Accessorizing (with) "Gypsyness" in the Twenty-first Century: Cultural Appropriations in the Fashion Industry

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Abstract

Prefaced with a brief discussion of representation and cultural appropriation, this article examines how the fashion industry recycles and revamps hackneyed tropes that cast Roma into narratives of wanderlust, mystique, and transgression. Such tropes perpetuate epistemic injustice, compromise understandings of Roma and their culture(s) within non-member groups, and curtail Roma designers' rhetorical agency. I flesh out the discussion with the case of Mexican American designer Rio Uribe and his line Gypsy Sport and argue that, despite Uribe's investment in social justice and much touted effort toward inclusiveness, he fails to acknowledge the unethical and harmful dimensions of his work. I turn to the fashion studio Romani Design (founded by Hungarian Roma designers Erika and Helena Varga) as an example of Roma initiatives that counter appropriative practices through reclaiming the heritage for self-representation and empowerment, then envision ways of intervening in the fashion industry's co-option and misuse of Roma's cultural heritage.

Introduction

This article examines how, under the guise of sartorial[1] narratives of resistance or multicultural celebrations, the fashion industry commodifies and markets "Gypsyness" in ways that produce and perpetuate epistemic injustice. Although this article focuses on the current historical moment and, within it, on the work of only a few designers (with a focus on Rio Uribe's work), the hope is that these discussions will generate interest in more comprehensive analyses of the fashion industry's history of (mis-) representation and appropriation of Roma and Romani culture, and in comparative studies that engage with scholarship that pursues similar work but within the context of Native American, African American, Aboriginal, and other minority cultures.[2]

After clarifying the usage of key terms and considering the ubiquity of "Gypsy" stereotypes in various artistic media (section one), the article provides an overview of critical stances on cultural appropriation and establishes the author's position (section two) before illustrating how and to what end the fashion industry uses appropriative practices in "Gypsy"-inspired collections (section three). In section four, I narrow my focus to one designer, Rio Uribe, whose Gypsy Sport line has occupied the spotlight on runways at New York Fashion Week and internationally, to popular and critical acclaim. I selected Uribe not only because of his high visibility (which means an increased circulation of the ideas that his work promotes) but also because his stance is particularly disheartening. Unlike other non-Roma designers, he appears invested in social justice and produces collections that have potential to contest the hegemonic powers of representation from within and to intervene in the industry's harmful co-option of "Gypsy" tropes. However, the potential is unrealized. Uribe's failure to even acknowledge the unethical dimension of his "Gypsy" branding speaks also to the embeddedness of essentialist thinking, the power of stereotypes, and the complexity of the work ahead as we envision change. In the penultimate section, I discuss the fashion studio Romani Design (Hungary) as an example of Roma initiatives that counter appropriative practices through reclaiming the heritage for self-representation and empowerment. The brief conclusion (section six) outlines some possibilities for intervening in the fashion industry's co-option and misuse of Roma's cultural heritage.

Notes on the title and nomenclature: The article's title draws on Anjali Vats' "Racechange Is the New Black: Racial Accessorizing and Racial Tourism in High Fashion as Constraints on Rhetorical Agency" (Vats 2014) and on Rio Uribe's comment, "Fashion is just an accessory to what is really happening" (as quoted in Katz 2017). Without quotation marks, the word Gypsy honors various groups' and individuals' choice of this form of self-identification and self-ascription. The use of quotation marks in "Gypsy" signals *gadje* (i.e., non-Roma) appropriation and (mis-)use, and draws attention to the perpetuation of the misnomer. "Gypsyness" refers to *gadje*-authored representations of Gypsies and Roma that have been formed

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1 Derived from the Latin noun *sartor,* which translates as "tailor," "sartorial" means "of or relating to a tailor or tailored clothes; broadly: of or relating to clothes" (*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed., 2012).

2 Richard A. Rogers (2006, 486) acknowledges the preponderance of "studies on appropriations of Native American cultures (e.g., Black 2002; Churchill 1994; Kadish 2004; Ono & Buescher 2001; Torgovnick 1996; Whitt 1995)."

through practices that homogenize, essentialize, stereotype, and often also fetishize and naturalize real or perceived difference. Exonymic representations of "Gypsies" have circulated for centuries across cultures and continents and have been reinscribed and disseminated through art, entertainment, literature, music, and now social media.[3] Whether exoticizing or vilifying,[4] such representations have operated together toward sustaining individual and national fantasies while also enabling *gadje* to project their fears and justify discriminatory practices. Although serving different purposes during various historical periods and in various geopolitical contexts, linguistic and visual romanticizations have generally tended to capitalize on motifs associated with clothing (sumptuous, vibrant), occupation (music, dance, "black arts"), and position (nomadic, at the periphery, outside "norms," in sync with nature). Formulaic representations encode modes of being that are employed to contrast with those of the *gadje* in enviable, threatening, or ambivalent ways. An illuminating discussion of how pictorial representations have responded to changing contexts is provided by Sarah Carmona's (2018) analysis of Romani iconography in 13 works from the Louvre and Prado collections. She notes that,

> While until the sixteenth century Romani dress and regalia were used inter alia to portray biblical figures known for their hermeneutic and prophetic gifts, from the second half of the sixteenth century, and especially with the repeated use of the fortuneteller by Caravaggio and his followers, the images of Bohemians, Gypsies, or Tsigane gradually turned into incarnations of vice, theft, and alienating exteriority. Later, when Romanticism and then Orientalism emerged as systems of thought and representation, revealing how the West perceived the Other, the Romani figure became sexualized and the female body objectified. What was previously fantasy or even the reviled norm became the reference through "deethnicization" (Carmona 2018, 146–147).

This "deethnicization" and orientalizing of the Romani figure that gained momentum during the Romantic period created optimum conditions for cultural appropriation, a process that continues, to increased detrimental effects, into the twenty-first century.

