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**Yinka Shonibare and Junya Watanabe:  
Fashioned commentaries on Postcolonial Africa, dress and Dutch wax**

*Ce ci n'est pas une pipe* by Magritte is important for understanding my work. You know how his piece presents a pipe and then says it is not a pipe. You can't smoke it. Sometimes people confuse representation for what it represents. But that physical thing doesn't exist in the world in that way. So if you see a woman walking down a road and she's wearing African cloth you might think, "now there's African-ness, true Africanity", but that cloth, and those clothes are not African.

Shonibare (1996) in Nancy Hynes, *Redressing History* (2001: 62)

The invented traditions imported from Europe not only provided whites [the colonisers] with models of command but also offered many Africans [the colonised] models of 'modern' behaviour. The invented traditions of African societies – whether invented by the Europeans or by Africans themselves in response – distorted the past but became in themselves realities through which a good deal of colonial encounter was expressed.

Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa* (1983: 212).

## **FASHION, ART AND AFRICA:**

Negotiating landscapes of power, trade, politics and exchange, fashion and dress practices<sup>1</sup> constructed much of the visual evidence of an African colonial encounter. In this essay I will explore how an artist and a fashion designer have each engaged with notions of postcoloniality, power and politics through the use of an 'African textile', a textile, which in itself, is a hybrid carrier of complex ambiguities<sup>2</sup>. Postcolonial theory and its close attention to material cultures and hybrid identities has helped position the complex works of several contemporary artists who work with cloth, dress and materiality (Hemmings, 2004). Artist Yinka Shonibare (b. 1962, London) uses the so-called 'African textile' variably in sculptural forms, costumes and canvases, to comment on the impact of colonial intervention and invention, and as a critique around notions of traditionality, (in)authenticity, "ethnic categorization" and neo-colonial power (Picton, 2001). Fashion designer Junya Watanabe (b. 1961, Tokyo) experiments with "cutting-edge fabrics, and inventive tailoring and draping", deconstructing and reconstructing selected concepts or single motifs each season (Niessen 2003: 326). Watanabe's use of the so-called 'African textile' in his Spring/Summer 2009 Ready-to-Wear collection (S/S 09)<sup>3</sup> raised some discomfort within the hegemony of the fashion system<sup>4</sup>.

This essay aims to investigate some of the complicities and complexities that surround the presentations and representations of their work (in the related fields of art and fashion) within a postcolonial framework. Their explicit references to colonial pasts and practises, their concerns with an 'exotic', and their use of the dressed body (as representations of negotiated identities) calls into question political implications of

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<sup>1</sup> In depth publications by authors Eicher, Hemmings, Rabine, Ross and Rovine, and editors Allman and Niessen address some of these complexities of power, colonial dress practices, and the fashioning of past and present African identities

<sup>2</sup> An 'African textile' can refer to a multitude of types of patterned textiles, from Vlisco's Dutch Wax, to Shweshwe, to Bogolan, to Kanga and Ankara cloth, but generally refers to brightly coloured, even garish, printed fabrics that are used throughout Africa and the African diaspora

<sup>3</sup> The fashion system requires presentations by designers of their collections bi-annually approximately six to nine months before the season; this collection S/S 09 showed in Paris in September 2008

<sup>4</sup> See Kawamura's *Fashionology*, and Niessen's *Re-Orienting Fashion* for detailed commentary on the control and hegemonic character that determines and still defines the international fashion system from its global fashion centre (namely, Paris) as a Western phenomenon

power, of notions of the self, and of the other, and points to an overlap in these artist's creative practice that encourages further address.

Recent academic research around dress<sup>5</sup>, fashion<sup>6</sup> and the construction of identities<sup>7</sup>, has shown how the notions of performance, appropriation and re-contextualisation have played a key role in the definition of postmodernist practices of fashion (Kondo 1997, Quinn 2002, English 2005). Postcolonial theory has been used to address the various intersections of, and performativity in fashion, in both postmodern<sup>8</sup> and postcolonial studies<sup>9</sup>. Although the terms, conditions and validity of postcolonial theory has received much criticism (Hall, 1996; Scott, 2005) it continues to be a useful critique of the dominant discourses in, and of, the West and acts as a challenge to the inherent assumptions and stereotypes within the material and discursive legacies of colonialism.

