

Ethnicities and “Racial” Rearticulations

Nation, race, ethnicity, and religion. As interconnected subject positions, they overlap and shift in meaning along with the cultural discourses in which they are embedded. None of them are things or essences; they are more like relationships (Tabili 2003). And thinking about them as subject positions allows us to think about possibilities for these positions to shift, as hierarchies and power relations change. All involve processes of self-labeling (i.e., agency, subjectivity) as well as subjection to labels and stereotypes supplied by others. All influence, and are influenced by, styling-fashioning-dressing the body. All need to be analyzed in terms of the cultural discourses that produce and change their meanings, and styled-fashioned-dressed bodies become a vital part of such an analysis.

As we saw in [Chapter 3](#), nations are not pure or pristine. Cultural studies scholar Ien Ang (1996) notes that nations are dynamic and have multiple racial and ethnic groups. Hence, it is inappropriate to define national identity “in static, essentialist terms” with “authoritative checklists” that gloss over cultural struggles and power dynamics of what it means to be Chinese or Kenyan, for example. China has fifty-six state-recognized ethnic groups, with overlapping forms of style-fashion-dress influenced by geography, natural resources, religion, and other cultural factors. Kenya has more

than forty state-recognized ethnic groups but closer to seventy distinct ethnic communities. Not surprisingly, it has been challenging to identify a single representative form of Kenyan national dress, as discussed in [Chapter 3](#) (Rabine 2002).

The same problem with authoritative checklists occurs when contemplating how terms such as race and ethnicity—the primary topics of this chapter—get used and applied. Race and ethnicity become entangled in everyday styling-fashioning-dressing of the body. Further, race and ethnicity cannot be separated from nation (as we saw in [Chapter 3](#)) nor in some contexts from religion. They also intersect, of course, in complex ways with other subject positions such as gender, class, and so on.

In cultural studies terms, individuals continually navigate and negotiate between processes of belonging and differentiating. Styling-fashioning-dressing the body enables articulations of what cultural studies scholars call *belonging-in-difference* (Hall 1991; Scott 2005). Imagining and belonging to a community always involve some kind of differentiation *from* other

communities. Most commonly in fashion studies, race is studied in the context of certain visible features of the body, such as skin color, hair texture, or facial features. Some of these features (e.g., hair) can be readily fashioned and refashioned on a daily basis, whereas others are not so easily manipulated and have historically become bases for discrimination. In contrast, ethnic dress has been studied as clothes worn by individuals to express their belonging to a community with a common heritage and to differentiate themselves from other communities (Eicher and Sumberg 1995).

ROOTS OF RACIAL AND ETHNIC CONCEPTS

As subject positions, the concepts of race and ethnicity share some common roots: Both have been constructed as mechanisms to classify human difference. The meanings of both have shifted over time and for various political, scientific, and economic purposes. Many centuries ago, they were often used in ways that were similar to the concepts of nation and religion. During the Middle Ages, religion “meant membership of a community much more than adherence to a set of principles or beliefs,” and it was common to think of individuals as born Muslim, Jewish, or Christian, just as one was born English or Persian (Bartlett 2001: 41). Similarly, in the sixteenth century (and earlier) in Europe, race described a group of people who shared ancestors—also classified as a tribe or a nation or people of common stock (e.g., the British race or the Roman race; *Oxford English Dictionary* 2010).

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the connotation of race changed along with the emergence of modern nation-states and the biological sciences. Race came to mean visible genetic markers (e.g., skin color, hair texture, facial features) as the newly emerging biological sciences sought to classify and label differences within nature: humans, as well as plants and animals (Marks 2010). Scientific classifications and hierarchies of the human species were used to justify slavery, conquest, and colonization. Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, for example, slave merchants sold an estimated 2.5 million African slaves, mostly to the Americas. An important factor in these sales was capitalism, which flourished through a trade in textiles, slaves, and sugar and spices (McClintock 1995: 113). In many ways, the modern nation-state was built on the backs of bodies

classified as racially different. Still, the significance attached to visible markers varied dramatically from one society to another. For example, even the slave societies of Brazil and the Old South in the United States interpreted skin color very differently. Whereas the United States structured race in binary (black versus white) terms, the Brazilian racial system has included multiple categories of skin color.

As a concept, *ethnic* derived from the Greek word *hethnic*, which meant “heathen” or “pagan” in the fifteenth century. From a European perspective, ethnic meant “pertaining to nations not Christian or Jewish” (again, religion was a strong factor). In the nineteenth century, ethnic became known as “pertaining to race; peculiar to a race or nation; ethnological—common racial, cultural, religious, or linguistic characteristics.” In the United States, ethnic came to assume the connotation of foreign or exotic (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2010). And yet, there was a contradictory discourse of the United States as a melting pot of ethnicities. This model of assimilation frequently assumed a white, Northern European (and generally Protestant) background: an assimilation or melting of individuals of British, German, and Swedish national backgrounds, for example.

The connotations of ethnicity changed in the 1960s, when the civil rights movements fostered the concept of *identity politics* and an increased awareness (and critique) of cultural representations of difference (including, but not limited to racial, ethnic, national, and religious difference). This awareness led to multicultural discourses to replace the older melting pot model of assimilation (Perry 2002: 8).

In the 1960s, *ethnic minority* came to mean “a group of people different from the rest of the community by racial origins or cultural background, and usually claiming or enjoying official recognition of their group identity” (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2010).

Cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall (1990) uses the concept of ethnicity to consider how identities related to space and cultural background are not only about the past, but also about the future. Ethnicities involve becoming, as well as being. They have histories, but at the same time, they undergo constant transformation:

Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous “play” of history, culture and power. (Hall 1990: 225)

Similarly, Maxine Craig (2002), feminist scholar and author of *Ain't I a Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of race*, defines race as “a set of socially constructed boundaries, practices, and commonly held meanings mapped onto a population whose members themselves represent wide physical and social diversity” (Craig 2002: 9). She draws on the concept of *racial rearticulation* (Omi and Winant 1994) to show how the boundaries, practices, and meanings of race are continually revised *both* from the bottom up (through everyday shifts in self-fashioning) *and* the top down (from media and legal categories imposed through cultural discourse). The interplay between bottom up and top down processes of racial rearticulation parallels the ongoing dynamics of subject formation: a process of negotiating and navigating subjectivity within and across diverse subject positions (e.g., race, gender, class).

