

Mikaila Brown

Fashion anthropologist

Creator of anthropological expeditions through Harlem's fashion scene called *Sidewalk Safaris*. Founder of *The Common Thread Project*. A company that dives deep to understand how different communities create fashion as a means to communicate who they are and teaches to raise better cultural awareness in fashion.

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Harlem, anthropology, fashion, hybrid, culture, Sidewalk Safari, Anthony Bourdain, business model, extrovert, sole purpose, pressure, rules, fashion industry, fashion as culture(s), self-narration, why, community, society, critical thinking, Dapper Dan, deep dive, minority fashion designer, sustainability, Botham Jean, Amber Guyger, activism, slow fashion, platform, cultural appropriation, backlash, conversation

We are sitting in a Café in Harlem. It's the last stop after a two hour Sidewalk Safari hosted and created by Mikaila Brown. It's three of us around a table: Mikaila (MB), another women who in this transcript appears as Unknown Speaker (US) and me, Johanna Schwab (JS).

JS: Amazing that we finally made it happen.

MB: I know. My schedule is crazy. I've been traveling back and forth between Atlanta and here. I'll be in Atlanta next week. This is my first time launching outside of the city. It's my second baby, if New York is my first baby, then Atlanta is my second. I'm trying to be down there as much as possible to make sure that it's right and learn the lesson, so that when I go to LA later, I don't repeat that.

JS: Are you doing the same kind of like history...?

MB: Yep, specific to that neighborhood. So not the same material, but the same framework.

JS: In Atlanta and then also in LA, that's amazing!

MB: Yeah, I want to be in ten cities by the end of next year, which will be very hard, because I'll also be teaching...

JS: That could be already a question: How long did it take you to find out about LA, enough to make a tour?

US: You're gonna be a mogul!!

MB: (laughs) That's the goal. I'm very expensive. I haven't lived an expensive life, but I know I'm meant to. So I always work to mourn the bougie person inside of myself (laughs again).

US: Yeah, yeah, what is it? Dress for the job you want...

MB: Yeah, exact. Fake it till you make it, that's what I've been doing.

US: Someone told me to and I told them: Ok, so i should show up at places in my pyjamas, because what I want to be is the idle rich...

MB: Real talk. You might want to try that for real.. (laughs)

US: Yeah, give me some \$ 500 Dollar pyjamas (laughs)

MB: ... cashmere, please. (laughs)

WORDPLAY

JS: I just say a word and you tell me what comes in your mind.

MB: Wonderful.

JS: The first word is wardrobe.

MB: Identity.

JS: Confidence.

MB: Authentic.

JS: Basic.

MB: Uninspired

JS: Style.

MB: Everything.

JS: DIY.

MB: The word I'm coming up with is constructive (..). When I think about DIY, it's that you're creating something that doesn't exist outside of the world, outside of you. So I don't know what that word is, but you know what I'm saying, maybe contribution. DIY is your contribution to the world, because without you, DIY, without you it can't exist, right?!

JS: Must have.

MB: Different for everyone.

JS: Passion.

MB: Life's purpose.

JS: Detail.

MB: What makes something special, it's the uniqueness of things.

JS: Patchwork.

MB: Community.

JS: Mainstream.

MB: Necessary but never preferred.

JS: So you call yourself a fashion anthropologist and you made up that word, or?

MB: Yes, yes. I would say I coined it, but I existed in academic circles for years. But I think I'm one of the first people to use it as a business model.

JS: And how does it come, like you studied anthropology?

MB: I did. I have my doctor in anthropology. And I've always had a love for fashion. It was only about four years ago, that I could put the two together. (..) now we live in a time where things are hybrids and conglomerates of different ideas. (..) 20 years ago, when I was thinking about what I wanted to be in the world, there wasn't these in between spaces the way they are now, because of the gig economy, because of companies like Uber and Facebook and Twitter. It's created this space where people can do things that aren't so black and white. When I first was becoming a professional, things were very binary. So for me fashion anthropology grew out of this ability to create a space for myself in the world that made sense, but kind of lived in between two things, which is culture and fashion.

JS: Amazing. We came just from your tour which is called *Sidewalk Safari*, which is also something you were inventing, or?

MB: Yes, yes.

JS: So maybe you can tell us something about that: what are they about, how did you come up with that idea?

