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Cultural appropriation is the adoption or use of elements of one culture by members of a different culture. Sage Paul, a member of the Setsune Indigenous Fashion Incubator, stated, “Cultural appropriation is not wanting to fall into *that* stereotype.” With this in mind, I want to implement the film “Paris is Burning,” directed by Jennie Livingston in 1990, and construct a relationship between cultural appropriation in fashion and this award winning film.

“Paris is Burning” credibly displays various nights in which those who feel oppressed by society, (the LGBT community) gather in numerous “ballrooms” and experience the thrill of fame, glamour, and success through fashion contests. The categories consist of outfits that the LGBT community feels they are not allowed to wear in front of society. This clothing varies from the *average day dad, the businesswoman, the congressman, the entrepreneur, the model*, and etcetera. Dressing up in these outfits, walking down the aisle, and participating in the event is referred to as the “walk.” Pepper LaBeija, a mother of one of the houses, defines the walk as an “opportunity to experience what society does not allow us to.” It is evident that these balls are a way to establish a connection between the culture of America, and the participants in the ballrooms. So do the actions of the LGBT community qualify as cultural appropriation in fashion?

Cultural appropriation in fashion is the adoption of the trends, fads, and ideas of cultures into ones one community. For example, a young Caucasian

male, who dresses in the average clothes of elite hip-hop artists, falls guilty of culturally appropriating their fashion. “It’s easy to throw the term cultural appropriation around in fashion,” says Chantel Fernandez in her article “The Good, The Bad and The Offensive: A Look Back At The Year In Fashion Cultural Appropriation.” Therefore, under this context, it can be concluded that the events put on by the LGBT community, are prime examples of cultural appropriation in fashion. However, does cultural appropriation always have negative effects?

The “balls” were based in New York City, the fashion capitol, and consisted of numerous competitions where those with bold personalities partook in the notorious “Walk.” The balls occurred in “houses”, but looked nothing like an actual house, more like a ballroom. Each house had a *mother*, or an owner who conducted the contests. In these established events, many of those present contained aspirations to fit in with the American social order, and felt that they must culturally appropriate themselves into the fashion industry of America by doing so. The houses served as safe havens where members in the LGBT community were able to experience the various lifestyles that they feel society oppress them from obtaining. Although the actions of the LGBT community are and should be considered as cultural appropriation in fashion, their true intentions were to affiliate themselves with a society they should belong to, but have been wrongfully excluded from.

Parul Sehgal, an author for The New York Times, raises an interesting question in his article “Is Cultural Appropriation Always Wrong?” Sehgal questions if the act of cultural appropriation can actually dissolve the concept of

stereotypes. Looking from the same viewpoint as Parul, the LGBT was making an effort to facilitate the elimination of discrimination in America. It is commonly misunderstood that cultural appropriation solely has negative effects on the uniqueness of individual cultures, which it does, however it can also be utilized to form a meaningful bond between opposing cultures. Through time, it is now evident to us that the attempt of the LGBT community to culturally appropriate the fashion of the American society into their community was beneficial for the acceptance of the LGBT community into American culture. As we can see, cultural appropriation in this case was used by the LGBT community to protest the isolation from society that they had endured for a period of time.

Since, it is now clear that the actions of the LGBT community are guilty of cultural appropriation of the American fashion industry, we move on to discuss whether or not cultural appropriation should be viewed as having negative effects on a specific culture, or can it more broadly be advantageous to uniting the cultures of the world and living in harmony. Is it possible, that if each culture submitted their most prized aspect into a bowl, and each aspect would later come together to form a whole new and independent culture that everyone abided by and became a part of, could we live in perfect harmony? Hasn't the United States been so successful because it is considered the world's largest melting pot?

According to Nadra Kareem, a race relations expert, cultural appropriation can be a positive aspect that society contains, however it "typically involves members of a dominant group exploiting the culture of less privileged groups."

Therefore, the idea of cultural appropriation is positive, however, dominating groups that indulge the traditions and events of submissive groups into their own culture, without completely recognizing the value of each culture's traditions, often abuse the concept of cultural appropriation. We see the flipside of this example in our breaking down of the LGBT intentions of participating in the ballroom events. On the flipside, when less dominating groups attempt to culturally appropriate a more dominant culture, it often facilitates the development of that group and helps attract more members to become part of the developing culture. Therefore, cultural appropriation is and was essential for the development of various cultures. However, like anything, when put into the wrong hands, it can be abused and used to suppress the upcoming traditions that a new cultural is attempting to develop. Nadra Kareem explains the answer to the question of why is cultural appropriation always looked upon in such a negative manner. She explains how larger groups often abuse it and they target the small-undeveloped cultures in which they can take various aspects and include them in their own culture. This makes people more likely to flee to the side of the larger culture, which means that many of the smaller cultures are incapable of obtaining new members at a rate that would allow them to expand.

So how can cultural appropriation be advantageous to society in today's world? Cultural appropriation, if used in the right way by the right people, can actually be labeled as beneficial to social order. It can be used to protest the unfairness that rests in our world, or to form a bond between two unfriendly cultures. Cultural appropriation can also give another culture an insight of what

its like for different groups to experience the traditions of other cultures and gain a deeper understanding of what its like to be in that society.

In conclusion, cultural appropriation can be identified as a positive aspect in various events of our history; however, it is widely abused by larger cultures that take advantage of smaller groups of people that are attempting to develop their cultures own morals and traditions. After analyzing the LGBT community, and their actions that associate with the ball, I have formed an opinion that they are culturally appropriating the fashion of the American society. However, I have also comprehended that cultural appropriation isn't always bad. It can be used to obtain an acceptance of various types of groups like the LGBT community. This is learned through the combination of the film "Paris Is Burning," and the concept of time. Through time, we understand the effects that culturally appropriating had for the LGBT community, and it is evident that this was essential to them gaining acceptance from the American Society.

Annotated Bibliography

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3. Sehgal, Parul, Mr. "Is Cultural Appropriation Always Wrong?" *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 03 Oct. 2015. Web. 15 May 2016. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/04/magazine/is-cultural-appropriation-always-wrong.html>>.