In the past fifteen years or so, scholars of race and ethnicity have begun to question the idea of a binary opposition between ethnic options (self-ascribed) and racial labels (imposed by others). They have argued that the concept of ethnicity tends to be overly romanticized, especially when applied to white populations (Kang and Lo 2004). Herein lies a striking contradiction: Ethnicity becomes constructed hegemonically both as a nostalgic version of whiteness (e.g., European peasant attire) and as “racial” (non-white) otherness/difference.

Indeed, the concepts of race and ethnicity are slippery, if not blurry, in everyday life (Kang and Lo 2004). As we saw in [Chapter 3](#), the differences between national dress and ethnic dress are also slippery and frequently hegemonic (as when one of multiple forms of ethnic dress becomes hegemonic so as to represent the nation).

In their current usage, the concept of ethnicity seems to offer more opportunities than that of race for agency, articulation, and flexibility for self- and group expression through style-fashion-dress. racialized discourses still have a tendency to fix race as biological or natural. Yet, as subject positions, both race and ethnicity are embedded in cultural discourses; both are socially constructed. As we have seen, the meanings of both race and ethnicity are fluid and have overlapped considerably at different times in history. What is at issue in this chapter is the extent to which individuals are *subjected* to oppressive, politically motivated and scientifically justified discourses based on physical attributes (i.e., how and why their bodies become racialized), and to what extent they are able to exercise agency and to articulate subjectivities of their

own choosing (i.e., those that connect with community identities and cultural belongings).

Building on Stuart Hall's work on new ethnicities, cultural studies scholars have begun to explore the ways in which new ethnicities are as much about the future as they are the past. Opening up ethnicity as a subject position linked to the parts and wholes of style-fashion-dress (Tulloch 2010), rather than dress alone, offers critical and creative possibilities for imagining both subject positions and subjectivity, regulatory cultural discourses and personal agency, and past and future.

Questions such as the following become relevant when trying to make sense of processes through which bodies become classified and through which they are fashioned to connect with places, cultural spaces, and communities—past, present, and future: Where do I belong? With whom do I identify? Where are my cultural connections? What do I believe in? Do they coincide with the boundaries of the nation-state? How do they compare with the way I look? Where was I born? Where have I moved? Where am I going? How do style, fashion, and dress become strategies to establish and reinforce the idea of having a place to *be* and *become* in the world: to have a cultural history or perspective, to be from somewhere, and to face the future with a sense of connection, as well as agency?

RACIAL REARTICULATIONS

Beginning in the eighteenth century, race was represented through scientific discourse as a biological concept—tied to physical features such as skin color, hair texture, facial features, and other visible qualities of physical appearance.

These qualities have been characterized as phenotypic—meaning that they are visible properties that can be traced in large part to genetics. Yet many scholars have noted how race is, in fact, a kind of fiction. For example, anthropologist and cultural studies scholar Roger Lancaster (2003: 77) indicates that race has been understood as a biological concept for so long “because a colonial history framed the way people, including scientists, perceived and thought about human bodies,” not because it was a scientifically sound system for capturing phenotypic variation (“it was not”).

As noted earlier, the concept of racial rearticulation (Omi and Winant 1994; Craig 2002) enables a way of rethinking, revising, and reclaiming race away from hegemonic representations. Because scientific and cultural representations have had so much to do with how race has been constructed and interpreted, the focus in cultural studies tends to shift from race as a thing to *racial formation* as a social process that categorizes people and creates social differences. The categories that emerged in the United States and elsewhere have often revolved first and foremost along the lines of color.

COLOR

In the United States, racial formation developed along an opposition between black and white, based on a history of slavery and the “one drop rule” that identified anyone with “one drop” of blackness as black (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992). This binary model has become more multicultural as the political agency of Native Americans, Chicana/os, and Asian Americans has made it apparent that there are many

limitations to this binary, oppositional system of racialization. After 1965, for example, when many immigrants came to the United States from Central and Latin American countries, Spanish-speaking groups in the United States were all recategorized by language and called Hispanics. Immigrants from Southeast Asia (e.g., Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos) were classified by continental origin and called Asians—along with Americans descending from China, Japan, Korea, Indonesia, the Philippines and other areas of the Pacific. Individuals descending from India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka became distinguished regionally, and so were called South Asians. (Individuals in Great Britain with the same backgrounds are called Asians; the categories vary by nation.)

A scholar of race and ethnicity, Herbert Gans (1999) has argued that there is a tendency in the United States to continue thinking of race as biological, scientific evidence to the contrary. Whereas most scientists agree that race is “not a useful biological concept,” the lay public still sees visible differences in physical features and “treats them as racial differences caused by differences in ‘blood.’” Although people do vary, of course, by skin color, the real issue is what gets noticed and judged:

Some visible bodily features that distinguish people are noticed and judged; some are noticed but not judged one way or another; and yet others are not even noticed, seeming to be virtually invisible...[I]n general, the bodily features of the most prestigious peoples are usually adopted as ideals of physical perfection, while features found among the lower social classes are judged pejoratively...*A major ingredient of the social construction of race is the determination of which*

visible bodily features are noticed and used to delineate race and which remain unnoticed. (Gans 1999: 382–83)

By going unnoticed or remaining unmarked and yet simultaneously representing the hegemonic norm, whiteness becomes a privileged visible bodily feature. This privilege manifests itself from class relations to beauty and fashion systems.

The civil right movements of the 1960s challenged these systems and heightened awareness of skin color with the self-accepting “black is beautiful” ideology, for example, that challenged, if not subverted, beauty standards. Activists (e.g., the Black Panthers) contributed to a process of racial rearticulation, enabling African American women “to see beauty where they had not seen it before” (Craik 2002: 108).

