

## Head Coverings, Arab Identity, and New Materialism

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Collective identity consists of a constellation of shared events, memories, traumas, successes, and geographies, among a variety of other things. Some of these “other things” are the shared everyday objects so connected to a people’s collective identity as to seem inseparable from it. These objects, though, have recently become battlegrounds over questions of whether outsiders should participate in the formation of these collective identities or not. At the writing of this piece, an anti-cultural-appropriation moment is in full swing. National campaigns have been launched to educate people about what objects from another culture are appropriate to use or not, and several high-profile cases of politicians who have appropriated another culture’s things have been brought to public attention. The “cultural appropriation wars,” as they have come to be called, began, in their most recent iteration, around Halloween costumes on college and university campuses.<sup>1</sup> Some of the tensions over appropriation have addressed the use of stereotyped bodies of racial and ethnic groups, as well as attire stereotypically associated with Black Americans, Native Americans, and Asians—somewhat broadly defined. While the cultural appropriation wars over Halloween rarely mention attire associated with Arabs, that attire

has certainly taken a central position within recent controversies.

The line between what is acceptable use of a cultural object that is not one’s own and what is “mindless” appropriation is still quite blurry. However, many are genuinely offended, and discussions are happening, primarily on campuses, about the balance between educating students and calling them out online. Controversies over the cultural appropriation of attire stem, in part, from a tendency in the United States to politicize objects traditionally associated with certain ethnic or cultural groups.<sup>2</sup> The process of politicizing objects, however, has often dire effects on people who use them on a daily basis. While perhaps useful to some, this politicization is hard to undo once its political purpose has been served. What happens, though, when we de-politicize objects? Or, is their de-politicization even possible?

In this chapter, I examine the *keffiyeh* and the tension that its politicization causes within the object’s everyday use to open up a conversation about how a focus on *keffiyeh* itself as an object

1 The Yale University incident in 2015, in which faculty pushed against students’ demands for safe spaces, free from offensive costumes, became the symbol for these “wars.” Halloween has become the most contested event around which the conversation about appropriation occurs, given the holiday’s freedom to play with identities not one’s own. For details, see Conor Friedersdorf, “The New Intolerance of Student Activism,” *The Atlantic*, November 9, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/11/the-new-intolerance-of-student-activism-at-yale/414810/>.

2 This topic has increasingly gained in prominence in current years. For some insightful discussion on sartorial expressions of cultural appropriation vs. appreciation, see, for instance, Hsiao-Cheng Han, “Moving from Cultural Appropriation to Cultural Appreciation,” *Art Education* 72, no. 2 (2019): 8–13; Michelle Liu Carriger, “No ‘Thing to Wear’: A Brief History of Kimono and Inappropriation from Japonisme to Kimono Protests,” *Theatre Research International* 43, no. 2 (2018): 165–84; Regan de Loggans, “Selling Headdresses to Hipsters: A Discussion on the Cultural Appropriation of Native American Regalia” (Master’s thesis, State University of New York, 2017); and Nadim N. Damluji, “Imperialism Reconfigured: The Cultural Interpretations of the Keffiyeh” (Honors Thesis, Whitman College, 2010).

with its own agency can illuminate the construction of an Arab identity through everyday objects. I do so by shifting focus from political controversies over the *keffiyeh* to the *keffiyeh* as a thing with a politics of its own. I will start by looking at how the scarf has become politicized, turn then to the scholarship on the entanglement of things with human intentions, and next ask if it is possible to reach a fuller understanding of the *keffiyeh* as an object we can simply appreciate without forcing conversations about appropriation on it. My examination of the *keffiyeh* through the lenses of new materialism will, thus, lead me to question the fine line between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation when considering the *keffiyeh* as a fashion item in a globalized world.

## 1 Head Coverings as Identity Markers

Head coverings are some of the material objects most often associated with an “Arab” identity. Whether it is the *hijab* or the *keffiyeh*, these objects usually denote an Arab identity even though they are worn worldwide by many non-Arab Muslims. Despite calls that a collective “Arab” identity is a thing of the past, Christopher Phillips argues that this notion has seen a resurgence not just during the Arab revolts of 2011, or the Arab Spring, but also in recent discussions about everyday markers of identity, such as clothing. Phillips admits that “Arab identity has been constructed, reproduced and disseminated ... by the state regimes” and that narratives of Arab identity “are now reproduced every day in a largely routine and everyday manner.”<sup>3</sup> The “everyday Arabism” that Phillips describes—such as the supra-national discourses promoted by some political regimes or news outlets like *Al-Jazeera*—is seen not only on television and online but also on the Arab streets. One of the crucial aspects of this urban scene is the distinctive

clothing seen in the Arab world, especially head coverings. Such coverings have multiple levels of utility and meaning in Arab cultures. The *hijab* is one of the most recognizable of them as it indicates the religious identity of the Arab-Muslim women. There is also their practical level: head coverings are used by both men and women for protection against harsh weather. Because many Arab-majority countries are geographically located in hot, arid climates, this requires people living there to cover their head and face during parts of the day. This mix of culture, religion, and practical use has caused head coverings to build up a history and life of their own.

Head coverings have also been used in more pointed ways by Arabs and non-Arabs alike to indicate an Arab identity on other levels. The veil, in any of its forms, has been used by Arab-Muslim women to identify themselves religiously, culturally, and even politically, and it has been used by non-Arab and non-Muslim people to identify Arab-Muslim women as culturally *other*—especially in Europe and the U.S. There is also a long history of Western film and art using head coverings to identify characters as Arab, at times in a derogatory way. Jack Shaheen’s book and subsequent documentary, *Reel Bad Arabs*,<sup>4</sup> outline just how influential these images are on the attitudes toward Arabs in the West. His ideas, of course, are informed by the seminal work of Edward Said and his field-defining “Orientalism.”<sup>5</sup> Both theorists point out some of the hard truths that Western cultures have yet to come to terms with in their representations of Arabs.

