Critiques of Appropriation and Transnational Labor Ethics

Serkan Delice

Dr Serkan Delice is a Senior Lecturer and Research Coordinator in the Cultural and Historical Studies Department of the London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London. His research focuses on appropriation, labor hierarchies, and refugee and immigrant labor in the fashion industry. He is currently working on a co-edited collection titled *Fashion's Transnational Inequalities* to be published by Routledge.

s.serkan@fashion.arts.ac.uk

Abstract

Ideas and concepts have their own lives and resilience, to which one should be sensitive. This article focuses on the ways in which a group of Indian artisan organizations and collectives deploy—in their critical exchange with a designer and retailer that have privileged access to the transnationally circulating capital—the concept of appropriation as a tool to confront the hierarchical divisions of labor, and the unequal distribution of capital, within the globalized circuits of transnational fashion production. In bringing together Karl Marx's critique of the appropriation of living labor by objectified labor and David Harvey's critical expose of the new mechanisms of "accumulation by dispossession," and connecting these labor-focused perspectives on appropriation to the phenomenon of so-called cultural appropriation, the following investigates the potentiality of appropriation in facilitating a transnational labor ethics that defies the problematic segregation of the "design" and "creative" processes from the increasingly alienated and absorbed productive forces of the dispossessed artisan and craft communities.

KEYWORDS: appropriation, labor, alienation, fashion production, transnationality, ethics

Introduction

In August 2021, Indian fashion designer and couturier Sabyasachi Mukherjee received an open letter signed by fifteen Indian artisan organizations and collectives, including the Crafts Council of India, the All India Artisans and Craftworkers Welfare Association, and Creative Dignity.[1] The letter interrogated why Wanderlust, a collection produced collaboratively by Sabyasachi and Hennes & Mauritz AB (H&M), had not been "made by Indian artisans and with no visible benefit to them," despite the fact that its publicity material connected the range to Indian craft and design.[2] Indeed, the website of H&M hailed "Indian textile and print traditions brought to life by the Sabyasachi Art Foundation, meticulously crafted embroidery and multicultural silhouettes" as a "key highlight" of this collaboration.[3] The raison d'^etre of the collection, from the perspective of H&M, was to "bring habitually inaccessible, made-to-measure, rare and costly creations to the masses."[4]

In his elucidation of the collection's design elements, Mukherjee acknowledged that he had "inspired" his team to "create an Indian version of Toile de Jouy using nostalgic elements of Kolkata and India, with romanticised Indian motifs like peacocks, tigers, coconut trees and the Taj Mahal"; the ideas for the printed Henley shirts had been "developed from Coromandel chintz and trade textiles"; and he had, in his own words, "used reproduced versions of old Sanganeri block prints," which were then digitally transferred onto fabrics.[5] He articulated the rationale behind the collection, in the same vein as H&M, as to "make beautiful, accessible clothing at affordable prices so that I could give back to the middle class";[6] "bring that finesse of craft to 'ready-to-wear'"[7] by means of "artisanal work in small quantities";[8] and "let it [the world] know India through its printed textiles."[9] He also told the press that he had negotiated, with H&M, three conditions in order for this collaboration to take place: "one is that it had to be India-inspired, second, a major chunk of

production had to be done in India (to generate jobs here) and thirdly, there had to be an Indian garment in the collection."[10]

Figure 1

Wanderlust. 2021. A Sabyasachi and H&M collaboration [Courtesy of H&M].

