

Theory, Taste & Trash:

Essay Assessment

‘How is ethnic identity (including whiteness) and/or gender used in the construction of taste? Here again you should focus on music or fashion or food? Please focus on the detailed analysis of one case study.’

Within the extensive realm of study on aesthetics, a discourse exists with regard to the significance of ethnic identity in the construction of taste. To explore such a topic, there may be no aesthetic form more relevant than the extensive art of fashion. As American designer Rachel Zoe puts it: “Style is a way to say who you are without having to speak”, thus it can catalyse a profound sense of identity for both wearer and designer, making fashion the ideal subject matter for this discussion.¹ However, such a wide-ranging medium does not come without its complexities; whether it be the vestiges of colonial attitudes, exclusivity and the othering of particular ethnic groups or the lingering impact of orientalism, the construction of contemporary fashion tastes can carry with them the unhelpful influences of a Eurocentric past. Furthermore, the concept of semiotic dressing may be useful to explore how some ethnic groups express their identities through the construction of aesthetic tastes. On top of this, fashion can be dense with imbedded meanings stemming from the aesthetics of ethnic and cultural identities like those of dandyism, self-expression, anti-racism, and the reclamation of agency, in a way that serves to construct empowering tastes. Overall, it seems

¹ <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/fashion/designers/a1576/50-famous-fashion-quotes/>

clear to me that ethnic identity can produce several differing notions of taste that can either be problematic or productive when viewed through the frameworks of fashion.

One concept that is key to the examination of ethnic identity as it pertains to the construction of taste is that of Eurocentricity. This refers to the idea that Europe is “the primary engine and architect of world history, the bearer of universal values and reason, and the pinnacle and therefore model of progress and development” which can perpetuate a narrative of European superiority above other ethnicities and cultures.² To assess how this idea may relate to the construction of fashion tastes, it might be useful to employ Hume’s concept of “the perfect beauty” in which he claims that there is “a considerable uniformity of sentiment among men” of what is to be perceived as beautiful.³ What’s more, Hume’s argument uses the reverence of Greek poet “Homer” as a basis for this claim, thus firmly planting his argument into a European framework, adhering to the typically Eurocentric attitudes of the Georgian Britain in which he wrote.⁴ It appears that Hume’s point here is one that could be considered to be a Eurocentric perspective as he has set the notion of a consensus on what is considered to be beautiful through a European standard, without proper consideration for the different aesthetic values that might be prized by non-European cultures. Such a proposal may be similarly applied to the medium of fashion, in place of poetry, as it seems that the aesthetic qualities by which fashion’s beauty is judged are situated mainly from European aesthetic

² Sundberg, J. (2009). Eurocentrism. In *International Encyclopaedia of Human Geography*. Elsevier Science. P 638. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/eurocentrism>

³ Hume, D. *Selected essays*. OUP (1993). P 139.
<https://contentstore.cla.co.uk/secure/link?id=ac22cd16-a150-ee11-8457-0050f2f05a7b>.

⁴ Hume, D. *Selected essays*. OUP (1993). P 139.
<https://contentstore.cla.co.uk/secure/link?id=ac22cd16-a150-ee11-8457-0050f2f05a7b>.

values, even in the 21st C. This notion might be found in the sort of styles that are praised by the fashion industry, namely an emphasis on tailoring and elegant silhouettes, which may be viewed as a continuation of prioritizing Eurocentric tastes. Moreover, this idea can be seen in the contemporary infrastructure of fashion as the three exalted ‘fashion capitals’ (London, Paris & Milan) happen to also be exclusively European ones, a fact that may limit fashion tastes to mainly those of a Eurocentric viewpoint. Therefore, Hume’s suggestion that there is a consensus on what is considered to be ‘perfect beauty’ can be harmful when such an argument is applied to those works of fashion that exist outside of European aesthetic norms. As a result of this, ethnic identities, if placed within the boundaries of Eurocentric thought, may construct fashion tastes that are problematic for the myriad works of fashion that exist beyond Europe.

