

Of Hipsters and Hegemonies

by Indira C. Endaya

“Whitening-cream my ass!” my friend Luisa exclaimed as EDSA’s smoggy skyline outside her train window was briefly secluded by the larger-than-life image of the very blonde Hollywood actress Alicia Silverstone, smiling, oblivious to the squalor of the Pasig River on her side and fumes below.

“Her career must be going downhill,” Luisa added “I wonder how much Kamiseta, (a Filipino ready-to-wear label) had to cough up to make her wear those *colegiala* (college girl) clothes.”

Nearby, also in full outdoor high-grade vinyl splendor, Mandy Moore oozed with sexy innocence. “Want Moore?” The billboard ad teased, after the MTV star got paid a hefty sum for celebrity endorsements by Penshoppe (yet another local clothing line, cashing in on that colonial mentality that refuses to go away).

“How patriotic of us, as usual.” I mutter.

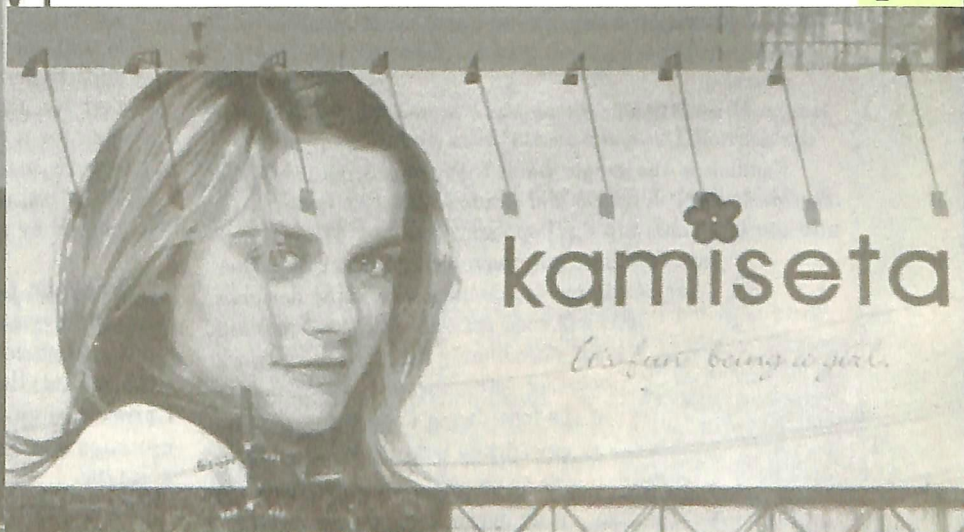
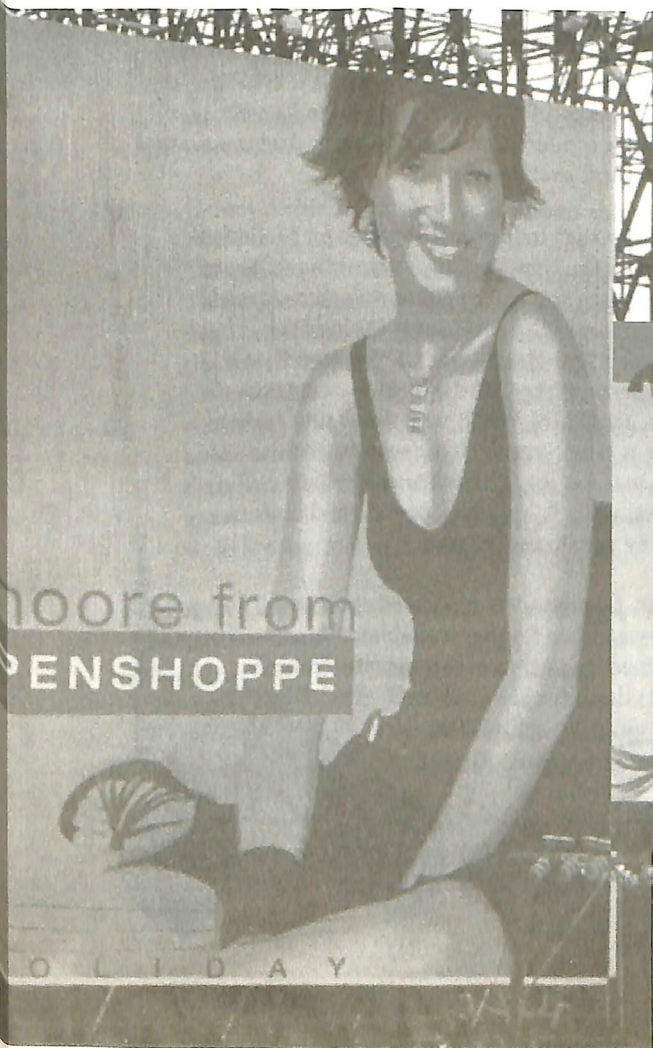
“What would happen if the stylists of Madonna or Britney Spears suddenly decided that the ethnic Pinoy look was hot?” Luisa wondered aloud.

“Imagine all these sacred woven patterns of various tribes chopped up and re-stitched to adorn Madonna or Britney’s bare midriff,” I reply. “The outfit would probably be complemented by the latest pair of trainers (with space-age aero-goop soles, the kind assembled by eighty sweat-shop child labourers from this side of the developing world.”