MB: Sure. So I call them *Sidewalk Safaris*, because when you go on a Safari, you're acutely aware, that you're paying attention to every detail and you're aware that you're entering a world outside of your own. (..) you're paying attention to the details, and you're observing how somebody's, an animal's or person's culture is different than yours. I became a fashion anthropologist, because subconsciously, as I was walking the streets, I was scanning people and looking for clues of who they are. I'm an extrovert, and a part of being an extrovert, is understanding people and making them feel comfortable. So as an extrovert, one of the ways I can make people feel comfortable to engage with me as a stranger, was to understand them and so clothing became kind of a roadmap for me: so I was paying attention to tattoos or the particular earring you wore, how you did your makeup and how you'd style and it made me realize at points that it was (..) the sidewalk, (..) this incredibly nuanced and exciting other world, that I got to observe and really engage with, even if it was something outside of what I was familiar with. So I initially wanted to have a travel show. I loved Anthony Bourdain. I loved what he was doing with food. I wanted to do that for fashion. But I didn't, I wouldn't have networks beating down my door. So the tours really were inspired by me to monetize, like, how do I make money from being a fashion anthropologist. I could be an academic, which is something I never wanted to do exclusively. I always wanted to be a business person. I always wanted to be an entrepreneur. So how do I monetize this intersection between fashion and culture? And I was going to do that research anyway. The tours allowed me to share with people. Not only to make money from it, but also to connect with people on an individual level and say: hey, let's look at this differently together and let's all learn together. I'll be honest, when I first started, I was like, I just want to make money doing what I love. But the more I did it, I realized that it was my sole purpose, that I was always meant to be doing this. And I had my own fashion line for four years. And

I looove fashion. I'm obsessed with fashion, but it never fulfilled me the way that this does now.

JS: Why did it not?

MB: I think the fashion industry is an amazing industry. But I think it puts a lot of undo pressure on creators: the proliferation of seasons, you know, back in the day, we had four seasons now we have 16. That means constantly putting up output, engaging new customers. That felt like a chore, I just wanted to create. And I found, being a fashion designer, there were almost too many rules, I felt stifled. What I like about my company now is, there are no rules, because no one else is doing it, so I get to make it my own. And I missed the part of the culture. So I had a socially conscious fashion line, so I talked a lot about culture within the collection, but not to the degree that I do now. And I like the tours, because I hope that it makes people think more critically about their own style and their own fashion. I think, people think of fashion as a very superficial industry, but it says so much about who you are. And so I wanted to empower people, in particular women to be self-narrators. I wanted them to be part of the narration of who they are to the world. So like, rather than constantly putting on a dress that you bought, because you saw it on Kardashian, I want you to think about: why you liked that dress? Why you like that color? Why that cut work with your body and celebrated your Latin hips and your curves, like I wanted to tell that story! That's somewhat harder to do with a fashion line, because you mail out the clothes and they have it. There's not much of a discussion: they come on the website, they like it, they wear it. The tours are a way, where I can actually control the narrative and like really engage much more deeply (..) about clothing.

JS: Yeah, Amazing. And, like, this umbrella project you're doing is called *Common Thread*...

MB: *The Common Thread Project*, yup!

JS: And I love the teaser or how you write about it. For me it's a teaser, where you say: where Van Gogh, Gucci sneakers and female barbers aren't nearly as unrelated as they seem...

MB: Right, right!

JS: What do you mean by that ?

MB: So the cool thing about being an anthropologist is that you learn how history, politics, culture, all come together to create a community as a society. And that happens with fashion. Such a good example: we were just on a tour and someone pointed out how (..) the bubble of the 80s, followed by a recession in the early 2000s, affects the way fashion is impacted today for local fashion artisans. I think it's such a complex, intricate story and fashion can be this amazing; it's like your favorite book. You love that book, because you can deep dive into the characters and learn the nuances and like you learn about the history of their mother and how it affects them now and how they date and their community and like the favorite foods, like it all comes together to tell the story of a person. And fashion is just like that, you can't divorce fashion from politics. You can't divorce fashion from history. You can't divorce fashion from culture. And why would you, because it only makes the fashion better, because it's a story. So for me, I think about fashion as art, I think of it as a story. Like it's telling a story. And like, that's so exciting. And I think people are

really excited about it, once they start thinking that way, but we're not programmed to think that way. So I see my company as a mission to push people to just think more critically about fashion, so that they enjoy it more. It's so much more than just like, it makes me look pretty. It's telling your story, it's telling the story of the designer, it's telling the story of the artisans who use their hands to make it, the person who worked at the mill who made the fabric; all that comes together to make this beautifully intricate tapestry. It's so awesome.

