What is Your Dress Heritage? A Project Exhibiting Diversity in Identity

ABSTRACT
My paper focuses on issues arising from a project that I facilitated at the fashion institution LISOF (where I lecture in Fashion Theory) and the subsequent exhibition that I curated at Museum Africa in Johannesburg in 2009. The images were developed by the students and were based on their in-depth research around their own or other identity constructs. I will be talking about some of the issues that arose from this project and therefore will **not be talking directly** to the individual images; instead I chose to address a broader theoretical framework. For the time allocated to this paper, I will focus on the wider context of the project and some issues arising from it.

The political turmoil and transition of the last two decades has impacted greatly on the expression of local identities, and has seen the investigation of new forms of identity constructs develop that attempt to address a conflicted past, and negotiate opportunities within the new political constitution of a democratic South Africa. This paper will position some key concepts and several conclusions that arose from the research and the resulting exhibition.

What is Your Dress Heritage? A Project Exhibiting Diversity in Identity

Preparing and exhibiting *"WHAT IS YOUR DRESS HERITAGE?* **Diversity in Identity"** raised a number of important questions around key constructs of identity within a particular socio-political context; namely a newly democratic South Africa. Notions of gender, culture and race were investigated and challenged, and constructs within sub-cultural, cultural and class paradigms were explored in terms of taste, distinction, belonging and differentiation.

The project looked into the mirror of Nietzsche's statement where '*you can explain the past only by what is most powerful in the present*'[i] by questioning how '*you can explain the present only by what was most powerful in the past*'. The project explored how young individuals remember parts of the past and how they choose to manifest these socio-cultural memories of heritage and history in their present identity narratives. This project was developed as an exploration of the current diversity[ii] in identity[iii] within a post-apartheid South Africa. Third year fashion design students from LISOF[iv] were asked to investigate contemporary notions of identity and belonging, and how these notions relate to individual, shared and collective pasts. This collaborative research and public presentation initiative between LISOF and Museum Africa[v] resulted in researched essays and visual narratives, with forty posters chosen for an exhibition; showcasing some of the cross-cultural, hybrid and transitional identities which reflect some of the broader social contexts of a post-apartheid South Africa.

CHANGE & HISTORY:
Contemporary societies are largely characterised by change seen in a mobility of ideas, people and information. South African contemporary society even more so reflects the **impact of change**, with recent political transformations in 1994 that shifted the social construct from one of dispossession and segregation to one that aims to support diversity and equality. With the continuous negotiation of the present, South Africans are currently exploring constructions of identity that reflect the **shifts in continuity** in a dialogue with various compound pasts, contributing to local identities that express diversity. The current, multiple, local youth identities reflect

notions of globalistion, but also notions of the post-modern. These youth styles reflect the role of the youth as agents of, beneficiaries of, and at times, even victims of major societal change[vi]. The transformation in local politics and power in 1994 is shown in these transitions of identity, and fashion[vii] is used to communicate various responses to these **fragmented** pasts. The need to belong and the right to a freedom of expression exist in these narratives**. C**ontemporary fashioned heritage is communicated through various dress aesthetics and styled semiotics. This project showcases some of the innovative expressions of identity, the problems currently being addressed and forms of counter-identity, in the construction of a new South Africa[viii].

POLITICS:
Recent political turmoil in South Africa, brought about radical political change, and ushered in a new South Africa, with the first democratic elections in 1994. The construction of new local, national and individual identities evolved from this transitional, political framework. The political oppression of the apartheid era was dominated by segregation and explicit differentiation negotiated on the surface of the visible body. With the shift in politics, came an equally radical shift in the construction of new identities. Diversity found expression in these emergent identities that responded to the new-found freedoms of social, emotional and material opportunities. The last fifteen years have therefore seen profound transformation in the composition of contemporary urban environments as the ideologies within these have shifted, and the historical constructs been renegotiated.

