

# Hybrid Sources: Depictions of Garments in Postcolonial Textile Art

**Jessica Hemmings**

Rhode Island School of Design, Two College Street, Providence, RI, 02903, USA.

[jh@jessicahemmings.com](mailto:jh@jessicahemmings.com)

## Abstract

In today's atmosphere of globalisation – through positive agents such as communication networks as well as negative ones such as the refugee crisis – the national and cultural identities projected by dress embrace increasingly complex influences. Postcolonial theory and its attention to material culture, hybrid identities, and the ensuing Diaspora has influenced the work of contemporary artists worldwide. Contemporary artists working with textiles use the garment shape, as a motif and sculptural form rather than a functional piece of clothing, to express the complex results of colonisation. Common to all the works discussed here is an attempt to negotiate conflicts between language, culture and history that the postcolonial world must reconcile. Examples are drawn from work by Sue Blanchfield, Michael Parekowitz, Erica Spitzer Rasmussen, Elaine Reichek, Doris Salcedo, Yinka Shonibare and Susan Stockwell.

## Keywords

Postcolonial, hybrid, 9/11, dress

## Introduction

In *Adorned in Dreams* Elizabeth Wilson writes that, 'Dress is the frontier between the self and the not-self.' (1985, p. 3) Today I would like to discuss a group of artists whose work investigates the post-colonial reality of a multiple or fractured sense of identity. Wilson's notion of the public and the private, the self and the not-self, becomes increasingly layered and complex in this context. Beyond a tension between the public and private, these artists articulate a sense of cultural duality and conflict, which resides within an individual's identity. This acknowledgement of multiple and fractured identity is central to a discussion of the reality we reside in today.

Rather than tracing the history of functional garments, this paper focuses on dress as a sculptural form. Within this category I would like to suggest that several recurring themes point to, and can be interpreted as, an articulation of postcolonial identity. The dressmaking pattern can act as a map of sorts, evoking the trade of objects, which underpinned the colonial quest. Mapping and renaming also appears throughout the selection of works to evoke the divide and conquer mentality that made colonization so ruthlessly effective. Authenticity versus copies and versions, both in the fabric quality and garment shape are also apparent. The empty garment often references loss of life and the violent histories many nations must reconcile. The distorted or damaged garment is rendered in materials that evoke the flesh and blood of the absent wearer, also working to reveal histories of violence and the burden of conflict still very much alive today. Finally, artist's responses to 9/11 are possibly our most timely evocation of the global reality of today.

The British born Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare is an undeniable inspiration for this paper. Shonibare has referred to his own identity in reference to his artistic output as that of a 'post-colonial hybrid.' (2002, p. 8) While Shonibare is a catalyst of sorts for the interpretations I would like to suggest today, I hope that the collection of artists I have brought together suggest that Shonibare's well publicized position as a postcolonial hybrid is in no way unique to one artist or one nation, but is an articulation of displacement and hybridity expressed through dress which can

be observed the world over. As Dr. Catherine Harper has recently noted, 'What is interesting about Shonibare's choice of industrialized, fake ethnic, 'batik print' is how it shakes our casually confident understanding of an 'African' look. (2004, p. 19) It is my hope that the work I discuss in this paper will disrupt any 'casually confident' assumptions we may make in relation to the reading of dress as personal and cultural signifier.

Shonibare uses the complex history of wax resist cloth to question images of the Victorian ideal as well as the complex identities dress conveys to others. The wax prints that Shonibare uses originate in Indonesia. In the nineteenth century the Dutch tried to produce them at home and trade them back to the Indonesians. This project was largely unsuccessful due to the inferior quality of the cloth. Today the cloth has come to be seen as a symbol of African pride, but has an ironic and certainly not African history. Furthermore, Shonibare purchases much of the cloth from Brixton in south London, further complicating the story of origin and association as well as complicating the boundary between the self and the not-self suggested by Wilson.

Along with Shonibare's reference to the trade of goods is a further reference to the sexual trade at work in colonial domination and conquest. The title 'Gay Victorians' alludes to both joy and homosexuality; commenting on the Victorian image that was not always quite as it seemed. In addition, the bustle is also a reference to the female African body that was mocked and ridiculed in the tragic story of Sarah Bartmann who was taken from South Africa, caged and put on display in France as an object rather than a person because of her pronounced buttocks. After her death she was dissected and used as a scientific specimen. Her remains were only recently returned to South Africa in April of 2002 for a respectful burial. 'Mr. and Mrs. Andrews without Their Heads' restages the famous Gainsborough painting. Absent is the backdrop of affluent grounds and Mr. and Mrs. Andrew's heads. Coined by the critics as 'postcolonial revenge' the work presents an image of landed gentry literally stripped of their land and consequently identity.