JS: And like in this case, (..) is there really a relation for you between Van Gogh, Gucci Sneakers or is that just like to...?

MB: No, no, so that's Harlem, like all those things are Harlem. So in Harlem fashion can be Dapper Dan, which is luxury; one of the few black designers in luxury, so the most opulent fabrics, made in Italy, brought here. But then you go two blocks down and it might be another boutique, like the Africian shop, because they love the fabric that's (from) there. For me, it's about neighborhoods and communities as much as about fashion. And like, what fashion lines, or what small fashion businesses make sense in a neighborhood; it's telling the story of that community. And a lot of times, especially in a place like Harlem, there's people who are like third generation Harlemites. And then there's people like me, who moved here because we're ambitious, and we want to make the most of the world, but we all live together, side by side right on top of each other and we all contribute to the culture of this place. If you would ask me: Do I have a lot in common with someone who's been in Harlem for like, 10 years? I'd say: no, I'm Jamaican. I grew up in Florida. I'm so different, but being forced to live in a neighborhood together, we have formed this community and this bond, that we are connected. And some of that is through clothing. And I love that. I love that. It's the *Common Thread*, because it's the common thread that draws us all together. Like it's a double entendre on purpose. It's not only about the threads of fabric, but the thread of like a tapestry of a community.

JS : Yeah, it's like a metaphor too

MB: Yeah. Yeah.

JS: And then you were already mentioning it, but I felt knowing you a bit now, or like following your work, there's two big motifs, which are community and cultural awareness...

MB: Yes, and that's why I only do minority designers.

JS: YEAH

MB: I only do minority fashion artisans. One, because for a lot of marginalized designers, they only have their immediate community, their friends and their family. That's who they're selling to and that's not sustainable in the world that we live in, especially with the global wave of gentrification. So for me that's the reason I want to give them customers that wouldn't automatically think to come to them, who would immediately love them, but just have never been exposed, have never been able to brush up against their brilliance. So I use my tours as a way to like broaden their audience, hopefully give them business that will keep them open for longer, but also inspire people from other countries to interact with their amazing genius. Like they're so smart. Some of these designers are making such beautiful things, but they don't have the marketing budget for the world to know and they don't have the connected friends or fathers to like, give them a platform. So this is my little, this is my form of activism. For me, my company is like, its capital, but it's also activism, it's community development, it's all those things together in one.

JS: And also like, at the beginning of the tour, it was so nice how you were talking about Harlem and how different (special) the relation to customer and the relation to clothes are (..) maybe you can tell us something about that again.

MB: Yeah, so we live in a world of like fast, fast fashion and fast fashion is about getting the product off the shelf as quickly as possible. What I love about minority fashion, which is very much sustainable - so when you think about sustainable you think of bamboo fabrics. You think about a girl who goes to Harvard, who goes to India and meets an artisan, and like makes a cute website - but in many ways local minority designers, they're sustainable fashion, because it's slow fashion. They take time with their pieces, they invest in them, they hand make them, it's like a process, they don't make a ton. So for me, what I love about Harlem and most of the minority designers that I work with, is that they love fashion so much. It's really not about the buck for them, because if it was about the buck for them, they'd work for a big designer, and churn out designs and they would just be made all the time and sold all the time. For them it's about the experience, about the engagement. It's about putting themselves into the clothing. It's about putting the consumer into the clothing as well. It's just such a customized experience. And we're losing that in fashion, because it's all about the almighty dollar. It's about selling things as quickly as possible, always having something new on the shelf. And these minor designs, they're sustainable designers. They don't get the same street cred as a white girl from Harvard, but they're slow fashion and the same way that slowly sustainable fashion is such a necessity, not only for the world, but for the environment. Yeah, these minor designs are contributing to that to that movement, but they don't get the same exposure or the same shine or the same remuneration. And so I'm glad to give them a platform bigger than what they already have.

JS: YEAH.

A heavy sigh of the other woman at the table lets Mikaila ask: You okay? Oh, god, what news is it now?

The woman shows Mikaila her cellphone and after reading the news, Mikaila happily screams: Oh, they found her guilty! Oh my God, I thought they were gonna let her off. (...) Oh, I'm so happy. So did you hear about this woman who walked into the wrong apartment and killed the man living in there?

JS: No.

(ed. note: The woman was called Amber Guyger and shot Botham Jean to death in his own apartment. Guyger later said, that she had thought it's her apartment and he a trespasser.)