1. On Cultural Appropriation

Cultural appropriation may be defined broadly as the taking of artifacts, cultural expressions, genres, history, intellectual property, rituals, symbols, or technologies that belong to a culture that is not one's own (Ziff and Rao 1997, 1–3; Rogers 2006, 474). *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (11th edition, 2012) offers two definitions of the verb "to appropriate" (which derives from the Latin "appropriare," meaning "to make one's own") on which most conceptualizations (both popular and theoretical) rely, and both underscore the unethical and exploitative dimensions of the practice: "to take exclusive possession

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3 For analyses of such representations see Beaudoin (2015), Nord (2006), and the essays in the volume edited by Glajar and Radulescu (2008).

4 See Stuart Hall's (1997) discussion of the "binary structure of the stereotype" that forces the stereotyped into shuttling between extreme opposites, and at times having to also inhabit both extremes at once (263).

of" and "to take or make use of without authority or right." Along these lines, Helene Shugart (1997) suggests that, "technically, appropriation refers to any instance in which means commonly associated with and/or perceived as belonging to another *are used to further one's own ends*. Any instance in which a group borrows or imitates the strategies of another – *even when the tactic is not intended to deconstruct or distort the other's meanings and experiences* – thus would constitute appropriation" (Shugart 1997, 210–211, italics mine). According to James O. Young (2010), it may include the representation of practices by outsiders, non-members' use of artistic elements specific to a cultural group, and the possession and use of cultural artifacts by non-members or culturally non-affiliated institutions (Young 2010, 135–46).

An appropriative act has implications that depend on numerous factors, including degree and scope, the power relations within which the process takes place, and the kind of epistemic knowledge it produces. Richard A. Rogers (2006) proposes that cultural appropriation is involved "in the assimilation and exploitation of marginalized and colonized cultures" as well as "in the survival of subordinated cultures and their resistance to dominant cultures" (474), and identifies four categories, according to the conditions (cultural, economic, historical, political, social) under which acts of appropriation occur:

1. Cultural exchange: the reciprocal exchange of artifacts, genres, rituals, symbols, and/or technologies between cultures with roughly equal levels of power.
2. Cultural dominance: the use of elements of a dominant culture by members of a subordinated culture in a context in which the dominant culture has been imposed onto the subordinated culture, including appropriations that enact resistance.
3. Cultural exploitation: the appropriation of elements of a subordinated culture by a dominant culture without substantive reciprocity, permission, and/or compensation.
4. Transculturation: cultural elements created from and/or by multiple cultures, such that identification of a single originating culture is problematic, for example, multiple cultural appropriations structured in the dynamics of globalization and transnational capitalism creating hybrid forms (Rogers 2006, 477).

According to Rogers, certain circumstances make appropriation benign or mutually beneficial (see the first category) while others might make it both harmful and unavoidable (see the second category), such as when minorities are coerced or incentivized into adopting the majority's culture as they negotiate their degree of assimilation into mainstream society; they might do it for survival (Clifford 1988), psychological compensation (Radway 1984), and/or opposition (Shugart 1997; Harold 2004).[5] Rogers' fourth category, transculturation, "involves cultural elements created through appropriations from and by multiple cultures such that identification of a single originating culture is problematic" (490). He sees this paradigm as having emerged from a set of fairly new conditions (such as globalization, neo-imperialism, postcolonialism, postmodernism). While retaining and making visible the implications of unequal power of cultural dominance and exploitation, Rogers contends that this fourth category foregrounds the inevitable hybridity of new cultural forms (491–493). Though relevant to other contexts, the transcultural paradigm is not particularly useful to this analysis, as it downplays the damaging effects

5 References acknowledged in Rogers 2006, 483.

of appropriation; however, some of its underlying ideas will prove useful to my discussion of Romani Design. Rogers' third category, "cultural exploitation," captures most aptly the conditions within which my arguments operate, so I will return to it in the upcoming sections.

In their introduction to the edited collection *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation*, Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao (1997) identify four concerns with cultural appropriation. Their first is with the "cultural degradation" and other "palpable damage" that results from erroneous or flawed renditions of the appropriated culture (9). They underscore the corrosive effects on the exploited culture, especially when the latter's preservation or self-mobilization relies heavily "on the construction of a strong cultural identity" (11). Ziff and Rao's second concern targets "the preservation of cultural goods as valuable objects" (12). They posit that cultural representations need to be understood in their original settings, as their meaning is intimately related to these contexts (12–13) and that "appropriative practices could undermine attempts at preservation" (14).

The third concern is with "the deprivation of material advantage" minority cultures experience when appropriators reap the financial benefits (14–15). A fourth concern is with the failure of appropriators to "recognize sovereign claims" (15) that would, in an ideal justice system, enable minority cultures to prevent what they perceive as cultural theft.[6]

My position aligns with that of cultural critics who see cultural appropriation as primarily harmful (Shugart 1997; Ziff and Rao 1997; Ono and Buescher 2001; Fricker 2007; Maitra 2009; Dotson 2011). As my following discussions suggest, the effects are particularly pernicious when the appropriators, taking advantage of a minority group's socio-economic vulnerabilities and limited political agency, proceed without "substantive reciprocity," without being granted permission, and without providing compensation (Rogers 2006, 477).