Luisa groans and I shudder to think of hordes of women flocking to the mall to replicate the urban-tribal Madonna/Britney look.

Despite other tragic associations, Middle east and oriental fashion design and looks are bound to be the mega trend for 2002...

Inspired by summer’s gypsy look, the ethnic vogue metamorphosed into an array of ribbons, beads, layers and embroidery.... Influences come from all over the globe; from chunky Bolivian knits, Na-



Billboards of Mandy Moore and Alicia Silverstone along EDSA, a major thoroughfare in Manila.

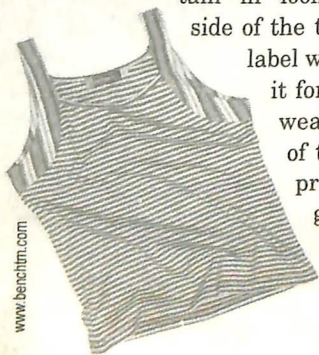
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Fashion is the magic wand that transforms the lowly *tsinelas* (rubber slippers) and sando (sleeveless undershirt) into the more chic hip flip-flops and tanktops. While a certain “in” look may have origins from the other side of the tracks, chances are, some designer label will soon make it look “cool” and sell it for ridiculously high prices as “work wear” or “street wear”—another case of the local being appropriated, mass produced and sold back to the margins as an essential wardrobe piece only to be chucked next season.

tive American sheepskin or suede to Mongolian tiered skirts, we can pretend we’re hardened travellers!

from Style File: Autumn and Winter Fashion 2002

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An outfit usually becomes chic only when it is fancied by the privileged (usually White/Western/First World), or those who aspire to be. In trying to understand this, I dig up more interesting readings that talk about fashion beyond what is written on glossy pages.

Two years back, in *Make* magazine, Ananya Mukherja, a sociology teacher at the City University of New York, wrote about her personal issues with the Hindu bindi as a fashion statement in American culture. It was a time when henna tattoos were suddenly cool and Gwen Stefani of the Band No Doubt sported a bindi that looked quirky, new and cute. Yet before that, whenever she wore a bindi, Mukherja, as well as her mother and other bindi-wearing women in an Indian community, were called “dothead” by New Jersey rednecks (who called themselves the dot-busters). She was also once mocked in Manhattan by a man who called her “Miss India.”

Why is it that a plain red bindi on her plain brown forehead marked her as an outsider but delicate bindis on non-Indian foreheads look interesting? Mukherja reflected, as she criticised the resurgence of ethnic chic and the “Fusion sexy” look: a combination of white skin, American attitude and exotic style:

I know that Indo-chic is a phase for Madonna and for the New York hip scene—that it’s been picked up and will be put down again. Already a different kind of orientalism is taking over—that of the vague “Far East”—and maybe soon that will shift to some other Third World Fascination. Or perhaps, the Third World will stop being fashionable for a time, again; it is seldom fashionable though, in the eyes of either Third Worlders or First Worlders, until it is first approved and metamorphosed by people in the West.

Far East fashion indeed arrived, but is all but gone. Suddenly I remember finding a couple of Japanese-themed music videos cool many seasons ago. In those slick and stylish videos, Madonna and Kylie Minogue wore geisha-like kimonos ala-Star Wars Queen Amidala.



www.rafec.com/Spring01/W/T/03.html

I suspect if I deconstruct some of the once-trendy sales-bin items at the back of my closet, (clubwear-top with a mysterious Kanji character and an assortment of cheongsam-like tops), I will come to the conclusion that I was a fashion victim in more ways than one.

How I wish that fashion was less about the commodification of identities and more about self-expression, (as numerous marketing campaigns would have us believe). I would really like to believe that my own clothing preferences would be a reflection of personal choice instead of hegemonies.

As Sharon Kinsella wrote in a paper on globalisation and orientalism:

Oriental-chic in Europe, and Japan-chic in East Asia, (and Asia-chic in Japan!) have merged.... Though often futuristic in form, Neo-Asian culture also utilises some of the recurring motifs of old-fashioned, (racist, and romantic) definitions of Oriental people. Motifs such as 'passive,' 'inscrutable,' 'childlike,' 'victim-like,' 'lacking subjective will,' 'machine-like' and 'ephemeral' have been separated from their previous, racial context. Some of these motifs are now packaged as the core attributes of a new global model of behaviour and style for the cool and mobile person.

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And yet the issue of class never fails to rear its elegant head. Fashion, after all, was invented by upper-crust people to set themselves apart from the masses. When the styles

of the upper class fashions trickled down to the lower class, they were forced to reinvent themselves. So says 19th century sociologist Thorstein Verblen as mentioned in Joanne Finklestein's piece on chic theory.

Finklestein adds that this trickle-down theory has since given way to the rise of a fashion-label that gives consumers "a sense of social location... that is made to seem part of the allure of fashionability and... stabilising identity which accompanies signature goods."

Finklestein also mentions Foucault's notion of the docile body that shows how "elements of a fashionable lifestyle—which include the urban habits of reading fashion magazines and engaging in body sculpting such as dieting and gym work-outs... are techniques for transforming the body into a commodity... subject to periodic upgrading."

And so, as they say, we are what we wear. If what we wear mirrors disparities in gender, race, and class, what else is new? And how do we change this?

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