Two key concerns in postcolonial studies, otherness and hybridity, evidence an experience of, and a relationship between, former colonial powers and their colonies, and both are, to some degree, concerned with identity. In this analysis of a marked overlap in the works of Shonibare and Watanabe, 'otherness'<sup>10</sup> appears, and is used as a distinctive positioning of non-Western identities, beyond a dominant Western hegemony. The use of an 'African textile' in garment forms by Shonibare (on mannequins) and Watanabe (on models) addresses the embedded 'hybridity'<sup>11</sup> of the cloth, as notions of stereotyping, authenticity and ambiguity are called into question.

Rovine (2009:135) in "Viewing Africa through Fashion" identifies how references to Africa have consistently appeared in couture collections over the last forty years<sup>12</sup>. This relationship has continually reflected Africa as an exotic, referred to as a source of inspiration, and as an anti-fashion<sup>13</sup>. Rovine explores the slippery terrain between fashion practices defined as African and categories of fashion associated with Western cultures. In the case of Shonibare referencing the dressed body in a fake, yet identifiably African textile, he presents historical figures whose 'exotic' choice of dress problematises the idea of fashion. Watanabe's use of the African textile (as a non-Western site) confronts the fashion system by referencing this 'other' site (Africa), which continues to have no place, agency or power within the conventional concept of fashion. How Africa was presented in the colonial encounter, and how it is currently presented to the world is often "as an Africa invented for that world" (Appiah, 1992). The impact of colonialism is still evident in much of Africa, since Africa continues to be ravaged by the legacies of colonialism and consequently from neocolonialism. Euro-American cultural values continue to dominate in Africa, in the

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<sup>5</sup> Dress as a term is used in academic study to refer to clothing, apparel, garb; ornaments or adornment of the body; everyday or functional modes of dress (Craik 2009:3)

<sup>6</sup> Fashion is considered a prevailing custom or style of dress, etiquette, procedure; a shared and internalised sense of the style of the time, often carrying with it the sense of successive change, movement and redefinition (ibid.)

<sup>7</sup> Recent research in the construct of identities addresses global, national, personal and even virtual identities through clothing

<sup>8</sup> See Angela McRobbie's *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*

<sup>9</sup> Postcolonial studies have shifted the attention of Third World studies to the politics of the personal

<sup>10</sup> Otherness is a particularly Western philosophical concept that developed in postcolonial theory with a close studies of both 'the Other' and 'otherness'

<sup>11</sup> Hybridity see Bhabha (1994) for an account of the construct of hybridity in post colonial discourse

<sup>12</sup> Examples include St Laurent in the 70s, Gaultier in the 80s, Ralph Lauren and Galliano in the 90s, and recently Dolce & Gabbana, Westwood and McQueen

<sup>13</sup> See Polhemus and Proctor (1978) in Niessen's *Re-Orienting Fashion* (2003: 251-253)

global capitalist economy; even though there have been transitional shifts in economic and colonial power (Dirlik, 1994). The socio-economic significations of Western dress have contributed to the development of a number of particular dress practices in Africa, for example; Herero traditional dress identities that reference Germanic missionary influences, *Les Sapeurs* with extreme acquisitions of French and Italian couture labels in the Congo<sup>14</sup> and the exchange of Western fashion items as commodity goods in the secondhand dress markets in Zaire.

It is against this complex backdrop of a fashioned and fabricated heritage in Africa (the terms fashioned and fabricated apply in both their literal and metaphoric readings), that this essay will explore the work of an African artist and a Japanese fashion designer. I will look at how their work is positioned, how each has used the notion of an imagined Africa to comment on, and critique this stereotype of colonial heritage, in what format these works are presented, and the circulation of their ideas or work through the secondary texts that position or locate their value in terms of a noticeable, differential treatment given to the artist (Shonibare) and the designer (Watanabe).

### SHOWINGS AND VIEWINGS:

Fashion and art practices have had a longstanding, at times ambivalent relationship. The influence on concepts of value in terms of fashion versus fine arts objects has led to quite distinct criticisms and presentations. Fashion has been showcased (on models) since the late nineteenth century<sup>15</sup>; this chosen method of viewing fashion has survived a mechanical age of reproduction, a televisual transition, and now recently into the digital age – with live streaming of fashion shows – transmitting a moving fashion image in a virtual world. This distinct ‘showing’ of fashion perpetuates its fleeting phenomenon, presenting collections of up to fifty pieces in less than thirty minutes<sup>16</sup>. What remains afterwards is a set of photographs that witness the moving model: it is this image then that needs to carry the value of the object into a broader framework. The presentation of Watanabe’s S/S 09 collection was similarly experienced (seen on site) by a group of fashion insiders.