2. Representation and Cultural Appropriation in the Fashion Industry

The topic of appropriation of Romani culture has been addressed by other scholars, especially in the context of music (Malvinni 2004; Helbig 2009; Silverman 2012, 2015), but to my knowledge no study has been produced on appropriative practices in the fashion industry. One might understandably question this article's attention to sartorial matters, especially in light of other, more pressing concerns with systemic structural injustice. I would suggest, in response, that top-down reforms, without simultaneous efforts to challenge and change popular perceptions of Roma, are not only unlikely to yield the most desirable long-term results but that they could fuel populist opposition. At the same time, altering mainstream perceptions of underrepresented groups (especially when social interactions with these groups are limited) requires concerted efforts that branch into the areas of education, social reform, and grass-roots advocacy. The

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6 Ziff and Rao exemplify this point with Aboriginal laws and rule-systems that delineate the terms of their ownership of symbols, rituals, stories, and other cultural elements, though such sovereign claims are generally discounted in courts of law that represent dominant interests and do not share the same views on intellectual property.

challenge is compounded by the considerable functions the entertainment media, music, and various other forms of popular culture play in shaping, sustaining, and exploiting reductive views of difference (see Lee et el. 2009; Arendt and Northup 2015). This, in turn, is complicated by the fact that what these industries produce is in large part a response to assessed or estimated "market demands." They recognize otherness as a compelling object of representation but are not particularly invested in understanding the mechanisms that power this fascination or its ethical implications. It is not in the entertainment industry's interest to wonder, with Stuart Hall (1997), about "the repertoires or regimes of representation" on which the industry draws when representing "difference," or to ask "Why does 'difference' matter?" or "[H]ow is the representation of 'difference' linked with questions of power?" (259). To seek answers to these questions means to be willing to assume responsibility over the meanings produced through representation.

In his discussion of stereotyping as a signifying practice that "reduces, essentializes, naturalizes, and fixes 'difference,'" Stuart Hall (1997) underscores the symbolic power of representation and its ability to "mark, assign, and classify" as well as to "ritualize expulsion" (259). Such power is particularly insidious as it works at two levels that might seem mutually exclusive but that in fact work in tandem – one at the conscious level and the other at the unconscious or suppressed level. As Hall (1997) insists,

> stereotypes refer as much to what is imagined in fantasy as to what is perceived as 'real.' (…)
> [W]hat is visually produced, by the practice of representation, is only half of the story. The
> other half – the deeper meaning – lies in *what is not being said, but is being fantasized, what
> is being implied but cannot be shown* (263).

This "binary structure of the stereotype" (*ibid.* 262) is closely connected to the ambivalence that governs approaches to "difference." As Hall encapsulates it, while necessary "for the production of meaning, the formation of language and culture, for social identities and a subjective sense of the self as a sexed subject," "difference" is at the same time perceived as "threatening, a site of danger, of negative feelings, of splitting, hostility and aggression toward the 'Other'" (*ibid.* 238).

Therefore, *how* difference is used by media and the entertainment industry is a fundamentally ethical concern. This bears particular relevance to the case of Roma, about whose history, heterogeneity, and real (i.e., non-discursive) presence in the world non-Roma have limited knowledge, especially in the United States. In an interview with Paul Gilroy and Lizbeth Goodman, Stuart Hall reflects on this by suggesting that "[i]n a sense, what the society knows about race [and ethnicity] and what it feels about race [and ethnicity] do not exist outside of the way in which those subjects are represented in the media"[7] (as quoted in Goodman 1992, 108). Julianna Beaudoin (2015) too has observed that,

> [w]hen there is a vacuum of accurate information on Romani realities, compounded by
> historic and mythical "Gypsy" stereotypes, entertainment media fills a factual void; in this

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7 That Hall has both race and ethnicity in mind here is revealed in his next sentence, where he suggests that analyses of media can provide "profound insight into the shifting relations that are going on around race and ethnicity at that moment" (as quoted in Goodman 1992, 108).

way, minor characters, or even fleeting references in fictional shows end up serving as the basis for understanding and categorizing an entire ethnicity (315).

Unfortunately, as consumers of culture, we often cannibalize the narratives we are served without questioning why and how they are produced, what purpose they serve, and how we might find ourselves replicating them in real-life situations. In fact, the more innocuous or depoliticized an art or entertainment form appears, the more insidious, in many cases, is its power to shape public consciousness.[8] Clothing has functioned as one of the most commodified identity signifiers in constructions of "Gypsyness" in arts and literature, and the fashion industry, attuned to the "visceral impact" visual stereotypes can exert on judgment (Fricker 2007, 37), has been quick to exploit their associations as it creates and exports its own sartorial tropes for commercial purposes.

Through appropriative acts that invoke or recycle ossified narratives of mystique, primitivism, transgression, or wanderlust found in artistic, cinematic, journalistic, and literary representations, as well as in pop culture and various media outlets, and that have, over the centuries, fueled personal or collective fantasies, the fashion industry has perpetuated essentialized or distorted views that compromise acceptable understandings of Roma and their culture(s) within non-member groups. In his discussion of appropriation as cultural exploitation, Rogers (2006) reminds us that the process of commodification, "by abstracting the value of a cultural element, necessarily removes that element from its native context, changing its meaning and function and raising concerns about cultural degradation," and further draws attention to how, "[i]n fetishizing and reifying 'artificial' meanings onto the elements of living cultures, the social relations and history involved in that act of commodification are obscured and neocolonial relations justified" (488). Wittingly or out of ignorance, designers producing "Gypsy-inspired" collections discount the cultural contexts from which they "lift" them and in which the appropriated material plays substantially different functions. They do so exploitatively, by profiting from the imbalance of power within which these generally non-mutual transactions operate. Perhaps equally important, by propagating stereotypes and fetishized notions of "Gypsyness," the fashion industry contributes to normalizing them, thus disincentivizing audiences from seeking – or even recognizing the legitimacy of – alternative narratives and discourses, such as those authored by Roma about their histories and lived experiences.

3. The Rhetors[9] of the Fashion Industry and the (Re-)production of "Gypsy" Tropes

The following discussion examines how designers, as main rhetors, articulate their inspiration, and how their work is read, decoded, and disseminated by related rhetors, such as fashion journalists who

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8 For a discussion on how images both communicate and produce social knowledge, and on the ideological power of iconic and popular imagery, see Hariman and Lucaites (2007).