Asian American Studies scholar Susan Koshy (2001) demonstrates how whiteness itself has been rearticulated at different times in U.S. history; it is not a fixed racial category. The initial boundaries of whiteness expanded to include groups (e.g., Irish, Italian, Eastern European, Jews) that were initially seen as racially distinct. She also shows how, historically, the U.S. legal system has inconsistently classified Asian Americans—constructed through a “racial” category across a wide range of national, cultural, and linguistic boundaries—as white and not white. Some similarities of inconsistent racialization have applied to the experiences of Native Americans, Latina/o, or Hispanic Americans.

American Studies scholar Ruth Frankenberg (1997) has noted how whiteness often remains transparent, unmarked by

history or practice, and hence continues to maintain superiority unless it is critically and self-reflexively examined. With such a perspective in mind, Pamela Perry (2002) conducted fieldwork in two high school settings to see how “shades of whiteness” are created and interpreted. She wanted to understand how students create boundaries between white and nonwhite and to examine the extent to which they use clothing, music, and other cultural forms to make sense of shades of whiteness. She found that most believed to be white “meant that you had no culture” (Perry 2002: 2). At one of the schools, the white students—influenced by media—wore hip hop clothing and listened to rap music without critique from other students (white, black, or other students of color). At the other, more diverse school, however, hip hop styles marked racial and ethnic boundaries that were more difficult to cross (Perry 2002: 21). Perry’s research points to the ways in which style-fashion-dress, as well as visible physical features, is subject to racialized discourses. This is one of the places where the boundaries between race and ethnicity become blurry.

Also blurry is the binary opposition between black and white. U.S. President Barack Obama’s biracial or multiethnic background (a Kenyan father and white mother from Kansas) represents the complexity of race and ethnicity—never simple but more highly visible in the twenty-first century. By the end of the twentieth century, fashion industry discourse had already appropriated and celebrated “in between” or hybrid racial spaces through “ethnic marketing” (note the shift from racial to ethnic terminology):

[N]othing is actually black and white anymore. Neither the classic blue-eyed blonde nor the African queen [is] gracing

the covers of fashion magazines. Instead, the idealized beauty standard is somewhere in between, a *mélange* of off-white features and khaki tones in a two-way process in which the black-female ideal lightened up from the 1970s Afrocentric period at the same time that the archetypical white woman was darkening, if only slightly, to a more mestizo presentation. Once black supermodels were on board, fashion magazines and cosmetic companies quickly began featuring Latina, Eurasian, and other mixed-race faces. (Halter 2000: 178)

Although probably overstated, the above quote from 2000, looking back from the present, is a helpful reminder that discourses regarding race and ethnicity shift, as ideologies become incorporated—albeit in a limited and toned down way—into dominant visual culture. As noted by Craig (2002), the boundaries of social meanings of race and beauty are fluid. They are not outside of the fashion process in terms of cultural representations, appropriations, and hegemonies.

Further, systems of racial formation vary culturally and nationally. In Nicaragua, anthropologist Roger Lancaster (1992) has described how a complex system of “color signs” becomes negotiated in relation to the ambiguities associated with *mestizo* (mixed) races:

People put color into discourse in a variety of ways. The ambiguity of Nicaraguan speech about color is perhaps its crucial feature. *Negro* refers to Atlantic coast natives of African heritage, but it may also refer to dark-skinned mestizos—the majority of Nicaragua’s population...[I]n everyday usage and for most purposes, color terms are *relational* terms. The relativity of this sort of usage turns on

the intention of the speaker, comparative assumptions, and shifting contexts. Not one but three different, perpetually sliding systems are in use...On one day, someone would be described to me as negro, on another as *Moreno* [brown hair, brown skin], and on yet another as *blanco* [white, light hair, blue eyes].... Virgilio's skin was darker than that of many African Americans in the United States, although here his indigenous appearance would undoubtedly classify him as either Native American or Hispanic. But for Nicaraguan purposes, what was he? White, brown, or black?...The answer is, it all depends on the context. (Lancaster 1992: 216)

Lancaster (1992) goes on to discuss how there is ambiguity in the color system in Nicaragua, and yet whiteness still holds the most power and privilege.

HAIR

In addition to skin color, physical qualities such as hair texture have been used to mark race, along with facial features and other attributes. Hair can be altered: straightened, permed, dyed, cut, braided, teased, and so on. While there is a certain amount of agency in acts such as these, it is also important to locate them in the context of racial formation and systems of hierarchy. This section—recalling the roles of subject formation and regulation in the circuit of style-fashion-dress—focuses on the politics and aesthetics associated with black hair, to illustrate how subjects alternately, and even simultaneously, internalize and resist hegemonic norms.

In her study of African American beauty, Maxine Craig (2002) notes that historically, there have been no neutral

words to describe varying textures of black hair. Prior to the 1960s, hair was classified as good or bad in everyday discourse. Good hair was straight, whereas bad hair was kinky or nappy. Ritual grooming practices for girls involved a hot comb with pomade, beginning around the age of seven or eight years. In the early twentieth century, Madam C. J. Walker (1867–1919) became a prominent social activist, philanthropist, and millionaire after she invented, produced, and marketed conditioning hair care products for African Americans. Born the daughter of former slaves and orphaned at age seven, Walker worked in cotton fields in the South and then as a launderer and cook before building her own factory and business from the ground up (Bundles 2001).

By the 1950s, most African Americans (especially women) had adopted grooming practices to straighten their hair. Craig notes how this changed with the civil rights activism of the 1960s and “black is beautiful” discourse and practice. Everyday habitus changed through a fashion cycle influenced by political activism:

In 1952, a black woman proudly wearing “nappy” hair was unfashionable. In 1960, she was a curiosity, in 1965 a militant, and in 1968 stylish. In 1970, she might have been arrested for too closely resembling Angela Davis. By 1977, she was an anachronism. (Craig 2002: 78)

As the symbol of black pride disseminated as a fashion trend, it ran its course and lost the political edge associated with activists such as Angela Davis (see [Figure 4.1](#)).