MB: So she lives in an apartment (..) It's like a very modern building where every apartment looks the same. She's a police woman. She walked into a man's house, because his door didn't fully click. It was one of those electric locks. She thought she was in her apartment. Because he was a black man, sitting on his couch, eating ice cream, she saw him as an intruder, took out her gun and killed him. Did not realize until after, that she was not in her apartment. Let me point out some facts. He had a big red mat in front of his door. She did not. She had an island at her apartment. He did not. So even though the apartment was cookie cutter, if she had any presence of mind, she would have known that it wasn't her apartment. But yet she defaulted to this black men as a threat to her and she killed him.

(all ordering coffee)

MB: I really honestly thought, because she cried and this week on the stand she was like: If I could, I wish I had died...

US: ...and her story was shit...

(...)

US: She had a boyfriend, a white boyfriend (..) she was supposedly sexting.

MB: So she said, the reason why she didn't realize it wasn't her house, is because she was sexting her boyfriend as she walked in. But the fact that you saw a black man and your first instinct is to shoot him to death... like even if all of that was true, the first question is, what are you doing here? He was sitting on his couch in like joggers you know, eating ice cream. So like, it's not even like he had a gun. (...)

US: So yes, I can't believe they did. (ed. note: pleaded her guilty)

MB: I love it.

JS: You were afraid, that she is not gonna be sentenced?

MB: Yeah, because a lot of times, when black men get killed in America, especially if it's a cop, they always get off. The only police who have gotten put into jail for that, have been black police; when a black police has killed another black person they've gone to jail but never, never...

US: ... a white person. (...) But even when police officers of color kill other..

MB: ... black people, they get off...Oh true. Yeah. I am so happy about that. And there was one point last week where I read an article (..) where even the prosecutor had said: I don't think she meant to kill him. And I was like, why would he say that? But then his closing argument was so good, because he showed the red mat. He was like, he had a humongous red mat in front of his apartment. She did not. Yeah. Like, how do you not notice that. Isn't that crazy?

JS: There's so many parts of that story that sound crazy.

MB: It's so crazy.

(...)

JS: Where was it actually?

MB: Oh good question.

US: Dallas.

MB: That's where it was, which is another thing, because Dallas is not black friendly.. Ok, so I was like: his closing argument was so good, but I was sure (ed. note: that they were letting her off) and then there was a point when they were going to try to ask for like involuntary manslaughter. They were trying to reduce her stuff so much. And I was like, she's gonna get a year at best. Oh, that makes me so happy.

JS: So much is she gonna get now?

MB: It sounds like murder murder.

US: So I'm sorry. I'm sorry. (ed. note: she means for interrupting us)

MB: No, no I needed to know that.

JS: And also like, it leads me to the last topic, which is cultural awareness.

MB: So I do a lot of work around cultural appropriation and my tours are the perfect place, because I think for most people, they don't mean to offend, they just don't know better, right?! So with cultural appropriation, one of the biggest reasons why cultural appropriation gets perpetuated, is because you don't know the history

right?! So you see a really dope black shirt and you're like: I love it. I'm gonna wear it and all that people are saying like, you don't know the history, you don't know the context. Like you don't get to wear it, unless you understand where it came from, what it meant to us. So on I my tours, I'm providing that education. And I'm also giving you the insider scoop, like, hey, don't wear that, because its gonna piss some people off. Black people in America are very comfortable in a group, between each other, to talk about race, but they are deeply distrustful of white people and the ramifications of hearing their racial grievances. So a lot of times, if they do say to a white person, its either hyperbolic or lost in the passion in which it is said, or it's not even said, because we don't even want to get into this fight with you. I feel like my tours become this safe space, where I'm very calmly explaining to you what it means to us, why we prefer you wouldn't wear it and then you're able to receive it. It's not an impassioned soapbox. It's like: here's the history, this is why we value it so much and unless you experienced this history, we prefer you didn't do it. It's told in a very loving and gentle way. And I think, for a lot of people, they just need to hear it in a loving gentle way. (..) I believe there's a need for the passion, like I'm not mad at the backlash. I'm not mad at black people stating their opinions passionately. I do it sometimes, too. But I know sometimes arguments can be undercut, because pepole use your passion against you. So I like that in my tours, we can talk about it calmly and rationally. You know, I mean, no hate. We're all in this together. But I want you to clearly understand, this wasn't meant for you. Please don't do it. You know what I'm saying?

JS: Totally.(..) You know I've been to the show of Anna Sui

MB: Aaw, I wanna go see that (..). Did you love it?