9 My use of the word "rhetors" means to position fashion designers and reviewers as "conscious and deliberating agents" who shape discourses and make choices with the express or indirect purpose of influencing audiences (https://www.thoughtco.com/rhetor-definition-1692059).

collaborate in meaning-making as they mediate between the artists' work and audiences while also often serving the interests of the industry. The fashion media's power to shape both discourses and public attitudes through particular agendas (especially since, as already suggested, social realities are increasingly constructed and mediated through interactions with media platforms) is often underestimated, as is fashion critics' "symbiotic relationship" with, and dependence on, fashion business.[10] The analysis will reference a number of designers and fashion houses, and will conclude (in section four) with a discussion of one particular designer, Rio Uribe, and his brand, Gyspy Sport.[11]

The fashion world has made tropes associated with "Gypsies" and "Bohemians"[12] integral to its visions for almost a century, generally by capitalizing on evocative associations with a "free" lifestyle, non-conformism, liberation, and counter-normativity. As an example, in the United States, where by the mid- to late-1960s hippies had displaced beatniks "as the prevalent bohemian culture" (Gore 1999, 77), the bohemian look (floral fabrics, flowing skirts, headscarves, fringes), whose power had been mythologized in unprecedented ways, became central to discourses on rebelliousness and resistance, both in streetwear and high fashion.[13] Over the last two decades, perhaps as a response to global socio-political and cultural changes, we have witnessed a resurgence in the popular imagination of the appropriation of traits associated with "Gypsies" and "Bohemianism." Designers and fashion houses such as Rina Dhaka, Salvadore Ferragamo, Barbara Fialho, Miki Fukai, John Galliano, Gucci, Ralph Lauren, Miuccia Prada, Rio Uribe, and Yohji Yamamoto have incorporated motifs identified as "Gypsy"/"gypsy" by the collection's title, fashion journalists, or other media coverage. Some designers openly have confessed the intent to use "Gypsyness" as marketable currency. At the 2015 London Fashion Week, Indian designer Yana Ngob reportedly declared that, "there's a huge following of boho [short for "bohemian"] and gypsy trends in the UK and I plan on capitalising on the same" (as quoted on redriff.com).

In her review of Greek designer Mary Katrantzou's 2016 London Fashion Week collection, journalist Suzy Menkes remarks that, after hearing that Katrantzou's collection had been inspired by Emir Kusturica's 1988 *Time of the Gypsies*, she "sat down expecting a wild spectacle of colour and pattern" (Menkes 2015a). She admits to being pleasantly surprised: "The fashion miracle of the collection was that the clothes all seemed so streamlined and wearable, however *Mary's magpie, gypsy mind* may have travelled" (*ibid.* 2015a [italics mine]). In her review of Manish Arora's 2016 collection "Romany Rave," which she qualifies as "half Indian, half gypsy," after remarking that "[g]ypsies are believed to have started their pilgrimage

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across the world in India, the designer's home territory," Menkes (2015b) criticizes Arora for making "Romany culture […] look like a kitschy theme, with hippie-de-luxe gilded chiffon dresses sweeping the floor of an underground dive by the river Seine." The critic's push against kitschy representation is laudable. However, how Menkes, a world-renowned and influential fashion journalist and editor for the *International Herald Tribune* and *International Vogue*, reduces Roma to an adjectival modifier connected to the avian realm ("magpie, gypsy mind") is deeply unsettling. Some of the assumptions that appear to shape her assessments are problematic as well as they reveal the entrenchments of essentialized thinking. Thus Katrantsou is praised for harnessing her "magpie, gypsy mind" and streamlining, while Arora, whom Menkes affiliates with Roma by virtue of their shared home territory (which Roma left centuries ago), appears to be reproved on grounds of "inauthenticity."

The deployment of "Gypsyness" as a trope of resistance is barely concealed in *Marie Claire* contributor Kira Gimpel's 2017 article, "For Fashion Snobs: A History of the Bohemian Trend (And Why We Think It's Back Now)," a topical review of the Paris Fashion Week Spring/Summer 2018. After attempting a lay definition of "Bohemian"[14] to reinforce her point, she accompanies it with a reproduction of "Gypsy Bohemian women in Turkey circa 1910." Advocating for "*authentically and ethically produced clothing*" (my italics), she suggests that this comeback is here to "re-inspire us to break away from the conventional and to also do so with our clothing" (Gimpel 2017). The five categories to which she assigns various collections could not be more entrenched in hackneyed tropes: fringes that suggest movement; the "most popular" paisley and floral solid prints; functionality for traveling; a "mix-and-match" attitude that shows nonchalance and "the individuality of the wearer" and, for the fifth, "also widely popular" (sic) "white lace" that shows "fine needlework." This last one might come as a surprise, but it should not. The interplay between non-conformism and propriety (framed by the last category's evocation of domesticity and purity) recalls literary narratives (such as Miguel de Cervantes's novella "La Gitanilla" and D.H. Lawrence's *The Virgin and the Gypsy*) in which Gypsy characters are used as foils who tease their *gadjo* counterparts' desire for transgression. In such narratives "order" (or some version of status quo) is always restored, presumably to alleviate contemporaneous readers' anxieties. Disregarding what Celine, Chloe, Valentino, Valli, and other designers referenced here might have intended with their fringes and paisleys, Gimpel markets "Gypsyness" as a strategy for possessing otherness *while* participating in all kind of oppositional discourses and aligning oneself with trendy narratives on sustainability and authenticity. Her conclusion is telling in this regard: "We know to expect this trend in the stores very soon (…). However, the real question is whether you'll choose to incorporate hand-woven lace and unconventional styling into your look as well as the ideology of these free-spirited pioneers of the trend" (Gimpel 2017).

Designer Katharine Polk's Houghton Bride Spring/Summer 2016 collection exploits the "Gypsy" trope's power to inspire dreaming, spontaneity, romance, and a return to the unspoiled. One reviewer who comments on "[t]he light and airy spirit of a gypsy… a collector of mementos of world travels… shells and beads, stones and crystals… natural beauty remembered in the floral motifs in lace, leather, and chiffon…

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14 "The term hints at an unconventional way of life, suggestive of people with shared interests in art, music and even spirituality. Similar to that of a gypsy, it is mysterious and without the intent of extreme fashion" (Gimpel 2017).

delicate crochets and embroideries, ancient handcrafts," urges readers to "indulge in the collection" and "get your daydream on" (Woolf 2016). The online *Fashion Gone Rogue* notes how, "[i]nspired by [the] travels of a gypsy, Polk showed a lineup of bohemian inspired looks including leather, lace and even bold metallic styles," and then adds that, "These looks are perfect for a destination wedding like the beach or even in your own backyard. Loose and flowing silhouettes can be worn by just about any body type" ("Bridal Spring 2016" 2015).