In 1969 a fourteen-year-old African American girl named Gloria Andrews wrote a column, “It isn’t enough just to wear

an Afro,” in *Seventeen* magazine. Andrews, who herself did not wear an Afro but was very active in the black movement, lamented that “about ninety percent of the kids I know are wearing Afros, yet practically none of them know anything about the black movement”:

I think kids should earn the right to wear an Afro. They can do this by working for their people. They can join in urging their schools to offer a black studies program. They can petition their cities to set up recreational centers for young people. They can involve themselves in urban renewal programs and do all kinds of volunteer work. And they should learn who their leaders are and what they stand for. They should learn to respect their own black values and not be satisfied with just looking the part. (Andrews 1969: 248)



Figure 4.1 Angela Davis, American activist and philosophy professor, testifies at a meeting of the Soviet International

Women's Seminar in Moscow, 1972. Courtesy of Getty Images.

By the mid to late 1970s, the Afro hairstyle had faded from fashion. Yet like many forms of style-fashion-dress, it has made a comeback. It fits critical theorist Walter Benjamin's (1968) concept of a "tiger's leap into the past"—wherein inspiration is derived from the past and comes back (never exactly in the same form) in a way that now feels fresh. In [Figure 4.2](#), singer Solange Knowles, born in 1986, wears a hairstyle inspired by the Afro hairstyle popular forty years prior. Yet note how the cut, shape, and styling differ and have a fresh feel.

Freshness, in fact, is a key concept in African American cultural stylings, which have historically had an improvisational quality (Kaiser et al. 2004). The everyday process of minding appearances includes articulations and rearticulations that meld nostalgia with newness. The concept of *double consciousness* articulated by African American theorist W.E.B. DuBois ([1903] 1997) describes the experience of knowing two worlds at once: the dominant culture and the minority one. Similarly, black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (1991) discusses the importance of both/and thinking in black feminist thought. Writing from perspectives that bridge fashion studies and cultural studies, bell hooks (1990) and Gwen O'Neal (1998) note how African American style is simultaneously political and aesthetic; it defies binary oppositions between political agency (which challenges hegemony) and "just fashion" or "just for looks." Yet as we have seen, the timing, the context, and the wearer's intent and motivation all contribute to the extent of the melding of politics and aesthetics.



Figure 4.2 Singer Solange Knowles wearing an Afro-inspired hairstyle at a Victoria's Secret opening of "swimsuit season," March 2011. Courtesy of Getty Images.

The politics of hair did not end in the early 1970s. Hairstyle, like skin color, has been the focus of U.S. court cases revolving around potential racial discrimination. Issues such as these have been analyzed in the field of *critical race theory*—"a dynamic, eclectic, and growing movement in the law...challenging racial orthodoxy, shaking up the legal academy, questioning comfortable liberal premises, and leading the search for new ways of thinking about our nation's most intractable, and insoluble problem—race" (Delgado and Stefancic 2000: xvi).

One good example of a critical race theoretical analysis is legal scholar Paulette Caldwell's (2000) critique of a 1981 court case: *Rogers v. American Airlines*. The plaintiff in the case, Renee Rogers, was a black female flight attendant challenging American Airlines' policy that prohibited braided hairstyles. She argued that the policy discriminated against her on the basis of race (blackness) *and* gender (female). That is, the argument was one related to intersectionality: the airline regulation affected her especially because she was a black woman. The legal system, however, is not set up to deal with intersectionality, according to Caldwell (2000).

The court dismissed Rogers's claim and supplied three reasons. First, the court did not agree that there was any gender discrimination. It stressed that American Airlines' policy was "even-handed" and applicable to men, as well as women. Second, the court stressed that the airline's grooming policy "did not regulate or classify employees on the basis of

an immutable gender characteristic.” And third, the policy did not have any bearing on the “exercise of a fundamental right.”

The court did analyze the racial discrimination claim separately but dismissed it on the same grounds as it did with gender discrimination, indicating that the anti-braid policy applied neutrally to “all races” and that there was no “impact of the policy on an immutable racial characteristic or of any effect on the exercise of a fundamental right” (Caldwell 2000: 281–82).

Caldwell goes on to argue, from a critical race theoretical perspective, that the court’s treatment of race should be closely scrutinized. It did not seem to understand that phenotypic and cultural aspects of race are intertwined: First, it rejected the idea that there is any analogy between all-braided and Afro (natural) hairstyles. Let us pause for a minute to examine this assumption, as Caldwell recommends. Is there such a thing as “natural” in the way individuals style their hair as it grows out of their heads? Yes, there are many biological variations and many cultural possibilities, but there are so many in between or both/and options to fashion appearances. The Rogers’s case is one that calls into specific relief the ways in which a binary opposition between biology and culture is neither helpful nor completely fair. Indeed, the *Rogers v. American Airlines* case reveals this very problem, as Caldwell comments:

Stopping short of concluding that Afro hairstyles might be protected under all circumstances, the court held that “an all-braided hairstyle is a different matter. It is not the product of natural hair growth but of artifice.” Second, in response to the plaintiff’s argument that, like Afro hairstyles, the wearing

of braids reflected her choice for ethnic and cultural identification, the court again distinguished between the immutable aspects of race and characteristics that are “socioculturally associated with a particular race or nationality.” However, given the variability of so-called immutable racial characteristics such as skin color and hair textures, it is difficult to understand racism as other than a complex of historical, sociocultural associations with race. (Caldwell 2000: 282)

As Caldwell points out, the court strictly interpreted race as a biological concept. It held that “[n]atural hairstyles—or at least some of them, such as Afros—are permitted because hair texture is immutable, a matter over which individuals have no choice. Braids, however, are the products of artifice—a cultural practice—and are therefore mutable, i.e., the result of choice” (Caldwell 2000: 282).

Adding insult to injury, so to speak, the court asserted (in concert with American Airlines’ argument) that Rogers adopted the prohibited hairstyle after it had been popularized’ by Bo Derek, a white actress, in the 1979 film *10*. This film featured Derek as the perfect (white) female “10” body—with long blond hair braided in a cornrow style—while running in slow motion on the beach. The film popularized both Derek as a sex symbol and the cultural rating system of female attractiveness. The cornrow braid hairstyle worn by Derek also received a great deal of attention, but it was not new.