JS: I loved it and I was also thinking about you, because it was written very big that she's like sourcing from all these cultures and I was wondering what you would say about that. You are also a teacher, like what do you teach your students in how to source from different cultures?

MB: Yeah, So there's two things. The first is: One of the benefits of my training as an anthropologist is, that you learn how to go into communities outside of your own and be respectful about getting information. So for a long time, anthropology was a form of colonialism; white men going into places like Africa to learn information, to help their government colonize, right?! But as more and more, throughout the years, especially as minorities became anthropologists, who were like: hey, not on my watch, that's not going to happen! So my training is in teaching people how to enter a community, ask for permission, get validation, be in conversation and collaboration. To me, that's what anthropology has become, because of our colonial background, right?! And so it makes it perfect for me to teach about how to approach cultural awareness in an engaged way, because I'm just using the tools that I use in anthropolgy. So again, I would never go in researching a community and not say: is it okay if I do that? I'm being very transparent with my motos, my outcomes and what I plan to gain. You're part of the conversation. So like, we're co authoring this, like, I might be the person who shares the information in a language that the audience understands, but it's your story. So you're as part of an author of this as I am, right?! And then I'm asking, if I am understanding it right. I am constantly going back and saying: did I get that right? Did I understand it right ? And pick up on all the nuances. I think that's so critical and key and fashion in particular has a very strong problem of seeing fashion as visual and not cultural. They see a beautiful picture of a design and beeing like: our next collection, we're going to make that.

JS: ... we were talking about that before, too.

MB: It makes me so angry, without contacting somebody in that community, asking for permission. One of the reasons that happens, is they don't want to share the profit, which is unfair, because it's millions and millions of dollars. And the creative inspiration is not your own. So pay words due. And they also don't want to be told: No! Because there are some communities that would say: No. There's a Native American Community where it is: No, you can't use that headdress. Yes, the headdress you would make would be beautiful, but it's not yours. And we have a special ritual around headdresses. And every feather means something and (..) people who buy your stuff, they haven't earned those feathers, so you don't get to sell it to them. A lot of designers don't want to be told: No. Fashion is a very entitled industry, especially if you make a lot of money and especially if you're a luxury brand. And so more than other industries, where it's kind of obvious, like we know banking is predatory, fashion has been predatory under the radar until like 10 years ago with Twitter and Instagram kind of calling people out. So, fashion has some catching up to do. And so my work is very much committed to being someone in the industry saying: yeah, that's not right. And this is how you do it better. And like, yeah, the profit margin might be a little bit smaller, but the appreciation will be more authentic than you seeing a picture and thinking: I really like this, I'm going to make it and I'm going to make money from it and never once engaging with that community. (..) I see my students as being the future generation of fashion. And they're on my watch, like, I'm committed to having those hard conversations with them. Because on my watch, there won't be a Gucci, there won't be an H&M monkey scandal. None of my kids are doing that, because we're having those conversations in the classroom and that's where to get them, not when they're out in the world, getting all these accolades for being so creative and not being told: No. A lot of these big designers, they're never told: No. And a lot of them have their own inherent prejudices. So they don't even want to hear from like, some indigenous person, like how dare you tell me how to create, I make millions of dollars. But you don't get to use their stuff. It'd be like go into someone's home, taking something out of their closet and then be like: why are you mad about it? Like, it's the same thing. It's that same feeling for a lot of marginalized communities. And I think we have to keep having these conversations out loud to change it. Case in point, Kardashians, critical, critical offenders of cultural appropriation all the time. Kim just changes her shapewear line from Kimono to Skims. 10 years ago, she wouldn't have done that, because she wouldn't have cared about the backlash. The more and more noise that is made about it, the more and more designers have to be held responsible for the creative choices that they make, especially when they're culturally inappropriate. And so like, I want to be part of that conversation. Because the more loudly we speak, the less likely will happen, the more likely marginalized designers will get profit margins for their creativity, which is incredibly important to their survival. So many minority designers, they get ripped off by someone like a Forever 21 and then they go out of business, they end up working desk jobs. Like that's a disservice to the industry. That incredibly creative person is giving up on fashion. My boutiques that are closing because of gentrification, they're going back to Africa. They're not working in fashion anymore. They were an asset to the industry. It's a loss for all of us when we lose these creatives, and so we have to create safe spaces for them, like we have to.

JS: Thank you so much. I'm pleased.

MB: Okay, good. Good. I'm glad we could do this.