While the veil, in its many forms, has attracted significant scholarly attention in the past decades,<sup>6</sup>

3 Christopher Phillips, *Everyday Arab Identity: The Daily Reproduction of the Arab World* (London: Routledge, 2013), 1–2.

4 Jack Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (Northampton: Interlink, 2001).

5 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

6 For recent scholarship on the veil, see Leila Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil’s Resurgence, from the Middle East to America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011); Elizabeth Bucar, *The Islamic Veil: A Beginner’s Guide* (Oxford: OneWorld Publications, 2012); Hilal Elver, *The Headscarf*

the traditional head covering worn by Arab men, the *keffiyeh* (spelled *kufiya*, *kufiyah*, or *kaffiyeh* depending on transliteration), has received comparatively less attention. However, the *keffiyeh* signals everyday Arabness in more ways than the veil does, being one of the most distinctive items defining an Arab man's cultural identity. Although, unlike the veil, there is little religious significance placed on the *keffiyeh* as Arab Christians, Muslims, Druze, and secular Arab men wear it, the *keffiyeh* has been intensely politicized, gaining new meanings in changing historical contexts. Since the 1930s, for instance, the *keffiyeh* has become a symbol of Palestinian nationalism and of solidarity with the rights of Palestinians. Yasser Arafat solidified the *keffiyeh's* association with the idea of national independence in the 1960s, a significance that it has maintained to this day. Outside the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the *keffiyeh* has become an object used to stoke controversy. This controversy came to a head in 2007, when Urban Outfitters began selling what they called "anti-war woven scarves." The company was criticized both by those who saw them highlighting Palestinians' plight and by those who were offended by its implicit critique of the Israeli policy toward Palestinians. While solidarity around objects can be productive for political movements, the politicization of an everyday object presents challenges for those who use it daily to no political ends.

In recent years, the appropriation versus appreciation debate has focused on an outsider's right to use a certain culture and its representations. Much of the debate has centered on attire associated with certain cultures, but it has also addressed the use of language and images by individuals not from that culture. The question frequently focuses on the word "right," but this is not the most helpful word to use when thinking of culture. "Right" is a word with legal implications, and what we refer to

when addressing issues of appropriation can be better categorized within the language of taste, sentiment, and offense. We have the right to offend, but the question is whether we should. Cultural appropriation has not hit the courts, so the language needs some fine tuning. In an interview with Conor Friedersdorf about the appropriateness of white artists to use images of Black lynching victims, for instance, Jonathan Blanks cautioned that, "[t]oo often ... what a cultural-appropriation argument boils down to is a misapplication of voice and representation." The aspect that Blanks is most interested in when engaging another's culture is that of "risk."<sup>7</sup> To engage one's culture is to take a risk at offense, but what are the implications for not engaging? Indeed, the controversies over the use of the *keffiyeh* outside the MENA are less about the politics of the region and more about the politics of representation. They are more about the appropriation of Arab identity than the Palestinian struggle for justice. A question remains, though. Is wearing the *keffiyeh* merely a way of "Orientalizing" Arabs, or just a way for many younger people in the U.S. to access history through fashion—unlike other generations who did so exclusively through printed material?<sup>8</sup> The question is a complex one. The *keffiyeh* has a long and complex history, and this particular moment in its history needs to be put in a larger social, cultural, and political context.

When asking where the power of this piece of clothing comes from or, more broadly, where any thing's power comes from, the answer is simple: it is the human subject who ascribes meanings to a thing. Similar to the veil, the *keffiyeh's* politics has been imposed on it. Its history and the meanings

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*Controversy: Secularism and Freedom of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Noreen Abdullah-Khan and Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, *The Veil in Kuwait: Gender, Fashion, Identity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

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7 Conor Friedersdorf, "What Does 'Cultural Appropriation' Actually Mean?" *The Atlantic*, April 3, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/04/cultural-appropriation/521634/>.

8 Fashion as a way of accessing history is a rich theme within anthropological studies. Closer to our focus, see, for instance, Emma Tarlo, *Visibly Muslim: Fashion, Politics, Faith* (Oxford: Berg, 2010).

we derive from it are more organic, though, and they change when we give a thing more agency in constructing its own meanings. If the new materialism's goal is to "rethink subjectivity by playing up the role of inhuman forces within the human" and "explore dissonant relations between those processes and cultural practice,"<sup>9</sup> then the *keffiyeh* opens up a conversation about the fragility of things and the limits humans place on them in their meaning-making process. The *keffiyeh*'s association with Arab identity, as seen from its history, is clearly the sticking point in its controversial status today. Its recent history has shown that it has moved from an article of clothing that provides an Orientalist gaze into the MENA to one that creates hard dividing lines for politics in the region. Therefore, the *keffiyeh*'s recent history as a politically divisive fashion item cannot be discounted as a mere moment in its long history. As Djurdja Bartlett points out, "one of the biggest casualties in its transmutation from political statement to a fashion accessory might be the *keffiyeh*'s association with methods of subaltern resistance."<sup>10</sup> This association is also part of the object's history, which is largely lost when it is appropriated for mere fashion statement. In fact, in trying to de-politicize the *keffiyeh*, the fashion industry has disentangled it from the meaning it held for much of the twentieth century.