When fashion designer Martin Margiela showed at the Boijmans Museum in Rotterdam, 1998<sup>17</sup> the title of the exhibition (*9/4/1615*) referred to the *nine* years of fashion production by Margiela, the *four* types of moulds applied in the collection, and the *one thousand six hundred and fifteen hours* that the garments in the exhibition were ‘on show’. This contrasts sharply with the hours (or portions thereof) afforded to seasonal fashion collections. With the exception of some performance art, the work of artists is shown in galleries (in temporary shows) or museums (in temporary and permanent shows). This temporal difference between art and fashion impacts the viewing experience, the notion of ephemerality of the objects in question, and the

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<sup>14</sup> See Friedman’s *Cultural Identity & Global Process* (1994: 117-146)

<sup>15</sup> Charles Frederick Worth was one of the early couturiers who used models in a salon setting to present his fashions

<sup>16</sup> Fashion shows all vary in quantity and time, but this example offers an idea of the fleetingness of these shows

<sup>17</sup> See Evans’s review: *Martin Margiela Exhibition (9/4/1615)*

opportunity afforded for contemplation, discussion, theorisation and the criticality of a response<sup>18</sup>.

Shonibare's work has consistently been shown in group and individual shows since his first showing in the group exhibition for the Barclays Young Artist Award in 1992. Further to the time afforded to individual works in specific exhibitions, is the additional benefit commanded by particular works that are shown repeatedly in new contexts, to new audiences and in new critical spaces. The works increase in value (both as cultural capital and in economic value), the more they are 'seen', quite unlike the conventions in the fashion system, where notions of the new, unique and exclusive still persist in the status of fashion items.

Watanabe's S/S 09 collection showed models with large flower-and-twig-filled head wraps, in other collections Watanabe has variably used turbaned accessories, semi-sheer veiling and full masking of the faces. Shonibare chooses to show much of his sculptural works on figures 'without heads' (most famously *Mr & Mrs Andrews without their Heads* 1998, but also other works that include *Gay Victorians* 1999, *The Three Graces* 2001, *Scramble for Africa* 2003). The startling lack of heads in these sculptural works makes them quite similar to dressmakers' dummies: de-personalising the figures, and, as Hynes points out, figures that hint at a "postcolonial revenge" (2001). Where both Watanabe and Shonibare use a textile with such a strong 'identity', they equally counter this with a refusal of 'identity' through the shrouding of the face and the covering of the heads (Shonibare used helmets in *Vacation* 2000), or the removal of them altogether.

This notion of identity has been questioned by Shonibare extensively, starting in his final year at Byam Shaw, where a tutor questioned the African-ness (or rather lack there-of) in his work, and to which Shonibare responded with an approach that was to "question identity rather than celebrate it, to tease out signifiers and toy with them mockingly" (Picton 2001). Similarly, Watanabe experienced the pressure of following the first wave of Japanese fashion designers known in the West (Kenzo, Issey Miyake, Yoji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo) who, because of their collective Japanese origins, are often presented as a stereotyped, grouped identity that continues to 'exoticise' them and their work (Mitchell 2005:15).

Watanabe (based in Tokyo) participates in Paris at the twice-yearly ready-to wear collections, along with a number of other known Japanese designers, who see themselves as internationalists, and are generally dismissive of any categorisation based on their shared ethnicity (ibid). This staging of a reversal in this particular S/S 09 collection by Watanabe, is not a reference to his own 'exotic' culture, but through an about-turn of both power and influence, the collection references another cultural 'other' that challenges the hegemony of the Western fashion system. This return of a gaze, through this 'other' culture creates a hybrid of identities, and destabilises and questions both the stereotypes and conduits of power in these interconnected, postcolonial worlds of Japan, Africa and Europe.

Here Shonibare differs with his work, which is "about being in London, ... concerned with the deconstruction of stereotypes, most especially of black and African people in

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<sup>18</sup> See Brand & Teunissen *Fashion and the Imagination* (2009) for more essays on the contested boundaries, and yet shared terrains, of fashion and art

the so-called West” (Picton 2001). Of his Yoruba origin, Shonibare reflects that although he is Yoruba and Nigerian, this “does not make him any less British. Indeed, being Nigerian and Yoruba is *how* he is British” (ibid). The focus of much of his work deals specifically with this interface to a London public, referencing his knowledge of “various categories of ‘identity’- African, European, British, Nigerian, black, modern, primitive – to play them off each other and, ultimately undermine any notion of a fixed essentialism” (Hynes 2001).