As Caldwell notes, black women have braided their hair in the United States and around the world for at least four centuries. In popular culture, the black actress Cicely Tyson wore a braided hairstyle in the early 1960s: “More

importantly, Cicely Tyson's choice to popularize (i.e., to "go public" with) braids, like her choice of acting roles, was a political act made on her own behalf and on behalf of all black women" (Caldwell 2000: 282). Derek's use of the style is a classic case of cultural appropriation, and the court's use of the term "popularized" only amplifies the problematic power relations in the intersectionalities between race and gender. The court simultaneously reinforced white hegemonic beauty standards, trivialized the racial politics of hair, and failed to acknowledge that some black women may choose to wear braids for the sake of the long-term health of their hair (which can be permanently damaged by the use of chemical straighteners), as well as cultural identity.

This court case reveals some ongoing problems associated with *not* thinking critically and intersectionally about issues of race and gender. In 2009 comedian Chris Rock developed (with Nelson George) a documentary, *Good Hair*, to bring some of the social, political, economic, and aesthetic issues regarding black women's hair to a mainstream audience, in a way that was both ironic and informative (Rock 2009). The documentary and Rock's two appearances on Oprah Winfrey's show to discuss it generated considerable cultural discourse. Supporters of the documentary and Rock's approach praised the sincerity and humor with which he brought issues within the African American community to the general public's awareness. Some critics did not appreciate his telling tales (about African American women) "out of school"; some pointed to the need for more context or argued that hair is a topic of great concern to women of multiple races and ethnicities.

ETHNICITY: BELONGING-IN-DIFFERENCE

As we have seen, the concepts of race, racial formation, and ethnicity relate in complicated ways to other concepts such as national and transnational identities, religion, and cultural meaning systems. In research studies (surveys and interviews) over the past twenty years or so, graduate students and I have asked respondents about their ethnicities, using an open-ended format. Responses reveal the complexities associated with terminology, as well as sites of identification and differentiation. They range from Asian American to more specific national affiliations: Korean American, Japanese American, Filipina American, Chinese American, and so on. South Asian or Indian American or Pakistani American. Latina or Chicana or Mexican American. African American or Black. White or Caucasian or Norwegian American, etc.

In a 2008 national survey we conducted among 1,952 U.S. men, white men expressed the least interest in fashion and appearance, while African American men's responses indicated the highest level of interest. Latino and Asian American men expressed an "in between" level of interest. Interpretations of these results (discussed further in [Chapter 6](#) on gender) need to account for the unmarked nature of whiteness, the history of racism in the United States, the importance of style-fashion-dress in African American culture (Kaiser et al. 2004; O'Neal 1998), and other cultural factors influencing ethnic belonging-in-difference.

Individuals identify with, and differentiate from, one another on an ongoing basis. Part of the struggle for meaning within culture involves the *twin processes of identification and*

differentiation. At times, due to historical and political circumstances, differences become glossed over; and yet at later points in time, they become extremely relevant, if not divisive. It is often difficult to sort out just which differences are racialized, which are ethnic, which are religious, and which are national or transnational in nature.

Ethnic studies scholar Lisa Lowe (2000) notes that it is difficult to completely disentangle race from ethnicity, because of the discourses that have historically linked them. She points to the importance of focusing on the cultural practices that produce identity, rather than focusing strictly on the identities themselves. The concept of “Asian American identities,” for example, should not be seen as a fixed “given,” but rather as a process of ongoing subject formation and “never complete” cultural formations. Lowe observes that discussions of ethnic culture and racial group formation vary widely among Asian Americans. There is tremendous heterogeneity in terms of national and class backgrounds, histories of immigrant exclusion laws, gender, and other factors influencing Asian American experiences in relation to hegemonic culture (Lowe 2000: 428).

As compared to race, however, ethnicity tends to be a more open or inclusive concept—allowing people to think through how (and with whom) they experience a sense of identity and belonging. Although hegemonic culture tends to regulate ethnicity (like race), and the meanings of both shift in an ongoing way, the concept of ethnicity tends to connote a higher degree of agency. The concept of *ethnicity* refers to the place or space from which people articulate their identities and communities. It also implies a kind of self-awareness or

self-reflexivity about a group's own cultural uniqueness; it is a process of belonging-in-difference.

There is a great deal of fluidity in how people articulate ethnicity. Some articulations are grounded in nations or other kinds of “imagined communities”: the Japanese kimono, the Chinese cheongsam, the Mexican sombrero, and the Scottish kilt, for example. Yet when we examine the cultural histories of any given form of ethnic dress, we frequently find complex appropriations and hegemonic processes, as well as invented (imagined?) traditions and complex intersectionalities.

The traditional dress for men of Highland Scotland, for example, is generally envisioned as a tartan kilt, knee-length wool socks, and other accessories. Yet in Malcolm Chapman's study of this look, he could find no evidence that it had ever been the popular dress of anyone, outside the Scottish Highland regiments of the British army and various “self-consciously folkloric circles”

(e.g., dancing groups, choirs, Scottish festival goers). The kilt *is* reminiscent, however, of the plaid skirt popularly worn by Gaelic-speaking Highlanders in the eighteenth century. Although the kilt and the plaid skirt vary in many ways, neither is bifurcated into trousers: they are both skirts. Chapman argues that this “oppositional propriety” to cultural gender norms “excited the imagination of those who observed them; it continues to do so today” (Chapman 1995). One cannot analyze the kilt without considering the intersectionalities between gender, ethnicity, and nation.

