Banana Republic text accomplishes the "creation of the exotic Other" (1992:77-79). While there are similarities between the Banana Republic catalogue's strategic use of images of exoticism and the way in which the exotic is presented in ethnic fashion, Lester's analysis also brings to light a number of differences. For one thing, in ethnic fashion (in keeping with more recent trends in the fashion industry) the models who present the clothing are more often than not both white and women of colour. Thus, while there is a distinction between western and non-western which reproduces notions of which cultures are considered 'ethnic' in contemporary societies, there is also a space provided for western women of colour to be interpellated by this fashion. As well, the appeal to ethnicity is very different given the fact that within ethnic fashion, ethnicity becomes an integral part of the product being sold, not

simply a background image as in the Banana Republic catalogue. With ethnic fashion, consumers are encouraged to appropriate and play with ethnicity in much more intimate ways than anything being suggested by the Banana Republic catalogue which reproduces ethnicity at a distance from its preferred audience. The most striking difference, however, is that of the issue of cross-cultural blending. Within the contemporary turn to ethnic fashion in general, and especially within multicultural fashion as exemplified by the work of Gaultier and Ozbek, we can see appeals to cultural blending which resonate with contemporary calls for racial tolerance, and multiculturalism.

I should stress, however, that despite these appeals to ethnocultural plurality, the commodification of ethno-cultural difference in contemporary ethnic fashion allows little room for representations which address the complexities and tensions surrounding ethno-cultural difference as it is actually lived by individuals and groups in contemporary societies. This sometimes results in rather odd representations of different ethno-cultural groups. Again, Gaultier's work provides an interesting example. In an earlier collection which combines elements inspired by street punk styles and the outfits worn by Hasidic Jewish men, models are dressed in outfits reminiscent of the long black coats worn by Hasidic men, with their hair made up to resemble the men's "payees" and donning imitation Sabbath "platter" hats. Gaultier, reflecting on his collection states that "Fashion always reflects society and what's going on in the world...Right now you can't ignore the mix of cultures and religions; you have to respond" (*Vogue*, 1993:471). He also describes the collection as a "homage to the Jewish religion" (*Vogue*, 1993:484). His choice of a Hasidic Jew-street punk fusion as his response to cultural and religious mixing and as "homage" to Judaism is rather perplexing. Hasidic communities are well known for their self-segregating practices. As communities, they support neither the mixing of cultures, nor the mixing of religions. Attempts to establish institutional completeness, with separate schools, stores,

and community centres attest to the Hasidic communities' desire to remain distinct from other groups with whom they often share neighbourhoods. They are also generally hostile to the "immodesty" of contemporary fashion maintaining rather strict gendered dress codes. (In recent years publicity has been garnered by Hasidic Jews in Jerusalem who have torched bus shelters with posters of "immodestly" dressed women.) It is unlikely given this, that the Hasidic communities would respond favourably to Gaultier's punk/Hasidic collection. They would, I think, neither see it as an appropriate homage to their faith nor would they likely endorse its message of cultural blending. Rather than paying homage to their faith, Gaultier's collection ends up making light of it in order to present a new flavour of exoticism for western fashion consumers.

Ultimately, Gaultier's lofty Punk-Hasid collection can in no way communicate the importance and meaning that Hasidic communities associate with their dress (nor for that matter does it likely communicate the importance and meaning of dress for street punks). The consumers of Gaultier's Hasid-Punk outfits will likely have no greater understanding after their purchase of either the Hasid or Punk sub-cultures and how their experiences and perspectives might differ from (and perhaps challenge) their own. Instead of promoting greater understanding, Gaultier's Hasid-Punk collection simply slaps two very different images together in a series of outfits which reduce culture to *exotic flare*.

(ii) Ethnicity as a temporal distinction

Besides the western/non-western dichotomy, there is a second defining characteristic of *ethnicity* as expressed in ethnic fashion. Ethnicity is presented within global fashion as *pre-modern* or at the very least as *pre-present*. While *Vogue* credits Gaultier with having created wardrobe for a "*futuristic* globe-trotting tribe," this is achieved by "blending *primitive* accessories, *eighteenth-century* shapes, and stocking sheer layers printed with *ancient*

motifs" (*Vogue*, 1994:333-my emphasis). That which is ethnic is clearly represented here and elsewhere as being located frozen in some moment prior to the present. This, despite the fact that the ethnic groups whose cultural products are being 'borrowed'' exist very much in the present; despite the fact that the currencies which make up the "ancient motifs" on Gaultier's tube dresses were still being used in people's every day transactions even as Gaultier's models were posing with their designs hugging their bodies.