### **DUTCH WAX PRINTED HYBRIDITIES:**

As Shonibare has observed that the irony of this African fabric is in fact only "a colonial construction, as its origins can be traced from Indonesia to Holland (hence Dutch Wax), to Manchester (from where it is) then sold to Africa where indigenous variations on the fabric have been appropriated for local use" (Oguibe 1999). While for Westerners, including diasporic Africans, the obvious appeal of the fabric lies in its so-called "authenticity," Shonibare observes that this is only a fictive authenticity, and that by appropriating this fabric, Africans are establishing a mark of identity that derives from multiple trade routes and global histories (ibid). As Picton points out in Shonibare’s work, the matter of the authenticity of the textile is not the issue; instead Shonibare explores the hybrid constructs inherent in various processes of seduction and powers of fiction and fantasy (2001). Hemmings (2004) identifies this hybridity in the re-staging of the famous Thomas Gainsborough painting, *Mr & Mrs Andrews without their Heads* 1998, where Shonibare presents an image of landed gentry literally stripped of their land and consequently identity (as the backdrop of affluent grounds and Mr. and Mrs. Andrews’ heads are absent), yet Mr. and Mrs. Andrews are impeccably dressed in period-correct costume, only that, in Shonibare’s sculpture, they are wearing Dutch wax and not satin. Hemmings elaborates, “the garments derive their symbolic weight from an understanding that dress and fashion clothe a vital site of negotiation between individual and national identity. In the postcolonial context, dress reveals 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” (2004). The blurring of these notions of in-authenticity, difference, iconography and meaning, continues to resonate in Shonibare’s work, through the development of both original prints and more generic, cheaper fancy-print cloths.

Research by Vlisco<sup>19</sup> in 2006 showed that 75% of all wax-printed cloth clearly displayed Vlisco designs, yet only a portion of this was “authentic” Dutch wax, i.e. made by Vlisco. The cloth, which claims an authenticity, has itself been subjected to multiple copies. Shonibare reflects on these ironies, through the staging of his sculptures, and more recently, the costuming in his films (*Odile and Odette*, 2005, and *A Masked Ball*, 2004). Vlisco's Netherlands country manager, Hessing describes Vlisco as the “quintessential African label” which has also supplied fabrics to Paris-based luxury labels such as Kenzo and Jean Paul Gaultier (2009). Hessing describes Vlisco’s relationship to “Paris, the world's fashion capital and home to a large African community” as well as Vlisco’s role in “Junya Watanabe’s recent Africa-inspired collection” (ibid).

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<sup>19</sup> Vlisco is the brand name of the Veritable Wax Hollandaise, or real Dutch Wax, established in 1847 in Vlissingen, The Netherlands as a business venture, producing Batik textiles intended for the Indonesian market, but ultimately finding success in the African market

Watanabe's design aesthetic is cutting-edge and considered avant-garde as his work is often in opposition to trends: designs are characterised by innovative "construction, complex seaming, darting and draping, reworking and redefining classic shapes, and morphing into entirely new silhouettes or new functions" (Quinn 2002: 158) Through his use of the printed Dutch wax cloth in the S/S 09 collection, Watanabe reworked identifiable Western garments into hybrid constructions through notable draping and inventive layering. In this process of de-construction, Watanabe continued a critique of the stereotype. Slowly erasing the print from the surface, the garments eventually revealed a plain surface: the fabric had lost its specific 'African identity', and had become a recognisable, Western interface.

## **THE BLACK DANDY & THE ORIENTAL OTHER:**

In sharp contrast with their use of the highly visible and heavily encoded African textiles, Shonibare and Watanabe have moreover also explored the neutral aesthetics of Victorian aristocracy. Shonibare's 1998 photographic narrative *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* examines various theoretical implications of Shonibare's "insertion of his own body into various genre scenes" (libraries, bedrooms, lounges), focusing on dialogues between the historical and the contemporary, and his appropriation of the Victorian world (McRobbie 1998). Shonibare "rewrites history from a distinctly postcolonial viewpoint" (ibid) and questions the paradox of excess evident in these colonial narratives. In these contemporary photographs, Shonibare depicts a day in the life of an imaginary Victorian dandy in a nineteenth century setting, further complicating the interpretation.