## 2 The Thing Itself

Each thing has a history, but some things' history is sometimes overshadowed by the controversies that have surrounded it. The *keffiyeh* falls within this latter category. Its name derives from its origins in the Kufa area of Iraq; literally, it means

"from the city of Kufa"<sup>11</sup> It also goes by different names: *shemagh* in Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Jordan, and Iraq; *dastmaal yazdi* in Iran; *chafiyeh* in parts of Iraq and Iran, and in Lebanon; *ghutra* (the white versions of the *shemagh*) in the Gulf states; and *rezza* in North Africa and Egypt.<sup>12</sup> Usually made from cotton, or a cotton and wool blend, and square in shape, the *keffiyeh* grew to be an essential piece of clothing for the Bedouins of the desert, who needed protection from heat and sand storms. It is important to note that head coverings were used in this region prior to the rise of Islam. As Djurdja Bartlett states, well before Islam, keeping one's head covered was a sign of respect.<sup>13</sup> Bartlett also explains that geography and social class had a lot to do with covering one's head, hence the role of the *keffiyeh* in signifying social status:

"It was headwear that marked men as city dwellers, villagers, or Bedouin, and indicated their religious affiliation and socio-economic position.... The *keffiyeh* was a marker of low status, distinguishing the *fellah*—peasant—from the *effendi*—the educated middle-class men of the town, who wore the maroon-coloured *tarbush* or *fez*."<sup>14</sup>

Those living in cities and seeing themselves as more cosmopolitan than their fellow Bedouins living in rural areas usually wore a turban or, in later centuries, a *fez*. Thus, not wearing the *keffiyeh* became a sign of one's status as a city-dweller and different from the Bedouin class.<sup>15</sup> Although

9 William E. Connolly, "The 'New Materialism' and the Fragility of Things," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 41, no. 3 (2013): 399.

10 Djurdja Bartlett, *Fashion and Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 135.

11 Ali Ameer, *A Short History of the Saracens* (London: Routledge, 2013), 424.

12 "What Do Arabs Wear on Their Heads?" *UAE Style Magazine*, August 24, 2013, <http://www.uaestylemagazine.com/24/what-do-arabs-wear-on-their-heads.html>.

13 Bartlett, *Fashion and Politics*, 126.

14 *Ibid.*, 126.

15 *Ibid.* See also "From Kaftan to Kippa," The Textile Research Center, accessed January 25, 2020, <https://trc-leiden.nl/trc-digital-exhibition/index.php/from-kaftan-to-kippa/item/55-04-the-bedouin>. The Textile Research Center in Leiden has traced the material history of Bedouin clothing within the larger context

eventually the *keffiyeh* became a symbol of Islam and became associated with those living more traditional lifestyles within Islam itself,<sup>16</sup> it is important to keep in mind its secular origins. Its association with geography, class, and decorum distinguishes the *keffiyeh* from the veil, which has a clear religious significance.

In Saudi Arabia, the *keffiyeh* is an object that ties men back to their Bedouin past, and also an object that has taken on a particular significance as a symbol of Arab pride. Ghazanfar Ali Khan goes so far as to call the *ghutra*, the Saudi name for the *keffiyeh*, “a historical dress code.”<sup>17</sup> The black rope that fits the cloth to the head is called *agal*: it is a two-loop coil of black braided cord heavy enough to hold a grip on the *ghutra* and prevent it from slipping. The *keffiyeh* also comes in a dazzling variety of styles. The design of the *keffiyeh* is usually a checkered pattern, but it can vary in color depending on the region. At times, a *fez* hat is worn underneath. The cloth drapes over men’s shoulders and back, a style that has become synonymous with men’s fashion in the Gulf states. While mainly a head covering, the *keffiyeh* is also often worn around one’s shoulders.

There is disagreement as to where the pattern on the *keffiyeh* emerged, but Khan argues that the red and white-checkered *ghutra* has its roots in Europe, from where it was introduced in ancient Arabia.<sup>18</sup> Others claim that the red-and-white-checkered *ghutra* has its origin in ancient Mesopotamia, being a symbol of fishing nets, or that it arrived in Saudi Arabia circuitously from England

only a few decades ago.<sup>19</sup> According to Ezra Karmel, the red-and-white *keffiyeh* “started to develop into a prominent article of clothing in Transjordan in the early 1930s after the British Officer John Bagot Glubb ... included it in the uniform of the Desert Patrol—a Bedouin unit of the Arab Legion that he created.”<sup>20</sup> From here, it spread to Saudi Arabia and other countries from the area. Regarding the origins of *keffiyeh*’s colors, Luisa Gandolfo notes that, for some, “the red-and-white keffiyeh denotes Jordanian and the black-and-white Palestinian,” while for others the colors are “the legacy of the British military presence.”<sup>21</sup> Photographic evidence from the earliest visual records of Saudi men shows them wearing checkered *keffiyehs* and, by the 1960s, the object had become a fashion staple.

An earlier, albeit important, moment in the transformation of the *keffiyeh* into a symbol of Arab pride is the iconic image of Thomas E. Lawrence, known widely as Lawrence of Arabia, wearing it during his guerilla attacks against the Ottomans in World War I. Lawrence is a complicated figure in the history of the Arabs. A British archeologist and army officer, Lawrence fought alongside them during the Arab Revolt of 1916–1918. The film that fictionalizes his life and the Arab Revolt is advertised to this day with the image of Lawrence, played by Peter O’Toole, wearing a white *keffiyeh* with a gold *agal*. This image is an exact reproduction of a photograph of Lawrence himself wearing the scarf in Jidda in 1917 (fig. 9.1). The image is complicated in that it shows Lawrence, a man infatuated with Arab culture, as the British savior of

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of the MENA history. Their online exhibition focuses on clothing as material culture, although it does acknowledge the politics of the *keffiyeh* as a divisive object.

16 Elon Gilad, “The History of the Kaffiyeh: From Proto-Hat to Symbol of Pride,” *Haaretz*, last updated November 26, 2014, <https://www.haaretz.com/.premium-the-history-of-the-kaffiyeh-1.5334284>.

17 Ghazanfar Ali Khan, “Not Just a Checkered Scarf,” *Arab News*, last updated July 4, 2015, <http://www.arabnews.com/fashion/news/769871>.

18 Ibid.

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19 “Traditional Urban Men’s Dress of Saudi Arabia,” *Saudi Arabesque*, August 29, 2016, <http://saudiarabesque.com/traditional-urban-men-s-dress-of-saudi-arabia/>.