Figure 1: Yinka Shonibare, 'Gay Victorians', 1999; wax-printed cotton textiles. Courtesy of the Stephen Friedman Gallery



Figure 2: Susan Stockwell, 'Pattern of the World' (detail), 2001; dressmaking patterns, coffee, tea, dressmaking pins; collage, staining, painting, drawing; 4 feet by 7 feet by 1 inch. Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Photo by the author

British artist Susan Stockwell who grew up in Manchester, a city built on the thriving textile industry of the Industrial Revolution and the source of much of Shonibare's 'authentic' African cloth. Stockwell assembles the world map from segments of a dressmaking pattern and draws the world in tea stains. Here dress most literally takes on Wilson's notion of the self and the not-self for dress can be read as both bodily

adornment and national agenda, although not necessarily that of the wearer. Maps were used, often dubiously, to chart colonial expansion and tea, along with textiles, were two of the commodities traded extensively during the colonial era. Threading guidelines suggest other symbols on maps – trade routes, shipping lanes, winds, currents as well as a fragmented version of the world that is in keeping with the colonial policy of divide and conquer. There is a note of irony in Stockwell's placement of 'shorten or lengthen here' written at the tip of Africa which alludes to the manipulation of space that colonial mapping enjoyed. In a similar vein 'Fiesta Gown' references the exploitative trade practices both of the past and present with its use of recycled coffee filters, both an anachronism and a reference to the impractical bustle dates the costume to the late 1800's and represents an elite lifestyle of consumption rather than labour and production. Stockwell's bustled dress is not dissimilar from that used by Shonibare. Feminine associations of dress making and sewing are also contrasted with the colonialism which is often seen as a masculine project.

The American artist Elaine Reichek often draws on ethnographic photography and images that depict the 'other' in a foreign and dehumanised way, treating people as objects and artifacts in much the same way that Shonibare's installations depict both the 'other' and the dehumanizing effect of the headless, multiple 'other.' Reichek manipulates the idea of the original version through repetition. Rows of traditional dress that should evoke a sense of individuality are multiplied and repeated to represent the idea of ethnicities unhelpfully lumped together and a refusal to treat people as individuals. Again the dressmaking pattern appears but the pattern comes from a mail-order business selling craft kits to make 'authentic' Native American goods. Instructions for making remind us of a loss of skill and knowledge amongst the population represented ironically through a contemporary remedy that is accessible to everyone through a generic mail-order, how-to project. In 'Cheyenne Dress-Up', another how-to project, the impossibility of a static relationship between generations is also apparent if the two garment sizes are seen to represent adult and child.

Reichek's 'Whitewash' plays on phrase 'white-washed' as in the telling of a false story as well as the racial association with white skin. The skirt is knitted with the inverted image of the cottage, alluding to the common observations by colonial powers that the native populations were somehow 'backward.' 'Red Dot Man', a pastiche of photography and knitted costume, is based on photographs of the Indians of Tierra del Fuego. Ironically the island's inhabitants died out with introduction of clothing by missionaries whose lessons in modesty actually caused disease. Apparently the clothing that was distributed contained germs to which the population had no resistance. The conflation of knitting with photography addresses the idea of translation and different forms of communication. Reichek has 'translated' the ethnographer's photograph and, in doing so, highlights the manipulations and assumptions made by the original photographer by exaggerating the tradition of photographing and recording the ethnic 'other' without naming or attributing. Jo Anna Isaak writes of Reichek's work:

There is a flagrant and funny feminism weaving in and around Reichek's reworking of ethnographic, anthropological and museum practices. It is manifest most overtly in the female-identified medium of knitting, which she uses to reproduce documentary photographs of native peoples and their dwellings. Knitting is an 'inappropriate' tool for this purpose – so unscientific, one of those typical feminine misunderstandings, as if some dotty old woman had gone on an anthropological expedition equipped with wool and knitting needles instead of a camera and notebook [ . . . ] it is as if she has taken literally Barthes' metaphor of the textuality of the text. (p. 140)

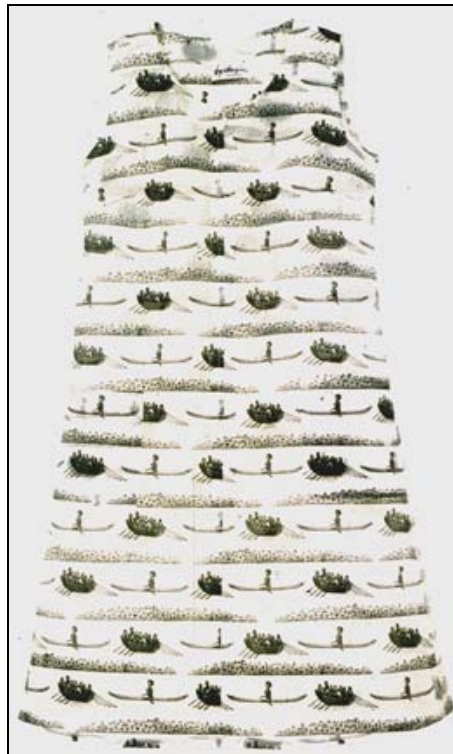


Figure 3: Sue Blanchfield, 'By Design, Made in Australia, 2002'; silk organza, printing inks, cotton, zipper; silkscreen printing. Photo: Michael Young.