Powell looks at the notion of the black dandy in art, portraiture and popular culture, where "European artists and intellectuals were taking note of this human exception, writing about these extrovert figures with their fashionable accoutrements, manners and airs" (2008: 69). Dandies were pivotal figures in 'modern Europe', serving as cultural alternatives to mainstream bourgeois society and as objects of both literary fascination and social scorn in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Because the dandy was "ideologically as well as socially anachronistic" (Powell 2008: 70-71), Shonibare's appropriation of the persona of the dandy draws on the art of dressing and "acting the part of a latter-day aristocrat, a wilful outcast from the conventional life of average citizens in a European nation-state" (ibid). This portrayal as a black dandy, positions Shonibare as a double other.

Kondo's consideration of the "other" in *About Face* deals with fashion and theatre, where the performance of race and the perception of (in Kondo's case) the oriental other is examined as the process of differentiating from, and conforming to "Western hegemonic social, cultural and gendered conventions" (1997: 12). The story of Japanese fashion's impact on the West is brief<sup>20</sup>. Although, this interest in Japanese fashion was not the first time that Japanese design had created an impact on Western fashion: after Japan was opened to the West in the mid nineteenth century, the European market was flooded with Japanese decorative goods as *Japonisme*<sup>21</sup> spread

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<sup>20</sup> Recognition of Japanese designers in the West only come about in the postwar years starting with Hanae Mori in 1965, Kenzo in 1970, and Issey Miyake (1974), and Rei Kawakubo and Yoji Yamamoto in 1981

<sup>21</sup> Japonisme (defined as the Western assimilation of basic Japanese aesthetics) was evident in architecture, painting, decorative arts and fashion

through the use of motifs, textiles and garment shapes, interiors, accessories and styling (Mitchell, 2005: 19-20). After centuries of isolation, Western clothing gained fairly rapid acceptance by Japanese men in the second half of the nineteenth century, yet it was not until after the end of WW2 that Japanese women chose to dress in Western style (ibid). This positioning of the West and the Rest in terms of oriental stereotypes continues in the portrayal of the exotic other of Japanese fashion: as geisha and kimonos, as radical and incomprehensible, and as conceptual and anti-fashion (Mitchell 2005: 29). Watanabe's S/S 09 collection simultaneously refuses (the stereotype), confronts (the fashion system) and positions notions of otherness (by appropriating an alternative aesthetic).

Rovine comments on the attention to 'non-Western fashion' in academic circles that has been mostly centred on Asia (which is also seen as producer of internationally renowned designers from India, Japan and China), and the source of much 'exotic' inspiration for Western fashion (2009: 134). Africa has too, been the source of inspiration (and fashion reference) throughout the twentieth century (Poiret, Yves St Laurent, John Galliano, Ralph Lauren to name a few). As Rovine describes, these "African and Asian fashion systems have in common not only their mutual 'otherness' for the Western dominated-international fashion industry" (2003: 135-7), but also their 'identifiable dress traditions' that have continued in spite of Westernisation or globalisation. Watanabe's reference to African dress traditions engages with this position of 'otherness' in the highly controlled aesthetics of the Western fashion system.

#### **TEXTS & REVIEWS:**

The development of primary texts and the impact of secondary iterations (reviews, essays, research texts and analyses) of the artworks of Shonibare and the fashion collections of Watanabe helps position the critiques and social commentaries that are set up through their work. Considering the scope of this essay, it is difficult to discuss this component at length (and this may warrant a further reading or seminar) as the texts themselves are considerably complex reiterations of imperialist language and continued colonialist projections of taste, power and aesthetics. The noticeably differential treatment given to the field of fashion is evident in the secondary texts that followed from the showing of Watanabe's collection. These texts contrast sharply with the more critical, informed and lengthy writing that locates the work of Shonibare in a discourse that recognises the crucial issues that are addressed in his work.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

Considering shifts in sartorial power in Africa, and the study of fabrics, materials and objects that have become symbols of political independence in Africa, signs of pride, difference and liberation, provides insight into concepts such as history, identity, the self and subject, representation and the consequences that begin to characterise the shift towards conditions of post-coloniality. Both Watanabe and Shonibare have confronted the homogeneity of the hegemonic ideal of a fashion world (the West) by exploring the visual experience of an 'other' – exotic, African and hybrid through their cross-cultural aesthetics, and the considered use of forms of visual mimicry.

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