Another way that ethnic identities can shape the way that tastes are constructed is through the unique styles of migrant populations living in Western nations. This could refer to the way that some migrant populations bring aspects of their birth nations’ styles with them into their new environments, thus introducing unique aesthetic elements into the tastes of their new host nations over time. Alternatively, some migrant groups may use aesthetic styles as a way to express a desire to adapt to their new surroundings, therefore integrating with the accepted norms and styles of their new countries of habitation. Within the medium of fashion, the concept of “semiotic garments” may be a useful idea to explore this dynamic as it refers to the way that certain aesthetic styles can contain within them “symbolism and meaning”.⁵ This appears to be used by some migrant populations in London through the fashion of denim jeans in order to absolve themselves of any specific cultural or aesthetic norm as Miller

⁵ Miller, D. (2010). Anthropology in blue jeans. *American Ethnologist*, 37(3), P 421. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40784606>

writes that “migrants use jeans to become ordinary” which may indicate that some migrant groups do not wish to associate aesthetically with the tastes of either their country of origin or their new home country.⁶ This is particularly interesting for the study of how tastes are constructed as it demonstrates how a range of ethnic groups wish to express a non-conformity regarding the aesthetic styles of any particular cultural or society. In this way, migrant populations can use their fashion tastes to eschew the outwards perception of their origins or identities, thus allowing them to exist outside of any preconceptions about their identities or backgrounds. As a result of this, it seems that, through the use of semiotic garment styles, ethnic identities can help to construct aesthetic tastes that serve the function of affording some groups the ability to be free of associations of their personal identities that are based on their outwards appearances.

On the other hand, ethnic identity’s role in the construction of aesthetic tastes might also be examined fruitfully through an analysis of the Eurocentric concept of orientalism. Said (1978) defines this term as a way of viewing the Orient (Asia and countries east of Europe) stereotypically, that “[characterises] the Orient as alien” and that accentuates ideas of the “strangeness [and] exotic sensuousness” of its many cultures.⁷ In the context of fashion, this might mean that certain aspects of Asian aesthetic styles are grouped together and stereotyped in a manner that not only sexualises the wearer but that also perpetuates offensive Eurocentric tropes about Asian ethnic identities. A poignant example of this sort of orientalism could be found in Christian Dior’s spring 2003 Haute Couture collection as this fashion show features several elements of aesthetic styles, inspired by those of multiple Asian cultures, that are

⁶ Miller, D. (2010). Anthropology in blue jeans. *American Ethnologist*, 37(3), P 424.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40784606>

⁷ Said, E. W. (1977). ORIENTALISM. *The Georgia Review*, 31(1), 162–206.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41397448>

merged together to construct outfits that might be viewed as a form of orientalist stereotyping.⁸ This can be found through designer Galliano's use of 'chinoiserie' fabric patterns in the show, a category of style which itself has roots in the European imitation of Chinese design and architecture that can be seen "to be a mockery of genuine Chinese art", thus its use in fashion can be seen as a stereotyping of Chinese traditions.⁹¹⁰ Further to this point, the runway presentation of this fashion show incorporates white makeup in what seems to be an intentional imitation of the traditional aesthetic styles of Japanese geisha women.¹¹ This choice could be perceived as a stereotyping of Japanese cultural heritages as it appears to be used in order to convey a sense of exoticism and to sexualise the show's models, a notion which Said might find to be typical of orientalist attitudes. Because of these ideas, I would argue that ethnic identities, when presented in fashion through the frameworks of orientalism, may assist in the construction of tastes that can be problematic or alienating as it can allow for the stereotyping of aesthetic qualities from Asia without a comprehensive understanding of their cultural and historical importance.