Some **key concepts converged in the project**, the conditions of socio-political change in contemporary societies, the interdisciplinary notions of visual culture and identity, and the understanding of diversities[ix], youth cultures, sub-cultures, counter-cultures and stereotype. The notion of identity is challenged by the fact that previously 'ascribed' identity constructs of age, gender and age relation have been weakened[x] and similarly, 'achieved' identities of class and occupation have been undermined. These shifts offer new challenges in the mapping of identities in the 21st century and in particular, in South Africa.

Considering the project set out to explore and broaden awareness about the structure and complexity of diversity in identity within a post-apartheid context, it succeeded in examining and presenting a cross-cultural, trans-cultural and multi-cultural expression as counter to stereotype, and encouraged a rediscovery of history and heritage amongst this a-politicised, born-free[xi] youth group. This reconfiguration of personal identities within various cultural and sub-cultural groups coincides with the radically shifted **politics of inclusion and exclusion** in South Africa. The re-negotiation of social boundaries reflects both forgetting and remembrance of the recent past in the construction of new collective memories and cohesive social identities.

MUSEUMS:
The secondary aim of the project was to showcase the collections of Museum Africa to a new public, and to engage students with the role and relevance of **archival research**. Museums in general demand attention to questions of how identity and difference are performed, collected and valued. Museums have historically divided the local from the colonial, showing the local within an ethnographic framework and the colonial in its perceived hierarchy of power as the reflection of modernity in a global

world. Calls for constructive re-dress within South African museums have taken longer than originally anticipated in 1994. A continued lack of financial aid or interest, difficulties in defining new directions and an overall criticism of the role of museums in a contemporary South Africa have hindered progress as other larger social problems take precedence[xii]. In this collaboration, Museum Africa has attempted to re-dress the politics of its past displays and offered a platform for the project to facilitate access to a new audience, and interact with a new, younger, more diverse public through fashion.

COMMON MOTIVES:
Gender Constructs
Various images/posters explored explicit questions around gender expectations, gender constructs around femininity and masculinity, expression through particular gendered dress positions, and the confrontation of conventional stereotypes

Issues of belonging
Belonging to cultural, local, sub-cultural or global communities is expressed through forms of dress, and forms the necessary, visible links within these style tribes

Culture
Overt displays of self-conscious cultural associations, hybrid cultural identities that challenge the traditional forms of cultural expression, and multi-cultural dress identities have been consciously negotiated in an attempt to redress various shared experiences.

Sub-cultures
With the adoption of new urban styles, sub-cultural tribes offer ideological frameworks that counter the stereotype and investigate the possibility of post-gender, post-race and post-class opportunities of belonging.

SEVERAL CONCLUSIONS EMERGED:
1) In this post-1994 generation issues of belonging and BECOMING, beyond racial and social stereotype, have taken on new forms of expression as histories are being newly re-written and a liberation from the past allows for expressions that 'pick & mix'[xiii] from religion, culture and tradition. This freedom simultaneously co-exists with its dialectical opposite; that of the threat of an imminent loss of past traditions and cultures which are disappearing in the face of post-modernity and **globalisation.** Local transformation in the face of global change presents a conformity to global trends in the attempt to belong; and seldom attempts to resist these global identity stereotypes/archetypes. Identities no longer belong to specific histories, societies or geographies as most individuals belong to a homogenised globalised community and commonality.

2) Dress that acts as a site for portraying new and variable identities and one's fashioned self, continually informs and reconstitutes one's representation of self. Through referral, semiotics and the embodiment of various coded negotiations, South African identities are witnessing a rise in a number of **hybrid** constructions. Nuttal (2009) investigates this urban phenomenon in her book titled *Entanglements,* through the study of youth cultures in Soweto[xiv] and urban centres like Newtown and Rosebank. These hybrid identities reflect the imagination of a plurality that exists in these

layered social contexts, and exposes a cultural mixing that is common to the structure of many 21st century urban spaces. Most notably the *Smarteez*[xv] and the *Black Diamonds*[xvi] are two hybrid identity constructs that have integrated coexisting fashion differences into contemporary dialogues[xvii]. Here imagination and appropriation feature as means of differentiation and expression of the dynamics of individuality and community-formation in new political and social conditions. Claiming to **disregard the political**, this born-free generation explores the freedoms that their parents fought for[xviii].