20 Ezra Karmel, “The ‘Jordanian’ Keffiyah, Redressed,” *7iber*, January 4, 2015, <https://www.7iber.com/2015/01/the-jordanian-keffiyah-redressed/>.

21 Luisa Gandolfo, *Palestinians in Jordan* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 130. For the origins of the *keffiyeh*, see also Joseph A. Massad, *Colonial Effects: The Making of National Identity in Jordan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).



FIGURE 9.1 T.E. Lawrence (aka Lawrence of Arabia) by B.E. Leeson. Rabegh, north of Jidda, 1917.

the Arabs.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, as Isabella Hammad notes, after the 1962 film came out, “a comparable fashion

<sup>22</sup> Technically, Lawrence was a spy for the British government tasked with keeping an eye on the Arabs in their subaltern resistance against the Ottomans, so his alliances were somewhat murky. For details, see Jeremy Wilson, *The Authorized Biography of T.E. Lawrence* (New York: Atheneum, 1990).

phenomenon occurred. Vogue labeled it ‘Desert Dazzle,’ Elizabeth Arden released a series of ‘Sheik’ beauty products, and McCall’s magazine published a spread on the ‘Lawrence look.’<sup>23</sup> Thus, Lawrence represents an important moment in the

<sup>23</sup> Isabella Hammad, “Dressing for Others: Lawrence of Arabia’s Sartorial Statements,” *The Paris Review*, April 8, 2019, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2019/04/08/>

*keffiyeh's* history—one that has maybe been underplayed. The *keffiyeh's* role as a symbol of Arab pride and self-determination has been solidified by its circulation in cinematic form from the twentieth century onward.

At one time or another, the *keffiyeh* took on various roles, becoming more than just an identifier of Arabness. Over the course of the last one hundred years, for instance, the *keffiyeh* grew into a political symbol and a controversial item of clothing as non-Arab Westerners have taken up wearing it. The political beginnings of the *keffiyeh* came during the 1930s, when Palestinians from rural areas started their revolt against the British. Not wearing a head covering was seen as bending to the will and fashion of the British, so the *keffiyeh* took on the symbolism of Palestinian nationalism.<sup>24</sup> Yasser Arafat, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) leader in the 1960s, capitalized on the symbolic potential of the *keffiyeh* for Palestinian nationalism. Indeed, the visual memory of the Oslo Accords was marked by Arafat wearing a head scarf while shaking hands with Yitzhak Rabin as Bill Clinton stands between the two. Arafat represents a larger moment in the *keffiyeh's* history and its association with Arab identity and subaltern protest. Students and intellectuals of Europe's left began to wear this head covering in solidarity with the Palestinian struggle, and it has been associated with that struggle within the Western left ever since.<sup>25</sup>

Of course, the politicization of the *keffiyeh* did not stop with Arafat. The *chafiyeh* was worn during the Iran-Iraq war to signal Shi'a resistance to Saddam Hussein. This black-and-white version of the head covering was also worn ten years ago by many rappers in Iran.<sup>26</sup> Its use in Iran demonstrates that the *keffiyeh* is tied both to Arab identity and the identity of the region. In a strange twist,

as Robert Trait notes, “the *chafiyeh* ... worn by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his loyal followers has become an unlikely fashion item for young Iranians drawn to the same western pop culture that country's leaders disdain.”<sup>27</sup> This use of the head covering both as a symbol of revolt against state-enforced norms and as a symbol of tradition shows how flexible and volatile the meanings attached to this piece of clothing are.

While the above examples show the *keffiyeh* being used as a symbol of Arab pride and self-determination, the *keffiyeh* has also been used to vilify Arabs and those seen as favoring their rights over others.' During President Obama's 2009 tour of the MENA, which culminated in his speech in Cairo, protests broke out in Jerusalem, a city he did not visit on the tour. The protesters held up images of Obama with a *keffiyeh* on his head and described him as an anti-Semite.<sup>28</sup> Another iteration of Obama in a head scarf was used by Barry Blitt for his *New Yorker* cover titled “Fist-Bump: The Politics of Fear.” The cover art of the magazine appeared in 2008 and depicted Barack Obama dressed in the typical long robe worn in the MENA and wearing a head scarf.<sup>29</sup> By placing a *keffiyeh* on Obama, the meaning of the head covering took on a more negative connotation. The implication was that Obama supported Muslims' rights, and by proxy Palestinian rights, denying Israeli Jews a voice. Throughout his administration, Obama was accused of being a Muslim and an Arab—both of those words being used as epithets. The use of the *keffiyeh* on Obama during these protests

dressing-for-others-lawrence-of-arabias-sartorial-statements/.

24 Gilad, “The History of the Kaffiyeh.”

25 Ibid.

26 Gandolfo, *Palestinians in Jordan*, 130.

27 Robert Trait, “Iran's Underground Rap Artists Take to Wearing a Symbol of Islamic Revolution,” *The Guardian*, November 30, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/dec/01/iran-chafiyeh-rap-music>.

28 “Obama a Jew Hater, Say Israeli Protestors,” *NDTV*, June 4, 2009, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/obama-a-jew-hater-say-israeli-protesters-395551>.

29 Mary Louise Kelly, “I'm Just Trying to Make Myself Laugh: 'New Yorker' Artist Shares His Cover Stories,” *NPR*, October 20, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/10/20/558777025/im-just-trying-to-make-myself-laugh-new-yorker-artist-shares-his-cover-stories>.



demonstrates that the association of the object with Arabness can be used in a very divisive way.