As Anjali Vats (2014) argues, in allowing outsiders to "take difference as they please to enrich their own cultural knowledge and worldly experiences," voyeurism becomes an enterprise with "neocolonial and racial undertones" (125). Besides inviting a voyeuristic consumption of difference, these fashion narratives (as authored by designers and/or reviewers) pitch "Gypsyness" as an available identity that, like ready-made clothes, can be worn or discarded, customized for "just about any body type" and personality, transferrable and multifunctional (e.g., good for both destination weddings or the backyard).

As revealed in these excerpted reviews, through a process of de-historicizing and resignifying, fashion rhetors craft perilous narratives about the relation between identity and performance. In some cases, the notion of performance has been used literally to amplify the semblance of authenticity. From John Galliano's Christian Dior Fall 2003 "exuberant" (Mower 2003) collection that "opened with a group of fiery flamenco gypsies, stamping the runway in flounced skirts, corsetry, and wickedly mannish, form-swathing jackets, their eyes flashing and matches clamped between their teeth" (Mower 2003) to Andres Aquino's 2012 Fashion Week collection that was introduced with Julia Kulakova's Russian Gypsy dances, "Gypsyness" is deployed not just as a discreet signifier but as a strategically packaged "cultural experience." On the surface, this is nothing more than a benign form of entertainment that reminds how the "reality" of the simulacrum has come to usurp the reality of the original in much contemporary culture (see Baudrillard 1983). Yet how are Roma-authored perspectives to compete with "haute-couture" exoticizations such as the one instantiated in Mower's (2003) description – "wickedly mannish," "eyes flashing and matches clamped between their teeth"? These *gadje*-authored performances' implicit promise of an "authentic" experience undermines the rhetorical agency[15] of Roma desiring to represent – and speak – for themselves (even when self-representation takes the form of not speaking).

4. Rio Uribe: Radical Inclusiveness, Exclusive Inclusiveness

As mentioned in my introduction, I chose Rio Uribe as a case study because of his high visibility and subsequent power to shape public attitudes, coupled with his professed investment in social justice. Thus, I found his failure to address or even acknowledge the unethical dimensions of his appropriative acts, starting with the brand's employment of the fraught word "Gypsy," both disheartening and worth scrutinizing.

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15 I use "rhetorical agency" to refer to a multiplicity of concepts, including, as Karlyn Kohrs Campbell proposes, "invention, strategies, authorship, institutional power, identity, subjectivity, practices, and subject positions, among others" (quoted in Vats 2016: 116).

While earlier associations with non-conformism remain the dominant mode/strategy, in recent years "Gypsy" tropes have been increasingly deployed along visual rhetorical narratives that challenge dominant and normative thinking on aesthetics, class, ethnicity, gender, race, and more. Among the most acclaimed emerging American designers is the thirty-two-year-old Californian-born Rio Uribe, the 2015 recipient of the prestigious Vogue Fund Award. The founder (in 2012) and creative director of Gypsy Sport, a line known for its "gender-bending sportswear, global nomad, and cool street" looks (Nnadi 2016), Uribe spent his childhood between L.A.'s Koreatown and Mexico and has worked with the luxury fashion house Balenciaga and brands such as DKNY, Opening Ceremony Japan, and *The Hunger Games* film series.

Image 1. Gypsy Sport
1.1(top left), 1.2 (top right), 1.3 (bottom left): Fall 2019 Ready-to-Wear Collection,
photos by Filippo Fior; 1.4. Fall Winter 2018 Ready-to-Wear Collection, photo by Regis Colin Berthelier

Critics have hailed Uribe's "renegade sensibility" and "commitment to smashing fashion convention" (Singer 2016) and called him a "natural-born disruptor" (Nnadi 2017). Uribe has described his line as a "streetwear brand inspired by pop culture and world culture,"[16] a line that is "alternative and global" (as quoted in Katz 2017). He has repeatedly underscored the democratic scope of his vision and the ethics of inclusiveness and responsibility that ground it.[17] In Evan Ross Katz's (2017) view, "[w]hen it comes to organic inclusivity in fashion, Gypsy Sport is both the blueprint and the aspiration." To his merit, Uribe has collaborated with (and donated proceeds to) various organizations that work to curtail homelessness, has done castings for his shows at protests and marches (such as the Women's March and the Muslim Ban March in New York City in 2017) and on the streets, and has built collections that address disenfranchisement, ghettoization, and homelessness. In her review of the guerilla-style show Uribe staged in the spring of 2017 "smack-bang in the middle of the Place de la République" in Paris, fashion critic Chioma Nnadi (2017) praises his daring vision: "Connecting with forward-thinking, disenfranchised millennials at street level has always been part of his raison d'être, and today he showed just how bold and beautiful that global movement can look like."

Reviewing his Fall 2018 Menswear collection, the same critic notes that Uribe's brand creates "a safe zone for personal expression and body positivity" (Nnadi 2018). Along the same lines, in the September 9, 2018 issue of *The New York Times Style Magazine*, Alexander Fury (2018) approaches Uribe's work in relation to queer aesthetics and recent explorations of "the hinterland that lies beyond the boundaries of both hetero- and homonormative conventions" and aligns his vision with that of another handful of designers whose clothes "don't simply suggest androgyny but […] announce a radically inclusive ideology." Other fashion critics such as Maya Singer (2016) have positioned his work within current discourses "about race," as she does in her review of the 2016 New York Fashion Week, where she admires how Uribe has created "a patchwork printout of close-up photos of his skin and the skin of various friends and Gypsy Sport team members." "The point he was making," she continues, "was an uncontroversial one – skin color is an abstraction – but he did a nice job of translating it into the language of fashion" (*ibid*.).