In representing non-western cultures as things of the past, western linear notions of the 'evolution' of cultures are reproduced and/or reinforced. This representation of non-western cultures as existing in some pre-present moment resonates with what James Clifford has called the "salvage paradigm" in anthropology in which "most non-western peoples are [perceived as] marginal to the advancing world system" (1987:122). The role of anthropology in the salvage paradigm, as Clifford describes it, is to salvage or collect the authentic identities and artefacts of these 'untouched' non-western groups before they are assimilated into the "Modern world:"

> Authenticity in culture or art exists just prior to the present—but not so distant or eroded as to make collection or salvage impossible. Marginal, non-western groups constantly (as the saying goes) enter the modern world. And whether this entry is celebrated or lamented, the price is always this: local, distinctive paths through modernity vanish. These historicities are swept up in a destiny dominated by the capitalist west and by various technologically advanced socialisms. What's *different* about peoples seen to be moving out of 'tradition' into 'the modern world' remains tied to inherited structures that either resist or yield to the new but cannot *produce* it (1987:122—emphasis in original).

Clifford's discussion is applicable to the ethnic fashion example which tends to highlight ethnic elements as artefacts from the past, and which relies primarily on the designer to take these 'historical' elements and transform them for present (or future) consumers in the west.[9] As one article notes, "even Ralph Lauren, the king of aristocratic style" has embraced ethnic fashion with a collection of outfits that "conjure up images of nomadic immigrants adapting their own customs to a new world" (*Vogue* 1993:471)[10].

In representing non-western cultures as existing *in the past,* and in reducing their cultural products to signifiers of exoticism, western designers are in fact dehistoricising and decontexualizing the communities whose products have inspired the various elements of different ethnic fashion collections. This being the case, it is particularly odd that Gaultier would claim as quoted above, that with the Global Village Chic collection, he wanted "to offer a little history lesson." Global Village Chic cannot provide us with a history lesson. Rather, what it presents us with is merely a collage of easily recognised symbols of exoticism.

While non-western cultures are presented as things of the past, their products are nonetheless fused by designers into "the latest fashion trend." In this way ethnic fashion is presented as a celebration both of the blending of culture and also of the blending of times.

(iii) Ethnicity as exoticism

Ethnic fashion which appeals to the idea that ethnic cultural products "come from" a specific (foreign/ancient) cultural context are presented to potential consumers primarily through the discourses of exoticism. In describing the elements of ethnic fashion collections, commentators highlight the idea that these products have 'come from' some cultural context other than the western norm. However, few of the descriptions of ethnic fashion mention the various cultures and groups whose cultural prod-

ucts have been used by designers to create their collections; often the influences remain completely unnamed. When descriptions *do* name influences, the references are often quite broad. *Vogue*, for example, notes that Gaultier's face jewellery borrows from "the far east" but leaves it at that. While we are told that the patterns of the tube dress "duplicate...snippets of Eastern European currency" (*Vogue*, 1994:333), we are not told which currencies. Despite the fact that the detailed henna painting from which Gaultier draws inspiration is a regionally specific cultural product, with different communities producing distinct patterns and using the paintings for different occasions, these specificities are lost as the body painting is appropriated and transformed by Gaultier for his collection. In uprooting cultural products, Gaultier and others are unable to communicate to the consumer anything of the specific cultural purpose or meaning previously attached to them as they are transformed into markers of exoticism.

The reduction of the elements of ethnic fashion to markers of exoticism, enables consumers to engage with ethnic pluralism in commodified forms without taking on any of the more difficult issues of power, hierarchy, privilege and oppression related to ethno-cultural difference as it is experienced both here in Canada and elsewhere. It is only through this process of simplification that ethnicity can appear as something that can be bought and sold. In this respect, the contemporary turn to ethnic and multicultural fashion is consistent with the fashion industry's earlier appeals to exoticism. As Craik points out in reference to Yves Saint Laurent's Peasant Dress collection of 1976, the collection "enabled the rich to 'play act' at being peasants" at the same time as it appealed to "ordinary women" who "felt an affinity with the humble origins of ...the new style." The recent turn to exoticism, like Saint Laurent's peasant collection, allows individuals who can afford it, to take on, and to play with the ethnicity of the Other at a superficial level without their having to engage with the true complexities of ethnicity as it is experienced by individuals in the cultures whose products they have

appropriated in altered forms. This is fashion which presents ethnicity as something that one can take up and then alter as easily as we change our clothes:

> A Russian gypsy swathed in a paisley chiffon scarf-skirt today could very well turn up as a sexy Italian bombshell in a transparent black evening dress tomorrow. Call it a new democracy of style. (Vogue, 1993:471)