The question remains, though, why is the *keffiyeh* used as a symbol of Arabness, whether worn with pride or to signal controversy? Is it simply that it is so universal in the MENA that it provides a recognizable visual? The moments when the *keffiyeh* gained political significance are rather straightforward, but the reasons why it became a symbol of Arabness are more difficult to explain. Its association with non-elites because of its functional appeal to those living and working in desert environments and its ability to tie one back to a distant past and culture have a significant impact on its meanings. However, the shrinking of the distance between cultures due to globalization and the easily transferable meanings of the *keffiyeh* via images to a wide audience have contributed to its widespread use as a signifier for a range of meanings, from Arab identity to solidarity with Palestinian liberation. For instance, one can easily signify Arabness by photoshopping a *keffiyeh* on someone's head since the scarf is closely associated with Arab and/or Muslim identity nowadays. The visual rhetoric of the *keffiyeh* is so ingrained in the Western culture that, as the examples above show, it can signal both disdain for Arabs and disdain for those who fear them or perform a fear of them for political purposes. Such instances fall in line with what James Der Derian calls "the political pornography of modernity."<sup>30</sup> Derian is concerned with the too-easy associations enabled by mass media between common cultural attire and extremism. Such associations are problematic for those who use the attire on an everyday basis. He discusses how such images have been used to distance some groups from their opponents and mentions the use of photographs of Afghan *mujahideen* in this war of images—referencing Ronald Reagan's frequent use of such images and their description as "freedom fighters."<sup>31</sup> Likewise, the *keffiyeh* has

been too easily appropriated in an attempt to associate it with extremist ideologies. Derian's project of releasing everyday objects from their association with ideology is a necessary intervention for objects like the *keffiyeh*, which have such easy slippage in their meaning. Conflating actions and attitudes with particular things creates polarized positions over meanings that are either socially constructed or essentialist. Susan Yi Sencindiver puts a fine point on this problem when she indicates that such "intra-actions' between meaning and matter ... leave neither materiality nor ideality intact."<sup>32</sup>

To think about the de-politicization of an everyday object like the *keffiyeh* involves doing a lot of imaginative work. There is no scenario in which the object will become widely divorced from its politics anytime soon. However, its other association with Arab identity in general is not necessarily political. To address this complex association, I turn to the new materialism and its subset, thing theory, fields that hold some potential for releasing things from the lives we give to them. The productive strain that runs through this thinking is one that pushes against the politicization of objects and images.<sup>33</sup> What would the de-politicization of the *keffiyeh* look like, though? Further, why would we seek its de-politicization since so many Arabs have found significant meaning in its identity-enabling quality? The answer lies partly in recent controversies over non-Arabs wearing the *keffiyeh* in attempts at solidarity or at simply being fashionable. These controversies must be understood in the larger

30 James Der Derian, "Imagining Terror: Logos, Pathos, and Ethos," *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2005): 25.

31 *Ibid.*, 23.

32 Susan Yi Sencindiver, "New Materialism," *Oxford Bibliographies*, July 26, 2017, <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780190221911/obo-9780190221911-0016.xml>.

33 As discussed later in this chapter, a productive strain within new materialism rearticulates the need for a breaking up of the human/nonhuman binary. Such a rearticulation of humans' relationship to the nonhuman is central to much of the posthumanist thinking about climate change and late capitalism, to give just a few examples.



context of the conversation about cultural appropriation. First, though, I would like to outline the basic ideas from the new materialism that I bring to thinking about head coverings and Arab identity.

### 3 The *Keffiyeh* as an Entangled Thing

The *keffiyeh* is an entangled thing. It is literally entangled with one's head or neck and has become entangled culturally with Arab identity, in general, and Palestinian liberation, in particular. The field of physics provides a helpful concept in thinking about the *keffiyeh*: quantum entanglement. Quantum mechanics examines entanglement at photon level to explore "whether or not single, isolated particles or photons may entangle over large distances."<sup>34</sup> Karen Barad has used this concept to address how objects become entangled both with each other and with ideas that are applied to them.<sup>35</sup> In this sense, the *keffiyeh*'s meaning is entangled linguistically and visually with Arabness; the object and the identity it is applied to are inseparable. To some, this can be limiting due to its easily reducible meaning. They argue that, by reducing the *keffiyeh* to an easy definition, one could easily reduce the Arab identity to a stereotype as well.

There are many things that exist in this entangled state and their interdependence is what matters here. Take the cowboy hat, for instance. This thing is an easy way to associate oneself with the western U.S. However, while a thing that can be easily identifiable with a locality or a movement can be helpful for building identities or coalitions, it can also have the effect of creating caricatures out of individuals, as it happens frequently with those who don cowboy hats. This association leads some to ignore the life of the thing itself and

its intrinsic functions, which go beyond the politics of the thing. The goal of the new materialism, in general, and thing theory, in particular, is to change one's thinking about things as being inanimate or lacking agency. Part of the larger post-constructionist turn in the humanities, the new materialism shifts focus from human uses of the material world to the material world as separate from human activity. The idea that objects have agency aside from the meanings the humans assign to them can guide one into more productive ways of thinking about head coverings as things with a history, meaning, and politics of their own. As Sencindiver explains,

"The polycentric inquiries consolidating the heterogeneous scholarly body of new materialism pivot on the primacy of matter as an underexplored question, in which a renewed substantial engagement with the dynamics of materialization and its entangled entailment with discursive practices is pursued, whether these pertain to corporeal life or material phenomena, including inorganic objects, technologies, and nonhuman organisms and processes."<sup>36</sup>

Likewise, Jane Bennett's book, *Vibrant Matter*, has put into accessible language a critique of "the philosophical project of naming where subjectivity begins and ends."<sup>37</sup> Here, Bennett claims that her intention is to address "slowly an idea that runs fast through modern heads: the idea of matter as passive stuff, as raw, brute, or inert." In her opinion, we have been conditioned "to ignore the vitality of matter and the lively powers of material formations."<sup>38</sup> As humans, we assume that matter is dead, lifeless, and only significant as it reinforces the narratives we create about ourselves. Bennett's argument states that our relationship to

34 Bengt Nordén, "Quantum Entanglement: Facts and Fiction—How Wrong Was Einstein After All?," *Quarterly Reviews of Biophysics* 49 (2016): 1–13.