Singer's comment connects to what Anjali Vats has noted as a trend toward "representations of racial performance" that imagine a postracial America in which race "is no longer a meaningful category of analysis" (Vat 2014, 114). While I see Uribe's bold interventions in current conversations about race and ethnicity as necessary, I concur with Vats that racial performance (or what Susan Gubar calls "racechange,"[18] e.g., whites performing blackness, blacks performing whiteness) may in fact "limit the rhetorical agency of those who wish to speak against the myth of postraciality" (*ibid*.). This is particularly pertinent in the case of Roma, whose histories and lived experiences, deeply marked by discrimination, prejudice, and various forms of racism (especially in Europe but by no means absent in the United States), underscore the utopian dimensions of postraciality.

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16 See https://gypsysportny.com.

17 In its casting call, Gypsy Sport declares, "Gypsy Sport has always been committed to showcasing diversity.
No Racism • No Sexism • No Ableism • No Ageism • No Homophobia • No Xenophobia" (https://gypsysportny.com/blogs/tv/casting).

18 See Gubar (2000).

I chose to discuss Uribe over other designers precisely because he has set the bar so high. As he delivers what Susan Gubar (2003) would call "nuanced […] stories about various modes and gradations of Othering" (44), he also draws attention to all kinds of sites of injustice and inequality, including those based on race and ethnicity. Moreover, he instantiates possibilities of enacting resistance. He challenges dichotomized views of race, gender, class, beauty, and body shape, as well as urban-rural, private-public, high-low polarities, and foregrounds productive discourses on intersectionality. His disruptions of high fashion conventions and attempts to de-essentialize identities and redirect dominant discourses toward inclusivity and fluidity have social and cultural implications that could serve minorities and marginalized groups. At the same time, these nuanced views on *some* issues do not exculpate him and do not mitigate the unethical dimensions of his exploitative appropriations. What place do Roma occupy in the supposedly radically inclusive world of Gypsy Sport?

Some may argue that the "Gypsy" of Uribe's brand is just a marketing tool or catchphrase not worth critical scrutiny. However, naming gives meaning to things as it brings them into language, and so the act of naming carries significance that impacts real-life situations. In a culture whose commerce relies so heavily on branding, "Gypsy" is a potent signifier, especially to audiences who draw their "understanding" of Roma/Gypsies primarily from pop culture, with the reality show *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* often identified as a top source of "knowledge." Asked about the "Gypsy" of his line's name, Uribe explains, "The reason is (…) gypsies have historically been persecuted by all nations, so I wanted something that has the feel of 'I'm not accepted everywhere, but I'm happy where I am.'" (as quoted in Katz 2017).[19] I am unsure how to interpret the latter part of his statement: is he suggesting that his line creates a space that not only fosters acceptability but normalizes difference? It is worth noting though that Uribe is aware of Roma's historical presence and the systematic prejudice and exclusion to which they have been subjected, so his choice to ignore this is troubling. In the same interview, commenting on the "bohemian implication" of the word, Uribe adds, "Gypsy is about subcultures and how to target those I related to or belonged to without neglecting others. Gypsies, as people, go beyond race, gender, religion or nationality (as quoted in Katz 2017)."[20] Here he deploys the word "Gypsy" as a synecdoche, using one disenfranchised group as a signifier for all others. He displaces Roma from the particulars of their lived experiences and history and emplaces them into a universalizing trope primed for tourist consumption. In "transacting" them to speak for the silenced, as a conduit for all kinds of narratives of inclusiveness and/or postraciality, he excludes them from the very discourse on self-representation and self-empowerment his aesthetic, as a fashion designer, means to embody. The more malleable and universalist his constructed "Gypsyness" becomes, perhaps the more invisible and silent it renders the people and culture that served as "inspiration." Uribe's collections defy normativity, inviting identification and disidentification[21]

19 On Gypsy Sport's official Facebook page, "Gypsy" is defined as " a nomadic or free-spirited person who lives beyond borders and outside of the social norms. (Also a misnomer for the traveling Romany people, once believed to come from Egypt, but are actually descendants from India and South Asia.)" (https://www.facebook.com/gypsy.sport)

20 Asked if he has received criticism "over the political correctness of that word," Uribe acknowledges he has and mentions he responds to criticism with this very explanation.

21 I borrow the usage of this term from José Esteban Muñoz (1999), who defines it as a process that "scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications" (31).

in the same breath. They challenge stereotypes by hyperbolizing or by combining elements borrowed from various cultural repertoires and transforming them through cross-pollination, fusion, and mutation. At the same time, rather than using such innovative means to draw productive attention to Roma's history of marginalization, Gypsy Sport (see images 1.1–1.4 as samples, with entire collections available at gypsysportny.com) might be generating new misperceptions and feeding apprehension.

As suggested above, while Rio Uribe's "Gypsy" brand pitches an ideal vision of an integrated world in which difference is celebrated and perhaps normalized, with age, appearance, class, culture, gender, and skin color eradicated as sources of bias and injustice, it also generates its own version of epistemic injustice. In this latter respect, Uribe might not be doing something much different from what other fashion rhetors engaged in flagrant and often tasteless appropriations do. He too runs the risk of turning the people in/under whose name his line markets its ideals "from an identity category into a costuming element" available for consumption, or for what Vats (2014) calls "tourist enterprise" (114). This kind of "enterprise," Vats argues, "permits interactions with difference without social, political, or economic obligation while, consistent with postracial ideologies, recognizing difference for its exocitcness [*sic*] and novelty instead of its continuing material significance" (*ibid*.).