Launched, with a price range from 799 INR to 9,999 INR, at select H&M stores in India and seventeen countries, including the US, the UK, and Japan, H&M's official website, and Myntra on the twelfth of August, 2021,[11] and reportedly sold out within minutes of its launch,[12] this ready-to-wear collection (of both womenswear and menswear) featured patterned, flowing maxi dresses; sequin-adorned caftans; khaki trousers; denim trousers; photographer jackets; t-shirts, bags, and jewelry with Sabyasachi's signature Bengal tiger logo on

them; and a viscose georgette sari. Ninety percent of the collection had reportedly been produced in India, with all patterns initially hand-drawn, and each print hand-painted to scale, by the Sabyasachi Art Foundation, and later digitally recreated by H&M (Figure 1).[13]

The problem for the artisans who penned the open letter to Mukherjee, however, was threefold: first, the lack of evidenced involvement of the members of Indian artisan organizations and collectives in the production process; second, the absence of clear acknowledgement and compensation of the "artisan communities that have the proprietary rights to these designs"; and third, the consequent blurring of the boundaries between the handmade and the mass-produced, that is, between artisanship and what the artisans call "mass cultural appropriation."[14]

Indeed, the signatories frame their criticism of what they perceive as the lack of engagement with the artisan sector and the deficiencies in transparency, crediting, and compensation by resorting to "appropriation" as a tool of critique: they historically contextualize the lasting damage to the livelihoods of artisans by harking back to the period when the British "appropriated designs and weaves to replicate on their machines"; they then cite the examples of power looms supplanting handlooms, digital prints undermining hand-painted artworks, and the ongoing appropriation of artisanal "design vocabularies" without credit and compensation leading to further dispossession and impoverishment of artisans and craft workers. For them, a potential ramification of the absence of a clearly established, and implemented, link between Wanderlust and the organized artisan communities is "mass cultural appropriation along with increased loss of livelihoods."[15]

This contentious case demonstrates the need to connect the existing conceptualizations of fashion and appropriation to the wider, systemic issues of the capitalist appropriation of living labor by machinery (Marx [1939]1978), capital accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2004), and the labor hierarchies and inequalities spawned by the transnationalization of production (Robinson 2005; Gordon 2007; Merk 2015; Sullivan 2015; Robinson and Sprague 2018). The artisans' grievance in this case, after all, is not concerned with a perceived absence of respect toward, or appreciation of, cultural so-called heritage and differences—they accuse Sabyasachi neither of stereotyping and

misrepresenting, nor of failing to achieve authenticity due to a lack of in-depth research and immersive understanding. Rather, they confront the marginalization and devaluation of their own labor-power by demanding unequivocal, and clearly acknowledged and compensated, involvement in the production of the collection itself:

> Apart from the many global stores, stalls and shelves boasting 'Sold Out' signs, imagine the sheer potential of this story had it only said, 'Handmade in India', supporting millions of jobs, equity and sustainable growth in communities that need it the most. Even if half the collection had been made by artisans, it would have made such an impact at a time of economic crisis like this pandemic.[16]

In the following, I will show how the dispossessed producers, and prosumers, of fashion now deploy "appropriation" on a transnational scale, and as a tool of a critical transnationalism, to confront fashion's transnational inequalities and hierarchical divisions of labor. Higbee and Lim define "critical transnationalism" as a productive means to interpret "the interface between global and local, national and transnational"; to avoid "a binary approach to national/transnational"; and to show sensitivity to the "boundaries, hegemonies, ideologies, limitations and marginalizations" engendered by the transnational model itself (2010, 10). I will argue that "appropriation" as a tool of a critical transnationalism in the face of capitalist accumulation by dispossession can contribute to the reinforcement of a transnational labor ethics based on radical sharing, universal inclusion, and a liberating understanding of labor as nonhierarchical, nourishing self-activity. To construct this argument, I will first discuss the appropriation of living labor in its relationship with the capitalist accumulation by dispossession. Second, I will highlight the need to shift the debate over appropriation from the perceived originality and authenticity—or the lack thereof—of the fashion object to the labor hierarchies and inequalities in the transnational production process by critically engaging with Sabyasachi's response to the artisans' letter. I will then conclude by deliberating the emancipatory potential of "appropriation" as a critical tool in its relationship with the wider domain of transnational fashion ethics.