35 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 349.

36 Sencindiver, "New Materialism."

37 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), ix.

38 *Ibid.*, vii.

non-human matter has been nothing less than contentious. Indeed, the controversies surrounding the *keffiyeh* have demonstrated the same damaging human intrusion into the life of a thing that has changed its meanings to serve a human agenda. This does not always imply a negative use of things, though: humans often benefit from linking things to their purposes. However, other critics have noted how humans' interference in the lives of things and non-human objects has often turned out for the worse.

Bill Brown made similar moves in the field of material culture with the publication of the special issue of *Critical Inquiry* in 2001. His introductory essay expresses the concern many have raised before with why we should not just "let things alone."<sup>39</sup> Attempting an answer, Brown argues that "[o]nly by turning away ... from the object/thing dialectic, have historians, sociologists, and anthropologists been able to turn their attention to things."<sup>40</sup> Similarly, in his introductory study to *The Social Life of Things*, Arjun Appadurai highlights pointedly that, while "from a *theoretical* point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a *methodological* point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context."<sup>41</sup> This process involves moving theory from the realm of human hubris and acknowledging, instead, that the meaning of things begins with the things themselves.

Indeed, if there is a candidate for an object that comes before its political meaning yet relegated only to its political meaning, the *keffiyeh* is a top contender. To begin an analysis of the *keffiyeh* with the *keffiyeh* itself raises three concerns about the "thing-power" of the scarf, to use Bennett's words.<sup>42</sup> First, the ability of the *keffiyeh* to gain

new meanings tied up with fashion shows that the object reasserts itself as a *new thing* independent of the meanings imposed on it by the politics of the moment. Second, a new materialist analysis of the *keffiyeh* leads to a reevaluation of its potential as a meaning-bearing thing, as opposed to a meaning-making thing. While its distant past meaning was made by its utility, its current sets of political meanings have been imposed upon it. Finally, an analysis of the *keffiyeh* as a thing manifesting agency highlights that it has become, in Barbara M. Benedict's words, "no longer merely [a bearer of] aesthetic enhancements" but "the context of life" itself.<sup>43</sup>

While new materialists have done much for disentangling things from "mind/body, nature/society, human/nonhuman, animate/inanimate, and subject/object binaries,"<sup>44</sup> theorists of the thing have done even more: they have used things as a way to recover meanings that a culture forgot, imbued them with agency, and cautioned that a thing's current cultural or political meanings do not include *all* of its past or future meanings. As John Plotz reminds us, such an approach focuses on "the places where any mode of acquiring or producing knowledge about the world runs into hard nuts, troubling exceptions, or blurry borders ... where the strict rules for classifying and comprehending phenomena seem suddenly no longer to apply."<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the *keffiyeh* occupies such a place. We should be reminded, for instance, that the *keffiyeh* is a signifier of a common past: all the Bedouin populations of the Arabian Peninsula used to wear it for reasons that had nothing to do with the politics of the moment. In other words, disentangling the *keffiyeh* from controversies that

39 Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 1.

40 Ibid., 6.

41 Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 5.

42 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 2.

43 Barbara M. Benedict, "Finding Room for Things," *The Eighteenth Century* 51, no. 1/2 (2010): 251.

44 Jeanette Samyn, "Thing the Real: On Bill Brown's 'Other Things,'" *Los Angeles Review of Books*, February 8, 2017, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/234780/>.

45 John Plotz, "Can the Sofa Speak? A Look at Thing Theory," *Criticism* 47, no. 1 (2005): 118.

surround it may reposition it as a social unifier, a cultural symbol, and a fashion staple for the Arab people.

As Brown points out, “[w]e begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us ... when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested.”<sup>46</sup> The *keffiyeh*, to many, has stopped working as it was initially intended to. It is no longer just a piece of cloth that protects one from the sand and heat of the desert but also a sartorial item that carries with it many associated meanings. The “thingness” Brown raises here aptly describes the moment when the *keffiyeh* began to signify more things than it can be expected to. Once the controversies over its cultural appropriation began, the *keffiyeh* no longer worked only as an object for keeping sand from one’s face.

#### 4 Fashion, Appreciation, and Cultural Appropriation

In 2007, Urban Outfitters began selling what the company marketed as “anti-war woven scarves.” The scarves were marketed, as much of Urban Outfitters’ products, as benign statements of peace. However, one design on the scarf included a skull-and-crossbones that a blogger compared to a Nazi SS symbol.<sup>47</sup> The controversy primarily played out in the blogosphere. The first to comment on the strangeness of the item being sold was blogger Daniel Sieradski, the founder of the progressive movement Occupy Judaism. His post began with the comment that “in hipster enclaves such as Berlin and Brooklyn, the kaffiyeh [*sic*] is so ubiquitous it’s already passe [and] as a fashion item is viewed by many in the Palestinian solidarity movement as a trivialization of the Palestinian

struggle.”<sup>48</sup> The debate just ballooned from there. Nadeem from the blog Kabobfest, a pro-Palestinian site, posted a virulent critique of cultural appropriation. He noted that the *keffiyeh* is being worn by individuals “who know little more about the scarf than its patterns,” expressing his disgust at the idea of “people expropriating aspects of my culture ... especially when they strip those things of all meaning.”<sup>49</sup> Another blogger on the site *Jewlicious* commented on Nadeem’s outrage by mentioning that the *keffiyeh* is just a scarf that “British and U.S. soldiers in Iraq use ... to keep dust off their faces,” with the added remark that “a death’s head design embroidered on them ... might be a bit too much.”<sup>50</sup> As a result of this controversy, Urban Outfitters canceled the sale of the scarf online, at least in the U.S. However, the company continued to sell it under a different name on their European site. *The New York Times* picked up the controversy and recorded Urban Outfitters’ response on the site once the item was taken down: “Due to the sensitive nature of this item, we will no longer offer it for sale. We apologize if we offended anyone, this was by no means our intention.”<sup>51</sup>