Critiquing Uribe's work may be seen as a futile exercise or something akin to preaching to the choir. I would like to suggest instead that we consider what this case study teaches us about how we might be able to intervene in the fashion industry's knowledge production and, equally if not more importantly, how we might convince designers like Uribe of the importance of joining that effort. Unlike other designers, Uribe shows genuine interest in capitalizing on fashion's potential to act not only as a form of art but as a social and political force, and to advance sartorial discourses that (re)shape public perceptions and attitudes. As Chioma Nnadi notes in her review of Uribe's 2019 New York Fashion Week ready-to-wear collection, "Uribe understands […] more than most" that "[c]lothes can't heal the world, but they can be a powerful tool for empowerment and self-expression," and that he "has taken pains to build his brand on a solid foundation of consideration and respect for all" (Nnadi 2018). Uribe needs to understand how he has failed in doing precisely that (building a brand that honors and respects), and how he has failed his own vision.

Such critical awareness (Uribe's, his fans') is integral to what I see as a larger endeavor of making the fashion industry rhetors, along with literary and television writers, musicians, and other artists, accountable for the visual and narrative discourses they produce. This, is turn, might make some of them inclined to use their success (and profits) to benefit Roma as well. The fashion industry could also play a "corrective" function in educating audiences,[22] but its rhetors themselves need first to be educated on Roma, their culture, histories, and lived experiences.

Another consequence of appropriation worth examining here relates to what Miranda Fricker (2007) calls "credibility excess" and "deficit." Following her line of argument and her emphasis on the power

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22 An example of this is the 2017 CFDA (Council of Fashion Designers of America) partnership with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Wishing to actively and concretely support the work of organizations that fight to protect rights and freedoms, over 50 designers teamed up on an initiative called "Fashion for ACLU" (Shepherd 2017).

of visual stereotypes to exert a "visceral impact on judgment" (37), Roma-authored narratives,[23] even as they increase in number, will have to compete in the popular imagination with those established by the dominant culture. Roma activists, scholars, and writers "authoring" narratives that do not reinforce those populating the *gadje* imaginary might be faced, as Fricker suggests, with a "credibility deficit owing to identity prejudice in the hearer" (*ibid*. 28) and, relatedly, owing to the epistemically unwarranted "credibility excess" (*ibid*. 17) that members of the dominant culture are granted by virtue of their status. Who is speaking and from what position matters.[24] If, as Karlyn Kohrs Campbell suggests, rhetorical agency "refers to the capacity to act, that is to have the competence to speak or write in a way that is recognized or heeded by others in one's community" (as quoted in Vats 2014, 116), then when *gadje* fashion rhetors monopolize or usurp the narrative authority of those from whom they appropriate and/or for whom they appear to speak, they also disable the rhetorical agency of the latter. Raising awareness about this kind of epistemic violence is particularly important to the current historical moment, when Romani designers are producing their own lines and trying to assert their own voices, as I discuss below.

5. Romani Fashion Designers and Romaniness

It is beyond the scope of this article to offer an encompassing examination of Roma designers, their collections, and the complexity of their roles as both artists and agents of change, though such discussions are much needed. Hoping to position the following illustration as an invitation to further research, I will focus briefly on Romani Design, Hungary's first Roma Fashion Studio and now an internationally acclaimed brand name. Founded in 2010 by Roma designers Erika and Helena Varga, Romani Design has been creating collections that reclaim, (re)envision, and perform Romaniness, raise awareness about the "cultural heritage of Roma traditional clothing," bridge cultures, and fight stereotypes.[25]

Breathtaking and highly innovative, the collections engage with Roma's history, identity, and with issues of representation, cultural memory, and social justice, underscoring the significant interplay of aesthetics and ethics. Romani Design clothes foreground heritage motifs, symbols, aesthetic elements, and other components of traditional clothing, as reflected in the use of rich colors, patterns inspired by the natural world, flowerbands, ribbons, pleats, natural fabrics, or the unconventional adaptations of *kretinca*, the traditional apron. Simultaneously, they reflect multiple forms of belonging, underscoring the interconnectedness between ethnic and national, as well as local and global, communities. Romani Design builds on the "aesthetic roots of Roma communities" while reflecting these communities' "embeddedness and deep connections with Hungarian culture" and to the world at large, as expressed explicitly in the collection "Wanderers of the Worlds."

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23 I use "narrative" with its most encompassing connotations, to refer to any meaning-making structure, including written and oral texts, and visual and aural artifacts.

24 I cannot help but ask myself how I would have read Uribe's brand in the context of a different statement of intentionality (see his stated intention of using "Gypsy" as an umbrella term for all "subcultures"). Would I have read it differently if he were Roma, and/or worked with Roma models, or if he had invested some of his profits to benefit Roma?

25 See https://www.romani.hu/en/history.

The inevitable convergence of aesthetics with ethics, history, and politics is reflected in some of the collections' titles and descriptions. Thus, the 2010 collection titled "Acceptance through Fashion" envisions social change through "the encounter of traditions with modernity"; the 2011 collection "Chameleon" highlights "the flexibility of traditional Roma communities to react to new challenges," and the 2016 collection "Romani '56" commemorates the Roma heroes of the Hungarian Revolution. The 2016 collection "Icon," inspired by five iconic actresses spanning "five different worlds," styles, and eras [26] (Marlene Dietrich, Audrey Hepburn, Frida Kahlo, Sophia Loren, and Marilyn Monroe) and showcased by five Hungarian actresses, fuses easily identifiable heritage elements with the five actresses' signature styles.

Together, these collections that (re-)envision Romaniness echo James Clifford's (1988) argument that in contemporary contexts (especially those involving de-colonializing processes), "cultural or artistic 'authenticity' has as much to do with an inventive present as with a past, its objectification, preservation, or revival" (222). Rogers' concept of transculturation (as outlined in section one of this article), though flawed in its implicit de-emphasis of the exploitative nature of appropriative acts, might be nonetheless useful in situating Romani Design outside bifurcating views of authenticity and in honoring their aesthetic and mission. As Rogers points out, transculturation highlights those processes of absorption, transformation, and hybridization that complicate productively notions of purity and authenticity that might otherwise promote essentialist and static views of culture (Rogers 2006, 494–495). Along these lines, a Romani Design piece inspired by Marlene Dietrich (or Audrey Hepburn/Frida Kahlo/Sophia Loren/Marilyn Monroe) and modeled by a well-known Hungarian actress delivers an expression of Romaniness that celebrates heritage culture while also acknowledging culture as encoded by (and encoding) symbols and commodities, and as inevitably "impure."