As bell hooks rightly notes, there is nothing in this type of appropriation and play with ethnicity which will necessarily lead to greater respect for ethno-cultural differences. The pleasure which commodified ethnicity brings, she argues, does not challenge people to re-examine their own positionalities within hierarchies of power. It does not even require that we acknowldege that such hierarchies exist. Hooks' discussion of the commodification of otherness both highlights the recent fascination with other cultures and their products, and shows how this trend does little to challenge the existing order:

> Within current debates about race and difference, mass culture is the contemporary location that both publicly declares and perpetuates the idea that there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgement and enjoyment of racial difference. The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes a spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture. (hooks, 1992:21)

Hooks argues that within contemporary North American and British popular culture, otherness is exploited by mainstream social forces, and that this exploitation serves to maintain the inequalities and structural relations which are associated with ethno-cultural difference. As she states,

> from the standpoint of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, the hope is that desires for the "primitive" or fantasies about the Other can be continually exploited, and that such exploitation will occur in a manner that reinscribes and maintains the *status quo* (1992:22-emphasis in original).

The commodification of otherness which hooks describes is engaged in similar processes of othering as that represented by Global Village Chic and other fashion lines incorporating "ethnic flavour" into western fashion. Hooks stresses that the commodification of otherness which perpetuates the idea that "there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgement and enjoyment of racial difference," in no way challenges the existing social hierarchies:

> To make one's self vulnerable to the seduction of difference, to seek an encounter with the Other, does not require that one relinquish forever one's mainstream positionality. When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the other (1992:23).

Although ethnic fashion does not usually involve the sort of intimate relations between the dominating consumer and the ethnic Other which hooks is describing in the passage above, her comments are nonetheless relevant. The affirmation of the belief that there is pleasure to be found in an encounter with the other, that there is pleasure in ethno-cultural diversity, is part of the message projected with multicultural fashion. Like the commodification of otherness to which hooks refers, the celebration of ethno-cultural diversity found in Global Village Chic, is, ultimately, incompatible with the more radical understandings

of contemporary ethno-cultural difference proposed by Bhabha, hooks and other cultural theorists, who challenge us to take note not only of the existence of ethno-cultural differences, but to also critically explore how these differences are maintained and constructed and how they relate to the ways in which groups and individuals are symbolically and materially positioned within hierarchical societies.

The appeal to exoticism found in ethnic fashion fails to involve the questioning of positionalities or privilege. Whether the possibility exists of alternative constructions within the fashion industry which do allow for and perhaps even promote more critical re-evaluations of difference is doubtful, given the designers' needs to present clear, easily marketed images of exoticism for the consumer market.

4. Conclusion

In *Adorned in Dreams,* Elizabeth Wilson argues that fashion is "a cultural phenomenon...an aesthetic medium for expression of ideas, beliefs and desires circulating in society" (1985:9). As I have shown, ethnic fashion as an aesthetic medium expresses *particular* ideas, *particular* beliefs, and *particular* desires about ethno-cultural difference and ethno-cultural tolerance. While there is clearly room within the descriptions of designers and fashion commentators for some differences in interpretation, it seems clear that some strands of the ongoing debates and dialogues on ethno-cultural difference will likely remain beyond the scope of commodified ethnicity such as exists in ethnic fashion. While fashion designers such as Gaultier can claim to be encouraging racial and ethnic understanding, their type of work, drawing as it does upon discourses of the exotic, does *not* lead to greater cross-cultural understanding. Rather, their collections simply reproduce in different forms stereotypical images which serve to further objectify groups and individuals positioned as 'ethnic.'

Notes.

1. I would like to thank Jacob Bakan, Alan Hunt and two anonymous reviewers for critical comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

2. The author seeking to explore how stereotypical categories are evoked and used quickly encounters a difficulty: on the one hand there is a desire to challenge the existence of such categories, on the other hand it is difficult to describe and explore their use without adopting and thereby reproducing them. Though this appears to be a rather straight forward problem, it is one with which I continue to struggle. Here I have tried to follow what I think are two useful academic norms developed to deal with this issue—when introducing a term which I feel is problematic, I have highlighted this with the use of scare quotes. As well, I have tried where convenient to point out to the reader how/why I think the term is problematic.

3. This paper is part of a larger, ongoing project which seeks to explore and analyze how multicultural and pluralistic ideals are taken up in a variety of social settings by individuals and groups.

4. The classification of fashion as ethnic and/or exotic relies heavily upon a whole series of questionable assumptions about what are 'normal' western cultural forms and what are not. References to the East and Eastern influences which are common in representations of ethnic fashion in the 1990s serve to reify and artificially divide cultural forms into an oversimplified western/eastern dichotomy. In categorizing fashion in this way, individuals in the fashion industry treat cultures and cultural products as static, distinct classifications. In so doing they necessarily ignore hundreds of years of cultural influence and exchange. The ongoing movement of peoples and cross fertilization of cultural forms is such that to speak in terms of western and eastern fashion elements is necessarily somewhat of an oversimplification.