The political economy of appropriation

All production, according to Karl Marx, is an appropriation of nature in accord with human needs, that is, for the maintenance and reproduction of human life. In the context of the bourgeois mode of production whereby the capitalist mode of appropriation produces capitalist private property, however, appropriation amounts to nothing but estrangement and alienation. In the Communist Manifesto, Marx and Friedrich Engels make it clear that the personal appropriation, by the wage-laborer, of the products of nature and society—an appropriation that "merely suffices to prolong and reproduce a bare existence" and "leaves no surplus wherewith to command the labor of others"—is not the problem. The problem, and what they aim, therefore, to abolish, is "the miserable character of this appropriation, under which the laborer lives merely to increase capital, and is allowed to live only in so far as the interest of the ruling class requires it" ([1848]2004, 24). In a society where the products of society are appropriated by the individual capitalist who subjugates the labor of others through such appropriation, a society where surplus labor is conceived as surplus value of capital, the workers cannot appropriate the products of their own labor—those products appear to them as "alien property," and their alienated labor appears as the property of capital (Marx [1939]1978, 260). Based on class antagonisms and the exploitation of the many by the few, this system of appropriating objects appears as estrangement to such an extent that "the more objects the worker produces the fewer can he possess and the more he falls under the dominion of his product, capital" (Marx [1932a]1978, 72). The appropriation of living labor by objectified labor defined by Marx as "the power or activity which creates value by value existing for itself, which lies in the concept of capital" rests on the "the total process of the machinery," that is, mechanization, whereby living labor is transformed into "a mere living accessory of this machinery, as the means of its action," and labor process, instead of being determined by the value-creating power of the individual worker's labor capacity, is relegated to "a mere moment of the realization process of capital." Such appropriation and absorption of knowledge and skills, of what Marx dubs "the general productive forces of the social brain," is simply inevitable in, and intrinsic to, the capitalist

mode of production where, as Marx indefatigably reminds the reader, “the increase of the productive force of labor and the greatest possible negation of necessary labor is the tendency of capital” (Marx [1939]1978, 280).

The external character of labor for the worker—that is, the fact that that labor does not belong to the worker’s essential being, but to an alien person, the capitalist, and to an alien power, capital, and that the worker’s activity, as a result, is no longer their spontaneous activity, but an alien object hostile to them—brings unhappiness, lack of physical and mental flourishing, mortification of the body, ruining of the mind, and, overall, the loss of the worker’s self (Marx [1932a]1978, 74). Thus, in relating the worker’s very sense of self to their own labor as it should be—labor as nourishing, and possibly collective, spontaneous self-activity rather than stunting, estranged activity for, and of, an alien power— Marx, from the outset, provides us with a vigorous, effective critique of the so-called cultural appropriation. This critique does not engage in a search for, and proclamation of, cultural authenticity and ownership whereby culture is reduced from what Edward Said (1993, 18) aptly describes as an ongoing, and always contested, product of “overlapping territories and intertwined histories” to a monolithic and exclusive property. What it does, instead, is to interrogate the capitalist labor hierarchies, inequalities and subordination that enclose and autocratize the production of culture as an ongoing, collective activity and creation: Are the productive forces that make culture the forces of the individuals, and their self-activity and associations with each other, as equal individuals, or the forces of private property accumulation and hence of the individuals only to the extent that they are owners and accumulators of private property themselves? How are the majority of individuals, including, in this case, artisans and craftspeople, dispossessed of their productive forces, which then turn into a law unto itself—appropriated and anonymized by capital to the detriment of those individuals—a world, in Marx’s words, “independent of and divorced from the individuals, alongside the individuals” (Marx [1932b]1978, 190)? Who is allowed agency, visibility, sustenance, growth, and enjoyment in the production process? Who is allowed to produce in a way that is compatible with their very nature and enables them to flourish without being subservient to the division of labor and their own instrument of production; without bringing the labor of others under the yoke; without blocking “the

development of a totality of capacities in the individuals themselves," a development that is essential to achieving self-activity (Marx [1932b]1978, 191)?