The controversy over the *keffiyeh* started well before the 2015 flare-ups that culminated in the infamous Halloween costume incidents mentioned at the outset of this chapter. A few years earlier, in 2013, the site *Complex* had published a piece titled “Check Your Privilege: Clothes White People Shouldn’t Wear.” Included in the list were American-Indian headdresses, Du-rags, Dashikis, Kamikaze *hachimakis*, and the *keffiyeh*. The article warned white wearers of the *keffiyeh*, somewhat humorously, that those who wear it think, “My

46 Brown, “Thing Theory,” 4.

47 Ck, “Urban Outfitters Bends to the Will of the Jews on Keffiyeh,” *Jewlicious* (blog), January 1, 2007, <http://jewlicious.com/2007/01/urban-outfitters-bends-to-the-will-of-the-jews-on-keffiyeh/>.

48 Daniel Sieradski, “Strangely Familiar ‘Anti-War Scarves’ Now at an URBN near You!” *Jewschool* (blog), January 16, 2007, <https://jewschool.com/2007/01/11720/oddly-familiar-anti-war-scarves-now-at-an-urbn-near-you/>.

49 Qtd. in Ck, “Urban Outfitters.”

50 Ibid.

51 Kibum Kim, “Where Some See Fashion, Others See Politics,” *The New York Times*, February 11, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/11/fashion/shows/11KAFFIYEH.html>.

style icon is Kanye West,” while what the writers of the piece thought the scarf really said was, “My style icon is Rachel Ray and all of my social activism is done via Twitter hashtags.”<sup>52</sup> The reason the writers gave for why “white people” should avoid the head covering was the object’s political associations.

Published during the heat of the cultural appropriation wars, this piece sheds light on another aspect of this debate: the role played by fashion in an increasingly globalized world. Should anyone other than Arabs wear the *keffiyeh* or not? Critics of cultural appropriation claim that certain groups have exclusive rights to display a certain behavior, performance, or item. Because the line between cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation has been blurred over the past couple of decades, now many choose to stay away from certain cultural productions or products rather than risk being accused of appropriation or insensitivity. As the abovementioned examples demonstrate, the line between using another culture’s products and being offensive or racist is no longer clear. The “you know it when you see it” test does not work for all cultural objects. In order to understand the *keffiyeh* as a thing-in-itself rather than entangled with politics as it is now, it is essential to understand the theoretical tools with which we can either allow it to remain entangled to conditions created by late capitalism, or undo that entanglement by acknowledging its broader material history and thus relieve some of the tension caused by this incredibly complex piece of cloth.

Coming back to quantum entanglement for a moment to work through this entanglement of objects, I turn now to Ian Hodder’s work in anthropology. Hodder’s work on entanglement theory from an anthropological perspective raises an important point that helps balance thinking toward things that have become so controversial that they

almost lost their original meaning. As Hodder explains, many times when humans attempt to disentangle a thing from its meaning, the thing becomes even more entangled, and humans themselves become entrapped when they attempt to fix entrapments. He calls the process of trying to disentangle things from their associated meanings “fittingness.”<sup>53</sup> Fittingness is a concept that expresses just how complex things and their histories are and how entangled humans become in those histories when they engage these things. The controversies over the appropriateness of wearing the *keffiyeh* are a clear example of this attempt at “fittingness” getting humans even more entangled in a thing. In the case of the *keffiyeh*, the attempts to make it into a taboo object for appreciation by cultures other than the Arab one may not be logistically possible now since the *keffiyeh* is a worldwide-used object. As Ghazanfar Ali Khan explains, “[t]he simplicity of the keffiyeh has made it an international trend even in cities such as Tokyo and Paris. It has become a popular global headgear.”<sup>54</sup> The *keffiyeh* has also begun to cross lines of gender. In the past two decades, women have begun to wear the *keffiyeh* in the style of a *hijab* in some countries like Malaysia.<sup>55</sup> Teenage girls in Israel have begun to wear it as well, despite its political

52 Jian Deleon and Matthew Henson, “Check Your Privilege: Clothes White People Shouldn’t Wear,” *Complex*, August 27, 2013, <https://www.complex.com/style/2013/08/clothes-white-people-shouldnt-wear/>.

53 Ian Hodder, *Entangled: An Archeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 114. Hodder’s example of an object that humans become even more entangled by when they try to untangle from is sugar. Sugar consumption globally was fueled by human slavery, and it was the reason for a high rate of diabetes among Native Americans. Contemporary sugar industry cannot be divorced from these entanglements, and whenever it tries to do so, it becomes even more entangled in that history.

54 Khan, “Not Just a Checkered Scarf.”

55 Thomas Fuller, “In Malaysia, Women Cover Up but in Colorful and Trendy Way: Headscarf Chic,” *The New York Times*, October 7, 1999, <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/10/07/news/in-malaysia-women-cover-up-but-in-colorful-and-trendy-way-headscarf.html>.

associations, because of its stylish look.<sup>56</sup> Even Walmart currently offers an array of “*shemagh* scarves,” or varieties of *keffiyeh*, marketed for women.<sup>57</sup> The sheer variety that the *keffiyeh* comes in and the diversity of its styles show that, while this article is associated with the everyday lives of Arabs, it has proven an extremely versatile piece of clothing in terms of function and fashion value all around the world.