5. Once again, I should stress that these are highly problematic terms. As it is used, non-Western cultural products can be understood here to refer to products associated with cultures which lie outside of the Euro-American industrial, capitalist imagined norm. As such they include cultural products associated with the majority of the world's population including people from Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and South America. Also included in this classification of non-western are products from the west's *internal others* such as the aboriginal communities which have long inhabited regions such as north America and Australia and the western communities who have immigrated from or whose ancestors came from

non-European regions.

6. For examples of this line of critique in the Canadian multicultural context, see the work of Lupul (1982, 1983, 1989), Bullivant (1981), and Peter (1981).

7. As Goodwin and Gore note (1990:65), this has resulted in the recategorization as world beat of music such as *La Mystere de Voix Bulgares* (A Bulgarian women's choir), whose "largely traditional music...which would once have been categorized under the older label of 'international music' was considered, in 1988, to be on the cutting edge of 'new' music."

8. There are, of course, a number of differences between how ethnocultural difference is dealt with by world beat and ethnic fashion. For example, with many traditional musical forms recategorised as world beat music, the world beat genre does not necessarily involve the same transformative processes through which non-western cultural products are packaged for western consumption as that which is characteristic of ethnic fashion. Under the category of world beat we can find not only a wide variety of different musical fusions, and transformed styles but also non-western cultural products which are *not* significantly transformed before being marketed to western consumers.

9. For a discussion of the transformative processes through which 'authentic' ethnic costumes are appropriated and incorporated into western fashion collections see Eric Cohen's case study of the "Boutiquisation" of textiles from the hill tribes of northern Thailand (1988).

10. Representations of non-western people's cultural products as 'ancient' are consistent with the belief that those cultures themselves come from the past. In the Canadian context the combination of the geographical and temporal assumptions about ethnicity underlie the continued belief that rather than ever-changing dynamic human creations which are part of the present Canadian experience, 'ethnic' cultures are something brought to Canada (usually through the immigration process) with people from "the old country."

References

Bhabha, Homi K.
1990 "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha" Pp. 207-221 in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference* Jonathan Rutherford (ed.) London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Bullivant, Brian M.
1981 "Multiculturalism- Pluralist Orthodoxy or Ethnic Hegemony?" *Canadian Ethnic Studies*. 13(2).

Clifford, James
1987 "Of Other Peoples: Beyond the Salvage Paradigm" Pp. 121-130 in *Discussions in Contemporary Culture*. Hal Foster (ed.) Seattle:Bay Press.

Craik, Jennifer
1994 *The Face of Fashion: cultural Studies in Fashion*. New York: Routledge.

Cohen, Eric
1988 "From Tribal Costume to Pop Fashion: The 'Boutiquisation' of the Textiles of the Hill Tribes of Northern Thailand." *Studies in Popular Culture*. 11(2): 49-59.

Flare
1994a "What's Hot and What's not for 1994." January, 1994: 52.

1994b "Spring '94 Trends." March, 1994: 59-76.
1994c "Fashion Advisor." May, 1994: 70.

Fox-Genovese
1987 "The Empress's New Clothes: The Politics of Fashion." *Socialist Review*, 17(1)): 6-30.

Goodwin, Andrew and Gore, Joe
1990 "World Beat and the Cultural Imperialism Debate." *Socialist Review*. 20(3) 63-80.

hooks, bell
1992 "Eating the Other" Pp. 21-39 in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Toronto: Between the Lines:

Lester, Elli
1992 "Buying the Exotic Other: Reading the 'Banana Republic' Mail order Catalogue" *Journal of Communication Inquiry*. 16(2): Pp. 74-85.

Lupul, Manoly R.
1982 "The Political Implementation of Multiculturalism." *Journal of Canadian Studies*. 17: 93-102.
1983 "Multiculturalism and Canada's White Ethnics." *Canadian Ethnic Studies*. 15: 99-107.
1989 "Networking, Discrimination and Multiculturalism as a Social Philosophy." *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 21(2).

Peter, Karl
1981 "The Myth of Multiculturalism and Other Political Fables" Pp. 56-67 in *Ethnicity, Power and Politics in Canada.* Jorgen Dahlie and Tisa Fernando (eds.) Toronto: Methuen.

Toronto Life Fashion
1994 no title *Toronto Life Fashion.* November, 1994: 42.

Wilson, Elizabeth
1985 *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Vogue
1993 "Independents' Day." September 1993: 471-487.
1994 "The Independents: Jean Paul Gaultier." (Fashion editor: Grace Coddington). March 1994, Pp. 332-337.