In a different vein, ethnic identities can have an impact on the construction of tastes through exclusivity and the othering of particular ethnic groups because of Western exclusionary attitudes towards traditional Islamic aesthetic styles. Such conceptions tend to be rooted in those of Eurocentric thinking and may be problematic when put in the context of fashion as they can lead to prejudice or the othering of Islamic ethnic groups. An example of this can be

⁸ <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-2003-couture/christian-dior>

⁹ See Source 1

¹⁰ <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/chinoiserie-an-introduction#:~:text=Chinoiserie%20was%20not%20universally%20popular,genuine%20Chinese%20art%20and%20architecture.>

¹¹ See Source 2

found through Western attitudes towards the Islamic religious garments of hijabs and headscarves as they are “understood primarily as offensive, oppressive, or illiberal in Western European and North American contexts”.¹² What’s more, the Islamic style of hijabs are not only seemingly misunderstood by Westernised narratives but also actively prohibited in some European nations like France as it has banned hijabs in public places under the grounds that they are “antithetical to "French" secular citizenship as well as to "progressive/feminist" culture”.¹³ Such attitudes towards aesthetic expressions of Islamic ethnic identities might also be found through the “hostility to the burqa and niqab [merging] with the hostility to "Muslim" or Arab non-Western contexts” which might be seen as a form of othering or racial prejudice based on aesthetics.¹⁴ Another example of this sort of Western perspective of traditional Islamic styles might be found in the documentary ‘Forbidden Fashion In Paris’ as it helps to demonstrate the impact of clothing restrictions in France from a more personal level and adds context to the way that style tastes can form under such prohibitions.¹⁵ This documentary also helps to explore the contemporary European political context of Islamophobia which may also contribute to the perpetuation of harmful Western perspectives towards traditional Islamic aesthetic styles. Therefore, due to Western misinterpretations of Islamic ethnic identities and cultures, it seems that fashion tastes can be constructed in an exclusionary way that might lead to the prejudice and othering of certain minority groups.

¹² Falguni A. Sheth (2009) *The Hijab and the Sari: The Strange and Sexy between Colonialism and Global Capitalism*. 2009. Contemporary Aesthetics.

¹³ Falguni A. Sheth (2009) *The Hijab and the Sari: The Strange and Sexy between Colonialism and Global Capitalism*. 2009. Contemporary Aesthetics.

¹⁴ Falguni A. Sheth (2009) *The Hijab and the Sari: The Strange and Sexy between Colonialism and Global Capitalism*. 2009. Contemporary Aesthetics.

¹⁵ <https://youtu.be/WtBcWhgTuyk>

Another way that ethnic identities might be used in the construction of taste is through ideas about empowerment and anti-racism. As Abiodun writes: “in the traditional discipline of art history, the importance of African art has hardly advanced” which he suggests “cannot be divorced from western imperialistic involvement in Africa”.¹⁶ This might mean that contemporary art produced by members of the African diaspora can be seen as a way of empowering such artists to reject western colonial attitudes by uplifting their own cultures and celebrating own ethnic identities within their work. In fashion, an example that may be useful to dissect this subject matter is Balmain’s Autumn 2024 menswear fashion collection as it features aesthetic styles that are not only made in collaboration with several African designers, but that celebrate blackness and the expression of African ethnic identities in their own right.¹⁷ This can be seen in the fashion collection through the repeated use of black silhouetted figures that are appliquéd onto garments of vibrant colours, an aesthetic choice that is reminiscent of the vivid cloth fabrics that are common in traditional Nigerian fashion styles.¹⁸ Moreover, accessories from the collection are made in collaboration with Cameroonian designer Ibby Njoya which can be seen as a way for the house of Balmain to empower African designers and uplift the use African aesthetic styles in an inclusive way. On top of this, designer Rousteing makes use of a motif of lips in this collection which might act as an empowering aesthetic choice as he tells reporters: “so many people laugh about my lips”.¹⁹ To this point, the mockery of black people’s lips is steeped in racist rhetoric and can be traced to the abhorrent Western practice of minstrel caricature, in which white actors

¹⁶ Abiodun, R. (2001). African Aesthetics. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 35(4), 15–23. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3333783>

¹⁷ <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2024-menswear/balmain>

¹⁸ See Source 3

¹⁹ See Source 4

would wear blackface makeup that exaggerated the size of their lips. Therefore, Rousteing's use of a motif of lips in this collection could be viewed as an empowering symbol of anti-racism as it seems to be used in order to reject harmful, racialised language and to convey authentically his own personal experience with his ethnic identity. As a result of this, ethnic identities can be seen to construct tastes that may empower both designer and wearer when expressed through fashion since they can not only act as a way to reject colonial viewpoints but also as a medium through which an active projection of anti-racism can be found.