This new moment for the *keffiyeh*, one in which it not only signals Arab identity and associations with a particular region of the world but also the class dynamics of fashion, shows just how far an object can be entangled with the human drive to politicize it. According to Mohammed Alshoaiby, the popularity of the *keffiyeh* as a fashion item is also bound up with more recent, post-oil boom connotations of Arab luxuriance and wealth:

“The keffiyeh went from a symbol of solidarity to a trend that took off across the globe. Sold everywhere from H&M to Armani, a Keffiyeh draped around the shoulders was the dominant Autumn and Winter look for both sexes worldwide. And with the Middle East becoming increasingly more globalized, particularly in bustling Gulf metropolises like Jeddah, Dubai, Doha, and Riyadh, the world is turning its attention to another kind of Arabia, one the Shemagh represents in its princely elegance.”<sup>58</sup>

Indeed, it is important to note that T.E. Lawrence himself had made a point not to dress up “as any old Bedouin. He was dressing up as a *sharif*: in other words, as Royalty.”<sup>59</sup> As he advised other British officers who embedded themselves in Arab ranks,

“if you wear Arab things at all, go the whole way.”<sup>60</sup> The recent fascination with the *keffiyeh* in the West is thus another chapter in the object’s long and entangled history with Western fashion and prestige items. Thinking about the *keffiyeh* as a commodity entangled with the conspicuous wealth of oil revenue has afforded many entanglement moves that are at the very heart of what subaltern protest attempts to resist—the commodification of all that is material, including the human body. Disentanglement might be an attractive goal, but what would disentanglement even look like? This is not only a theoretical and social question but also a historical one.

Benedict notes that humans have not always thought of things the way they did after the empiricist revolution of the Enlightenment. In fact, after this moment, “things no longer carry significance in their capacity to represent or embody general truth, but rather through their irreducible singularity.”<sup>61</sup> In other words, asserting the value of the *keffiyeh* as a thing-in-itself involves a process of cultural reassessment whereby the agency of the thing takes precedence over the agency of the subject. What critiques of the use of the *keffiyeh* focus on is not the thing itself but the structures of meaning thrust upon it. In thinking about the Marxist concept of “commodity,” John Frow asserts that it refers “not to things but to the form taken by things when they are produced for exchange rather than for immediate use.”<sup>62</sup> The commodification of the *keffiyeh* demonstrates that it is not the thing itself that has caused such controversy but the forms or meanings which the thing signals. Any process of disentanglement begins by addressing the actual basis of such controversies and not the thing itself.

56 Rachel Shabi, “On Trend? Check,” *The Guardian*, November 1, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2008/nov/01/middleeast-fashion>.

57 “Shemagh Scarves,” *Walmart*, October 14, 2018, <https://www.walmart.com/c/kp/shemagh-scarves>.

58 Mohammed Alshoaiby, “The Shemagh: The Heart of Saudi Men’s Fashion,” *Saudi Gazette*, December 13, 2013, <http://saudigazette.com.sa/article/68622>.

59 Hammad, “Dressing for Others.”

60 Qtd. in Hammad, “Dressing for Others.”

61 Benedict, “Finding Room for Things,” 252.

62 John Frow, “Commodity,” in *New Keywords: Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, ed. Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg, and Meaghan Morris (London: Blackwell, 2005), 46.

## 5 Conclusion: Why Things Matter in Forming Identity

As Jennifer Cotter reminds us, new materialism is part of the larger posthuman turn in critical theory. She boils it down to “a ‘new’ ontology of the relationship of life and matter that displaces the centrality of the human and contends that all matter is endowed with ‘vibrancy,’ ‘aliveness,’ ‘affect,’ and ‘agency.’”<sup>63</sup> What does this “new” vibrancy of the object mean for its “old” politics, though? According to Cotter, “new materialism expands the notion of the individual in classic bourgeois political economy to now include objects with their own ‘thing-power.’”<sup>64</sup> The *keffiyeh*, or any other thing related to Arabness, should not have its identifying power taken from it because this power is important for those who rely on the everyday association of this object with cultural identity. Therefore, the goal of new materialism is to clarify that cultural objects, such as the *keffiyeh*, are things-in-transition and that their full meanings are yet to be known. Further, these meanings will last long after those who imposed their own meanings on them are gone. In other words, the thing has a politics of its own.

From its use-value as an object protecting against a harsh climate, to its cultural associations with Arab pride and self-determination, to its contentious association with Palestinian politics, to its reemergence as an object of fashion and a symbol of Arab wealth and elegance in a global context, the *keffiyeh*'s long and difficult relationship to

imposed meanings will not abate anytime soon. Ted Swedenburg asks if “purple designer kufiyas spell the end of Palestine solidarity.”<sup>65</sup> When asking this question, Swedenburg, who is an anthropologist, addresses the growing fashionability of the *keffiyeh* in the U.S.: he notes the rising popularity of this fashion item amongst performers such as Lupe Fiasco and Kanye West. The point he makes is that the *keffiyeh* as a fashion symbol and the *keffiyeh* as “a sign of political solidarity” are not mutually exclusive: both can be motivations for wearing the scarf without being, as Swedenburg argues, an “Orientalist.”<sup>66</sup>

My argument here is less about whether broader society should or should not use the *keffiyeh* and more about whether one should influence such decisions with theoretical positions. An object can serve multiple purposes, but when confronting the politics of an object one must take into account not only its everyday uses but also the various associated meanings the object has for those who rely on it. The arguments surrounding the reinstatement of the *keffiyeh* as a fashion item did not lead to more open conversations about issues of political relevance. What these conversations did was to limit the *keffiyeh*'s meaning to just one of the many meanings it has taken on over the years. Acknowledging the *keffiyeh*'s complex symbolism could provide, instead, some relief from the anxiety over the question whether wearing another culture's object is an act of appropriation or cultural appreciation.

63 Jennifer Cotter, “New Materialism and the Labor Theory of Value,” *Minnesota Review* 87 (2016): 171.

64 Ibid., 172.

65 Ted Swedenburg, “Bad Rap for a Neck Scarf?” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42 (2009): 184.

66 Ibid., 184–85.