Such intersectionalities, along with others (e.g., class) influenced the belonging-in-difference articulation of ethnicity by the famous Mexican painter Frida Kahlo

(1907–1954). In an essay published in *The Latin American Fashion Reader*, Maria Claudia André (2005) describes how Kahlo articulated an ethnic nationalist Mexican identity, as well as complex gender and sexual subject positions through her style-fashion-dress. Born in a well-to-do family, just a few years before the beginning of the Mexican Revolution, Kahlo adapted indigenous Tehuana ethnic dress—from the Tehuantepec region of Mexico—to represent an anticolonialist and nationalist Mexican identity, as well as her own unique sense of style and representation. She articulated resistance to both Spanish colonial and local masculine domination through the aesthetics associated with a matriarchal society. She linked this articulation contextually with a nationalist project fueled by revolutionary activism. Representing herself in complex ways in her brightly colored dress and in her painted self-portraits, Kahlo has assumed the status of a cult figure since the mid-1980s. Her images—seen on everything from T-shirts to refrigerator magnets and wooden doorway beads—raise some interesting questions regarding representation: Was Kahlo aiming to articulate a “self-exoticizing” image? Or was she appropriating from indigenous ethnicities? Regardless of her intentions, global capitalism has benefited from her representations with commodities that continue to flow within and across multiple nations. And her imagery leaves ambiguous traces of intersectionalities that still capture the imagination and compel critical interpretations.

Capturing the imagination in euromodern cultural discourse has been the discourse of exoticism and anxiety surrounding “Gypsy” or “Roma” minority culture. The emerging field of Romani studies (similar in concept to ethnic studies programs in the United States) aims to (a) counter the strong, negative

stereotypes that circulate in the media and among the European public about Romani people; and (b) to acknowledge the heterogeneity and complexity in Romani culture (Tremlett 2009). One of the debates in the field is whether Roma is an ethnicity in the sense of a group with a cultural heritage, when identity is continually made and remade in the present, through a variety of different cultural formations and social processes. Part of the debate concerns whether the Roma experience, especially in Hungary, is more akin to an underclass than an ethnicity. Using the cultural studies concepts of “new ethnicities” (Hall 1996) and hybridity enables a more expansive analysis of Roma experiences, thereby “de-essentializing” the debates on Roma, “without losing sight of ethnicity” (Tremlett 2009: 165).

In an ethnographic study of a Gábor (Gypsy) community in Romania, Saba Tesfay (2009) described the community’s “customary dress” as follows: Men wore broad-brimmed hats around the age of ten. The hat is commonly called the “Jewish hat,” because as one Gábor man told Tesfay: “We have a liking for the Jews and have adopted this hat from them” (Tesfay 2009: 14). (This liking is explained as representing “smartness and deftness in business and in trade,” but it is also important to note that Romani, as well as Jewish, individuals were tragically subjected to Hitler’s concentration camps during World War II.) Although Gábors admit that their appropriation of the hat comes from Jewish men, they claim it as their own, even in their self-definition: “hatted Gábor Gypsies.” As one middle-aged man indicated, Gábor men used to wear velvet trousers: “We didn’t care if it was dirty, but it has gone out of fashion” (Tesfay 2009: 14). Nevertheless, one older man indicated: “We haven’t changed

our dress, not at all...for the Gábors, this is ancient and has existed as long as the Gábors have” (Tsfay 2009: 7). Today, men wear loose-fitting black trousers (not velvet), a shirt, and a dark overcoat. They have distinctive mustaches and side whiskers; in the past they had long beards. Older men often wear a waistcoat with silver buttons. The waistcoat “used to be worn by the Hungarians, no one else but the Hungarians and the Gábors. When I die, I will leave it to Csabi [his son]” (Tsfay 2009: 14).

Gábor women have less agency than men in their choice of dress, according to women and men alike; the particular community Tsfay studied belonged to the Adventist Church, and Gábor Adventist women were not allowed to wear the large gold earrings that are so popular among non-Adventist Gábor women. They are also required to wear a colorful pleated skirt, a colorful patterned blouse, and a long pleated apron made of the same material as the skirt. Married women must wear a kerchief, tied in the front; both married and younger women wear a red ribbon in their hair (Tsfay 2009). Overall, it can be said that Gábor dress does change and is influenced by surrounding cultures, but Gábors very clearly articulate their ethnicity through their dress as well as their verbal discussions about issues of identity and community. Religion, too, becomes an important factor that inflects some Gábor subject positions.

RELIGIOUS REARTICULATIONS

Is religion a subject position that is distinct from ethnicity and race? Historically, as noted earlier, it has been difficult to distinguish completely between them. Ethnic identity and ethnic strife, for example, has often been identical

to religious identity and strife (Bartlett 2001), as the history of Jewish people reveals. Yet in the above case of Gábor Adventists, it is their religion that distinguishes them (and the prohibition against gold earrings for women) from non-Adventist “Gypsies.” If we were to picture a Venn diagram with two overlapping circles for ethnic and religious subject positions, in some groups the circles would completely overlap; whereas in others, there would be an intersection but also remaining space in the circles for different articulations of style-fashion-dress.

Style-fashion-dress scholar Linda Arthur (1999) describes conservative religious groups as exerting “control over their members’ bodies.” In other words, dress becomes a symbol of social control. This control applies to Gábor Adventist women, as we have seen. It also applied in an ethnographic study of orthodox Mennonite women, whose clothes (a shirtwaist dress and head covering) are supposed to display that one is on the “right and true path.” As one woman noted, “I put on all of the Church’s rules” about submission and modesty (Graybill and Arthur 1999).

However, religion may also offer a sense of freedom or a context in which to articulate ethnicity. Clothing scholar Gwen O’Neal (1999) notes how dress has functioned in “the black church” as a form of positive ethnic identification. In the black church, slaves articulated a blend of traditional African religions or belief systems with Christianity. The church came to serve as the social center of African American life, and church dress came to articulate the expression of African American culture. This tradition emerged from slavery, when a lot of effort went into “Sunday” clothes as a way to distinguish them from everyday work clothes and the

oppression they represented. Sunday clothes, in contrast, became a means for expressing cultural agency (O'Neal 1999).

In a somewhat similar dynamic, religion occupies an important place in a sense of belonging-in-difference in South Asian communities in the United States. Since the end of the nineteenth century, the emerging indigenous elite in India and Pakistan promoted religion (i.e., Hindu and Islam) to garner support among the masses (Mohammad-Arif 2000). When people from South Asian countries migrated to other locations, religion became an effective vehicle to foster “community formation and identity re-composition” (Mohammad-Arif 2000: 67). It functioned to maintain a sense of ethnic identity to curb complete Americanization, or assimilation into U.S. society. The same principle applies to other ethnic minorities in the United States (e.g., Irish, Greeks, Jews). In the case of South Asian Muslims, there is a tendency toward a heightened religiosity in the United States, for two reasons: First, there is a relative space of religious freedom. And second, South Asian Muslim parents may find religion to be an effective mode of transmission of cultural heritage to their children (Mohammad-Arif 2000).