For Australian artist Sue Blanchfield the uneasy relationship between the diverse inhabitants of present day Australia has become the focus of a series of works. Working with rayon purchased in haberdashery store in a remote area in the Northern territories, Blanchfield reconstructs the generic shape of the dress. In one version, printed on white cloth, Blanchfield has printed the English names of region. Once again the self and the not-self is apparent, in these works played out through the disconnection that language reveals. On a 'darker' cloth are printed the names of the same locations but in the native dialect of the Yolngu peoples of the region. But Blanchfield notes the banality of the English names when compared to the names associated with the sacred sites named by the indigenous peoples and sees this gap as emblematic of the miscommunication between the native people and the colonizing culture. In Blanchfield's 'Dress Study #3' a colonial era painting that depicts a negotiation between the British and a leader of the Eora people is used to reference the relationship between European Australians and indigenous Australians. Set in repeat, Blanchfield evokes the numerous, overlapping, and partially concealed attempts at communication and negotiation that are a part of Australian history. Blanchfield explains that names such as 'Captain Cook Shopping Centre' and 'Endeavour' Drive reinforce the idea of exploration and conquest and the argument that the land was empty and waiting for inhabitants when the British arrived.

Columbian artist Doris Salcedo takes the violent civil war in Columbia as a continuation of the displacement and violence started by colonial Spanish occupation. Salcedo explains, 'I believe that the artist who produces in marginalized places, in times which are convulsive and difficult, immediately establishes contact with a political dimension.' One of her most literal works, 'Untitled 1989-1990' references the 1988 massacres at La Nega and La Honduras plantations. Lost lives and the many who have disappeared will be remembered through imagery that references figures standing tall rather than defeated by their violent deaths. Another reading of the work alludes to stacks like paper files of information, waiting, unanswered, for official filing and perhaps more importantly, response. In other works clothing fragments and lace trapped in cement are seen to represent a fossilized sense of the feminine: trapped as well as lost lives. Shoes initially collected by the artist from mass graves – often the only object that could be used to identify the victims – are enshrined. Trapping such items behind a screen represents a void or absence and like Santiago's

work allows the objects to be seen as relics. Of Salcedo's work Dan Cameron writes of the 'unresolved nature of public tragedy, and, by implication, the social disintegration that follows in its wake.' (1998, p. 9) These are themes arguably present in much of the work discussed.

In these final examples, the post-9/11 reality of today has been taken up. Eric Spitzer Rasmussen is an American artist who appropriates myths from other cultures. Her research into the way Uzbekistan mothers attach plaits to children's coats as a talismanic means of protection is here borrowed by the artist to create her own post-9/11 talisman. With hair donated by friends, Rasmussen explains that she felt a need for all the protection she could acquire in today's volatile world. Rasmussen represents a contemporary artist borrowing from the traditions of other cultures in a time of great cultural uncertainty, not forced, but sought. The Maori artist Michael Parekowhai's 'Poorman, Beggarman and Thief' is fashioned after the artist's father whose name in the Maori language, Hori, is used with negative connotations to refer to the Maori peoples. Here the nametag is set in direct contrast to the seriousness of the museum setting and, importantly, the suit which the mannequin wears. On display at a recent exhibition at the Asia Society in New York City, this work and others fashioned after the artist's brother cannot avoid referencing the heightened security in New York City, and around the world, since 9/11 in addition to the cultural dialogue they engage with. These final examples now embody our new version of post-colonial reality.

### Conclusion

In this research the garment derives much of its symbolic weight from an understanding that dress and fashion clothe a vital site of negotiation between individual and national identity. Yinka Shonibare's stated position as a postcolonial hybrid offers a useful interpretive tool that can be applied to work, not only from one specific region, but from around the globe. In the postcolonial reality of today, these artworks suggest that the intersection between nation and individual continues to search for a balance between the burden of the past and the demands of the hybrid present.

### References

Bongers, H and Gerald M, 2002, 'Preface' in Yinka Shonibare: *Double Dutch*, NAI Publishers, Rotterdam, pp. 8.

Cameron, D. 1998, 'Inconsolable' in *Doris Salcedo*, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, pp. 9-14.

Harper, C. 2004, 'Alien Nation' in *Selvedge*, Selvedge Limited, London, pp. 19-20.

Wilson, E. 1985, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*, University of California Press, Berkley, Los Angeles.

Isaak, J. 1998. 'Who's 'We', White Man? in *Material Matters: The Art and Culture of Contemporary Textiles*, YYZ Books, Canada, pp. 137-147.

## **Biography**

Jessica Hemmings is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Edinburgh where she is writing her dissertation of the role of textiles in the fiction of Zimbabwean author Yvonne Vera. She teaches in the Liberal Arts Department of the Rhode Island School of Design and writes for numerous magazines including *Fiberarts*, *The Surface Design Journal*, *Crafts Arts International* and *Selvedge*. Research interests include the relationship between textual and textile production, postcolonial theory and material culture.