In Theories of Surplus Value, Marx, while explaining the difference, in the context of the system of capitalist production, between "productive labor," labor that can directly be transformed into capital in that it produces surplus-value for its employer through its greater quantity than is contained in its price, and "unproductive labor," labor that provides use-value only and does not produce more exchange-value than it costs, makes a rather peculiar analogy between English poet John Milton and a silk worm:

> Milton, who wrote Paradise Lost for five pounds, was an unproductive laborer. On the other hand, the writer who turns out stuff for his publisher in factory style, is a productive laborer. Milton produced Paradise Lost for the same reason that a silk worm produces silk. It was an activity of his nature. (1969, 401 [emphasis in the original])

This questioning of the capitalist demarcation between "productive" and "unproductive" labor demonstrates the great extent to which Marx not only confronts the hierarchical, anthropocentric divisions between the value-creating powers of human and non-human species, but also associates culture with labor-power, with that ongoing activity of one's very nature. The designation, in the system of capitalist production, of labor as "productive labor," however, is entirely oblivious, and hostile, to the nature both of human and non-human beings, since it has nothing to do with the content and use-value of that labor; what really matters is whether the product of the laborer is "subsumed under capital, and comes into being only for the purpose of increasing that capital" or not (Marx 1969, 401). Marx's critique of capitalist appropriation is, therefore, focused not merely on the appropriation of material life, but also, and more importantly, on the appropriation of the very labor that produces that material life. Marx, in other words, is highly critical not only of the capitalist demotion of labor into a mere means, but also of the perception of material life as the end; for him, labor (understood, in an anti-capitalist sense, as spontaneous self-activity) is, and should be recognized as, the end, and material life as the means.

In his critique of the “divorce,” caused by capital, between the objective conditions of labor and the worker, and between labor and property, Marx does investigate how capital “destroys craft and artisan labor” by confining it into “forms in which it does not appear in opposition to labor—in small capital and in the intermediate species, the species between the old modes of production (or their renewal on the foundation of capital) and the classical, adequate mode of production of capital itself” (Marx [1939]1978, 275 [emphasis in the original]). Thus, for Marx, artisans and craftspeople belong neither to the category of “productive” nor of “unproductive” laborers: they, on the one hand, do produce commodities, and reproduce their labor-power, by working with their own means of production; they can also create surplus-value and appropriate their own surplus-labor; but they, on the other hand, do not employ laborers, and do not exchange labor for money as money/capital, in the same capacity as the capitalists—they are their own wage-laborers, and only their own labor is materialized in their products. Marx anticipates, therefore, that the “handicraftsman,” in the long run, would either be transformed into “a small capitalist who also exploits the labor of others, or he will suffer the loss of his means of production and be transformed into a wage-laborer” (Marx 1969, 409).

This positioning of artisans and craftspeople as “split in two,” that is to say, as capitalists employing themselves as wage-laborers, however, rests on the assumption—and Marx does acknowledge this—that they can create their own surplus-value by being able to sell the product of their own labor at its value (Marx 1969, 408). But artisans and craftspeople are not “split in two” in the same way everywhere around the contemporary world. Whilst those artisans and craftspeople who can connect themselves to, and benefit from, the capital circulating within the transnational networks of production, representation, distribution, and consumption are able to prosper and accumulate wealth, others who do not have as much access to that circulating capital and whose knowledge, skills, and productive forces are absorbed by the active, outreaching machinery of transnational capitalism can no longer sell the products of their own labor at their value and are left increasingly dispossessed and propertyless. Moreover, and as will be demonstrated in the next section, that machinery sanctimoniously retains, rather than destroys, the notions of craft, artisanship, heritage, appreciation, and empowerment in order to satisfy

its need for producing and selling authenticity. This is the reason why David Harvey's concept of "accumulation by dispossession" is particularly useful.