In the process of reclaiming and (re)envisioning Romaninness, Romani Design reveals the multidimensional and complex nature of such an endeavor. Celebrating one's heritage through fashion should be easy. However, the industry's history of cultural exploitation of Romani aesthetic elements, symbols, and popular fabrications of "Gypsyness," combined with a long history of systemic discrimination and lack of access to resources, have compounded the difficulty and added an inevitable political dimension. Thus, in order to produce work that celebrates Romani heritage, Romani Design has to simultaneously engage *gadje* (mis-) representations and stereotypes, and confront dominant regimes of representation. It also has to risk "re-creating existing stereotypical patterns" (Szilágyi-Kispista 2018, 156), a point Ágota Szilágyi-Kispista raises in the context of her analysis of a different category of Roma design but which is equally relevant here. Though too complex to be addressed in this article, the issue points to yet another layer of difficulty confronting Roma artists who reclaim a heritage whose modes of signification have been altered and cheapened through decontextualization, overuse, and economic trafficking. Therefore, as they recuperate appropriated cultural elements so they can be returned and (re)envisioned within cultural contexts to which they belong, the creators of Romani Design also perform work of resistance and contestation.[27] Thus, among other things,

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26 See https://Romani.hu/en/history.

27 Other designers too, such as Juana Martin (Spain) and George Radulescu (Romania) have drawn attention to the activist role they have had to occupy, by necessity, when creating fashion that reflected cultural tradition and also empowered their communities. See Marin 2014, and the interview (in Romanian) with Radulescu (https://vimeo.com/11191130) in which he discusses his creation of a fashion line with the intent of combating stereotypes and anti-Roma sentiments.

they disrupt and question *gadje*'s monopoly over issues of representation and, symbolically at least, discredit what Friker (2007) calls the appropriators' "credibility excess" (17).

Image 2. Romani Design:
2.1. Collection "Wanderers of the World" (top left); 2.2. Collection "Rebel Spirit" (top right);
2.3. Collection "Romani '56" (bottom left); 2.4. Collection "Icon" (bottom right)
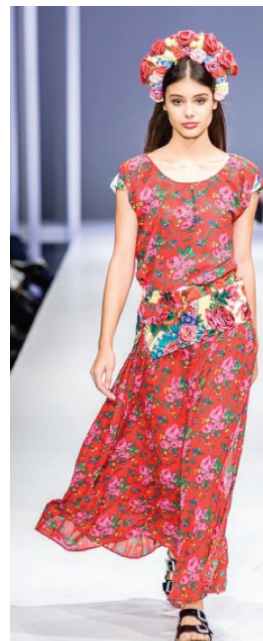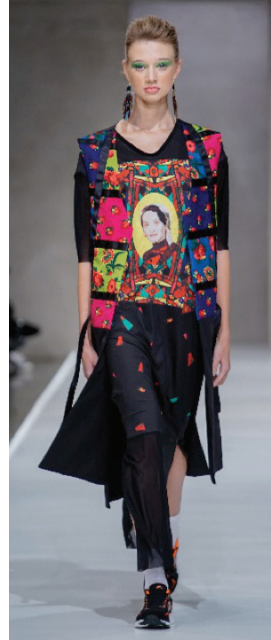
Appropriators and others involved in the perpetuation of "Gypsy" tropes either control or have privileged access to the fashion industry, including its commercial domains. This has severely limited Roma designers' access to economic resources and to opportunities for foregrounding their vision. However, Romani Design has used its success and limited resources to invest in the community. It provides educational programs and workshops that foster creativity and cultural pride among Roma youth and serves economic needs by training, employing, and empowering Roma women. Thus, it models for the industry what it means to produce responsible, sustainable, civically minded fashion, and how to use it as a medium for social intervention and empowerment. The case of Romani Design evidences the need for non-Roma designers and consumers of "Gypsyness" in general to curb the impulse to appropriate, and to help build political, social, and economic environments that encourage established and emerging Roma designers to speak for themselves.[28]

Conclusion

Imagining change-effecting responses to cultural appropriation is complicated, and not only because what constitutes appropriation remains controversial, but also because, even if a consensus were reached, solutions would depend on a range of variables, including the fields and modes of appropriation, power relations, the values that are threatened, the purpose of appropriation, and the assessable or projected effects on all involved, including the exploited and the beneficiaries. In my discussion of cultural appropriation of "Gypsyness" in the context of the fashion industry, I tried to be sensitive to these variables, hopefully with a modicum of success and without slipping too often or unreflectively into the traps of essentialism. In envisioning reforms I have to remain tentative for similar reasons. As a literary scholar (primarily) and someone who is conscious of the confines of my knowledge of, and access to, Roma peoples' heterogeneous histories and lived experiences, I do not claim a comprehensive or cohesive vision. Change necessitates concerted national and transnational as well as localized (site- and community-specific) efforts. It also necessitates multidisciplinary interventions into knowledge production. As far as the fashion industry is concerned, such interventions need to incorporate the following: foster public and professional environments that support Romani designers and provide them with resources and opportunities to exert agency as they (re)claim and showcase their cultural heritage; address the industry's ongoing dissemination of "Gypsy" tropes through constructive critiques and by mentoring new generations of fashion rhetors; educate audiences about the corrosive effects of cultural appropriation and on how to become critical consumers of culture; and join other scholars (as those investigating the use of appropriation and commodification of the cultures of indigenous peoples or other silenced minorities) in comparative work.

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28 This point is aptly argued in Szilágyi-Kispista's (2018) analysis of work produced by Meșteshukar ButiQ (Bucharest, Romania), which looks at the role of design in the representation and self-representation of Romani identity. The scholar notes that "Roma are now themselves the initiators of a progressive interpretation of their own heritage" (152) and ready to create artistic spaces for self-representation.

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