On the other hand, Muslims may also experience anti-Islamic prejudice (Islamophobia), perpetuated in popular media and punctuated by 9/11 and other terrorist events attributed to fundamentalist Muslims. Islamophobia (cultural anxiety about or fear of Muslims) as a concept has circulated in the United States, Europe, and around the world since 9/11, but its roots are older. Anthropologist Andrew Shryock (2010) asks: “Given the scant knowledge of Islam most Americans and Europeans bring to the creation of their anti-Muslim

stereotypes, can we be sure that Islamophobia is ultimately about Islam at all?” (3). Shryock goes on to argue that Islamophobia may be a discourse that adapted from earlier Cold War polemics, or a residue from older battles between European and Ottoman power, or euromodern models of “race, empire, and human progress” (Shryock 2010: 3).

How do Muslims articulate their religious and ethnic subject positions in the context of contemporary cultural discourses about Islam? Anthropologist Emma Tarlo (2010) closes her fascinating book—*Visibly Muslim: Fashion, Politics, Faith*—with a discussion of young Muslim women who blog about a range of topics related to style-fashion-dress: from politics to shopping and how to wear *hijab* (a head scarf) in a variety of styles and with other clothes and accessories; reviews of fashion-related magazines and television shows; links to online *hijab* shopping sites; and different international Islamic fashion events in Britain, the United States, Canada, Turkey, Egypt, and Indonesia. In a transnational context, Tarlo argues, cultural discourse on blogs such as *hijab Style*—as well as the styles worn in everyday life—represents the birth of modern Islamic fashion “in which *distinctions of ethnicity have become irrelevant*” (Tarlo 2010: 225, emphasis added).

Undoubtedly, Tarlo is using ethnicity here to refer to the diversity in the regional and cultural backgrounds of Muslims within national contexts: British, Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi, Arab, Albanian, Bosnian, Iranian, Nigerian, Egyptian, Iraqi, and Turkish; along with individuals of mixed backgrounds, including white British and European converts. Many of Tarlo’s informants sought to distance themselves from the ethnic dress (or national dress?) of their parents’

generation. Rather they sought to wear modern, Islamic style-fashion-dress. Tarlo's point about the diminishing importance of ethnicity and ethnic dress observation, however, raises a crucial question on the relationship between religion/faith and ethnicity, and a provocative possibility at the heart of subject formation through style-fashion-dress. For some individuals, religion can be interpreted as a cultural discourse to which they are subjected (i.e., a subject position). Yet many of the women Tarlo interviewed focused on their subjectivities and their relationship to *hijab* with a sense of agency and subjectivity.

Tarlo makes the persuasive case that new kinds of faith-based fashion subjectivity have arisen since 9/11. As one of her informants indicated:

September 11th was some kind of trigger. The media was portraying Muslim women as oppressed and making out that Afghan women were desperate to rip off their burqas, and that infuriated me. (Tarlo 2010: 24)

An entanglement of faith and politics permeated the discourse in Tarlo's interviews. Between this entanglement and the new media that put style-fashion-dress into transnational Islamic discourse, might we consider modern Islamic fashions as representing new modes of ethnicity? To the extent that culture creates ethnicity (Bartlett 2001), and ethnicity is as much about the future as it is the past, interactions through new media can be seen as new communities generating new visual and verbal discourses.

As described by cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall earlier in this chapter, ethnicities are continually in motion through the

“‘play’ of history, culture and power” (Hall 1990: 225). Transnational discourse opens up cultural spaces for new expressions of belonging and becoming. Perhaps these new (transnational) ethnicities offer avenues to explore the politics and aesthetics of style-fashion-dress through new sites of identification and differentiation.

At the same time, in the case of visibly Muslim style-fashion-dress, it is important to analyze it carefully through not only transnational subjectivities but also context-specific subject formation and cultural regulation: nation-by-nation policies, community-by-community practices, and subject-by-subject articulations.

One clothing style that articulates multiple, intersectional meanings of ethnicity, nation, and gender; along with religion, is the headscarf—banned in public schools in the nation-state of France, required in public spaces in the Iranian Islamic Republic, and the object of considerable transnational debate. When does a scarf become a significant religious symbol, whether its usage is prohibited or mandatory? What is at stake?

The practice of wearing a headscarf (*hijab*) to school by some French Muslim girls became a particular site of debate and contestation. In 2004 a law was passed that banned “significant religious symbols” in public schools. Examples of such symbols were Muslim girls’ *hijab*, Jewish boys’ *yarmulkes* (skull caps), Sikh boys’ turbans, and necklaces with large Christian crosses or Jewish Stars of David (smaller symbols were okay). Because it was widely believed that the real target was *hijab*, the media have typically referred to the law as the “French headscarf ban.”

Contradictions abound as one compares religious symbols in the context of nation, as one contemplates the role of religion in a transnational world, and as one considers the double standards between *haute couture* or high fashion (a turban on the runway) and religion (a headscarf worn to school).

What are the relationships among ethnicity, religion, nation, and gender? And how do gender and other subject positions intervene and become entangled in contexts of colonialism and other power relations? Textile head coverings may be, in part, a form of subjection for some, but the agency they may afford in expressing religion and ethnicity warrants attention.

Shifting gears (and decades), the two French women in the photograph in [Figure 4.3](#), taken in 1944, are wearing headscarves. In this context, the scarves—fashioned into turbans—do not have a religious connotation. Their meanings are ambiguous. A bit of modern French fashion history is in order to interpret these styles, but the story of people wearing fabric on their heads actually goes back much earlier to Middle Eastern practices of veiling (with the fabric hanging down) and wearing turbans (with the fabric piled up on the head).