Similarly, ethnic identities can be used in the construction of tastes through ideas about self-expression and a reclamation of agency. These notions can be found in the aesthetic styles of dandyism, a style that Glick notes as being "associated with the "feminization" of modern culture" that "comes to represent a retreat from politics and history into art and/or commodity culture".²⁰ In the fashionable context of African American dandyism, this might mean that an expression of ethnic identity is "mediated through garments, accessories and beauty regimes generally associated with heightened femininity" that might be considered to be an act of rebellion against hierarchical power structures.²¹ Such a style may be identified in the self-expression of musician Billie Holiday as Tulloch writes that the "modernity and originality" of Holiday's expression of fashion allowed her "to cultivate the power of self-presentation to subvert existing social forms in an attempt to question cultural truths".²² In this way,

²⁰ Glick, E. (2001). The Dialectics of Dandyism. *Cultural Critique*, 48, P 131.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1354399>

²¹ Tulloch, C. 2016. *The Birth of Cool : Style Narratives of the African Diaspora*, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2016. *ProQuest Ebook Central*. P 88.
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/suss/detail.action?docID=4187330>.
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²² Tulloch, C. 2016. *The Birth of Cool : Style Narratives of the African Diaspora*, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2016. *ProQuest Ebook Central*. P 90.

Holiday's apparent use of dandyism as a manner by which she could express her ethnic identity seems to have allowed her to reclaim agency over how she was perceived by the public. As well as this, African American dandyism can also be identified in a contemporary context through the work of online fashion influencer 'Wisdom Kaye'. Such adherence to the aesthetic styles of African American dandyism can be found in Kaye's use of eccentric fashion styles that may be typically associated with qualities of feminine styles like his use of skirts, gowns, high-heels, and an elegant combination of bright fabric combinations.²³ As a result of these styles, Kaye's aesthetic choices appear to be aligned with ideas of African American dandyism in a way that allows him to express a truthful self-presentation that also has the power to subvert societal attitudes about him in much the same way that Holiday had done in previous decades. This seems to have allowed both Kaye and Holiday to forge their own sense of taste whilst still adhering to qualities that could be considered to fall under the category of dandyism. Because of this, I would make the suggestion that when ethnic identities are expressed authentically through fashionable mediums like that of African American dandyism, they can allow for more self-expressive tastes that can also act as a form of rebellion against societal preconceptions.

Overall, it appears that there are several contributing factors to the role of ethnic identities in relation to the construction of tastes. Through the perspective of Eurocentric frameworks, ethnic identities may be used to form tastes that are problematic, exclusionary, and harmful to BAME groups. As a subset of Eurocentric attitudes, the concepts of orientalism and a Western intolerance to certain aesthetic styles may also contribute to the manifestation of

²³ See Source 5

tastes that are equally unhelpful to such communities. However, when ethnic identities are expressed in a productive manner through forms of self-expression and rebellion like those of African American dandyism and anti-racism, they can serve to seed a construction of tastes that is uplifting and empowering for marginalised ethnic groups. What's more, the use of semiotic garments can allow for an expression of ethnic identity that does not adhere to any particular aesthetic societal norm, allowing such communities to forge their own path of self-expression through their tastes. Thanks to their analysis through the artform of fashion, greater understanding of these factors is offered, resulting in a more insightful discourse overall. Ultimately, the combined weight of these ideas lead me to suggest that ethnic identities can be used to construct tastes that are, on one hand harmful and on the other, productive when filtered through the guise of fashion aesthetic styles.

2850 Words

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