Drawing, critically, upon Rosa Luxemburg and Marx's conceptualization of the dual aspects of capitalist accumulation, Harvey argues that the practices of what Marx calls "primitive" or "original" accumulation, which does include the "commodification of labor power and the suppression of alternative, indigenous, forms of production and consumption," are neither phenomena of the past that belong to an "original stage" prior to expanded reproduction nor outside of the contemporary capitalist system. Rather, capitalism internalizes such "cannibalistic as well as predatory and fraudulent practices" of capital accumulation through dispossession. According to Harvey, "the commodification of cultural forms, histories and intellectual creativity," along with self-interested patenting and licensing regulations shaped by the transnational capitalist class and the degradation and depletion of the global environmental commons, is among the new mechanisms of accumulation by dispossession that amount to "a new wave of 'enclosing the commons'" (2004, 75).

Why is appropriation still a useful concept?

In confronting the conventional industry divisions between "making" and "design," and suggesting unambiguously that at least half of the collection could have been handmade by artisans, the artisan organizations and collectives that have signed the letter ask for a disruption of the opaque, hierarchical, exclusionary, and unsustainably fast-moving capitalist production and accumulation processes that appropriate, displace, and dispossess them of their productive forces. The signatories do not make a distinction between what they call "design vocabularies" and the knowledge and skills pertaining to craft and artisanship. Neither do they sharply distinguish "design and craft" from the act of manufacturing: they question why the publicity statements "speak of this collection as linked to Indian design and craft while carefully omitting the fact that it has not been manufactured by any artisan." Instead, they accentuate the importance of "creative manufacturing," "a rights based

approach to protect artisan rights," and "collaborative approach and vision" in the face of the prospect of "mass cultural appropriation along with increased loss of livelihoods."[17]

Mukherjee's response to the open letter, however, shifts the debate from the labor hierarchies and inequalities in the production process, which the concept of appropriation—both in its critical deployment by Marx, Luxemburg, and Harvey, and the way it is used by the Indian artisan collectives—thoroughly captures, to an ultimately unchallengeable demonstration of the authenticity and erudition of the collection itself: he feels the need to corroborate that his "inspiration-board for this collection was thought through, and deeply researched."[18] Given that the artisans' letter includes no allegation of a lack of research and rigorous thinking, this emphasis on the extent of research undertaken is puzzling, but not coincidental: Mukherjee differentiates, unequivocally, the domain of what he perceives as "making," "craft-based," and "artisanal" from that of what he demarcates as "the Indian design sensibility and esthetic—that is so rooted in our heritage of crafts and textiles": He consecrates and rigidifies the former by confining it into "the world of luxury"; he authenticates the latter by underlining its rootedness in craft heritage and the extent of exhaustive research by which it is underpinned:

> Just as 'Make [Made] in India' needs to be encouraged, so should 'Designed in India'. And they are very different aspects of the fashion industry. This is a wakeup call to the potential of India's entrepreneurship, design sensibilities and incredible scope of work and talent. The Wanderlust collection, of course, remains rooted in my design sensibility and beliefs, and to make this a seamless collaboration I had three conditions to make it happen. The first was that it would be distinctly Indian, because that is who I am and who my brand is. The second was that the majority of this collection would be 'Made in India' by H&M. And the third was that the sari, H&M's first sari, would be a part of this collection. For me, Indian crafts and the artisanal belong in the world of luxury, not on the high street.[19]

Figure 2

Workers screen-printing bedsheet fabric using chemical pigment color at a screen-printing workshop at Sanganer village near Jaipur city, Rajasthan, India [Photo by Jignesh Mistry/CNES].

While such authenticity work is essential in terms of reinforcing the legitimacy of one's design practice in the highly fluid and transitory context of the transnational production and consumption of fast, high-street fashion, the restatement of the systemic industry divisions between design and symbolic production of fashion on the one hand and making and material production of fashion objects on the other absolves the designer of the responsibility to address the artisans' primary concern: "Have the artisan communities that have the proprietary rights to these designs been credited or compensated in any way?" (Figure 2).[20]

The artisans' assertion that there are artisan communities that have the proprietary rights to some of the designs from the collection is substantiated by a fact that they put forward in their open letter: "In the case of some of the designs used in 'Wanderlust', the Sanganeri print artisans have a Geographical Indication registration (GI), which means they are legally recognized as the proprietors of this technique and design vocabulary."[21] The World Intellectual