3) Clothing as an information system of self, acts as an urban **sign system** of negotiation and recognition in contemporary spaces. Since Barthes[xix], the construction of meaning through dress signifiers has resulted in closer research into the role of the perception of others in the interaction of self and identity. Without the affirmations or the denial of others, identity constructs have little relevance. In South Africa these **cross-cultural dialogues through dress** have offered opportunities in urban spaces to communicate; engaging in narrative through Converse sneakers, denim, brands, hair styling and accessories. Clothing acts as language in the popular images that circulate in the media, thereby creating the illusion of understanding and belonging. Contemporary appropriations of traditional dress styles explore a whole new terrain of cultural communication in a modern context. Notions of the tradition in dress as symbols of the political[xx], historically fore-grounded difference are now used to assert possession, attitude, authorship and personal power.

4) Reference to notions of memory, heritage and history in the formation of new identities, is evidenced in many of the recent fashion collections as showcased by local designers. In a country with such radically, racially divided pasts, South Africans have needed to renegotiate their own, and other historical constructions **beyond the notion of romantic nostalgia** for the past. Much of the past is embedded in contexts of pain and trauma. Issues of heritage, monument and tradition have surfaced in recent years, partly as a form of counter-culture and partly as a form of reminiscence. These characteristics/material expressions are portrayed through modes of ritual, display and dress, as evidence with this collection of posters.

As can be seen through this project, clothes signify particular times and put people in touch with age and peer groups, generations, rites of passage, and countless other life expressions. It becomes clear that as South Africans explore the possibilities of modernity with a HERITAGE of style, fashion becomes the site for the dynamics and politics of the individual, the local, and the global.

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[i] Nietzche, 'You can explain the past only by what is most powerful in the present'. *The Use and Abuse of History*

[ii] Diversity is recognised as the multi-dimensionality of people, nature and individuals

[iii] Identity in this essay includes an integrated study of the situated, specific and embodied natures of the subjects involved

[iv] LISOF is a private, accredited Higher Education institution offering Bachelor and Diploma programmes in fashion and is based in Rosebank, Johannesburg and Hatfield, Tswane, South Africa

[v] Museum Africa, situated in Newtown, Johannesburg, aims to showcase the everyday, mundane and popular culture in an attempt to break from the conventional hierarchy of museum collections

[vi] See Jonathan Friedman's *Cultural Identity and Global Process*

[vii] Fashion is referred to here as the mode of presenting the self within a public context, and therefore relates to Roach-Higgins and Eicher's definition of forms of fashion, clothing and the dressed body

[viii] The "new" South Africa is used to denote the period after 1994, were a new democracy was voted in and new identities were demanded (see Coombes 1999, Nuttal 2008)

[ix] UNESCO's call for cultural diversity and the right to cultural expression counters the impact that globalization has on local cultural practices

[x] See Jonathan Friedman's *Cultural Identity and Global Process*
[xi] This born-free youth were born after the new democracy of 1994 and have not experienced, or lived under Apartheid conditions
[xii] Housing, education, Aids, crime, poverty, domestic and gender violence, and corruption are some of the issues currently needing urgent attention
[xiii] See Ted Polhemus in *Streetstyle: From Sidewalk to Catwalk*
[xiv] Nuttal's *Entanglement* addressed brands, designers and youth cultures in one of Johannesburg's largest townships where complex political influences have created radical identity transformation
[xv] This name was first used by Kepi (original founder of the group) in 2002 as an indication of the 'brightly coloured on the outside, and brown inside' dress code of this enigmatic local style tribe
[xvi] *Black Diamonds* refer to a new emerging affluent black population that appreciates fine tailoring, education, lifestyles and taste
[xvii] See Bongela's exploration of the layered fashion statements that reflect their layered environments
[xviii] Smarteez, Punk, Gay, Kwaito subcultures explore the aesthetics of their identity in the attempt to create new social structures
[xix] Barthes seminal *The Fashion System* (1967) outlined constructs of signification in dress
[xx] *The Politics of Fashion* looks at the dialectical use of traditional dress as symbol of resistance and oppression

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