The practice of veiling among women is believed to have originated in Assyrian (now Iraqi), Persian (now Iranian), and Byzantine cultures, well before the birth of the Islamic religion in the seventh century C.E. The first known historical reference to veiling was an Assyrian legal text of the thirteenth century B.C.E. Urban upper class women wore the veil to mark their prestige and to represent their privilege to shield themselves from the “impure” gaze of commoners. It

became illegal for lower-class women and sex workers to wear veils (Zahedi 2007).



Figure 4.3 Turbans fashioned from scarves in France in 1944. Photo by Fred Ramage/Hulton Archive/Getty Images.

The cultural practice of using fabric as a head covering became common to men (more commonly the turban) and women (more commonly the veil) throughout the Middle East and parts of Africa and South Asia. With the advent of Islam, this practice—widely varied in specific locations and contexts—came to have religious connotations (Zahedi 2007).

World trade, imperial conquests, and colonization helped to spread the practice of textile head coverings in various forms. In particular, Europeans became fascinated with what Edward

Said (1978) called “Orientalism”: biased and distorted “outsider” interpretations of the East—attitudes shaped by imperialist attitudes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The roots of Orientalism had been seen in a fascination with imagined national differences (recall the Cesare Vecellio’s 1590s depiction of a Persian man in *Habiti* in [Figure 3.3](#)).

In the nineteenth century, Western fashion experimented with various forms of head coverings and the concept of bifurcated lower garments (i.e., trousers) for women. Inspired, for example, by Turkish styles, U.S. feminists such as Amelia Bloomer experimented with the appropriation of some aspects of Oriental (Turkish) styling into their everyday attire in the 1850s, as a dress reform alternative to corsets and hoopskirts. Although the bloomer style did not catch on and evoked substantial cultural ridicule, the style became incorporated into children’s and women’s bloomer or romper styles for active wear and young women’s physical education uniforms (Warner 2006).

Yet it was probably the continuing influences of Orientalism that contributed most to Western masculine “harem fantasies.” The Russian ballet set and costume designer Leon Bakst drew heavily on the European fantasies of Scheherezade—the heroine and storyteller (to the king) extraordinaire, depicted in exotic harem pants, turbans, and jewels—in *One Thousand and One Nights* (also known as *The Arabian Nights*). Bakst’s extravagant and exotic set and costume designs in the Russian ballet adaptation of the story attracted the fascination of the French fashion designer Paul Poiret (1879–1944), who began to adapt the stage costumes for modern fashion. Poiret is famously known for his

elaborate and exotic parties. In 1911 he and his wife, Denise, hosted “The Thousand and Second Night” party, requiring guests to wear style-fashion-dress inspired by *The Arabian Nights*—and coincidentally available through his own designs. Denise played the role of the Queen of the Harem and wore a turban with egret feathers and harem pants designed by Poiret. The turban epitomized the European perception of Persian dress. Guests were invited—indeed required—to wear similar Oriental styles such as harem pants and turbans, styles that Poiret himself had been designing (Takeda and Spilker 2010: 176–77).

Hollywood starlets wore turbans in the 1920s and 1930s on the silver screen, and turbans have continued to circulate now and then on fashion

runways and in everyday life. In 2010 in New York, models wearing designer Jason Wu’s spring collection wore black or cobalt turbans. Meanwhile in Milan, Giorgio Armani accessorized his monochromatic collection with North African-inspired turbans. Some of the models resembled Greta Garbo in the 1926 silent film *The Temptress*. How can one explain the fascination with head wraps? Harold Koda, curator of the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, does not believe it has anything to do with politics or world events: “It’s not a part of a Kumbaya fashion movement. I think it’s more of Poiret’s view of Orientalism than women watching the news and referencing what’s going on in Afghanistan. It’s an exoticism, a sense of the other that is visually compelling” (Oliver 2010).

Issues of gender, nation, the appropriation of otherness, and other factors become entangled in what is considered the transnational flow of fabric head coverings. Whereas the

turban becomes a fashion symbol now and again on runways in Europe and the United States, other forms of fabric head coverings generate cultural anxieties, based on their links to religion.

There is considerable debate about the issue of females covering their heads in public schools and in public settings in France and other countries in Europe. Since the French Revolution in 1789, the French nation-state has operated on a principle of *laïcité*, which roughly translates to secularism, or a separation between church and state. In 1905 a law was passed to prohibit the state from recognizing or funding any religion; the goal was to keep religion out of public education. Religion was to be a private, not a public, affair. The modern nation-state, according to this system of *laïcité*, “replaces religion as the privileged source of social and cultural integration” (Ortiz 2003: 432).

The dynamic shifts, however, in the context of globalization, in which the eighteenth-century ideas of nation, state, ethnicity, religion, and rights no longer apply so well to transnational political, economic, environmental, and other realities (Vesselinov 2010). Transnational religious communities, for example, propelled by diasporic immigrant communities and Internet access, cut across national boundaries. The French policy of *laïcité* becomes challenged in the transnational context, which is further complicated by France’s former colonial histories in nations such as Algeria and Morocco.

In the context of discourses of globalization and multiculturalism, transnational target marketing to specific ethnicities and newly imagined communities flourishes. Some

writers have referred to this new kind of consumer experience as portable ethnicity (Halter 2000: 9).

But does portable ethnicity always work so well? The politics of racism, classism, and other power relations remind us that there are always some hegemonic forces that make ethnic articulations a continual site of cultural struggle. And, ethnic articulations can easily be appropriated by capitalism at the same time that ethnic markets are represented in particular ways and

for particular reasons. In the United States, for example, ethnic (especially Latina/o or Hispanic) consumers are frequently represented by marketers as “family-oriented, traditional, and brand-loyal, which, in marketing, serves largely as synonyms for conservative consumers” within a larger dominant culture that pays lip service to family values, brand loyalty, and religion; and that is cognizant of the growing demographics of the Latina/o or Hispanic communities in the United States (Davila 2001: 216–17).

Ethnic appropriations and racial and religious rearticulations cannot be separated completely from discourses of ethnic marketing, which situate style-fashion-dress subjects as consumers. This situating brings us to the subject position of class, considered in the next chapter.