Property Organization (WIPO) defines "geographical indication" as "a sign used on products that have a specific geographical origin and possess qualities or a reputation that are due to that origin," which "enables those who have the right to use the indication to prevent its use by a third party whose product does not conform to the applicable standards." The WIPO maintains that in order for a sign to function as a GI, there must be a clear and demonstrable link between the product and its original place of production. The "qualities, characteristics or reputation of the product" should, therefore, be "essentially due to the place of origin."[22] In his response to the artisans' open letter, Mukherjee himself highlights that he and his team "are not just aware but are deeply respectful of Indian crafts, Geographical Indication Representation and the rights of our artisans."[23]

Yet, a GI does not enable its holder to "prevent someone from making a product using the same techniques as those set out in the standards for that indication."[24] What it does is to stop the selling of the products under the same name as that of the GI. The existing research from the field of Intellectual Property Studies as to the post-registration efficacy of GI demonstrates convincingly that a protected GI is susceptible to be relegated to a mere matter, indeed, of representation. As has been noted by Gargi Chakrabarti:

> [F]ake/imitation products of GIs are rampant, as seen with Bikaneri Bhujia as well as Bagru and Sanganeri print. Many fake products are flooding the market due to high demand from customers. There is a lack of awareness amongst end users which prevents them from differentiating between the original and fake products. Such cheap colourable imitations also cause a revenue loss for GI holders. This shows that the statutory provisions of post-registration quality control and vigilance process are not adequate to take care of the GI holders' interests. (2018, 6)

Chakrabarti explains, compellingly, the difficulty of identifying the original holders of the GI by referring to a) the role of the "intermixing of cultures" in the historical development of art and handicrafts in India, and b) the related fact that some of the types of artisanship and craft that are ascribable to India have also developed in similar or distinctive ways in many countries in the region on account of market demand (2018, 5). In the post-registration phase, this difficulty, I argue, would be much exacerbated and evolve into a near

impossibility of reaching a legally and critically binding consensus over the extent not only of fakeness and imitation, but even of plagiarism—be it understood as "wrongful copying" (Stearns 1999, 9) or "unauthorized and uncredited" copying (Pham 2017, 68). In the context of fashion production, plagiarism—which, unlike copyright infringement, is an ethical problem rather than a legal one anyway—occurs, mostly, as unacknowledged paraphrasing, and it is rarely possible to pinpoint who fails to acknowledge whom, or even why one should be acknowledging, and request authorization from, another. Indeed, in his response, Mukherjee takes great pains to assert that the prints used in the collection were "a hybrid that is inspired by the esthetic of the Sanganeri block print, the French toile, chintz prints and so on," not a "replication" of the Sanganeri hand block prints; that they were not being "marketed or sold as a Sanganeri print, or for that matter as an artisanal product"; and that the collection in its entirety was not "meant to be a substitute for couture or the artisanal. It stands in its own sector and industry."[25] Any critique of appropriation that starts from the ever controversial and contestable act and extent of copying can be reciprocated in analogous ways. This is the reason why the artisans, I argue, do not embark on an examination of the originality, authenticity, and reductiveness of the collection; instead, they revert to a much earlier, but still valid, critically valuable, and politically effective understanding of appropriation as a means of capital's absorption of living labor into objectified labor— appropriation as a way of understanding, and defying, capital's hierarchical, segregationist divisions of labor and its dispossession of the many of their productive forces for the benefit of the few.

In her useful criticism of the cultural appropriation/cultural appreciation binary, Minh-Ha T. Pham underlines the urgency of shifting the discussion "away from questions of personal intention and inspiration— unknowable or at least unverifiable and ultimately irrelevant things—to where it belongs: the fact, source, and effects of this kind of unauthorized copying" (2017, 73). However, it is unclear how the characterization of "unauthorized copying" (assuming that the copy is proven, incontestably, to be an unauthorized copy) as "racial plagiarism," a term Pham proposes to highlight "the racial relationships and inequalities that are obscured by terms like cultural appropriation," (69) will interfere with, and confront, the systemic, ongoing

appropriation of labor that facilitates the hierarchical, exclusionary and dispossessing production and accumulation processes. The value that is extracted by the racial capitalist processes, after all, is not a static value. What Pham describes as "racialized groups' resources of knowledge, labor, and cultural heritage" (73) are continuing production processes that are permeable, that is, subject to appropriation, by capital. Labor, on the other hand, is not a distinct "resource" adjacent to "knowledge" and "cultural heritage"; it is simply what produces and reproduces them— the problem is the systemic appropriation of that living labor into dead, objectified labor, into capital.

There is, therefore, a continuing need to shift the debate to what Jennifer Ayres rightly diagnoses as the "painful connection between inequitable labor practices in the industry and unethical design processes" (2017, 161). The key for the industry worker interviewees with whom Ayres discussed the problem of appropriation was that "the creative process needed to be a collaborative process of evolution and transformation" (2017, 158). Ayres, therefore, concludes that "the more appropriate debate to have is about the ethics and integrity of the creative process and working conditions" (2017, 163). Yet, here, there is also a risk of ring-fencing "the creative process," of putting unduly emphasis on whether the "design process" is compromised or not, when that compromise itself is actually, in most cases, a persistent result of the hierarchical detachment of the "design" and "creative" processes from the appropriated and absorbed productive forces of those artisan and craft communities outside of Western Europe and North America that are demoted, by capital, to alienated wage-laborers. Thus, the question of how one understands ethics in the context of transnational capitalism and its systemic appropriation of labor is of fundamental significance.

Conclusion

In the ever-proliferating, and much-needed, critiques of the so-called cultural appropriation, there is a risk for the entire domain of ethics to be reduced to a mere activity of trying to fathom who commits what offense within a spectrum

from harm to oppression. Ethics, as Alain Badiou crucially reminds us, however, was, and is, never solely about designating what is morally objectionable. “For if our only agenda is an ethical engagement against an Evil we recognize a priori,” he asks, “how are we to envisage any transformation of the way things are?” Rather than ethics in general, there are “ethics of processes,” whereby one draws from a situation, to the maximum possible extent, “the affirmative humanity that it contains.” Ethics, as such, is a truth-process that entails “affirmative invention” of a “broad, positive vision of possibilities” (Badiou 2002, 13–15).

In this article, I have shown that it is such affirmative invention that the Indian artisan collectives engage in not just by deploying appropriation as a critical, defensive tool to interrogate the hierarchical divisions of labor and the boundaries between design and making in the fashion industry, but also by demanding direct collaboration in production. While transnational capital and globalized circuits of production and accumulation engender labor hierarchies, power inequalities, and resultant dispossessions, they also create possibilities of what Jeroen Merk calls “bottom-up contestation and struggle,” that is, a process of socialization of labor that counteracts the process of appropriation, commodification, and marketization (2015, 130). There is, therefore, a need for further research into the potentiality of the critiques of appropriation—especially of those critiques of appropriation produced outside of Western Europe and North America—in facilitating a worker-driven politics, as well as a transnational labor ethics, within the globalized fashion production network. This emphasis on a transnational labor ethics does overlap with Marx’s contention that the appropriation, by the laboring classes, of the existing totality of productive forces, and the development of the individual capacities, to achieve “a complete and no longer restricted self-activity” must have “a universal character” (Marx [1932b]1978, 191). Labor as nourishing self-activity can be achieved by individuals, only when achieved by all.

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Notes

1. Creative Dignity is a movement that "has brought together over 500 diverse creative producers, small enterprises, civil society organisations and professionals to energise the ecosystem that Indian artisans need in this time of COVID-19 and post-COVID19 impact." For further information: "Our Journey," Creative Dignity, accessed December 29, 2021, https://creativedignity.org/ home-2-3/.
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